

VIRGINIUS H. CHASE, PEORIA BOTANIST

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VIRGINIUS HEBER CHASE was born January 8, 1876, at Wady Petra, Stark County, Illinois, the son of Heber and Emma Brain Chase.

He is of the eighth generation from Aquila Chase, a sailing master honored by a stone tablet in the New England Historic Genealogical Building in Boston, Massachusetts, as being the first pilot at the mouth of the Merrimac River.

Aquila Chase took up land in Hampton, New Hampshire in 1640. In studying the family tree, the only record of a member being arrested for a misdemeanor is that of Aquila himself, his wife, and her brother "for gathering pease on the first day of the week." Since this all took place in a Puritan village back in 1646, perhaps the family may be said to have outlived the disgrace.

Many in the Chase line have left honorable records. For instance, the children of Deacon Dudley Chase, who represented the fifth generation from Aquila, include a physician; a successful lawyer; a bank president; a judge of the Supreme Court of Vermont, United States Senator and a member of the Council of New Hampshire, who was the father of Lincoln's Secretary of the Treasury, Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase; and of Philander Chase, the first Episcopal Bishop of Ohio and founder of Kenyon College and later the first Bishop of Illinois and founder of Jubilee College.

While we refer to Virginius Chase as a botanist, he does not as-

pire to that title, but would rather be considered as of the old school of naturalists, getting his joy of life from reading the book of Nature and sharing it with his friends, as did Gilbert White of Selborne and Henry D. Thoreau of Walden, and if he has a motto, it probably is that of Thomas Paine, "The world is my country and to do good is my mission."

He would not deny it if you accused him of being a collector of the most incurable type—in fact, he would prove it to you.

His first lesson in botany came at the age of three, when he toddled out to the garden and tried to eat a pretty red pepper. Perhaps Mr. Chase is not a scientist, for scientists say nothing is ever proved by a single experiment and Chase did not repeat this one. To this day, the odor and flavor of peppers of any kind are still repulsive to him.

We find the old saying, "as the twig is bent, the tree's inclined," well exemplified in Mr. Chase's case. As a child at his grandmother's home, he was allowed to look at a large prehistoric stone axe that his grandfather had found and to handle a large pink arrowhead. Then there was a woven covered basket that a sailor, a great uncle, had brought back on his last voyage from Calcutta, India, which was filled with shells from tropic seas.

A few years later, the inspection of the collection of birds' eggs of Ernest Chamberlain at Robin's Nest

Farm, proved a greater attraction than the whole World's Fair did in 1893.

At the age of five, a few days of frantic effort covered the bottom of a cardboard box with pinned butterflies, grasshoppers and beetles. A few weeks later, pests well known to all entomologists had reduced the collection to dust and that was the end of that.

Permission to collect birds' eggs was not received until some years later, in district school days. To this day, he will tell you the greatest thrill of his whole life was when he climbed the old cottonwood tree in the south pasture and saw and collected his first set of crow's eggs.

His days in district No. 9 school are chiefly remembered by the noon trips to the forty or more acres of original prairie sod a half mile to the east, with its undulating surface, where *Cypridium candidum* grew by hundreds, *Dodecatheon meadia* by millions and *Phlox maculata* by the acre. Across the road from this were five acres which were almost a solid growth of *Iris*. Birds' eggs were the objects of the trips, but in case he might be tardy when the one o'clock bell rang, a large bouquet or an armload of the choicest flowers were always taken back to keep the teacher in good humor, and somehow he says it always worked.

Eggs of redwing blackbirds in the *Iris* and of meadowlarks and Bob Whites in the grass were abundant. The finding of the eggs of the upland plover was a rare thrill and to find those of the kildeer a constant dare. To find the eggs of the migratory shrike was a rare treat and after being away twenty years, he was much



VIRGINIUS H. CHASE
19 years of age

pleased to find a pair, probably descendants of those he had robbed years ago, were again nesting in the same clump of trees.

In going home from school, a slight detour gave a quarter of a mile of dense bottomland thicket to explore, where he found nesting black-crowned night herons and little green herons, yellow-breasted chats and the commoner species. It was mostly a thicket of *Prunus americana* and *Malus ioensis*, roofed over with *Vitis riparia*. In the openings, *Trillium recurvatum* and *Mertensia* were the most abundant of flowers.

After district school days, two winters at Princeville academy ended all formal education. Then a few weeks' instruction in tele-

graphy at Wyoming and Chase took charge of the telegraph office and railroad station at Wady Petra.

With short hours and much leisure, the boy was ready for new worlds to conquer, for the commoner birds' eggs were already in his collection and others seemed to have been beyond walking distance.

