

Spiny Globe-Trotter

► THE CACTUS FAMILY as a whole is pretty strictly American, and most of its 1500-odd species have remained in their native hemisphere. But a few kinds of the oval-jointed prickly-pear cactus have penetrated into practically every part of the world where the climate suits them. They have made themselves so thoroughly at home that in most places where they now grow they are regarded as part of the native vegetation.

In most places the prickly-pear cactus was introduced as a botanical curiosity for rock gardens, or possibly for its edible fruits. Once established, it has shown a mobility in migration astonishing in a plant not equipped with any special means of dispersal. Where it has been considered useful or ornamental, the cactus has of course had plenty of willing human aid; but it has also managed to spread over wide areas of semi-arid land where man-assisted propagation is out of the question.

Lack of special dispersal means may have been largely offset by the high survival ability of the plant. One of its leathery-skinned, succulent joints, chance-snagged on the wool of a sheep, might ride only a few hundred yards or at most a mile or so. But where it fell off it would not perish like the twig or leaf of an ordinary plant; it would strike root and grow up into a healthy, bristly cactus bush. The role of birds, rodents and other animals in carrying cactus seeds is not at all well known, but it must be of some significance.

In some of the lands to which it has been carried, prickly-pear has become a major pest. Most spectacular, of course, was the case of Australia, where the

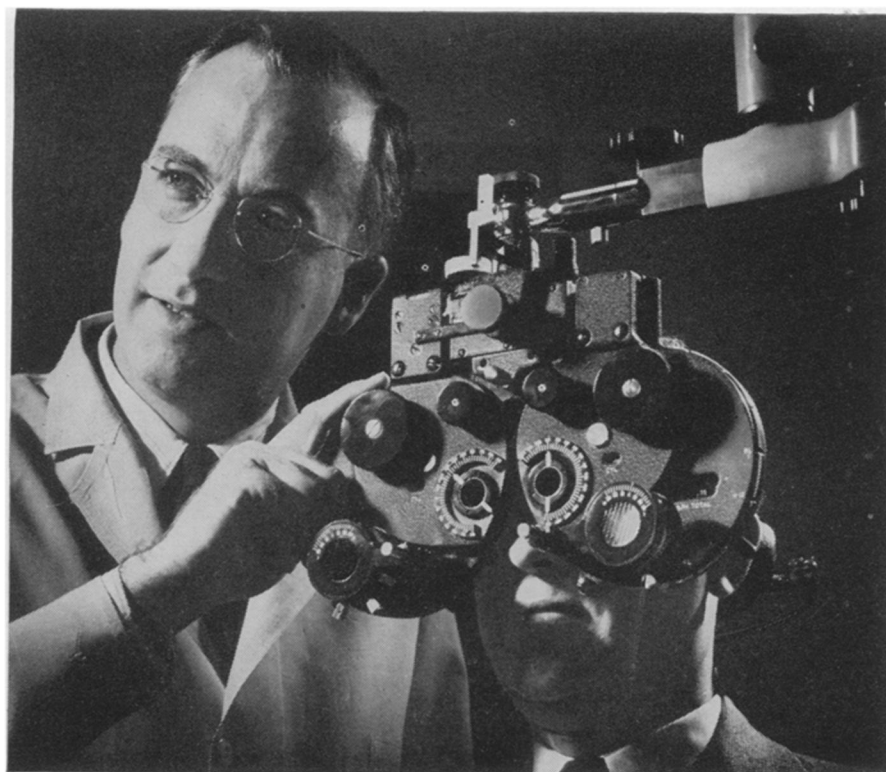
plant was rendering millions of acres of the best grazing and farm lands unusable. Importation of the cactus moth as a counter-pest came just in the nick of time. On the other hand, cactus is a prized hedge plant on Madagascar and one or two other tropical islands where cattle are numerous and have to be kept out of yards and gardens.

Prickly-pear cactus demonstrated its capacities as an emigrant plant very early. It appeared in the Mediterranean basin very soon after the discovery of America, and in a few decades was all over the

lands on both shores. It has become so common in Palestine, for example, that one of the most common of artists' anachronisms is to paint it into Biblical scenes as part of the landscape of 2,000 or more years ago.

Science News Letter, May 26, 1945

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