

## CHAPTER V

### MAHOGANY AND CEDRELA

Mahogany is common in south Florida. It is spreading naturally wherever it has a chance. Only a hundred miles across the Strait of Florida is the Island of Andros, a British possession, long famous for the quality of its mahogany. It is almost identical with what is produced on the Florida Keys and Cape Sable Region. A large part of the tree is usually left in the woods. They are going back after the stumps which are close to tide water. There are a lot of woods which masquerade under the name of mahogany, but I know of only two kinds, the one yielded by *Swietenia mahagoni* of Florida and the West Indies and *Swietenia macrophylla* of Central America.

The wood of the mahogany tree, in fact of every tree that I know of, varies very much depending upon the climate and soil conditions in which it grows. The mahogany will grow on hot limestone rocks, in brackish soil, close to the sea, in little islands in salt mangrove swamps, in places subject to strong winds, in the shade of other trees, in fact under all kinds of adverse conditions except fire and cold. The slower it grows the heavier and more beautiful the wood. Mahogany is usually a rich, reddish brown not unlike the complexion of a healthy red Indian. According to an official color scale, twenty-five parts red, sixty-four black and eleven orange = acajou; eighty-five black, fifteen orange = mahogany; and eighty-three black, four red and thirteen orange = mahogany brown. A good rich mahogany color is hard to excel. As they say in Spanish America, "a tired red horse is a dead horse." Although mahogany is cold to the

touch, there is often a luster in its grain which is called "fire." Some of the bird's-eye mahogany may be due to sapsucker holes. I have seen many mahoganies badly ringed by sap-suckers. In countries where it is common, it is used for everything, even fuel and shingles. I remember once seeing a pig pen in Pinar del Rio constructed of mahogany poles. In many cases the grain consists of bands of color and not actual rings. The wood must dry before it will float and some of the best wood used in boat construction is "mud-seasoned." Thus buried in mud, a slow osmotic action occurs which produces a wood of superior grade.

In short, the oldtime simon-pure mahogany grows in Florida. It is native here and the wood although hard and heavy, is of superior quality. It is the prince of hardwoods, in short, the yardstick for cabinet woods throughout the world. It was the first tropical cabinet wood used in Europe. Some of the old furniture constructed years ago has an almost priceless value. In some of the negro cabins in the West Indies there are big, old-time four-posters that were passed on to the workers when the big plantations grew up to weeds, when their masters passed on or were forced to move to fresh pastures. This tree will grow on old canal banks or on slight elevations in the Everglades. Lake Okeechobee is probably its northern limits, although there are mahogany trees in the Bermudas.

Years ago I shipped Florida mahogany to New York. They found all kinds of fault with it. They claimed it had black spots in it, was too hard and heavy, etc. If marked from Andros Island or shipped from Liverpool it would have had a better chance. A specimen sent to the Paris Exposition from Key Largo was classified the same as San Domingan mahogany and marked "excellent for the manufacture of high-grade furniture." Mahogany has been used with good results in the French West Indies as a shade for

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chocolate. In the British West Indies, it adds about an inch in diameter each year. It seeds freely in large pods as big as turkey eggs. The seed is winged like that of the maple and when it drops rotates. This delays the fall so that the chances of distribution by the wind are increased.

On many little coral islands in South Florida and the West Indies there are many little mahogany trees. If furnished half a chance they will prosper.

The grain of the wood depends very much upon checks on growth. This may be due to periods of drought, seed years, or even perhaps to the influence of the moon. The mahogany grown in India is from seeds shipped from the Western Hemisphere. They gather the seeds and ship them to seed stores in this country to be sold in their own homeland.

Students of the periodicity of leaf fall in Ceylon, which has to do with the grain of the wood, since everything that happens to the tree of any nature whatsoever is recorded like a diary in its wood say however, that there are certain personal or internal forces at work within the tree in the Tropics which may cause it to do certain things regardless of the climate. These influences in the Tropics may be very evident especially when the tree is not severely checked by such forceful factors as severe cold or drought. Closely related to mahogany, there are other very quick growing woods, light in weight and fragrant, which may have the same kind of grain, but will not have such a polish or hold so well with glue. Light furniture is the kind which gets roughly handled. The heavier the wood the less they are moved. These are, however, good woods such as the toon-cedar of the Philippines, *Cedrela odorata*, the Spanish-cedar, *Cedrela braziliensis*, the acajou, *Gaurea trichilioides*, the gauraguao of Puerto Rico, *Soymida febrifuga* of India, *Khaya senegalensis* of Africa and countless others unsurpassed for the production of wood of a very high grade, in fact, unsurpassed by

any other order of plants. A certain percentage of Spanish cedar is allowed in almost all cargoes of mahogany and since so much of it is used in the manufacture of cigar boxes and boats in Florida and the West Indies, its propagation should be encouraged wherever it can be grown. These light woods are gradually replacing the oldtime mahogany. They are easier to work and for that reason can be produced in greater quantity in the same length of time. It is speed and not durability, mass production and not quality that is characteristic of modern times.