At the World's Fair of 1893, he first saw a herbarium specimen and that settled it—a herbarium was the thing he wanted and must have.

His mother's old Gray's Manual she had used at Kansas University when she studied under the famous Dr. Snow looked intriguing but seemed beyond his comprehension, and his mother appeared to have forgotten the little learned in the few weeks of school. His aunt, Agnes Chase, at that time knew no botany, but with mutual interest they tackled the problem together. The night Agnes succeeded in running down *Campanula americana* by herself, the game was on for them both, and for that matter, still is.

For the first few years, Agnes in Chicago, a proof reader on the Chicago Inter Ocean, and Virginus at Wady Petra, in the railroad station, collected at every opportunity, and by exchange of fresh material by mail, verified each other's determinations.

Mr. Chase's correspondence with Hill, Ruth, Porter, Wooten, Brainerd, Lunell, Sargent, Henderson, Wheeler, Bicknell, Beal and others, and exchanges of specimens with National Herbarium, Gray Herbarium, Missouri Botanical Garden, Gleason at the University of Illinois and others made life worth while.

Chase collected plants of *Viola* for

Brainerd's garden experiments, and grafts, fresh flowers and hundreds of herbarium specimens of *Crataegus* for Sargent to use in his historic round-up of that genus. Prof. Sargent came to Wady Petra to personally see the type trees of his new species—*Crataegus peoriensis* and *Crataegus pratensis*—growing, and also trees of *Crataegus illinoensis*, which Ashe had recently described from material collected by Chase.

Opinions differ, but Chase still thinks Sargent, with his field studies, knew more about *Crataegus* than any who have come since.

An incident Chase will always remember was when he put in a good part of two days trying to run down a plant with distinctly parallel-veined leaves, as all good monocotyledonous plants are supposed to have, even to reading over the description of every species in that group, only to have to give up in despair. Months later by accident he stumbled on the name of *yuccifolium* and found his plant was an *Eryngium* placed among the *Umbelliferae*—a booby trap others no doubt have fallen into even though they don't confess.

Mr. Chase and Frank E. McDonald, another Peoria botanist, were good friends, and after selling his herbarium to the University of Illinois, McDonald gave Chase his large herbarium case and his book of notes and plant records. After McDonald's death, Chase bought his botanical library and later Mrs. McDonald gave him the moss herbarium of 2000 specimens McDonald had made during the last years of his life.

After turning over the telegraph office to a younger brother, Chase

built a grain elevator and conducted a successful business in lumber, drain tile, coal and feed at Wady Petra for five years. Then, the rest of the family having moved to Kansas, Chase traded his interests in Wady Petra for Kansas land and in three years found himself penniless and in debt.

Then followed a year with a produce dealer and wholesale grocer at Paragould, Arkansas, then a few months with an Illinois well driller, and five years in Peoria grocery stores working ten hours a day and sixteen on Saturday.

The next 28 years were spent in the P. & P. U. railroad freight house at Peoria with practically no vacations, and during two world wars working seven days a week and nine to ten hours a day, so one may perhaps be able to forgive him if he did not get much done. He did act as president of the local Audubon Society, Boy Scout Committeeman, Boy Scout Commissioner and Examiner in Bird Study and Botany for the Boy Scouts.

In addition to his collecting in Illinois, may be mentioned some 150 species in Butler county, Kansas and 664 numbers collected in a hurried trip of only 24 days with Dr. C. D. Sneller via Bad Lands of South Dakota, Black Hills, and Yellowstone National Park to Craters of the Moon and back by way of Montana and Minnesota.

A set of the plants collected at the Craters of the Moon was mounted, labeled and presented to the superintendent of the monument as the nucleus of a herbarium to show those species growing within its boundary. Two hundred fifty specimens from

this trip went to the National Herbarium and a full set to the Peoria Academy of Science.

In 1939 Mr. Chase went as botanical collector to Mexico with the second Hoogstraal scientific expedition from the University of Illinois. In spite of a wreck, which deprived the expedition of its leader and forced it to travel with no windshield and only a tarpaulin to protect the specimens, Chase managed to bring back ten sets of herbarium specimens. The first set was given to the Field Museum for identification, and Dr. Standley declared it to be the best prepared lot he had ever seen come out of Mexico. Another set was given to the Peoria Academy of Science. A set of 160 grasses was presented to the National Herbarium.

To help defray expenses of the expedition, sets were sold to Gray Herbarium, University of Michigan, Missouri Botanical Garden, Carnegie Desert Museum, U. S. Division of Plant Industry, New York Botanical Garden, and University of Illinois—in all, approximately 5000 sheets.

