

**BOTANICAL ANECDOTES: CIRCUMSTANCES
SURROUNDING THE COLLECTION OF *DICHONDRA
MICRANTHA* (CONVOLVULACEAE) IN
LASALLE COUNTY, TEXAS**

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ABSTRACT

A pathetically humorous account of events relating to the collection of *Dichondra micrantha* in LaSalle County in the spring of 1954 by the late B.C. Tharp and M. C. Johnston is rendered by a detached observer. It is further noted that most botanical excursions are likely to be surrounded by interesting vignettes, the publication of which might serve to enliven the botanical literature. Authors familiar with such are urged to place on record the happenstances concerned.

KEY WORDS: Flatulence, B. C. Tharp, M. C. Johnston, *Dichondra micrantha*, Texas, LaSalle County

To me, a long-time herbarium and field botanist at the University of Texas, Austin, almost every plant I ever collected had some sort of history or story connected with it, and must have been so for the thousands of collections assembled by a plethora of collectors both before my time and afterwards (see for example, Turner 2005). Most such nuances are soon forgotten, but these can be imaginatively reconstructed from collecting accounts of some of the more flamboyant collectors who recorded their travels (such as Humboldt, Bonpland and Kunth in the New World, Spruce along the Rio Negro in Brazil, Berlandier, Lindheimer and Charles Wright in Texas and the southwestern U.S., M.E. Jones in Mexico, etc.). Indeed, every plant ever collected for voucher purposes has its own little history, most of this unrecorded by the collector or collectors concerned.

One of the more notable (to me!) such collections was that of the late Lloyd Shinnery (1918-1971) who gathered the type of *Aster correllii* Shinnery from a precarious crevasse along a mountain ridge in the Guadalupe Mts. of Trans-Pecos, Texas, at the same time falling several hundred feet, this nearly causing his death. He clung to his specimen throughout the fall, subsequently pressing the plant concerned, this expressed in more detail in Turner (1998). Unfortunately, none of this adverse adventure is recorded on the label of the type.

This brings me to the collection of *Dichondra* referred to in the title of this telling. The specimen concerned (TEXAS: LaSalle Co. "Lawn in the city square of Cotulla, Turner *et al.* 3479," 1 Mai [sic] 1954, TEX) is cited by Tharp and Johnston (1961) in their account of the North American species of the genus. While I provided the voucher number and witnessed its collection, I did not otherwise participate in its procurement.

The details surrounding the collection of this particular voucher are still vivid in my memories; indeed, it remains one of the more pathetically humorous collecting incidents of my career, one that always emerges when I see a member of that genus along the roadside, or wherever, bringing a sordid grin to my cheeks and fond memories of Professor B. C. Tharp and his doctoral graduate student, Mr. M. C. Johnston.

At the time of the field sortie, I was 29 years of age, fresh out of my Ph.D. studies at Washington State University, and newly hired as an Instructor to replace the venerable B. C. Tharp (1885-1964), potential tenure of course depending upon my academic approval by the latter. In short, I aimed to please the beloved, long-time taxonomist at Texas on this our first lengthy field trip together. Tharp had requested my presence on the foray, no doubt to ascertain my knowledge of plants in general, and perhaps to get me to know better his last doctoral candidate to work under his immediate supervision, Marshall C. Johnston, who later on became an expert on the family Rhamnaceae, and perhaps better recognized as the coauthor with D. S. Correll on the well known, *Flora of Texas*.

Tharp and Johnston had planned this trip to south Texas mainly to collect specimens of *Dichondra*, the former having had a long time interest in the group. He was collaborating with his student, hoping of course that the latter might bring the study to fruition given time and circumstance, which he did, as indicated in the above citation.

Having made several stops along the highway from Austin to the border town of Laredo, Texas, Tharp, driving a newly purchased Dodge vehicle, pulled up to the lawn of the City Square in Cotulla, Texas, presumably having seen a mass of prostrate *Dichondras* in the mowed lawn as we slowed to pass through the small village. We all exited the vehicle, and Tharp and Johnston proceeded to get on their hands and knees, each with a geology field-pick or hammer, digging up long strands of the mat-forming plants which typically root at their nodes (hence their popularity as pent-house “grasses” in cities the world over, the long stubby growths not requiring much lawn care, least of all mowing).

While the two collectors dug away, I was struck with the strange maneuverings of Tharp. Instead of finding his own clumps of *Dichondra* to extricate from the lawn, he began to circle in on the diggings of his student, soon aligning himself a foot or two in front of the fellow, who was presumably unaware of this posturing, hardly noting that the arse of Professor Tharp was now only six inches or so in the front of his face. So positioned, the Professor loosened a mighty fart which startled both me as well as the student. My first reaction was “who on earth would foist off such an affront on a final year doctoral student, least of all in front of an aspiring tenure track professor who hardly knew either.”

With such a thought lingering, I was amazed by what then transpired. While Professor Tharp, still on his all fours, chuckled mightily at his spontaneous petard, his student arose suddenly, and assuming the stance of some pompous politician (What came to my mind at the time was the French leader Charles de Gaulle; I can still recollect that memory!) recited a spontaneous verse which I shall never forget, this spoken slowly and with great dignity as a truck full of hay appeared suddenly in the background passing along the town square. I quote:

Farmer Brown came to town
With a load of hay.
Professor Tharp let a fart
And blew it all away.

One might think that such an extraordinary display of acceptance would have been the end of the matter. But not so! Professor Tharp became very indignant with his student's response, becoming livid with anger and noting that Mr. Johnston was very disrespectful of his major professor, and that he did not appreciate this presumed sarcasm. Marshall said nothing in his defense, nor did I.

Tharp was so disgusted with his student's brilliant elocution (in my opinion) that he immediately ended the excursion. On the return trip to Austin, his student received a chain of angry castigations that were mostly reiterative accusations of disrespectfulness. Marshall remained mute, as did I. Indeed, Tharp exceeded the speed limit most of the drive back to Austin; anything either of us might have said would surely have decreased our chance of survival. I was pleased to exit his vehicle alive, and I am sure the student felt the same. Because of Marshall's stance and spontaneous oration of that day, and judgment to keep his cool thereafter, I knew he would be a leader in his field, which he became.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to my literary friend, Jana Kos, and to my colleague of many years now, Dr. M. C. Johnston for reviewing the paper.

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