CONTENTS

A TRIP TO THE SOUTHWEST
IN SPRING

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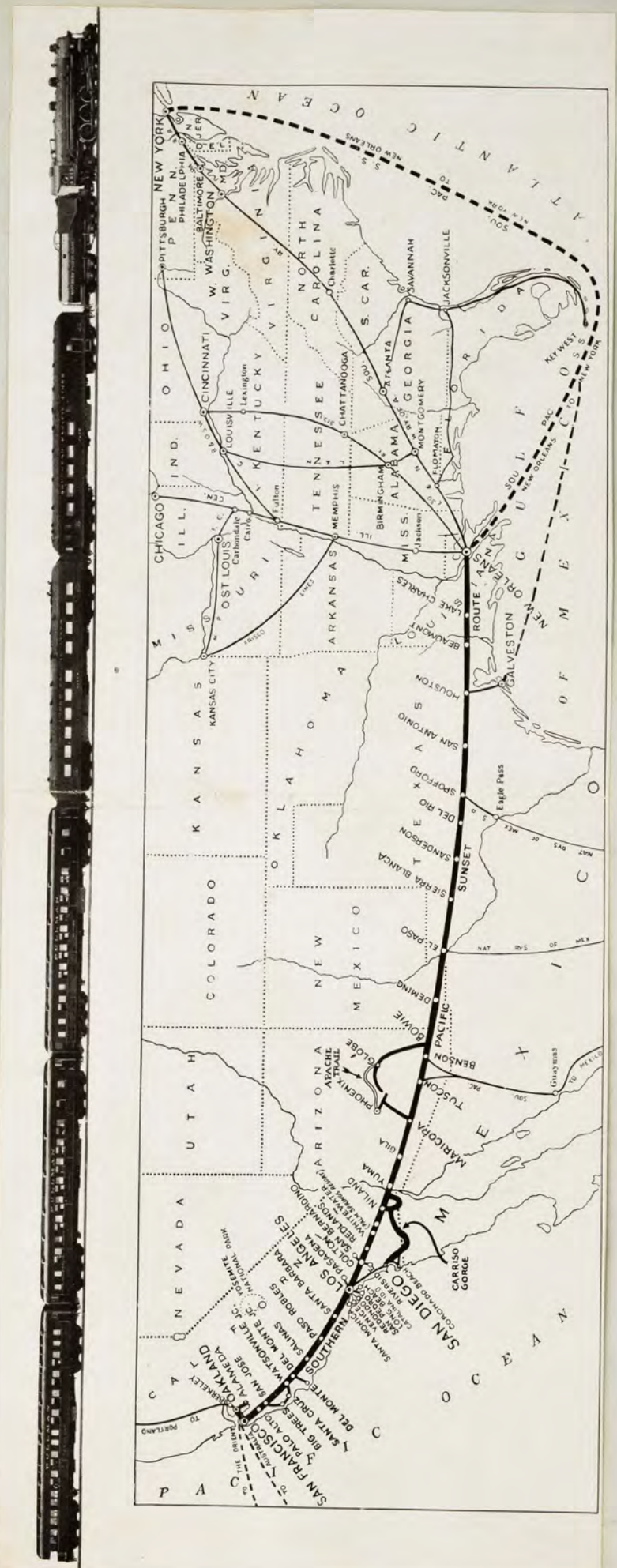
1925



Cincinnati
to
New Orleans

Southern Ry.

New Orleans

El Paso

Tucson

Phoenix

Palm Springs

Los Angeles

Southern Pacific

CINCINNATI to NEW ORLEANS

We left Cincinnati on the morning of February 21st, when scarcely a touch of spring had yet been felt. Familiar and attractive landscapes of the hill country of Kentucky and Tennessee passed in review all day. Our progress southward is almost imperceptible, if we are to judge by advance of vegetation. Only the hazel, which borders every stream, gives promise of approaching spring; it is in full bloom.

