

# The Sunflower, Emblem of Kansas

by

Elizabeth Barnes<sup>4</sup>

“Miles and miles of gold and green  
Where the sunflowers blow  
In a solid glow.”

—Robert Browning

Evidently Robert Browning who was so enamoured with the beauty and the artistry of Italy, did not find that country standing alone in its contributions to loveliness.

We do not know if the poet was ever privileged to view the gorgeous panorama of gold that Kansas highways stage in September. We do not suppose he ever drove through Johnson County on one of those fall days of bright sunshine, blue skies and crisp air, when every road and path presents its colorful pageant of gold and blue and royal purple. If he had had this privilege, no doubt he would have taken that moment to pour out his joy in song.

Be that as it may, now that once more the fields and roadsides are bordered with masses of golden bloom, it is quite apparent why the sunflower was, inevitably, chosen as the state flower of Kansas.

Those legislators knew well what they were doing when, back in 1903, they sat down to consider, and came up with this official declaration:

“Whereas, Kansas has a native wild flower common throughout her borders, hardy and conspicuous, of definite, unvarying and striking shape, easily sketched molded and carved, having armorial capacities, ideally adapted for artistic reproduction, with its strong distinct disk and its golden circle of clear glowing rays—a flower that a child can draw on a slate, a woman can work in silk, or a man can carve on stone, or fashion in clay; and

“Whereas, This flower has to all Kansans a historic symbolism which speaks of frontier days, winding trails, pathless prairies, and is full of the life and glory of the past, the pride of the present, and richly emblematic of the majesty of a golden future, and a flower which has given Kansas the world-wide name, ‘The Sunflower State’; Therefore:

“Be it enacted by the Legislature of the State of Kansas: That the *Helianthus*, or wild native sunflower is hereby made, designed, and declared to be the state flower and floral emblem of the State of Kansas.”

The author of the law, Senator George P. Morehouse, at a banquet given the October following the passage of the act at the state encampment of the National Guard at Ft. Riley, eloquently elaborated on his choice for state flower:

“This native wild flower is common throughout our borders and is always hardy and conspicuous. It lifts its head in triumph along our most beautiful and classic valleys, and mingles its cheering light with the verdure of expanding prairies. The seasons have little effect on its coming, for it flourishes in time of flood, and the drought of arid summer adds to the multitude of its blossoms.

“It is of definite, unvarying and striking shape, ever faithful, whether gracing the beautiful gardens of the rich or lingering near the humble habitation of the poor.

Wherever reproduced, whether in color on canvas, worked in iron, or chisled in stone or marble, its identity is ever present. I am pleased to see that it has been wrought in bronze and, as a badge, decorates the new uniforms of the National Guard.

“It has marked the position of Kansas in many an imposing pageant. This flower has to every Kansan a historic symbolism. It speaks eloquently of frontier days when buds and blossoms of civilization were not numerous and when we were deprived of many of the refinements we now enjoy.

“The sunflower recalls paths and winding trails, and we are reminded of its golden lines of beauty, at times making their graceful turns over hill and vale, and breaking the dull monotony of many a prairie scene.

“It is not a blossom lingering a few brief hours, but lasts for a season. It gracefully nods to the caresses of the early morning zephyrs. Its bright face greets the rising orb of day, and faithfully follows him in his onward course through the blazing noontime, till the pink-tinted afterglow of sunset decorates the western sky and marks the quiet hour of eventide.

“Few can recall all the state favorites, but the entire nation knows that Kansas has the sunflower, and is the ‘Sunflower State.’ ”

There could scarcely have been a different choice for the state flower. For the sunflower has always been a part of Kansas. It was here when the first settler came. It grew and flourished along with the pioneer; with the first breaking of the soil by wagon wheels or by the plow, there the sunflower sprang up and blazed the way along the entire length of the Santa Fe Trail.

Wherever man came to sow and to reap, there waved that symbol of the fabled wealth which Coronado sought on Kansas soil. The sunflower kept pace with abundant crops. If a claim was abandoned, the sunflower remained to carry on, taking possession of deserted fields, and growing within the roofless walls of forsaken cabins.

History is filled with references to the sunflower. Apparently, it originated in South America, where it seems to have been highly esteemed by the Aztecs. These people were sunworshippers. In their temples the conquering Spanish found many images of the sunflower, wrought in pure gold.

The North American Indians cultivated the sunflower more than one thousand years ago, as is evidenced by the discovery of urns filled with sunflower seeds of the same species as those planted in gardens. These urns were found in the ruins of homes of the bluff dwellers of Missouri and Arkansas.

The early French Missionaries recorded that the Indians were fond of preparations made of sunflower seed meal. They also obtained oil by boiling the meal, and skimming off the oil, as it gathered on the surface.

Lewis and Clarke noted the abundance of the sunflower and its use by the Indians. In their journal of July 17, 1805, is found this entry:

“Along the bottoms, which have a covering of high grass, we observe the sunflower growing in abundance. The Indians of the Missouri, especially those who do not cultivate maize, make great use of the seed of this plant for bread, or in thickening their soup. They first parch, then pound it between two stones, until it is reduced to fine meal. Sometimes they add a portion of water, and drank it thus diluted.

“At other times, they add a sufficient portion of narrow-grease to reduce it to the consistency of common dough, and eat it in this manner. This last composition we preferred to all the rest, and thought it at that time a very palatable dish.”

All parts of the sunflower can be utilized. The seeds contain 20% of oil and 16% of protein. The oil can be used for table salads, and is said to be of equal merit with olive oil for that purpose. Sunflower seed oil can also be utilized in cooking, soapmaking and makes a useable fuel. The oil cake, which is the residue left over after the oil has been pressed out of the seed, makes a good feed for poultry and cattle. A yellow dye can be made from the bloom.

The sunflower plant, as a whole, provides good fodder for cattle. Sunflower silage is rated as containing 90% of the food value of corn silage.

By shredding the stalks and removing the fibers, a floss is obtained. The Chinese long ago discovered the toughness and pliability of this floss, and pressed it into service by combining it with silk to produce a more durable fabric.

The pith of the sunflower can be utilized as a valuable commodity, too. Much lighter than cork, it can serve several purposes. One of them has been its use in the manufacture of life jackets.

Is it any wonder, considering the sunflower's versatility, that it is cultivated as a valuable field crop in other lands?

Is it any wonder that reports of the first explorers back to Spain and France brought expeditions in search of the fabled gold to be found in the land of the Kansas? It was here all right, though in different form, from what the explorers expected.