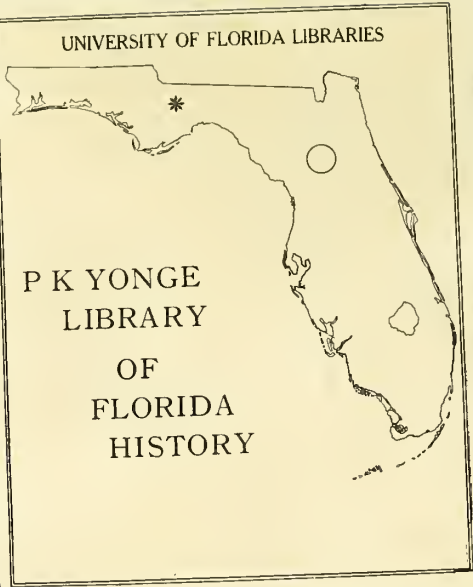
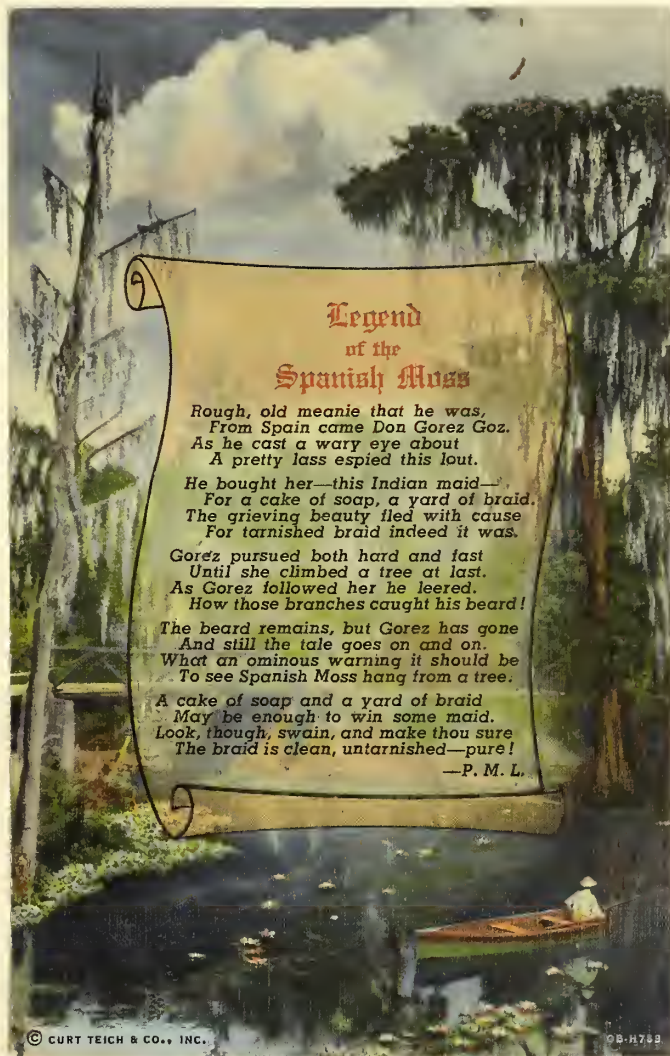


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HISTORY



**Legend
of the
Spanish Moss**

*Rough, old meanie that he was,
From Spain came Don Gorez Goz.
As he cast a wary eye about
A pretty lass espied this lout.*

*He bought her—this Indian maid—
For a cake of soap, a yard of braid.
The grieving beauty fled with cause
For tarnished braid indeed it was.*

*Gorez pursued both hard and fast
Until she climbed a tree at last.
As Gorez followed her he leered.
How those branches caught his beard!*

*The beard remains, but Gorez has gone
And still the tale goes on and on.
What an ominous warning it should be
To see Spanish Moss hang from a tree.*

*A cake of soap and a yard of braid
May be enough to win some maid.
Look, though, swain, and make thou sure
The braid is clean, untarnished—pure!*

—P. M. L.



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Moss

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HAIR OF THE PALE MOON FLOWER

Long gray moss hanging in sweeping festoons from the massive branches of venerable live oaks is a never ceasing delight to tourists and visitors in the Southland because of the mysterious aspect it lends to bayou or hammock; but aside from its weird beauty, the plant has proven veritable manna from Heaven to many a poor family in the backwoods.

