

CHAPTER VIII

THE SWEET GUM AND OTHER SOUTHERN SWAMP PRODUCTS

The liquidamber and witchhazel are closely related and although the witchhazel is a strictly northern tree, the liquidamber is not. The witchhazel yields, when the bark is distilled in diluted alcohol, one of those soothing decoctions dear to the heart of almost every American. They say there is nothing in it of special virtue, yet it is one of those time-honored, time-tried lotions that will probably always last as long as the witchhazel-tree survives. Maybe the liquidamber has the same properties. Around it clusters also another mystery. A forked witchhazel stick has long been a favorite divining rod. This may have something to do with its interesting name.

The real subject of this chapter is its near relative, in fact the other native member in this country of the witchhazel family, the liquidamber. This tree is common throughout the South, known to everybody and has lately become the second most important hardwood timber in this country. It grows in wet places and strange to say reappears in the highlands of Southern Mexico and Guatemala. In this region the gum of this tree is highly prized as a medicine by the natives. It grows everywhere on the Gulf Coast and as far north as New York, and yet I have never seen a single specimen in South Florida. The tree is commonly known as "red-gum" or "sweet-gum" and for a long time was not considered worth much till hardwood became scarce. In fact this tree, although one of the commonest, was hardly discovered until lately.

It reproduces itself vigorously and has escaped destruction by fire because it is not easily killed. It has a very sticky gum, a corky bark and lives in wet, sour soil.

All of us remember this striking tree with its spiny seed pods which they string into ropes for decoration, with its curious twigs covered with ridges of corky bark, with its sweet sticky gum and above all in Autumn with its unsurpassed brilliancy of coloring. It has star-shaped leaves and will grow in sandy or swampy soil and is excellent as a wayside tree in places where other trees would fail to grow. This tree is called "bilsted" in some places, in fact has many local names but none better than liquidamber. It is called by this name in Oaxaca, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, although it has many strange Indians names which are impossible to pronounce.

The Indians of Central America and Mexico appreciated and used the gum of this tree long before the Spaniards landed, and appreciate and use the gum for remedial purposes more than we do, although there is no commoner tree in the Southern States. The only way I can account for its absence in South Florida is the fact that our soils are alkaline and this no doubt is one of the trees that grows best in the acid soils of our flatwoods and swamps. If any plant hunter unfamiliar with this tree were to meet it in the forests of Guatemala he would eagerly collect the seeds for introduction into this country.

The gum is the storax of commerce. The natives of the Tropics rub it on flesh wounds of horses and cattle. The mahogany cutters, if they injure themselves, apply this remedy. The Indians mixed it with chicle-gum and chewed it to preserve their teeth. Heretofore storax has been imported from the Orient. It is yielded by the Asiatic liquidamber. Storax has been used in pharmaceutical preparations, adhesives, incense, perfumes, soaps, glove powders and for flav-

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oring tobacco. We have imported storax for many years from the Orient. Although it is yielded by a liquidamber that resembles our own species, the local industry never developed. Now, however, that we are having hard times and people are hunting here and there for a means to earn a few dollars the industry has developed to such extent that the American storax market is over-stocked.

The first production of tung-oil has been shipped out of Florida. The imported storax is no longer needed and with the development of ramie culture in the South, China will soon be deprived of her best market for odds and ends. In fact these hard times force us to hunt in our own woods for many essential oils and medicines of various kinds instead of buying them in foreign lands. It is foolish to buy storax in the Orient with hundreds of wild liquidambers growing in great profusion throughout the swamps of our South. This was not an exclusive Oriental discovery. The Indians of Mexico and Central America knew of it ages ago.

We have a species of Ilex or holly (*Ilex vomitoria*) which yields a tea equal to the famous maté of Paraguay. We have a tree called the Georgia-fever-bark (*Pinckneya pubens*) named for Pinckney, the South Carolina revolutionary patriot, which was used for the treatment of malaria when quinine could not be had. Unfortunately this tree is rare and local and was probably almost exterminated for medicinal purposes. The famous princewood (*Exostema caribaeum*) common on the Keys and in the West Indies is another most excellent bitter tonic. These trees belong to the Rubiaceae, the same family to which coffee and quinine belong. We should endeavor to make the most of all these native things before it is too late. Hidden in these swamps and hammocks are many useful things that may furnish industry to our people and relieve us of the necessity of buying imported products which may be inferior. Many of these native

products have never been tested and have never gained access to the channels of trade.

Princewood, which is quite common on the Keys, has been extensively collected and sold for medicinal purposes. It is sometimes called "Jamaica-bark" or "West-India-bark."

The beautiful *lignum-vitae* which grows on the Keys and is so famous for the hardness and toughness of its wood, gets its name *lignum-vitae* or "wood-of-life" from the fact that its gum was at one time supposed to cure all the ills that man is heir to. It is still much used in medicine with good effects in several ailments.

The bark of the *Jamaica-dogwood* has strong narcotic effects. The berries of the *cabbage-palmetto* are useful in bladder troubles. In fact in our native Southern flora there are many very useful tree products that have been up to date wholly neglected. Dr. Charles Mohr was one of the pioneer foresters of the United States. After many travels throughout the world he started a drug business in the city of Mobile. During the Civil War he was employed by the Confederate Government to manufacture drugs from native sources and to test the medicinal preparations smuggled into this country from Europe. The exigencies of war brought this about. Maybe hard times will do the same.

Industry follows population rather than population industry. When for various reasons hard times come, men through necessity commence to think and by thinking develop little means of livelihood which may ultimately develop into big industries. Junk piles are closely watched; beach-combing is practiced; various waste materials are utilized and in our rich assortment of woods and plant products in general we may find, by looking, many things like storax which need not be imported all the way from China.

By studying the ways of our Indians we may yet find some valuable plant products. Little by little

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with no records, only traditions, they are forgetting the ways of their fathers. Here is a fertile field for the students of woodcraft.

Up the State the camphor-tree grows as well as in its native land. Years ago wild vanilla was common in South Florida. Sarsaparilla, ginger, pepper and other condiments would probably also grow here if we used the same cultural care that is exercised in the lands where they are grown. The production of choice products is seldom easy anywhere. We are always thinking of big industries with big payrolls. A lot of little industries dependent upon home products would be better.

Besides tung-oil and storax and other valuable products that have come out of old China there is ramie, one of the world's greatest fibers. There are species of ramie growing wild in our South which have never been tested. The true ramie, *Boehmeria nivea*, breaks loose from cultivation occasionally and grows like a weed in rich moist soil. The best authorities say it is the most perfect of all fibers. It is certainly the most prolific. It is perennial and on rich moist soil produces crop after crop in enormous quantities. We go on just the same raising cotton year after year and what is stranger still, sell this cotton to China and buy from them ramie.

And so for many years we have been buying storax in China while the tree that yields it is probably at the present time the commonest broad-leafed tree in Southern swamps.

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