Reminiscence of Miss Grace Meeker
(1986-1947)
as dictated to Mrs. John Penney in the late 1930s

When a man from the Great Lakes region told his wife that he had accepted a position in Ottawa, Kansas, she resigned herself to the thought of living in a region of arid plains, grasshoppers, tornadoes and dust storms and by the thought that teaching in such a country would be missionary work. Another lady in the same situation exclaimed, “If we have just one tree in our yard, I shan’t complain.”

As a matter of fact, this eastern Kansas town on the banks of the Marais des Cygnes River is proud of the elms that line every street, giving somewhat the aspect of a New England village to this place that was a spot in the wilderness, or more properly speaking, a ford in the wilderness when John Brown came to Kansas.

In tracing the beginnings of the elm-lined streets, we find ourselves in a tangle of Indians and Baptists. When the Ottawa Indians were moved from Ohio to the territory in Kansas what had been set aside for them, the Baptist Board of Home Missions sent Jotham Meeker to them as a missionary in 1837. One of the many first things done by this pioneering missionary-printer was to oversee the planting and tending by the Indians of a huge apple orchard from trees supplied by the government, a remnant of which was still in bearing as late as 1915.

Meeker was joined some years later by a well-educated, half-breed Chippewa Indian named John Tecumseh Jones. It was in his capacity as trader for the Ottawas that Jones suggested to the Baptist leaders, who in 1860 were discussing the possibility of a denominational college for Kansas, that the whites provide educated teachers and the Indians land out of which to create endowment. He and some white leaders advocated the plan with such success that in 1862 the United States Congress set aside 20,000 acres of land in the Ottawa reservation to be used for the establishment of the college. A charter was secured in 1865.

In the meantime whites had bartered with the Ottawa Indians for their land in ways often dark and devious until by 1867 they had no land left and had been moved on to Indian Territory, leaving their name for the town and the university, which henceforth belonged to the whites alone.

Six hundred and forty acres had been set aside for a campus in 1865, and about that time a nurseryman by the name of S. T. Kelsey, who had come west from Bloomington, Illinois, for his health was invited by the trustees to establish a nursery on the campus. He planted hedges and plots of trees, and no doubt many now venerable trees came from his nursery.

Mr. Kelsey was something of a crusader, for in those early days he had not only talked but lectured and wrote urging the growing of timber as a means of developing the country. It is interesting to note here that a nursery which was established in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, in 1864 sold that year and for many thereafter thousands of Osage orange trees for hedge plants in Kansas. Easily grown, they provided fences, shade, firewood, and windbreaks and played a large part in the development of the country.

The first tree in City Park was a seedling peach, and by it an Englishman named John Lester built a greenhouse on Skunk Run, now Park Creek. In this greenhouse Mr. Lester grew such tender things as crepe myrtle, and his garden south of the old Central School delighted townspeople with its English daisies and vegetables such as eggplant, familiar in England but strange indeed to early Kansas.

Soft maples were planted extensively in young Ottawa since they grew quickly. A superstition of those days, attributed to the Ailanthus or tree of heaven, along with sunflowers, was the power to remove from the air the miasma which was held responsible for malaria or ague, so they were much used. The early settlers found that some things, such as the sweet gum, mountain ash, and tulip tree, which had been cherished in the east, would not grow in sod. Vinca minor, too, had to wait until the prairie sod had been turned under, changing the character of the soil.

In 1883 Dr. M. L. Ward returned to Ottawa from Manhattan, Kansas. He had come to Ottawa fourteen years before from Norwich, Chenango Count y, New York, and had taught in the college for some time before going to Manhattan where he helped to establish the agricultural college. Called back to be head of the school, he managed the college farm in addition to his duties as president and teacher. The school needed money, so he surveyed, platted, ad sold college land to start an endowment fund. It was he, probably with memories of elm-arched New England street in his mind, who planted the trees on the campus and along the streets. Ottawa’s grand old man!

In 1870, just four years after Ottawa was incorporated, a niece of Mrs. M. L. Ward, a little girl who had had her playhouse under a butternut tree with a caraway bed in which to play in New York, left her home in the East with her parents for the new country. At that time there was a fringe of timber along the waterways around Ottawa, but everywhere else there was tall, waving prairie grass, blooming in late summer with red blossoms. The family lived first on a farm near Middle Creek, then in town at Sixth and Mulberry.