One of the most prolific growths along Gulf and South Atlantic seaboard, its hoary strands replenish themselves with the seeming rapidity of fire as they spread through the forest in waves of somber hue.

But despite the abundance of Spanish moss, there is no great fortune to be made from its horsehair core, which has to be hand-picked from the trees by means of a long pole

with a double barb on one end; and while it often falls to the ground in great quantities during a windstorm, ground moss produces a poor grade of commercial hair unless gathered immediately.

Six months of curing are required to produce the best grade. Cured moss yields less than 35 percent of its weight when green and ginning takes another 15 percent, so that the finished product is hardly a third of the raw bulk. A ton of green moss will make no more than 600 pounds baled and ready for the market.

But fallen moss cures naturally in the water, and much of the output in Louisiana is fished from the bayous where it has dropped from tall cypress trees. The common practice of curing it there is to allow the moss to remain under water until the gray bark rots off the black hair core.

Considering that picking will cost around \$30 a ton and the top price for hair is usually about 9 cents a pound, the margin of profit is necessarily small for the buyer. If some more economical means of gathering the moss could be devised, there would be more profit for buyers and the pickers might reap an additional harvest from demossing trees.

As it is, landowners have to pay considerably more for cleaning their trees of moss than the moss is worth. Some easier method of picking might also increase consumption by augmenting the commercial supply, since hair moss has great possibilities as a material for fabrics in addition to its use by upholsterers.

American aborigines discovered the process of curing moss and wove it into fabrics which they colored with vegetable dyes. Jonathan Dickersonⁿ, shipwrecked on the coast of Florida in 1697, described the breechclout worn by native men as a "piece of plaitwork of straws, wrought of divers colours". He told of wearing an Indian mat over his shoulders like a poncho and of women who clothed themselves with the "moss of certain trees, making gowns and petticoats thereof" which looked very neat at a distance.

Pictures drawn from life by Jacques LeMoynes in the same period and locality depict "beautiful girls, belted below the navel and down the thighs with the moss of certain trees", according to a narrative accompanying the drawings. LeMoynes's life sketches seem to indicate a girdle of moss fabric worn by the women, with fringes hanging down the thighs, while others are shown wearing bandoleer-capes of the same material.

To practical-minded lumbermen, the plant was a nuisance until found useful for upholstery. The moss on a tract of timber is sometimes considered of sufficient value to sell or lease like turpentine rights, though pickers usually gather it on any land they choose without permission or objection from the owners, as demossing helps the trees.

Rural families gather moss as a source of extra revenue when they are not doing anything else. Colored tenant farmers

add considerably to their income in this manner. The average picker can gather 500 pounds a day in Louisiana where boats are employed on the bayous and canals for that purpose.

In one instance, a family of five people marketed 100,000 pounds of green moss for $2\frac{1}{2}$ cents a pound and 20,000 pounds of cured moss for 3 cents a pound, all in a single season.

Spanish moss derives its name from the fact that it flourishes in those areas first settled by Spain and not because the plant was brought to America by Spaniards, as some may suppose.

Seminole Indians in the Florida Everglades have a legend about the origin of Spanish moss, which they say represents the silvery tresses of an old Indian woman. Captured by an enemy tribe while still a girl, Pale Moon Blossom wore the love flower in her hair for a youthful lover who, unknown to her, had been killed in battle by the enemy.

When he did not come to rescue her as she had hoped, the girl yielded finally to the importunities of Tonowaha, the aged chief of her captors, and became his wife. She continued to wear the ^{love} flower in ~~her hair~~ and when she became an old woman, Pale Moon Blossom wound a lock of her hair around a bough of the tree beneath which she asked to be buried.

From this lock ~~of hair~~, grew the Spanish moss, or so legend declares; and some do say that inside the outer covering of gray bark, one may still find the glossy black hair of the girl while upon each strand grows her tiny flower,

which ^{becoming} ~~becomes~~ fragrant only at night ^{and which} and the Indians know as the Pale Moon Flower just as they call Spanish moss the Hair of Pale Moon Blossom.

