

Sandhill plums offer a different kind of harvest around Kansas

By RYAN CARLSON

While most today think of bananas and oranges when they hear of fruit, in the 1800s views of such things were quite different.

Wild fruits were very plentiful in this area in the 1800s. Lewis and Clark noted that fact in their journal they kept during their journey. In that journey they mentioned plums among the many fruits that grew on the prairies. The fruit also played a role in literature of the American West. In “The Bald Face: and Other Animal Stories” Hal George Evarts

took readers on a journey that included a multitude of settler’s wives in bonnets gathering sandhill plums for food.

The fruit is not the same as its European cousin. The proper scientific name of the sandhill Plum is *Prunus Pamila*. Though today we regard it as a plum, it was also considered by some in 19th century as a cherry. The 1876 edition of “The Gardener’s Monthly and Horticulturist” did so in recognizing its small size.

The 1904 publication of the “Kansas Horticultural Society,”

Volume 27 named the sandhill plum. Nicholas Mayrath of Dodge City wrote in that publication that the sandhill Plum makes an excellent jam or jelly. He did note in his writing that the fruit was quite bitter if eaten on its own. But for the men and women traveling the prairies in the 1800s, if there was a will, there was certainly a way. The settlers learned that if mixed with sugar, the plums would not only be easier to eat, they would be delicious.

Many Rice County citizens can remember back to when individuals used to flock to



the roadsides to pick them. Retired Lyons Daily News Reporter John Saylor said he had many a memory

of the fruit from his youth. His Grandmother in Ness County used to pick them by the bushel and turn them into jam. “I would go to her house and see them laying in piles by a boiling pot,” said Saylor.

When he came to Lyons, Saylor would often travel the county for stories. Along those travels he would often pass by sandhill plums in the summer time. Saylor remembers on one such trip to Raymond he saw

a thicket full of red plums. At that time, press cameras had plates and were stored in large bags. “I took everything out of my press bag and filled it to the brim. My wife, Caroline, made me a big batch of sandhill plum jelly,” said Saylor.

Rice County, at one time, had a location famous for sand hill plums. “A Standard History of Kansas and Kansan’s,” Volume 2 refers to a location known as the Plum Buttes. That location was between Atlanta and Ellinwood near Silica on the Santa Fe Trail. The buttes were known for being taller than the surrounding prairie, around 120 feet, and full of sandhill plums making that location famous to those who regularly traveled the trail.

The buttes lasted for at least two townships of space. The buttes gradually disappeared between 1865 and 1884 according to a Professor Bernard B. Smyth because of erosion. Today they no longer exist.

Today anyone who wants to pick sandhill plums can still find them out in the wild. Though some ditches are often mowed, the plums still grow in others. Good spots to look for the fruit include anywhere in the “Sandhills” area. This includes the land between Avenue V and Avenue Q in Rice County.

Traditionally individuals on the prairie picked the fruits in July right at the end of harvest. The picked fruits would then be taken home and boiled in water to extract the juice. Afterwards, sugar is added to increase the sweetness of the brew with a final dash of pectin to make it gel.

Here’s a recipe to make sand hill plum jelly from blogger Just Plummy:

Cover a bunch of sandhill plums with water in a crock pot. Cook the plums on low heat until the plums crack and have lost their color. Strain the juice and pour it into a 8 to 12 quart pot. Add one teaspoon of butter to prevent foaming as well as a box of Sure-Jell pectin and red food coloring. Boil the brew and add in 6.5 cups of sugar. Pour the final mixture into some sterilized jars and use a canning method for preservation.

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