

# By Two Canadian Trails in Late August

by the late Dr. H. M. Speechly

Reprinted from the *Country-side Monthly*, December, 1910

In Western Canada there are two kinds of trails which are full of interest to the field botanist who usually is some busy person engaged in strenuous work, but who does not disdain this glorious opportunity for observation as a "side-line" far more attractive than any other; for, of course, we have no professional field botanists on our trails. No, we Westerners are too materialistic to bother about "weeds." Thus it comes that locally the present writer is known more or less humorously as the "Canary and Weed Man." Content am I.

Let us take the trail that is newly-graded first, a trail that for the purpose of travel is torn straight out of the heart of the 99-foot road allowance, or public road, which actually or in theory runs parallel to, and outside of, each side of each section of land. This grade slopes gently from its centre 15 or 20 feet on either side to a shallow ditch in such a manner as to allow water to run off easily, but at the same time to permit vehicles, loaded or unloaded, to pass each other conveniently. Supposing such a graded trail to have been graded in the previous fall there will be provided a beautiful seed-bed of black loam for the growth of wild annuals and perennials during the next spring, which will flower luxuriantly for the next two summers at least. In late August, when driving along such prairie trails, I feel as if I were some minor potentate making a royal progress among friends, not subjects. Sunflowers are perhaps the tallest and most conspicuous, casting bright yellow glances all up and down their stout stems, which bow and bend most gracefully without any obsequious touch. And all about them wave plumes of golden-rod (*Solidago canadensis*), those stippled plumes of even brighter yellow which, in tier upon tier, top stout leafy stems of rougher type, supplying that frequent contrast in nature of delicate traceries associated with strong rough outlines. There is no lack of green background to all the colour supplied by the yellows and the purples, such as, the purples of

the ever-present willow herbs, which mingle with golden-rod or sunflower all over this continent in August, whether in the forest, bush, or prairie. Stately among the green are the oraches, green even to their spiked clusters of small sessile flowers, waving broad leaves like elephantine ears in friendly salute to the admiring gaze. Pigweeds, indeed! No, sir, call them sonorously by their botanical name, *Chenopodium atriplex*, and there you have a name with something to suit their majestic appearance, which dwarfs the minor beauty of their cousins, the lamb's-quarters, whose pyramidal growth is nevertheless quite imposing sometimes. In and out of these flit the vesper sparrows at sunrise and again when the sun is getting low on the horizon.

Nodding amid this greenery are heads of both tame and wild oats; and even stray heads of No. 1 hard wheat stand in ornamental clumps at frequent intervals. Another fine touch of bright colour is supplied by the peculiar shade of purple—is it a purple or is it not nearer a French gray?—of the purple aster, which in the old land is so popularly known as the Michaelmas daisy. Alas, by Michaelmas some mean frost has usually destroyed these beauteous clumps which, like the smell of potato haulms touched by the frost, recall memories of the allotments by the village green, the old church tower, the door opening through the red brick wall, and the leaves of walnuts floating on to the tennis court and the lawn!

Sometimes these asters mingle in sheets with sunflowers and golden-rods away across the prairie; sometimes they alternate with the daisy fleabane along the trail suggesting the cool colouring of blue and white porcelain vases. Often, and quite in the background, the tall evening primrose droops gracefully, and now flowering almost at its highest point shows a much less significant bloom than those cultivated varieties also so common in old country gardens; but at this season its lower leaves are turning colour so as to supply that



attractive scarlet tinge which alone the painted cup (*Castilleja coccinea*) supplies in other parts of Manitoba and the West. Quite cypress-like are the false tansies (*Artemisia biennis*) which row upon row shoulder out all other growths by their rank, pushing pyramids, so aromatic and pungent to the scent when bruised by the wheels. How their strong stems tinkle against the axles! Here and there their cousins the fireweeds (*Erechtites*) are becoming hoary with age.

Now for a time we leave the taller herbs and drive through a sea of yellow gum weed (*Grindelia squarrosa*) whose buds are sticky and scented as if with furniture polish. Very brilliantly against these shine spikes of *Liatris scariosa*, the blazing star, whose bright purple-crimson knobs are not the least suggestive of any kind of star. A few spikes of the cool French-gray flower heads of the wild mint still rise above their dark green clumps and set off here and there the late bloom of a seedling wild rose. Ah me, how lovely is that bluish-pink or that red as red as blood! The older bushes of the prairie rose are now full of hips of a shining polished vermilion hue so attractive to our childish days when we nibbled off the sweet outer rind only to be irritated with the hairy seeds within.

The low marshy spots are crossed by small wooden culverts and bordered by lush banks of knotweed (*Polygonum persicaria*) bright with pink spikes of bloom. On drier spots a deceptive impression of frost catches the eye where the silverweed spreads its fern-like foliage, and here and there its later blooming cousin, *Potentilla gracilis*, sprawls in bushy fashion dotted with tiny yellow blooms. Among them all the ball mustard rears its elegant candelabra of seeds and the tumbling mustard prepares its mazy wheel. Was it this weed, in the West a noxious weed, which inspired the hot-blooded Psalmist to exclaim: "O, my God, make them like unto a wheel!"? Or even if you say it is better translated, "like the whirling dust," both are familiar phenomena to the Western settler. In the fall the tumbling mustard breaks its stem near the ground and like a crinoline let loose bowls across the unbroken prairie and the cultivated fields alike

