Bride of the Forest

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When one moves from an arid area to East Texas he is immediately impressed by the trees, usually the pines, but sometimes by another less dominant species.

In 1912, T.J. Lewis moved with his wife and several children from Runge, located between San Antonio and Goliad in Karnes County, to Elkhart. Mr. Lewis had originally come to Texas from Alabama. He was inspired by the abundance of dogwood to compose a clever riddle devised for the enjoyment of his children. To the knowledge of the writer it has never been published.

One winter evening, after the stock had been fed and the family sat around the fire for the usual Bible reading and storytelling, Mr. Lewis surprised his children with this rhyming riddle which he composed:

One dogwood (would) bark,
One dogwood knot (not),
They both lay snug
In the corner of the lot,
A man went to see
And they both were dead;
They had no tail,
And they had no head.

What a mysterious message Mr. Lewis had conjured from his observation of the native tree which grew everywhere in Anderson Country--so plentiful that it was felled occasionally for firewood, though the primary household use at that time employed the small sturdy branches. They were bound together into a yard broom, familiarly referred to as a “Bresh (brush) broom,” used to sweep clean the grassless area surrounding the dwelling. Of all the available shrubs, it proved most efficient (due to its nature of growth) and was long lasting.

The forest came up to the back door for many in East Texas during the early nineteen hundreds, and like Mr. Lewis, many a man looked into the time-worn face of a good wife and, against a background of spring dogwood blossoms, saw her again as his bonny young bride.

Although the dogwood of this locality (Cornus florida) is but one of about forty species in the temperate regions of the northern hemisphere, it is the showiest member of the genus. It is found from Massachusetts to Florida, and ranges from Ontario to Eastern and Southern Mexico. The common name is derived from the former use, in England, of a decoction of the bark of a European species, the blood-twig (Cornus sanguinea), to wash mangy dogs.

The flowering dogwood is known by many other names: dog tree, false box, Florida cornel, Indian arrowwood, boxwood, bitter redberry, cornel, and various Indian names. Mon-ha-can-nil-in-schi and Hat-ta-wa-no-min-sche are recorded, as well as the shorter term has-ki-la used by the Alabamas and do used by the Koasati.

About the middle of March the Dogwood blossoms. Each unit is a cluster of small greenish flowers surrounded by four large white floral bracts which are leaflike structures with the appearance of petals. These conspicuous bracts are about
two and a half inches across. They are especially prominent because they appear
before the leaves. Only occasionally are they pink; however, plant breeders have
developed a deep rose or red dogwood that has proved extremely popular as an
ornamental plant.

The true flowers develop into small, single stones having two parts. The
cherry-like fruit, or drupes, color in September. These bright so-called berries, which
are from one-fourth to one-half inch long, combine with the matching autumn
foliage to add tremendous red beauty to the landscape. The leaves are simple,
opposite the flowers, dark green above and whitish beneath.

Because legends lie in safe territory that can never be touched by scientific
investigation they seem to be legion. The legend of the dogwood is well known and
has become part of the folklore of East Texas. Imaginative minds have woven the
story of the crucifixion into the physical structure of many plants. The dogwood
shows a brownish, scarred appearance at the outer edge of its notched bracts which
are arranged at right angles to each other, forming a cross. Since this plant is
classed as a shrub or small tree, usually only ten to fifteen feet high, legend has it
that it was once a large tree, used as timbers from which Christ’s cross was
constructed. Afterward, its growth diminished so that it could never be forced into
such service again. Its dwarfed size still tells the story, as well as the nail-scarred
signs on the snow white flower crosses.

Few realize the significance of our native plants in local culture. Almost every
growing herb and tree has been investigated for its ability to satisfy physiological
and psychological needs. Only natural drugs were available until relatively recent
times. Of their valuable uses known today, almost all were tested, established, and
passed on to us by native American Indians.

Medicinal use of the dogwood by the Indians was widespread. The Alabamas,
whose descendents still reside on the reservation near Livingston, Texas, drank a
preparation made by boiling the inner bark in water as a treatment for dysentery.
They also made a strong tea by boiling the leaves. A quart bottle full of this was
poured down a horse’s nostrils to relieve colic.

East Texans, as well as early explorers in the United States, used a decoction
prepared of the dry bark in place of Quinine in the treatment of intermittent
fevers. The bark of all parts was reputed to contain the same substance as is found
in cinchona, but in different proportions. The principle is extractable with either
water or alcohol. A simple infusion was often made with a teaspoonful of dried
bark, or dried root bark, to a cup of boiling water. Dosage consisted of half a
cupful, hot or cold, taken upon rising. It was known that the curative alkaloid was
less effective than quinine and that it did not exist in appreciable quantities;
however, it was thought that fevers could sometimes bewarded off by merely
chewing the twigs. Dogwood bark was the most common quinine substitute used
during the Civil War. The bark of cherry and willow trees was also used in the
same manner of the dogwood, yet sometimes the bark of all three was boiled
together. The extract was usually combined with whisky, when it was available.

Besides serving as a febrifuge, other pioneer medicines included the use of the
bark infusion for sore mouth and as a poultice in external inflammations. Both of
these treatments were based on tissue shrinkage due to the bark’s astringent
qualities.