A night intervenes. Southern long-leaf pine (Pinus palustris) covers the sandy flats of Mississippi. For mile upon mile we pass through forests of straight and slender young trees. Occasional recent clearings are thickly covered with the young brushy long-leaf like we see used for Christmas decoration. Older stands are very dense. All are devoid of undergrowth, except for a sparse grassy carpet.

Where the sandy places give way to gently rolling land, loblolly pine (Pinus taeda) mingles with the long-leaf. At lower levels, the hardwood trees replace the pines. Oaks and hickory are readily distinguished, and with them a dense understory of small-sized trees and shrubs — some deciduous, some evergreen, a few in bloom.

But mostly the monotonous pine land continues. This is the poorest land of the coastal plain, and scarcely a human habitation is seen, and not an acre of farm land.

When finally we enter the alluvial bottoms of the Mississippi, we get our first glimpse of the southern swamps. The morning is dark and cloudy, and the gray day serves to emphasize the dreary grayness of these swamps. The oaks, hickory, and tupelo are not even beginning to leaf out. All are of a uniform gray, and all are heavily draped even to the point of suffocation with dark smoky-gray Spanish moss. Only the scarlet samaras of red maple add a touch of color to the landscape.

Where there is more water, the broad spreading bases of the bald cypress and the rounded swollen trunks of tupelo grow up out of the water. Words can not describe this dismal landscape. We only know that we would not exchange our winter with its snow and zero weather for more comfortable temperature conditions, if this must be a part of it. It is impossible to distinguish the entire form of any tree, and to get the beauty of bare branches against the sky, for all are obscured by the everpresent moss.

The amount of water increases and the forest swamp gives way to grass and sedge marshland as we near New Orleans. Here the swamp land is drained and levees hold back the streams.

In the suburbs of New Orleans we see examples of many of the southern trees. Beautiful evergreen magnolias, spreading live oaks, and red bay are freely planted. Avenues of palms border some of the streets. Palmettoes with their rough trunks are abundant; stately royal palms tower above the other trees. But the delicate beauty of northern planting is lacking, and it is not far enough south for true tropical vegetation.

Flower gardens are in bloom -- sweet alyssum, pansies, Calendula, big marigolds, ten-weeks stock, and some kind of a lavender flower.

The suburbs of New Orleans are very pretty. But, oh, what a dirty city, i.e., the business section, and especially the old French section and the market. Cincinnati is a "spotless town" in comparison.

NEW ORLEANS to EL PASO

Just after noon, we start on our long journey westward. It seems good to get on a western train, it is so much cleaner and brighter, the windows all polished and everything new. Twelve miles from New Orleans, our train goes onto a ferry which takes us across the Mississippi River. The transfer from the land tracks to the ferry is made ~~is made~~ slowly, over a movable section which raises and lowers with change in river level. The train must be broken, for the ferry is only long enough for four cars. But as there are three parallel tracks, the whole train is taken on the ferry at one time. This is the largest steel transfer in the country; small but powerful tugs along side slowly transport us to Avondale on the west shore.

Levees border the banks of the river, so the shores are free of vegetation. But back of the levee, the bottomland swamps extend for miles. Now the sun is shining brightly, and the landscape which appeared so dull and dreary in the morning is beginning to have a charm which at first we did not feel.

For two hours we ride through this swamp land. The mixed hardwood swamps cover the wet and swampy ground. Several species of oak, hickory, tupelo, sweet gum, red maple, and magnolia are seen in these areas. Scrub palmetto forms miles of the undergrowth. Smilax and other vines clamber

around. Golden ragwort is in full bloom. The fresh green fronds of the royal fern are already about two feet high. The yellow catkins of willow, the scarlet samaras of red maple, the fresh green of the new leaves, and the dark glossy green of magnolia lend a color that was absent in the Mississippi swamps. At slightly lower levels, stretch large expanses of open water. Here the cypress swamp is at its best. The broad buttressed bases, the knees, and the drapery of moss form a never-to-be-forgotten picture. Water hyacinth floats on the ponds and bayous, and duckweed covers large areas of water. In places, bamboo forms a dense undergrowth in the mixed swamp or cypress swamp, forming the so-called cane brakes. The color contrasts here are sufficient to somewhat offset the drab grayness of Spanish moss. Where red maple is so draped the effect is striking. This swamp forest covers all the lower levels, but a few feet above the Gulf.