gradually dropping off its seeds; "the seeds as in many 'tumbling weeds' are not easily shed from the rough pods; consequently a head of this weed may blow about the prairie for the whole winter, dropping a few seeds at intervals for many miles." I make this quotation from the book on "Farm Weeds of Canada," published at the office of the Superintendent of Stationery, Government Printing Bureau, Ottawa, in order to let our readers know that such an admirable book exists. The letterpress is by the late Dr. Fletcher—the really great naturalist, ever-lamented by farmer and scientist alike—and by Mr. George H. Clarke, B.S.A.; but the excellent coloured illustrations are by Mr. Norman Criddle, of Aweme in Manitoba, a near neighbour of mine, as he lives only about 50 miles northwest of Pilot Mound. If we have a better all-round naturalist than Mr. Criddle in the Northwest, I have not heard of him yet. The book will cost you not more than five shillings, including postage, as the price is a dollar.

After this digression, just let us stop the horse and notice that, though it is a calm day and straw piles are altogether too precious this season to burn, all round the horizon are columns not of smoke but of whirling dust, which twist and twirl and progress for miles, now collapsing to the ground, now raising a canopy high in the air, so you Westerners can choose what translation of Psalms 83 and 13 you please.

At this time of the year the telephone poles are favourite perching places for young sparrow hawks as well as the offspring of the larger members of the hawk tribe; and to a casual glance, in colour quite like the surface of the trail, are the mourning doves which feed all along the road and fly off with the quick beating flight of the pigeon tribe.

Perhaps, however, my favourite trail in late August is that north trail which skirts Barbour's Lake and which though comfortably graded has not been despoiled of all its bush. Both in the late days of August and the first days of September this trail shows signs of the passing of summer and the coming of fall. On the tranquil bosom of the lake the ducks collect their fledglings safe from the gun. The nighthawks and the swal-



lows are all on the southward move. Like bright torches the ashes all too early flame yellow among the green poplars, and where clearings have been made the crimson flush of fading underbrush begins to burn. But it is north of the lake where the chief attraction lies for me. At this time of the year the alteration of clearings with untouched bush preserves the late flowers from blighting wind and frost, while the very openness of the clearings brings out most brightly the puce-purple of the dogwood clumps, the brilliant scarlets of the little cherry trees, the mingled crimsons, browns, yellows and green of the seedling oaks, the deep crimson of the highbush cranberry, and perhaps brightest of all, the fiery scarlet which paints tiny gooseberry bushes with unwonted splendour. Mixed wonderfully with these are leaves of all sorts still green or beginning to yellow with age on poplars, Balm of Gilead, hazel and saskatoon. Here, too, the late asters join with tall sheaves of golden-rod to produce their lovely contrasts of purple. White asters also vie with here we find the handsome New England aster whose rays around a yellow disc are more crimson than purple. While asters also vie with the daisy fleabane in luxuriance. It is odd, however, that people long resident in Manitoba travel up and down that trail without ever noticing one of the chief beauties of its late flowering season.

After the middle of August only the watchful eye catches sight of that fine blue which is the chief glory of the gentian tribe. It is the closed or bottle gentian (*G. andrewsii*) which coyly peeps among the herbage showing now a light porcelain blue corolla tipped with white, tight closed except at the tip, whence peer the stamens or the stigma. Sometimes the blue approaches ultra-marine, at other times the colour is an intense violet-blue. Usually from five to seven flowers are crowded in a terminal cluster, but often lower down the stalk one or two additional clusters grow from the bases of the oval leaves, which sometimes are quite rusty. The fringed gentians, loving dry meadows and wayside places, do not frequent the damp places beloved by the closed gentian. Here the bumble bee finds its last feast of the season within these walls which

allow it entry and probably it alone. Let me end by quoting Elaine Goodale's lines, which though written for the fringed gentian and for "down East" have some relation to our present theme:

Along the quiet road, winding slow,  
When free October ranged its sylvan  
ways,  
And, vaulting up the terraced steep  
elbow,  
Chased laughing sunbeams through  
the golden days,  
In matchless beauty, tender and  
serene,  
The gentian reigned an undisputed  
queen.

**Editor's Note:** We are indebted to Thomas Heaslip, Loughries, County Down, North Ireland, for sending us the interesting description of prairie roadsides in autumn reprinted above. We are indebted to R. D. Symons, our conservation chairman, for the following information about Dr. Speechly which he obtained from the Public Press and from Dr. Speechly's daughter. Mr. Symons corresponded with Dr. Speechly in 1913, 1914, and 1915 and received much help and encouragement in his bird studies from Dr. Speechly.

### Dr. H. M. SPEECHLY 1866-1951

Author of *By Two Canadian Trails in Late August*

Dr. H. M. Speechly was born in India in 1866 where his father was Bishop of Travancore. He was educated in England and received his professional training at London Hospital.

After practising in England, Dr. Speechly came to Canada in 1901 and settled in Pilot Mound, Manitoba. His garden there was a veritable park, illustrating what could be done to beautify property on the prairie. For years he kept official records of bird migration and became an acknowledged authority on natural history. His articles in *The Grain Growers' Guide* and *The Northwest Farmer* were widely read in the western provinces.

In 1916, Dr. Speechly went to England on overseas service, returning in 1919 to practise medicine in Winnipeg. In 1929, he was appointed Provincial Coroner which office he filled with distinction until his retire-