Continuous and constant demand for such woods as Spanish-cedar for cigar boxes, pencil-cedar for pencils, even common pine for orange crates, slowly but surely eats into our supply of woods for special purposes. They will be sorely missed some day. Even now various trades are searching for suitable substitutes. In the case of cheap cigars they are using poplar and other white woods and pasteboard on which they print with considerable skill the grain of the true cigar box cedar wood. In some cases cedar oil has been used to give to other woods the fragrance that belongs to cedar. Most oldtime smokers want a cigar box of true Spanish-cedar because it is supposed to repel bugs and increase the fragrance of the cigar. Its virtues are now retained with a foil wrapper or a celophane covering. This probably does little good insofar as the cigarette beetle is concerned since he infests many cigar factories, his eggs are wrapped in the cigar and in time eats his way out. Cedar oil probably has little effect on a bug that chews tobacco. When a cigar is being smoked and there is a slight unexpected sizzle it is probably a beetle that is being exploded by the heat.

In all parts of the Caribbean region except South Florida and the Bahamas the cigar-box-cedar is an intimate consort of the mahogany and was at one time abundant. They are closely related and usually grow together. Any of the trees which flourish in the

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Bahamas, Cuba and Yucatan are also usually at home in South Florida. But the **cigar-box-cedar** is also absent from the Bahamas and Puerto Rico. Cigar boxes like most crates and boxes are never used a second time. In the case of cheap inferior wood this matters very little because inferior waste wood may be used, but the cigar box is high grade wood, as high grade as mahogany, and although there is not much wood in a cigar box, like pencils, matches, and tooth-picks the drain on the supply is very constant and steady.

There is not a great difference in the capabilities of South Florida, the Bahamas, Western Cuba and Yucatan. Geologically at one time they formed one solid land and are all parts of the same great rock mass much of which is now covered with water with the highest parts in the form of islands still uncovered. This is the real reason for the similarity of vegetation of Cuba, South Florida, the Bahamas and Yucatan.

The soft, fragrant wood of the Spanish-cedar was in such demand that it was quickly exterminated, mainly for the manufacture of cigar boxes.

The seeds are winged, light and easily transported by the wind. I have seen them germinating in the crevices of rocks even in the rock of walls and houses. This together with the fact that it grows quickly in these regions when it is planted would seem to indicate that its absence from many places is more of a marvel than its presence. It is true that only a small quantity of wood is consumed in a cigar box, but the high grade Cuban cigar carefully packed in these fragrant boxes has for many years gone to the most particular of smokers throughout the whole world. I doubt if there is any place on earth where modern trains or steamers go that choice Havana cigars in cedar boxes may not be found. Many of the cigars imported into Europe from the East Indies are hermetically sealed in tin cans. A first class Havana cigar would look cheap and undesirable in anything

but a neat cedar box. Much of the joy of smoking is imaginary anyway and the man who uses tobacco will use any kind in a pinch, even substitutes if necessary, but the majority of men are fooled if the product is well packed in a neat cedar box. I think the majority would pick a poor cigar from a good box rather than a good cigar from a tin can. Since the cigar box cedar is the acceptable time-tested wood for this purpose, there is every reason why countries like Cuba and Florida with many acres of wasteland well fitted for its growth should be planting it wholesale to supplement their great cigar industry.

There is no special significance to the word "cedrela", the name of this genus. It is probably just a modification of the word "cedrus", the Latin for cedar. Linnaeus, the great Swedish physician, the man who gave order and system to living things, naming thousands of plants and animals from all the world dubbed the genus "cedrela", just as we name children and Pullman cars.

Of these living things on earth which are gradually passing under the juggernaut of modern industry, we are only custodians. Use or usufruct does not mean destruction. When a living creature is completely destroyed, like the dodo, it is gone forever. It can never be duplicated except in pictures. All these things have great educational and scientific value, even if they cannot be used in industry.