A slight increase in elevation, i.e., a rise to land lying 15 to 20 feet above the Gulf, is sufficient to drain the surface of the land. Here the trees are mostly live oak. The live oaks are mostly large trees, very widely spreading, with a comparatively low broad crown. These, too, are draped with Spanish moss.

We can not get a very good idea of the original vegetation cover here, for this is good farm land, and almost all of it is utilized.

All afternoon we ride through this kind of country, alternating swamp and farm land with scattered live oak. In a few places, meadows of a tall species of Andropogon and other very tall grasses, tell us that we are passing through patches of the Texas coastal prairie. Night overtakes us while we are still within forty miles of the Gulf coast in this southern mesophytic vegetation.

At daybreak, a scene strikingly different from that of the night before greets us. We are now near Uvalde, Texas.

our left (the south) flows the Rio Grande, bordered with bright green streamside vegetation. Carriso grass, about fifteen feet high, is conspicuous.

The Rio Grande, east of Devil's River.

Away from the river, we notice that the vegetation is changing. The mesquite trees are smaller and more scattered on the plains, and tend to be confined to the dry washes. The mesquite semi-desert is giving way to the southern desert scrub. Gray and gray-green is the prevailing color, though occasional bushes are a deep rich green.

Desert just east of Devil's River.

The clumps of prickly pear are larger and more numerous; Yuccas occur in patches instead of scattered. This is the transition to the Texas Low Succulent Desert, the southern desert scrub which is characterized by the abundant admixture of low succulents and semi-succulents — cacti, Yucca, Agave.

Shrub desert, with Yucca and lecheguilla.

Lecheguilla

Lecheguilla is particularly abundant on rocky slopes. This is very different in appearance from Yucca. It is very low and the leaves straight and stiff, and apparently succulent. Last year's dry flower stalks are still standing on many of them.

Sotol is also abundant. It is the brightest green of all the low Yucca-like plants, and sometimes covers the gentle slopes. The leaves are much more slender than those of the lecheguilla, and longer. Most of the plants are low, but some have short stalks, raising the tuft of leaves six inches or a foot above the ground. It is the young flower shoot of this plant that the Mexicans use for one of their intoxicating drinks.

Yuccas of several species abound. Most of them are low, very much like our eastern species. A few are taller. An occasional one is sending up its huge cluster of white flowers.

Patches of prickly pear are scattered about and cling to the sides of cliffs. In places they are abundant, almost dominant. Again, we see none or few for miles. This is largely due to overgrazing of these range lands. The prickly pear plants are burnt over rapidly to remove the thorns and prickles, and then become good food for the cattle and sheep which graze on the meager desert fare.