Early Spaniards probably used moss in packing articles for shipment back to Europe. Known variously as Spanish, Southern or Florida moss, it is sometimes called "old man's beard" from its appearance.

It is not a true moss at all but a fibrous perennial of the pineapple (Bromeliaceae) family. Requiring considerable moisture, Spanish moss thrives best in wet localities and is seldom found far from swamps or water of some kind even in those regions where the plant abounds. It is an epiphyte rather than a parasite, requiring the support of other plants but taking no sustenance from the trees themselves.

The strands attain a length of three or four yards and consist of a hair core covered by grey bark. Spanish moss is the most common of all air plants from South Carolina to the southernmost tip of Florida and westward along the Gulf of Mexico to Texas. Other species are found on the Atlantic coast of Central and South America as far as Brazil.

The roots are weak and soon dry up while the plant fastens itself to the bark with slender tendrils and takes its food from the air and rain through fuzz along the stem. Small, grass-like leaves from one to three inches long grow from these strands. Tiny green flowers that are slightly fragrant at night are found at the base of the awl-shaped leaves in May and June.

Seeds develop slowly from the flowers, for not until the following March do they appear. Each seed is covered with delicate, barbed hairs like feathery parachutes upon which they float through the air for great distances and find lodgment in the cracks of bark where the seed germinates.

As soon as the young shoots reach a few inches in length, they break away from their cradles and suspend themselves from any support to which they may fall or be blown. Several strands frequently grow simultaneously from a single seed or sprout. Detached from the parent stalk, the strands continue to grow and blossom. Thus a minute particle carried by wind or bird to some distant point will come in time to fill a whole tree.

Found in greatest abundance on live oaks, Spanish moss is also conspicuous in pine, gum, cypress and various other trees and even upon fences and telegraph wires where it will survive for a time but dies eventually for lack of moisture exuded by the live tree. Moss will not grow on some trees. Woodsmen have observed that after a tree is dead, the moss on it will die eventually; and occasionally moss kills a tree by becoming so thick upon the branches as to smother it.

One of the easiest ways to gather moss is for pickers to follow in the wake of logging operations and pull the strands from the tops and branches of trees felled by the loggers. Children are often employed to climb live oaks and pull it



down with hooks.

Cypress trees produce the best moss because they grow in or near the water, although it is impossible for a novice to differentiate between cypress moss and that taken from oaks, gum or hickory; but the cypress trees are too tall for moss-gatherers to pick.

While the quality depends to some extent upon the character of the green moss and the kind of tree in which it is found, the length of time spent in curing it is an important factor in determining the grade.

Moss-bearing forests are widely spotted in Florida. The plant is most prolific in cypress swamps or along the banks of streams where it is not easily accessible, though highland forests of oak are also good producers.

When moss is gathered, it is usually left under the trees in small piles to be picked up by trucks or wagons. Pickers may cure the moss themselves or sell the green product directly to a ginner or dealer. The curing is of utmost importance for it is upon this process that the grade of the finished bale may ultimately depend.

The process is known to the trade as pitting. After the green moss has been wet down thoroughly and packed in trenches four feet wide and of equal depth, it has to be turned over with a fork in two or three months when the moss is again soaked with water and left in the pit for a few months longer before finally being removed.



When the gray bark slips readily from the dark core, it is taken from the pit and hung upon lines to dry. A fair second grade can be made after three or four months of curing and a third grade in even shorter time. As a rule, however, the longer the moss is allowed to remain in the pit up to about eight months when decomposition sets in, the better the grade is.

The fiber is wholly dark when the moss has been cured properly. White specks of bark may be detected clinging to the strands if it is removed prematurely. Moss must be inspected occasionally while in the pit to guard against fermentation and injury to the fiber. If the interior of the pile becomes cold, it is turned over to generate new heat and facilitate decay in the bark.

Ginning is the final step in the preparation of moss for the market. The gin is a toothed cylinder of heavy steel working against concave ribs much in the manner of a cotton gin, thus freeing the moss of sticks, bark and other debris. It is then shaken up with a pitchfork or raked back and forth over a lattice floor to free the strands of trash before being run through the gin a second time. Higher grades have to be put through a second or finer gin before baling.

