

Notes on the History of Tea

It is surprising how incomplete our knowledge is. We are all aware that we import coffee from tropical America. But where do we obtain our tea? What is tea? From what plant does it come? How long have we been drinking it? All these questions passed through my mind as I read the manuscript of the preceding article. To answer some of my questions, and yours, I gathered together the following notes.

The tea of commerce consists of the more or less fermented, rolled and dried immature leaves of *Camellia sinensis*. There are two botanical varieties of the tea plant. One, var. *sinensis*, the original chinese tea, is a shrub up to 20 feet tall, native in southern and western Yunnan, spread by cultivation throughout southern and central China, and introduced by cultivation throughout the warm temperate regions of the world. The other, var. *assamica*, the Assam tea, is a forest tree, 60 feet or more tall, native in the area between Assam and southern China. Var. *sinensis* is apparently about as hardy as *Camellia japonica* (the common Camellia). The flowers are white, nodding, fragrant, and produced variously from June to January, but usually in October. The name is derived from the chinese *Te*. An alternate chinese name seems to be *cha*, which passed into Hindi and Arabic as *chha*, anglicized at an early date as *Chaw*.

The United States consumes about 115 million pounds of tea annually. The major tea exporting countries are India, Ceylon, Japan, Indonesia, and the countries of eastern Africa. Pakistan, Formosa and Argentina also export lesser quantities of tea. It is interesting to note that southern Russia produces a tea crop which is consumed domestically. Of course China also produces a large tea crop which is not exported to any extent.

Tea was being prepared in China at least as early as the 4th century A. D.; it was taxed as early as 793 (during the T'ang dynasty). Introduced into Japan (as an article of commerce) in the 9th century, it was cultivated there by about 1200 A. D.

An Arabian merchant named Soliman travelled to China about 850 A. D. and in an account of his travels described the use of tea in that country. Europeans, however, did not learn

about tea until the publication of Juan B. Ramusio's edition of Marco Polo's Travels in 1545.

It is not certain whether it was the Dutch or the Portuguese who first introduced tea into Europe very early in the 17th century. It was apparently first brought to the attention of the (British) East India Company in 1615. Between 1615 and 1657 small lots of tea appeared in London (imported from Holland) and sold for between £5 and £10 per pound. In 1657 the proprietor of Garroway's Coffee House obtained a large consignment and began offering the prepared beverage for sale. In 1664 the East India Company presented two pounds two ounces of tea to King Charles II, at a cost to them of 40 shillings per pound. By 1677 the demand was so great that the East India Company finally took steps to obtain a regular commercial supply of tea.

From 1660 until 1689 the prepared beverage was taxed in England at the rate of 8 pence per gallon. Beginning in 1689 a duty of 5 shillings per pound was levied, plus 5% *ad valorem*. The taxes were gradually increased, until about 1770 when they totaled 119% of the original value. It may be recalled that at that period the tax on tea figured in certain disturbances in the American colonies.

Tea was first known in the West only as dried leaves, and for a considerable period the true tea plant was unknown to western botanists. Apparently the first living tea plant in Europe was owned by one Captain Goff, a director of the East India Company. It is recorded that he grew it in his orangery, and that he would not part with any propagating material. In due course of events his plant died and the species was temporarily lost to cultivation in the West. In 1763 Carl Gustavus Ekeberg, the captain of a Swedish East Indiaman presented Linnaeus with seedlings of tea that he had germinated and grown on a return voyage from China. Living plants were reintroduced into England about 1770, and Thomas Martyn records that they were introduced into Georgia at about the same time. It is also recorded that the younger Michaux planted tea as an ornamental in the gardens of the Middleton Barony, on the Ashley River, about 15 miles from Charleston, S. C., about 1800.

Tea was introduced into Brazil in 1810. In an attempt to facilitate commercial production a colony of Chinese were settled in southern Brazil also. By 1850 the Chinese colony had broken up, but by then tea plants were widely distributed in Brazil.

About 1835 the (British) East India Company began planta-

tion culture of tea in India. It should be noted that by this time the Dutch had plantations in Indonesia which were producing tea commercially.

Dr. Junius Smith, a lawyer who was one of the founders of the British and American Steam Navigation Co., started a tea plantation on his property near Greenville, S.C., in 1848. Unfortunately he died in 1852 and his plantings were neglected. At about the same time a Dr. William Jones, in Riceboro (or McIntosh), Liberty County, Georgia, set out a tea plantation. In 1858 Robert Fortune was commissioned to obtain propagating material of tea, as is described in the preceding article. Fortune sent about 10,000 tea plants which were increased to 30,000 in a short time. Tea seeds were also imported from Brazil. These were distributed in the southeastern states until the war brought an end to this activity. After the war fresh supplies of seed were imported from Japan. In 1867 it was discovered that seed could be obtained domestically from the plants imported in 1858. Between 1868 and 1876 some 5,000 to 20,000 plants were distributed annually. Between 1877 and 1879 more than 100,000 tea plants were distributed. Apparently the plants grew well, but none of the recipients seem to have produced tea commercially.

In 1880 the Hon. W. G. Le Duc, United States Commissioner of Agriculture, engaged a Mr. J. Jackson, a British national who had had experience in tea production in India, to set up a model commercial plantation. The property formerly owned by Dr. Jones, in Liberty County, Georgia, was purchased, and his plantings were the source of samples of tea submitted to the Commission that spring. Mr. Jackson also planted more than 20,000 more tea plants that first year.

In the United States tea culture was encouraged sporadically by the government for the next thirty years but with little success. After the publication, in 1912, of Bureau of Plant Industry Bulletin No. 234 "The Cultivation and Manufacture of Tea in the United States," official governmental encouragement of tea cultivation seems to have ceased.

Gordon DeWolf, Jr.

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On December 14 a reception was held at the Administration Building in Jamaica Plain for the Sponsors, Patrons and Donors of the Friends of the Arnold Arboretum, to meet Miss Stephanie Sutton, on the occasion of the publishing of her book, *Charles Sprague Sargent and the Arnold Arboretum*.

Miss Sutton was present to autograph copies of her book while the Friends enjoyed refreshments and examined the displays of Sargent memorabilia. Examples of *The Silva of North America*, *The Forest Flora of Japan*, *Manual of the Trees of North America*, all by Sargent, were on display, as well as books by Alfred Rehder, E. H. Wilson, George Russell Shaw, and other contemporaries of Sargent. Also of interest were examples of "Garden and Forest," a journal of horticulture, with articles signed "C.S.S."

Another interesting item was a colored map of North America showing natural divisions of North American forests, prepared under the direction of C. S. Sargent.

A collection of photographs of remote parts of China and Tibet, by Joseph Rock, Wilson, and others, were displayed, as well as historic photographs of James Arnold, Joseph Rock, E. H. Wilson, and C. S. Sargent and his family. It was an afternoon of homage to Charles Sprague Sargent and of appreciation to Stephanie Sutton for her fine book.