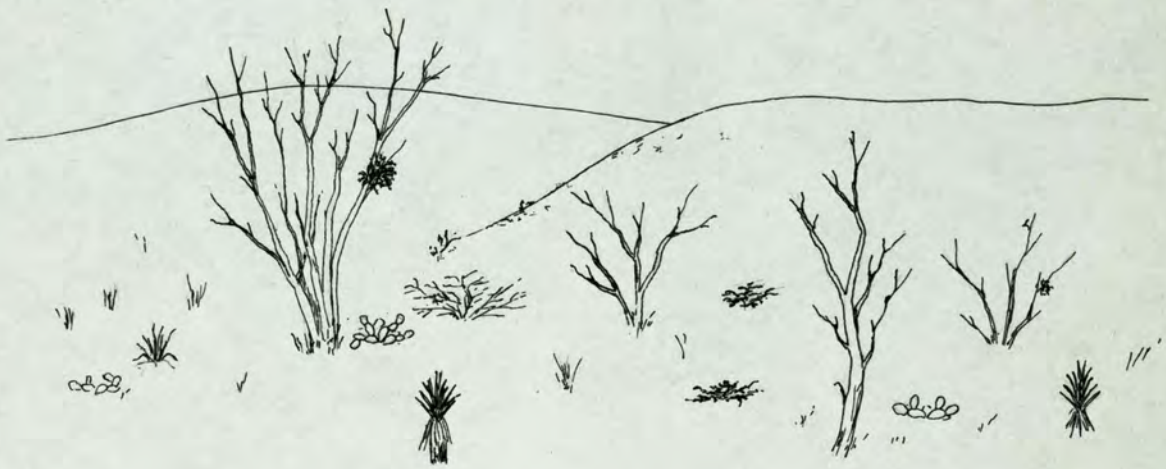
In some places, the shrubs are very abundant. "Blackbrush", a very dark green shrub, is conspicuous; "white chaparral" is a pale fuzzy white; buckbrush or wild lilac is in bloom; "laurel" forms bright green clumps in very rocky places. Several gray sagebrush-like plants are abundant.

We are beginning to wonder how it is possible to say that the creosote bush is a dominant in this Texas desert, for we have not yet found any area in which there is a dominant, unless it is the slopes covered with lecheguilla or sotol. The shrub areas are a mixture of many kinds, among which we can not distinguish anything of a coppery green which could be creosote bush.

East edge of Pecos River valley.

As we approach the Pecos River the plains are more even, and the creosote bush appears, very much

The horizon is level, the plains are thickly dotted with bare mesquite trees, in which are conspicuous green tufts of mistletoe. The mesquite trees are about as closely placed as trees in an orchard, but of course are scattered irregularly. Dry brown grass covers the ground between the trees and clumps of lower bushes. Soon the plains give way to rolling land, and



the variety of vegetation increases. Mesquite is still dominant, but with it are a half a dozen kinds of low, dense and thorny shrubs, one of which is evergreen. Patches of prickly pears, scattered Yuccas, and tufts of dry grass complete the vegetation. This is the Texas Semi-Desert in its early spring aspect.

We run along the Rio Grande between Del Rio and Langtry. High and picturesque cliffs dotted with

shrubs and succulents, border the tracks on one side; on

scattered at first, but nevertheless here.

We cross the Pecos on a high bridge, for the canyon of this desert stream is over 300 feet deep. The stream itself

Pecos River Bridge,

Canyon of the Pecos River

is bordered by low trees — mesquite, willow and poplar. The canyon walls are almost bare, except for a few bushes in the rock crevices, and clumps of prickly pear.

The desert plains continue again on the west side of the canyon. Creosote bush becomes more and more abundant, and now ocotilla appears. There is no mistaking this shrub. Its form is so characteristic, that once having seen a picture of it, it can be recognized at once. One of the low shrubs must be the tar bush (Flourensia).

Only an artist could give an adequate idea of the colors of these deserts. The drab and dismal grayness of the southern swamps was depressing. The grayness of the desert is so changeable, the colors so delicate, that we find not a moment of monotony in a whole day of "desert sameness". Every shade of gray, including palest mauve and fawn, and greens of more than conceivable variety add to the colors of the rocks — pale gray, white, red and black. A hazy sun gives just enough brightness. A few flowers — lavender Pentstemon, yellow Lesquerella, and white composites — are in bloom.

Canyon at Langtry
Creosote bush plains.

As we come on westward, it gets dryer and dryer. The delicate colors are obscured by dust. The shrubs are farther and farther apart. This region has felt the effects of a year's drought. The cattle and sheep have been forced to eat everything palatable, and the prickly pear is almost gone in some of the overgrazed areas. Not a drop of rain has fallen here in seven months. The water holes are almost dry. Lines of mesquite mark the dry washes, and occasional willows are seen at water holes.