As a dentifrice, the powered bark was used to whiten the teeth. Some used
the fresh peeled twigs for the same purpose. The Indians thought the sap of the
twigs had the additional merit of preserving the gums.

In 1836, the bitter principle was separated from dogwood, and termed “cornin
(or cornic acid).” In 1928, this substance was obtained in the pure state and its
glycosidal nature established. Finally, in 1936, betulic acid was found in the bark of *Cornus florida*.

Although the dried bark rated as a bitter tonic, astringent, febrifuge, and antiperiodic, it was discarded from the U.S. Pharmacopoeia over seventy-five years ago because its curative ingredient was judged to be only "a feeble, astringent bitter."

According to the well-known horticulturist Liberty Hyde Bailey, the bark of the roots yields a scarlet dye, and when mixed with sulfate of iron, makes a good black ink.

The value of the wood is not debatable. It is very hard and heavy, with a fine lustrous, close grain. Only the wear-resistant sapwood is used for shuttles for cotton mills, for bobbins, tool handles, golf club heads, wedges, cogs, mauls, and engravers blocks. Dogwood is listed among the native wood that was used for carving during the Civil War. Furthermore, its grain and color make it ideal for ornamental cabinet work.

Poverty often turned the bride of the field or forest into a sober matron who was not the seeker of pleasures but, as always, the children came in for entertainment no matter how frugal the times. They found that the dogwood berries, which could be gathered as they trudged through the woods to school, were the right size and perfect ammunition for popguns designed from "switchcane" bamboo.

Because of its multiple uses, it is remarkable that the dogwood is still with us. True, it is protected by law from the roadside admires who would break its flowering branches, unaware that its beauty is short-lived due to quick wilting. Also, many are disappointed to find that fragrance plays little part in its allure. Garden Clubs keep it on the list of plants for conservation and protect it by prohibiting its use in arrangements for flower show awards.

The dogwood is honored in several annual celebrations connected with nature trails, and historical pageants. The Tyler County Dogwood Festival had its birth in 1938 when citizens met in the interest of constructing present U.S. Highway 190. At that time the dogwoods were in bloom and it was felt that other people should be given an opportunity to enjoy their beauty in springtime. Their first festival was presented on April 6, 1940, under the auspices of the Tyler County Chamber of Commerce and has continued annually since that time, with the fixed beginning date as the last Saturday in March. The historical pageant and queen’s coronation is usually held on the first Saturday in April, at the amphitheatre in Woodville. In 1970 over thirty-five hundred people were in attendance. A parade presenting duchesses from forty surrounding towns, as well as colorful dances in the evening, highlight the occasion.

Palestine and Anderson County celebrate an annual "Dogwood Trail and Spring Tour" in late March or early April. The Texas Dogwood Trails Association, founded in 1938, helps to promote the planting program in Davey Dogwood Park. Historic homes and Old Pilgrim Church, (near Elkhart) may be toured at this time.

Despite continued interest in these local festivities, the pity of the fact is that not enough is being done to insure the survival of our native dogwood.

"The white flowers are the source of the dogwood’s popularity, yet the real value of the species lies in its fruit and its high calcium content," says Dan Lay, wildlife biologist for Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Mr. Lay resides in Nacogdoches and is active in projects of the surrounding area. He goes on to say, "the dominant pine contribute acid to the forest soil and dogwood serves as a sweetner. Dogwood is the best source of calcium on the generally acid soils of eastern Texas. It contains five to ten times more than other plants growing on the
same site. Its calcium content may exceed two percent...water percolation...is much more rapid under a dogwood than under a pine. Soil fertility, condition, organic matter, and water-holding capacity are enhanced by the dogwood."

"Deer browse the leaves and twigs and even consume the fallen, dried leaves. They eat the fruit from September to February. Turkeys eat the fresh fruits and scratch old stones out of leaf litter the year round, Squirrels eat the seed's germ in August (before it ripens)," says Mr. Lay, "and a variety of birds relish the fruit."

Where forestry is presently practiced with an eye toward maximum utilization for wood pulp purposes, many dogwoods are being destroyed. Burning, used in pine culture, is destructive to dogwood. Herbicides also claim their toll.

In the words of the song—"when spring is bu'stin' out all over" the flowering dogwood stands like a bride in shimmering white lace among the stately pines. But if our ancient Red Man should return, he would weep over the rape and slaughter of her humanoid trunks. In times past, they were arrayed in majesty that matched the fairness of his maidens and undergirded with strength of his warrior braves. How would he now know the time for planting maize (corn) without its flowering as an indicator that all danger of frost had passed? How would his children bleach their teeth without an abundance of the twigs, or keep the gums healthy without application of the sap within? What would serve so well to cool his burning brow?

The Indian Chief, wise to the ways of nature, would surely cry out for his beloved dogwood. She is "the bride of the forest" and everybody's favorite among the dwindling forest trees of East Texas. If he followed the trail of fire or the song of the saw, he might turn out an epilogue that goes something like this:

The bark is gone
From the dogwood knot.
The pine grows tall
Where the blase is hot.
Wildlife starves
And a share is dead;
Man has no heart
With his brilliant head.
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