Grace Meeker had been born with a love for growing things, an interest which developed under the encouragement of her aunt into a scientific study of botany. As she grew up, she explored the botanical resources of her new home. Her first ferns were kept under a pine tree which had been started at Sixth and Mulberry, so small then that she had to stoop to put her treasures under its branches for shade.

She astonished incredulous eastern friends when she reported no less than eight varieties of ferns. Ferns in Kansas? It simply couldn’t be to persons who then, as now, pictured all Kansas as short grass plains country, but ferns there were; the maidenhair spleenwort, and the Christmas fern which like sandstone ledges, and such limestone lovers as the cloak fern, rock brake and rarely, the walking fern. On reporting the discovery of the maidenhair spleenwort, an astounded eastern lady wrote back that she had found it only on the tip of Long Island!

Young Grace discovered on her rambles that native timber while sparse, was surprisingly varied. The native evergreen was red cedar, and there were elms, willows, oaks—both white and red—sycamore, basswood, hackberry, Kentucky coffee tree, two varieties of ash, the redbud, mickernut *[mockernut?],* cottonwood, and thorny locust. There were a few nut trees, black walnut and three kinds of hickory; shell-bark, smooth and pignut. There were such fruits as persimmon, paw-paw, mulberry, wild plum and wild crabapple. She discovered a single specimen of the hop hornbeam on Rock Creek, and identified as the ptelia (hop tree), a tree whose bark the Indians used for a febrifuge as the whites used quinine, instead of the wafer ash Gene Stratton Porter called it.

There was a variety in the underbrush, too. The Kansas dogwood is used in other states nowadays as an ornamental plant, and the list includes such shrubs as black haw, prickly ash, cockspur thorn, sumac, buckbrush or Indian currant, two kids of wahoo, one of which has foliage that turns brilliant crimson in autumn, red haw, the twining shrub bitter sweet, and New Jersey tea. Settlers didn’t like this New Jersey tea because of the tough root which would turn a breaking plow, that implement heavier than the stirring plow which was usually drawn by two teams. It is lovely to look upon with its plumy, pure white blossoms though.

Our young botanist was delighted with the number and variety of wild flowers. She found the prairie phlox, pink with a deeper eye, now nearly extinct; blue gentian, of a purer and lovelier blue than the fringed gentian; the sensitive brier; lady’s tresses; two species of wild hyacinth; the yucca; two kinds of erythronium, or dog’s tooth violet; bloodroot; moccasin flower; spring beauty; Dutchman’s breeches; false rue-anemone; Solomon’s seal; wild verbena; and several kinds of violets, among others.

As soon as people began to beautify their homes they wanted lawns, which for the most part were sodded from bluegrass pasture. Miss Meeker recalls that the first dandelions came in grass seed, and tells of a man in the country who, longing for dandelion greens, sent to Ohio for seed which he planted in a bed. High winds blew the seed, which found no hold in the heavy prairie sod nearby, but came up in a trodden barnyard two miles away and in another bare spot two miles farther on. From such small beginnings.

The wild lotus of Kansas deserves special mention. The cress-colored blossom grows on a stem from the middle of the uncut round leaf. The editor of the *American Botanist* tells with wonder of blossoms the size of soup bowls, but in Kansas they grew to be as large as dinner plates!

With the settling of the country and the development of roads and traffic, wildflowers have lessened, in some cases inevitably, but in others needlessly. For years Miss Meeker kept secret the location of a ravine overgrown with bloodroot, only to find in later years that the farmer had blasted there to obtain rock for a fence! There are many other rock ledges, but nowhere else such lush growth of the rare and beautiful bloodroot.

Nor do politics and botany mix. A few years ago the Garden Club started a wildflower garden in that noble stand of native timber, Forest Park. One of the college classes drew up plans for the planting. Trees, shrubs, and wild flowers were carefully transplanted and what looked like a worthwhile enterprise was nicely started when a change of mayors brought destruction. The oak trees were cut down, the red-buds were taken up and placed in a row next to the drive, while other shrubs, small trees, and the flowers were cut off with a mowing machine!

So nature has done well by this part of the state, situated midway between north and south, east and west, the flora is immensely varied. Our predecessors have done well, too, in planning and planting; now our share is to appreciate and preserve what we have and to educate the young generation to the value of its heritage.