We are gradually climbing upward. As the altitude increases, the moisture conditions must approximate those of the eastern part of this desert. Sotol and lecheguilla again become abundant and the variety of shrubs increases. Creosote bush loses its dominance, and finally drops out entirely. A few mesquite bushes are scatterd about, and on rocky outcrops, are low junipers. This appearance of juniper does not seem to be an altitudinal response, for we see it for only a little while.

Short grass and wire grass, dry and brown, cover the ground between the desert shrubs, forming a transition to the desert grasslands of the higher altitudes. More cattle are seen, and occasional windmills indicate the presence of ground water at reachable depths.

Higher but apparently bare rocky mountains border the desert plains on either side. Dark spots high on the slopes are junipers — the only suggestion of the Western Xerophytic Evergreen Forest.

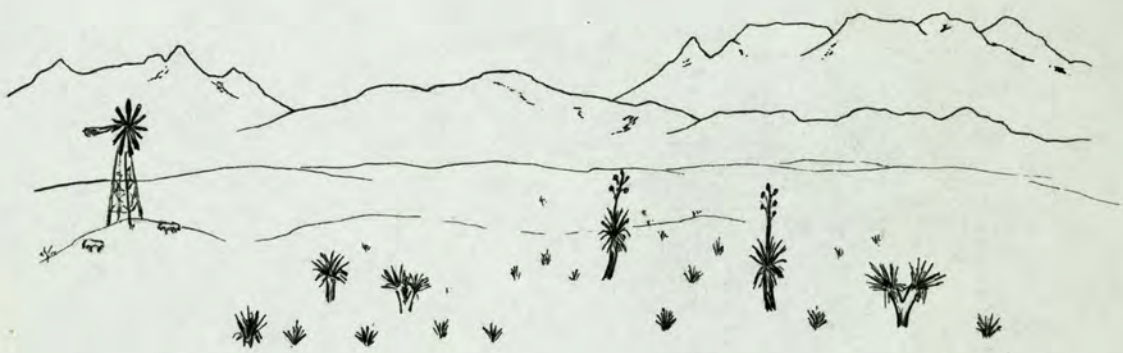
In places, grasses and Gutierrezia dominate. The Gutierrezia is a dull golden brown (last year's stems) and makes the plains look as though the sun is shining even though it has now become quite cloudy. A few tumbleweeds are hanging on the railroad fence.

A tall branched cactus (1) — a cylindrical Opuntia — appears, and some are dotted with bright yellow fruits. Mesquite (2) is scattered about, and a few Yuccas (3). The ground is carpeted with dry grass, tufts of a bright green bunch grass (4), and Gutierrezia (5). This is at an altitude of about 4000 feet.

On upward we climb; grasses become more and more dominant. As we near the mountains, which rise abruptly on either side, the amount of juniper increases. Two kinds, a low tree, and a sprawling mat, dot the rocky slopes.

The pass (Paisano) is reached at an elevation of 5000 feet. The mountain slopes are close by. Here they are dotted over with dwarf evergreen oaks, the chief source of firewood in hundreds of miles. The rocks are brightly colored with lichens. The grasses are taller, but dry and brown. A few junipers are seen. If this is the Western Xerophytic Evergreen Forest as it occurs at 5000 feet in Texas, it is an extremely sparse "forest" of trees that are scarcely more than shrubs. Only two species of trees occur here, one juniper and one oak.

Soon after we leave the pass and start down the western slope, the grassland becomes more pronounced. Then Yuccas appear again, in vast numbers, stretching away for miles.



Just west of Toronto, on the west slope.

Some, the younger plants, are small and low — tufts on the ground, like our Yuccas. Others have massive woody trunks from a foot to five or six feet in height. A few are branched at or near the summit. Dead flower stalks and seed pods stand up on some. This is a most peculiar and striking landscape.