



THE COTTONWOOD³

Populus deltoides and P. sargentii.

This tree can rightfully be called the "Pioneer Tree of Kansas." It was the cottonwood that gave the first shade and shelter to the early homesteaders of central and western Kansas. If the full truth were known it might honestly be said that the successful growth of the cottonwood grove on the homestead was often the determining factor in the decision of the homesteader to "stick it out until he could prove up on his claim."

The cottonwood might also be called the "Kansas Eucalyptus," for it grows more rapidly than any other of our native species. Under favorable conditions it makes a height growth of 6 to 12 feet per year, and an increase in diameter of fully an inch or more. It is a tree that attains a height of 80 or 90 feet with a clear trunk of 30 feet or more, and a diameter of 6 to 8 feet at the base.

The cottonwood is a tree of wide range of natural growth. It grows in all the states east of the Rocky Mountains. It is a tree that adapts itself to a variety of soil conditions. It makes its best growth on deep, rich, well-drained loam soils, but it also grows with remarkable rapidity on sand bars and along the sandy river channels throughout the state. It even thrives on strongly alkaline soils, but it also does not make the clear growth that is found on the fresher soils.

From the standpoint of lumber production there is not another tree that is adapted to growing in this state that will produce as great a yield of lumber in board feet as the cottonwood. Along creek or river channels, on overflow land suitable only for the production of timber crops, it is safe to estimate a yield of 12,000 to 15,000 board feet per acre from a full stand of cottonwoods at 25 to 30 years of age.

The cottonwood lumber is well suited for interior building purposes. For the framing, flooring and partitions in barns the cottonwood is superior in many ways to the pine and fir lumber that is on the market. Not only is cottonwood lumber valuable for farm building purposes, but it also has a very important place in the lumber trade. Cottonwood staves are the best staves available for flour barrels. The lumber is in great demand for chicken crates, egg crates, fruit and vegetable boxes.

Because of the hardiness of the cottonwood and the ease with which it can be grown, there are more groves of cottonwood trees throughout

—Photograph courtesy of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture.

central Kansas, than of any other species. These were planted by early settlers, 30 to 50 years ago, during the life of the "timber-claim act." The trees in these groves are reaching maturity and many have been cut and sawed into lumber.

The cottonwood is an easy tree to propagate. The seedlings can usually be found by the thousands along any creek or river channel. At 1 or 2 years of age these are suitable size for planting. If seedlings are not available, the trees can be readily grown from cuttings. These when planted in fresh, moist soil strike root readily and make from 4 to 6 feet of growth the first season. An acre or two of waste land, if planted to cottonwoods, will in a few years yield a surprising quantity of saw material.

THE COTTONWOOD IN KANSAS*

Since the Kansas legislature chose the cottonwood as the state's official tree, there has been a storm of discussion over the selection. Numerous persons, some of them in places of influence, have cast aspersions on the choice. It has been pointed out that the Kansas neighbors, Missouri with the hawthorn and Oklahoma with the redbud, have picked much prettier trees; that the cottonwood is a nuisance in some seasons of the year with its flying cotton; that it inclines to be ungainly in its proportions, soft of wood, easily broken, ragged in its old age, and plainly a plebian member of the arboreal family.

What these detractors of the cottonwood seem to forget is, that if ever a typical prairie state, as Kansas has been called, had a typical tree, it is the cottonwood. When the pioneers who fought the Indians and broke the sod, first came to the plains country, almost the only tree they knew was the cottonwood. Where the elm, the pine, the maple and other trees refused to grow, the cottonwood sent its questing roots deep enough into the thirsty soil to find moisture, and lifted its gallant light green top like a defiant banner against the winds, the heat and the cold of flat country.

The cottonwood was almost the only fuel the first homesteaders had, unless the buffalo chip be counted in that class. It furnished them their only shade. They used its trunk to make rafts and log cabins. Upon the tender, pulpy bark of its boughs, cut into the 4-foot lengths of "long fodder," their horses and even cattle subsisted when snow covered the ground and other feed was unavailable. Kansas has shown both imagination and loyalty to its traditions in selecting the cottonwood for its state tree.