The finding of *Syringantha loranthoides*, a tall shrub, collected only once before since it was originally collected nearly a hundred years before; collecting *Bouteloua heterostega*, which had never before been collected on continental America, and *Paspalum malacophyllum*, which had been collected in North America but once, in Yucatan; and collecting *Muhlenbergia thurberi* for the first time in Neuvo Leon, as well as two unnamed species, was quite gratifying as that particular region

had been considered pretty well worked before.

In an old publication, "Birds," issued by Nature Study Publishing Co., Chicago, one of the first publications to use crude color photography, one may find pictured the nests of orchard oriole and rose-breasted grosbeak made from nests collected by Chase and sent to the Chicago Academy of Science while Frank Baker was curator and Woodruff, taxidermist.

Mr. Chase's first published item, "A Battle of Ants," appeared in Popular Science of December, 1897. A brief sketch of the life of Frank E. McDonald was published in Rhodora of September, 1920. Between 1923 and 1926 twenty issues of the Peoria Star contained timely column articles on nature study of local interest.

For the program of the meeting of the Illinois State Academy of Science in Peoria in 1931 he presented a sketch of the life of Dr. Frederick Brendel. Two years later, when the Peoria Academy of Science organized sections for special studies, he was placed at the head of the section on Botany and Dr. C. D. Sneller, then president, said, "Of course Chase must be custodian—he has it as an enzyme in his blood," and he has held the two appointments ever since. He also served as president of the Peoria Academy in 1937.

As publicity for the Academy, under the heading of "Nature Rambles," the Peoria Star published each Sunday between 1933 and 1936 a total of 130 articles on many lines of nature study by Chase.

Two years ago, Mr. Chase donated

to the University of Illinois all duplicate herbarium specimens on hand, some 8000 sheets.

His private herbarium contains 18,240 sheets of ferns and spermatophytes of the United States, 1061 sheets of foreign plants, and 2107 packets of mosses and hepatics, a total of 21,408 specimens. Besides these, he has prepared and mounted 6571 sheets for the Peoria Academy collection.

His special interest at the present time is a seed collection put up in two-dram vials—now only in the second hundred.

His private collection of shells—marine, land, and fresh water, exceeds 200 species. Of fossils from coal vein No. 2 of the famous Mazon region he has representatives of a good portion of the known species and also a fair collection from local stripping of coal No. 5 and coal No. 6 in marine fossils.

His personally collected Indian artifacts number more than 2000.

Of new species of plants to his credit he has:

Psaronius peoriensis and *Psaronius septentrionalis*, two species of fossil fern bark of Peoria county, presumably of Permian age, described by Gillette in Botanical Gazette, Vol. 49, Sep. 1937;

Xanthium chasei, a new cockle bur from Tazewell county, Illinois, described by M. L. Fernald in Rhodora, Vol. 48, April, 1946;

Galium juniperinum, a bedstraw from Neuvo Leon, Mexico, described by P. C. Standley in Botanical Series, Field Museum of Natural History, Vol. 22, June 12, 1940;

Bouteloua chasei, a grass from Neuvo Leon, Mexico, described by

Jason Swallen in Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington, Vol. 56, page 81, Sep. 10, 1943;

Crataegus illinoensis, a red haw from Stark County, Illinois described by W. W. Ashe in Journal of Elisha Mitchell Scientific Society, Vol. XVI, Feb. 1900;

Crataegus peoriensis, a red haw from Stark and Peoria counties, Illinois, described by C. S. Sargent in Botanical Gazette, Vol. XXXI, January, 1901;

Crataegus pratensis, another species of red haw from the same region, described by Sargent in the same issue as the preceding.

From living and herbarium material collected by Mr. Chase, two hybrid violets, *Viola pēdatifida* x *sagittata* and *Viola pēdatifida* x *sororia*

were described by Ezra Brainerd in Bull. Torr. Bot. Club, Vol. 40, June, 1913.

In publishing *Panicum praecocius*, Hitchcock and Chase, in Rhodora, Vol. 8, 1906, took V. H. Chase's number 649, collected at Wady Petra, Illinois, as the type specimen.

That Mr. Chase has many loyal friends is attested by the fact that at Bradley University, Peoria, will be found the name of Virginius H. Chase on the Roll of Distinction, placed "in recognition of his contributions to the study of Systematic Botany, especially with reference to the Flora of Illinois." He has also been elected a life member of the Peoria Academy of Science.

Now, having recently retired, he says at last he hopes to get started doing something!