

The Sunflower and the Cottonwood

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In the eastern continent, washed by the quiet, peaceful waters of a great triple-named strait and the storm-tossed waves of the Atlantic, glorious in hydrographic beauty, lies the land of the Celt; a land rich in tradition and pregnant with history; a land teeming with bitter but sacred memories, whose mystic chords stretching from every hearthstone bind its fearless, loyal, impulsive sons to the Emerald Isle as with bands of iron and links of steel. And the magic wand to fire the brain, the mighty lodestone to touch the heart of every true son of Erin and bring thronging to his mind the memories of the land of his birth, is a modest little three-leaved flower, that grows wild and sweet on bog and glen, in forest glade and sunkissed valley, over all his native land—the Shamrock—the emblem of his country.

Across the channel from Ireland and beyond the Cheviot Hills and the Tweed, is the land of the Pine and the Heather where dwell the descendants of the Gaelic Highlanders—the canny Scot; a race whose love of native land, of home and kindred, was for centuries tried in the fiery crucible of war ere the crosses of St. Andrew and St. George were conjoined in the flag of a united kingdom. The emblem of this brave and loyal race is the thistle, a plant devoid of beauty but stolidly growing in almost every soil and clime, triumphing over conditions under which less hardy plants would wither and die; with rough and thorny exterior repelling contact, it in no small measure typified the unconquerable manhood of the race it represents.

In the west of Germany flows a river along whose borders the stolid Teutons have for ages past, battled in defense of the Fatherland, and which has ever been to them an inspiration to a patriotism the height and depth of which is so beautifully expressed in their national hymn, "The Watch on the Rhine."

"A voice resounds like thunder peal,
Mid dashing wave and clang of steel;
The Rhine, the Rhine, the German Rhine,
Who guards today my stream divine?
"They stand a hundred thousand strong,
Quick to avenge their country's wrong;
With filial love their bosoms swell;

They'll guard the sacred land-mark well.
"While flows one drop of German blood,
Or sword remains to guard thy flood
While rifle rests in patriot's hand,
No foe shall tread thy sacred strand."

But it is not of the sacred landmarks or emblems or other lands that I would speak tonight, but of one that rivals them all in sentiment and beauty—the Sunflower, the emblem of OUR commonwealth, and its pioneer companion, the Cottonwood.

In the days preceding the advent of the home builder, when Kansas was known as the Great American Desert, and its now fertile prairies were untouched by the husbandman and unscarred by the plow, uninhabited save by wild beasts and savage men, it stretched a broad and semi-arid plain between the populous marts of the east and the rich products of the west; a land unproductive as to vegetation in all save its rich grasses upon which grazed its innumerable herds of bison, antelope and deer; a land where buffalo grass was king, where over thousands of acres of extent naught except the soap weed, the cactus and the sage brush contested its right to rule supreme. No flower delighted the eye nor gratified the nostril with delicate perfume. No tree escaped the water course to cast its shade upon the brown bosom of the plains or break the awful monotony of illimitable prairie. But in 1824 a wagon train starting from Independence, Missouri, blazed the path of prairie commerce across the plains of Kansas and the mountain chains of Colorado to Santa Fe, the gateway to the blue Pacific and the Eldorados of the west—a path that was destined to become one of the most noted as well as the best natural highway of its length that the world has ever known. Along this historic trail sixty to one hundred feet in width, and seven hundred miles in extent, four hundred of which were within the present limits of the state of Kansas, the bleached bones of men and animals, the wrecks of camps and wagons, the lowly mounds that marked the grave of pioneer or savage foe, spoke in the crude but expressive language of the plains, of the sacrifice and suffering that made the desert to blossom as the rose. That wove the warp and woof of civilization which builded great cities, the thunder of the buffalo in wild stampede and the war whoop of the savage. But before this great change was to occur, long years were to intervene—years of heroic achievements and sublime heroism on the part of the hardy pioneers which in the fulness of time gave birth to the American homestead, the solid foundation upon which is reared the magnificent superstructure of our government. The history of the men who opened the way for the homeseekers to the prairies of Kansas is the history of the Santa Fe Trail, and the Santa Fe Trail is the historic birth place of the Kansas Sunflower. Following the first slow

