BOTANY

NATURE RAMBLINGS

by Frank Thone

"Leaves Three, Let It Be!"

POISON ivy vies with political speeches, just now, for the unenviable distinction of being Public Pest No. 1. You can't go out on a picnic yourself, you can't send your kids out to a camp, without the risk of having your household quiet upset for a week by an attack of the blistered, itching, red-skinned affliction known to the medical profession as rhus dermatitis, but to the laity as just plain ornery ivy poisoning.

Hardly a corner of the land escapes. Poison ivy grows all over the United States and Canada east of the Rockies. Its evil twin, poison oak, takes charge of the Pacific Coast region. And in Eastern boglands a third member of this criminal fraternity, poison sumac, holds its sway.

Eastern poison ivy and western poison oak look so much alike that it takes an expert to tell them apart. They are either low shrubs on the ground, or vines climbing trees and stone walls by means of thousands of short, clinging aerial roots. Each leaf is divided into three leaflets; whence the ancient doggerel warning, "Leaves three, let it be!" This distinguishes them from the American woodbine or Virginia creeper, which has five leaflets to a leaf: "Five fingers may handle five leaves." Both prefer open, moist woodlands—exactly where you like to picnic or camp.

Poison sumac is found only in the East, and only on the borders of acid bogs—in the same kind of soggy land where grow tamarack trees, skunk cabbage, and the purple pitcher-plant. It is more vicious than either poison ivy or poison oak, but attacks fewer people. It looks very much like common sumac, but differs in having drooping clusters of pallid, waxy berries, and a pale gray bark. Moreover, common sumac grows mostly on uplands, never in bogs.

All three of these plants are strictly American products. The first person ever to take notice of poison ivy in print was Captain John Smith. Noting that it differed little in appearance from English "yvie," the redoubtable Captain went on to state that it "causeth rednesse, itchynge, and finally blysters," but that if let alone the ailment presently went away of itself. Captain John Smith must have had a good tough hide.

Or he may have been one of the fortunate half-immune people. The three poison weeds affect different persons very differently. Some seem to be totally immune—though this immunity can never be depended on to last indefinitely. And immunity once lost is seldom recovered.

The poison of poison ivy and its kin-criminals is an oily substance related to carbolic acid. The leaves must be contacted to give you a "dose." Stories of ivy poison "caught" from just going near the plant most probably have some unknown or ignored element in them. Either the victim had previously rubbed against poison ivy somewhere else, without noticing it, or had handled some object that in turn had been in contact with poison ivy—garden tools, for example, or a picnic basket. It is even possible for an extremely susceptible person to be poisoned by shaking hands with an immune person who has been recklessly plucking poison-ivy leaves.

Remedies Aplenty

Fortunately, most poison ivy victims can get rid of their affliction in relatively short time, and it is even possible to prevent yourself from being poisoned at all. Something over 300 remedies have been proposed for ivy poisoning. Most of them of course are worthless, but there are several that really work.

A very good remedy, not as well known as it deserves to be, is a five per cent solution of potassium permanganate in water. You can mix this up yourself, or get your druggist to do it for you.

Poison Sumac

Puncture all blisters, and swab up their watery contents with absorbent cotton or sterile gauze. Then thoroughly moisten all poisoned skin areas with the solution. It will turn the skin brown, but this can be cleaned up after a time with lemon juice.

A highly successful preventive treatment is a five per cent solution of ferrous sulphate in a half-and-half mixture of water and alcohol, with a little glycerin added. Wash this solution on all exposed parts of the skin, before going into the woods. Do not rinse or dry the skin; let the solution dry in place. The iron in the compound unites with the poison and renders it insoluble and harmless. This "iron treatment" has been used by thousands of persons, and has given complete protection to all except a very few unlucky extreme-susceptibles.

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PALEONTOLOGY

60,000,000 Winters Leave Tiny Skeleton Unharmed

MORE than sixty million Wyoming winters have had little effect on the skeleton of a small, rat-sized animal which has been discovered by Dr. Glenn L. Jepsen, of the Princeton University geology department, and his associates.

The specimen, which was alive in the paleocene epoch, at the very dawn of the Age of Mammals, has been so perfectly preserved that even the hyoid bones of the throat, scarcely an eighth of an inch long and no larger in diameter than an ordinary horsehair, are undamaged.

It was found in the Big Horn Basin of Wyoming by the Scott Fund Expedition of the University, under the direction of Dr. Jepsen. The bones have just been removed from the rocky matrix in which they were imbedded, and Albert Thompson, of the American Museum of Natural History, who aided in this work, declared it was the most difficult he has ever done.

Only a few toes are missing from the skeleton which, judging from the length of the hind legs, was that of a leaping animal similar to the modern lemur. It is by far the most complete skeleton of that age yet found.

Several skulls and a great many jaws were also uncovered by the expedition, which will continue its researches in vertebrate paleontology this summer under a grant from the American Philosophical Society.

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