The cigar-box-cedar is called "acajou" by the French, but the Spanish refer to it in an affectionate and appreciative way. They speak of it as "cedro-dulce", "sweet-cedar", "cedro-real", "royal-cedar", "cedro-fino", "fine-cedar" and "cedro-odoroso", or fragrant-cedar. In Mexico in one place it is referred to as "nogal-cimarron", or mountain-walnut. The best common name is Spanish-cedar.

The old Spaniard, Oviedo, was no doubt the first man to mention this tree in writing in North America. Although not always reliable in his statements, he

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says, "In Hispaniola and other islands and on the mainland there are certain trees, which, because they have a pleasant odor, the Christians call 'cedro'; in truth, I do not believe they are cedars, but because the wood has a better odor than that of other trees, our carpenters have given it this name." This is probably the first mention of this tree as cedar. It has no resemblance to our northern cedar-trees and might be far more aptly called by its Mexican name "mountain-walnut". It is a beautiful broad-spreading tree resembling a walnut. It is easily propagated from cuttings and seeds, is a very quick grower and second only to its great consort, the mahogany.

This tree is not confined to the Caribbean region. A tree very similar in character grows in the jungles of Brazil. Of late a wood very like this cedar is being shipped into the United States of America under the name of **Philippine-mahogany**. It is used in furniture-manufacture and in boat-building. It is extensively used for the latter purpose in this region. The use of the word "mahogany" in this connection has even caused lawsuits. It is really not a mahogany although it belongs to the same family as does mahogany. Both belong to the **China-tree** or **China-berry** family with which all southerners are familiar. It is a cedrela, the same as the cigar-box-cedar. It is sometimes called "toon-cedar" and in northern Australia it is called "red-cedar." The term "mahogany" should not be applied to anything except to species of the genus "swietenia". The tropical cedar should be called "cedrela". Although dense cedrela wood may look like and even be substituted for mahogany it is cedrela and not mahogany to the botanist. The word "cedar" is so loosely applied to about fifty or more species of trees distantly related that it has no botanical significance. Because of its oily nature the cigar-box-cedar is inferior to mahogany for cabinet work. Although it is more widely distributed than other tropical timber trees, there are no new planta-

tions that I know of anywhere in the American Tropics. As in the case of mahogany, the methods of logging are very crude and wasteful. The supply of cigar-box-cedar from many parts of the Tropics is decreasing mainly because of increased local demands. Many tropical peoples are learning the futility of exchanging tropical cedar for common pine from the North. I remember years ago that a hardware firm located amid many choice tropical woods in Brazil, requested that boxes of cheap hemlock in which hardware was packed, be put together with screws instead of nails since they used the wood for picture frames and other articles of decoration. This illustrates the point that anything plentiful and common in your home section, no matter how suitable and useful, is given second place to things from a distance. Although no better or not so good they are different.

The Conservator of Forests for British Honduras in referring to Spanish cedar says, "It occurs and is worked in conjunction with mahogany, to which it is closely related botanically, constituting about three per cent of the total output of both timbers. The wood is noted for its fragrance, durability and ease of working, and is in demand in the United Kingdom for river-boat building. Locally it is used for dugouts and cabinet-making. It can be readily veneered as it takes glue particularly well, and is often highly figured, particularly in the buttresses and burls."

As he says in the above, it is readily veneered, but I have never been able to see the sense in this veneer business. It saves expensive lumber, but it is not solid and true. It is what it is, just a veneer. In almost every case it peels off in time and I, for one, would rather have cheap solid pine than pine with a cedar or mahogany veneer.

Wherever the cigar box cedar trees have been planted in this section they have flourished. The seeds have germinated naturally in the neighborhood



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of mother trees and if there were more of them it is more than likely that it would spread naturally of its own accord and in the course of time become a naturalized citizen. In a very short time it would yield wood big enough for cigar boxes and other small ornamental objects. One tree which I planted, reached a diameter of sixteen inches in ten years, but owing to its exposed position was uprooted by a hurricane. It needs to be planted in forest formation in combination with such sturdy veterans as our native mahogany.

We have most excellent soft woods in the form of cypress, white-cedar and pencil-cedar, but none of these can replace the cigar-box-cedar, because of use association over a period of several generations. A high-class cedar box usually means a good cigar. This use-association is time honored and so deeply rooted in the mind of the public that it requires generations to establish substitutes. The cedar cigarbox for good cigars will probably continue just as long as the supply of this species lasts, to be finally replaced by the metal container.