The finished product is a coarse black fiber like horsehair which is compressed into bales weighing between 125 and 150 pounds each and covered with burlap and wire to prevent loss or keep clean in transit. The average bale weighs 135 pounds.



Moss hair will retain its resiliency indefinitely. Samples left upon the ground in all kinds of weather for as long as five years on a stretch have been found well preserved at the end of that time. Only after such extreme exposure does this vegetable horsehair become brittle and begin to break up or decay.

Hair moss that has lost its resiliency through constant service often may be worked over and renewed. To its use for upholstery in furniture and cushions for railway coaches, airplanes or automobiles may be added those of material for hair fabrics and crinoline, stiffening for clothing and a padding or packing for various articles.

The principal ^{substitutes for hair moss} ~~substitutes for hair moss~~ are animal hair, cotton linters or waste, kopak, coconut fiber, excelsior, straw, sisal, seagrass and flax tows. Its chief competitors ^{are} ~~are~~ are animal hair on a quality basis and African palm fiber, known also as crin vegetal or vegetable horsehair, on the basis of price.

The use of hair moss is increasing and becoming more varied all the time, although it is not employed as extensively in automobile ^{cushioning} ~~cushioning~~ now as formerly because mats of animal hair cut by machinery have been found more expedient in methods of mass production employed by the automobile industry while moss requires the defter touch of an upholsterer to give the best service.



But its consumption in furniture upholstery is definitely on the increase, according to the National Association of Furniture Manufacturers. About 60 percent of the better grades in furniture are being stuffed either with moss alone or a combination of moss and animal hair. Ninety percent of the supply goes into the making of furniture while the bulk of the remainder is used for upholstering airplanes, railway cars and automobile cushions.

Among other uses are those of plaster binder, filler in mattresses and packing for journal boxes, although the introduction of inner-spring mattresses has curtailed considerably what was once a principal market.

Prices paid for green moss range from a cent a pound for low grades up to three cents for the better grades, averaging usually about $1\frac{1}{2}$ cents a pound, while ginned moss is sold at from 7 to 12 cents except at times when the market has been off and the price down to 4 and 6 cents. The average price for ginned moss runs about \$9.17 per 100 pounds, f.o.b. shipping point.

The darker, richer, glossier the hair, the better its quality. Three grades of cured moss are recognized: (First) black, (second) dark brown or mixed and (third) light brown. Louisiana cypress moss, known as "Black John" is considered the best quality, bringing from 4 to 5 cents a pound cured. A specially selected hair produced in Florida corresponds to Louisiana's "Black John". About 15 percent of the total production is first class moss.

The average gin can handle 78,000 pounds a day, according to a survey conducted by the Louisiana State Division of Forestry. A total of 144 pickers is required to keep a gin of this capacity operating during the regular season of 150 days between November and April. Ginners do not as a rule buy green moss during the summer because of the prevalence of young strands in the lot. It is not until fall when the young moss produced in the ~~fall~~^{summer} has matured that the fiber is tough enough to stand rotting. Between 20 and 30 men are employed by the gin at wages of \$1.50 to \$2 a day.

The commercial supply is limited almost entirely to Louisiana and Florida with the former producing around 10,000,000 pound a year or the bulk of the crop. The last estimates of ~~annual~~ production available were 18,800,000 pounds in 1926 and 11,200,000 pounds in 1928.

The value of the present annual production has been estimated at between \$2,500,000 and \$3,000,000. A dozen of the larger dealers produced \$315,269 worth of hair in 1931, \$1,500,529 worth in 1929, \$865,572 in 1927 and \$1,068,564 for 1925.

Two ginners in Florida and five in Louisiana accounted for the bulk of production for the period from 1931 to 1933. The rest was divided between 50 small gins, some thirty of which were located in Louisiana.

The moss industry began in Louisiana shortly after the Civil War and in Florida only a little over 25 years ago. Pioneers braided the strands and made bridles of them or used the fiber for padding saddles and horse/collars. Some of them staffed their pillows and mattresses with it, but only in comparatively recent years has moss been used commercially as a filler for mattresses, ^ucushions and pillows because of its cleanliness and cheapness.

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