freight caravan drawn by patient oxen along the old trail, from every spot where the carpet of the prairie was broken by the wheel of wagon it sprang up and marked in living, glowing verdure the course of the trail from Leavenworth on the east to Fort Aubry on the west. Where the seed germ came from that produced the plant we cannot tell; but we know that it came and grew and blossomed where no flower had ever grown and blossomed before. And I am willing to account for its origin in our state by accepting the beautiful Indian legend that the Great Spirit sowed it in the path of the pale faces as a perpetual reminder to his red children to be watchful of their hunting grounds and the wigwams of their tribes against the encroachments of the white man. If this legend be true, however, then the Indian was thrice warned, for stretching northward through the region which afterward became the northern tier of Kansas counties, a gleaming mass of yellow petal and green leaf, ran the Oregon Trail over which poured a vast and resistless tide of immigration to the valley of the Columbia and the west; and southward from a point of McPherson county ran another ribbon of gold along the famous Arkansas Trail; what the compass means to the sailor on the pathless sea, or the pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night meant to the ancient Israelites as they fled from Egyptian bondage, the Sunflower meant to the freighter, the stage driver, the hunter and the soldier in the early days of Kansas history, for it marked with the gleams of molten gold the path of civilization; the route that led unerring from the trackless plains to the habitation of civilized man; the path in which lay safety from desert wilds and savage foes; and the man who, fleeing for his life over Kansas soil before a horde of naked savages, has seen miles away the nodding sunflower, the unmistakable sign of the trail wherein he has found brave hearts and willing hands to succor him, and crouching in the sunflowers has heard the music of the rifle balls dealing death to his foes, has never since that day seen fairer flower than the emblem of our commonwealth. Neither has the man at Council Grove, Diamond Springs, Plumb Buttes, Pawnee Rock or Cimarron Crossing, who has awakened with the war whoop ringing in his ears to battle for his life against the fierce onslaught of murderous Kaws, Osages, Padoucas or Pawnees, and finally to steal away under the sable mantle of the night leaving behind a comrade, wife or child carefully concealed from the ruthless savage in the bosom of the earth, and who after months of wandering with the memory of that bleak and lonely grave upon the prairie gnawing like a cancer at his heart, has returned to that hallowed spot to find that from every inch of soil broken by the spade when he laid them to rest a sunflower had sprung up, clothing the grave with beauty. But not on the trails alone was the sunflower to grow and blossom and enshrine itself in the hearts of men. But as the home-seekers, the Pilgrim Fathers of Kansas,

left the great highways of travel and sought the open country, it marked the course of the prairie schooners to the very portals of the sod houses or dugouts that they builded and called home, and grew in profusion and beauty around their doors. Here, also, came the Cottonwood, and resisting drouth and heat and insect pest, lived and flourished and cast its grateful shade for man and beast in summer and interposed its sturdy trunk as a shield from the icy blasts of winter. And when the Angel of Death came to the little prairie home and removed to the home beyond the little prattler that for a few fleeting years had filled its walls with sunshine, it was the hollowed trunk of the Cottonwood that formed the casket in which the little form was committed to the earth. It was Cottonwood branches that fenced the tiny grave about and protected it from the prowling coyotes; the ghouls of the plains, and it was a cottonwood slab that formed the monument upon which was recorded the history of the little life, on earth, forever stilled.

Then came the Sunflower bursting from the broken mantle of matted sod, from every scar which the descent of the precious clay into the bosom of the earth had made, and with shimmering yellow petals following the sun in its course shed the balm of its loveliness upon human hearts stricken with the bitterest draught of human agony.

Truly, the Cottonwood, the pioneer tree, will never lack voices to sing its praises or pay it tribute, for so long as the great state exists which it has so signally blessed, its hundreds of thousands of grateful people will honor it and sacredly guard it from the ashes of forgetfulness.

Truly, the Sunflower needed no statutory provisions nor formal adoption as the emblem of our state, for the Vox Populi selected it as the emblem of a state that through the refining influences of manifold difficulties overcome, "With heart within and God overhead," is pressing forward toward the star-crowned heights of her ambition. As a citizen of this great state, with pride in her glorious past and a firm and abiding faith that before her lies a still more glorious future in which her noble head will touch the stars toward which she has ever striven and with a profound reverence and love for them, realizing what they have bestowed in blessing upon her inhabitants, I take off my hat to the Sunflower and the Cottonwood—the pioneer flower and the pioneer tree of Kansas.