

## AMERICAN LOTUS, FAMED PLANT OF GRASS LAKE, ILLINOIS, IS ERRATIC IN DISTRIBUTION

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In a collection of plants sent recently to Field Museum by Brother Elias of Barranquilla, Colombia, is the first specimen of the American lotus (*Nelumbo pentapetala*) that the writer has ever seen from South America. It comes from the lower valley of the Magdalena River, from which the plant had, however, been reported previously.

The American lotus, a plant quite different from the classic lotus of the Nile, although of the same family, is of exceptional interest from the standpoint of distribution. In the Chicago region it is rare, and it is widely believed that it is known only from the celebrated locality of Grass Lake, northwest of Chicago.

Every August, many thousands of people visit that lake to see this showy plant in blossom. Each season Field Museum receives inquiries regarding the plant and its distribution, for it has often been stated by the uninformed that Grass Lake is the only known locality for the lotus, or that it is the only American locality at which the Egyptian lotus is found. Both of these statements must be labeled altogether erroneous.

As a matter of fact, the American lotus has a wide distribution in North

America, west to Nebraska, Missouri, and Texas, and eastward to Florida and the Atlantic coast. However, its occurrence is so erratic as to arouse speculation. Even in the vicinity of Chicago it probably is not confined to Grass Lake. Indeed, I have been told by an old settler that formerly it was extremely abundant in the Calumet River and its marshes, but has been destroyed, apparently by industrial operations.

It is generally common in certain extensive regions such as along the flood plain of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers in Missouri, where there are many miles of swampland crowded with it. It seems probable that the plant may be a native primarily of the Mississippi Valley. In the eastern states, as well as in some regions of the central ones, the plant is quite as localized as in the Chicago region. I recall that near the city of Washington, D.C., it is known in only one locality, but there it is plentiful. The same is true in many other eastern regions.

This erratic distribution is believed to have arisen from the fact that the plant was a food staple of the Indians, who ate the seeds and also the very thick and succulent rootstocks. Doubtless on their travels they carried the small, hard seeds, which, if they are like those of their Asiatic relatives, have greater longevity than any other seeds known, from one place to another, to plant them for food. Except by human intervention, the seeds probably are not easily diffused, and it thus happens that in one region, lotus plants are found now in a single lake or pond, although many others equally suitable for growth may be near-by.

The American lotus is not confined, in-

are known to have traveled on foot for great distances, and a journey from Texas or Oklahoma to Mexico and Honduras is quite within reason. How the plant reached the Magdalena Valley is less easily explained.

## PLANT SPECIMENS ENDURE CENTURIES

The lotus brings to mind another interesting subject. Botanists often are asked how long a pressed and dried herbarium specimen will last. A herbarium, appropriately called in early botanical literature a *hortus siccus*—dry garden—is a rather recent device; but well preserved specimens three hundred years old, and probably some that are considerably older, exist. More than that, I have seen dried garlands taken from

Egyptian tombs about 4,000 years old. These garlands had been moderately pressed, whether during their long storage or after their removal in modern times, I do not know. At any rate, the lotus leaves and flowers in them, while discolored and faded, as are most very old herbarium specimens, preserved perfectly their form and texture, and were not inferior in preservation to ordinary herbarium specimens ten years old. Despite the fact that they had been stored in sealed tombs, they must nevertheless have

been accessible to ordinary atmospheric changes. It therefore is evident that no limit can be placed on the time for which a herbarium specimen, moderately well protected, may be preserved. There is no material reason why the specimens now in the Herbarium of Field Museum should not be still in existence and useful for study three thousand years from now.

## Research on Asterism

Studies of the cause of asterism (the appearance of a luminous star) in gems, carried out by Dr. Albert J. Walcott in the Department of Geology at Field Museum, are attracting much favorable attention from those interested in gemmology. Fine examples of these stars appear in sapphire, garnet, and crystal in the gem room (H. N. Higinbotham Hall—Hall 31).

The principal commercial woods of the Amazon Valley are displayed in Hall 27.



Illustration by courtesy of Antioch (Illinois) Lions Club

## Part of Lotus Beds at Grass Lake

These showy plants are at their best in August, when thousands of persons visit this celebrated locality, which is easily reached from Chicago by automobile or other means of transportation. The round trip may be made in a day.

deed, to the United States, but its occurrence elsewhere is so strange as to cause further speculation. It is known from Cuba and the Dominican Republic, and from Mexico, both in the Tampico region and far away in the State of Sinaloa. Far south of there it abounds in Lake Yojoa in central Honduras. Its next jump is to the lower part of the Magdalena Valley in distant Colombia. Of course, it is not improbable that it might be found in intervening areas, but so far, if one may depend upon records, it has not, and it is a large and conspicuous plant not easily overlooked.

It is dangerous to venture theories regarding plant distribution. At best, these are matters of speculation. The lotus is so abundant in the Mississippi Valley that one would suppose that to be its center of dispersal. It may well be that the colonies in Mexico and Honduras descended from seeds carried thither by Indian merchants hundreds of years ago. Such merchants





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