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Joseph Hinson Mellichamp
1829-1903

(PRESENTED AT THE MARCH MEETING OF THE COLUMBIA MEDICAL CLUB)

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Joseph Hinson Mellichamp, physician and botanist, was born in St. Luke's Parish, South Carolina, May 9, 1829. His father was for many years preceptor of Beaufort College, and afterwards was pastor of St. James' Church, on James Island. Himself a lover of outdoor life and of natural objects, he influenced the tastes of his son in the same direction and especially for botany, an influence which continued throughout his life.

In 1849 Joseph Hinson Mellichamp was graduated from South Carolina College and in 1852 from the Medical College at Charleston. He then spent some time in Europe, studying in the hospitals of Dublin and Paris. On his return he established himself as a physician at Bluffton, S. C., and here he remained most of his life, the exceptions being the time when he was a surgeon in the army of the Confederacy, and when, during the last years, much of his time was spent with his daughter and only child in New Orleans.

His extended practice among the planters and their dependents made strong demands on his time, but he found time for much botanical research and collecting. In the interesting floral region around him were many of the rarer species described by Walter, Michaux and Elliott. Specimens of these were much prized by the botanical fraternity and, through his correspondents, were largely and freely distributed, finding their way into, and retaining at the present time, a place in many of the best herbaria.

His advantageous location and familiarity with the flora of his locality brought him into intimate touch with many of the contemporary botanists of note. In the "Botanical Works of the Late George Englemann," edited by William Trelease and Asa Gray, 1887, under the caption "Notes on the Genus *Yucca*,"

Englemann has the following to say: "Within the past two years an unpretending physician of South Carolina, Dr. J. H. Mellichamp, who does not even claim to be a botanist, but is imbued with arduous zeal and keen sagacity and who lives right among the Yuccas, has wonderfully improved his opportunities, and has very greatly aided me in my investigation by specimens as well as by his observations. I may add here that also on other families of plants of his rich State, already so long and well known through the labors of Walter and Elliott, have his researches shed new light as will appear in future pages of these transactions.

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"Dr. Mellichamp's notice of a minute drop of glutinous liquid in the tube formed by the coalescence of the so-called stigmas led me on to further experiments. That tube proved to be the real stigma, exuding stigmatic liquor and insects (in these night-blooming flowers, of course, nocturnal insects) must be the agents which introduced the pollen into the tube."

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Under his treatment of the "Coniferae," he says at the conclusion of his description of *Pinus Elliottii*, Engelm, New Species:

"*P. Elliottii* was imperfectly known to Elliott and was considered by him a form of *P. Taeda*. Later botanists ignored it, till Dr. J. H. Mellichamp, of Bluffton, S. C., rediscovered it about ten years ago, and directed my attention to it. Without his diligent investigations, ample information and copious specimens, this paper could not have been written. . . . I am particularly indebted to Messrs. Bolander, Brewer, Parry, and Lemmon for their contributions of the Californian and Rocky Mountain Conifers, and to

He married Sarah Pope, a daughter of James Pope (1788-1863) & Eleanor Adams of Bluffton, S.C.; the Mellichamp home was burned 4 June 1863 by Union troops.

Messrs. Canby, Gilman, Ravenel, and Mellichamp for those of the Northern and Eastern American Pines."

Sargent in his *Silva of North America* says of Dr. Mellichamp that "he rendered substantial service to science" . . . "and I am glad to take this opportunity to acknowledge my indebtedness to him for the assistance he has rendered me by studying the trees, and especially the oaks of the Carolina Coast Region." Dr. Asa Gray also noticed him in a highly complimentary way.

A botanist contemporary with Dr. Mellichamp, W. H. Canby, has the following to say in the *Torreya*, Vol. 4, No. 1, January 1904, with regard to the work and character of the man:

"His good judgment in making observations and clear statements of the results brought him the correspondence and esteem of Doctors Gray, Engelmann and other masters of the science. For Dr. Englemann he investigated the flowering and fruiting of some species of *Yucca*, the peculiar oaks of his region, and especially *Pinus Elliottii*, which he practically discovered, and, in the excellent notes he furnished, adequately described. Very acute observations on the insectivorous habits of *Sarracenia variolaris* were published in the Proceedings of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. In this paper he recorded his discovery of the lure by which insects are tempted to the fatal pitcher of the leaf; of the fact that the secretion therein is more or less of an intoxicant; and the curious fact that the larva of a certain insect was able to resist the secretion and feed upon the decaying mass. Dr. Sargent, in his *Sylva of North America*, acknowledges his services in the study of oaks and other trees. Dr. Gray so esteemed his assistance that he named a Mexican Asclepiad (Milkweed) in his honor, *Mellichampia*. Desirous of helping others, he was one of those men who, diffident and retiring, and not caring to advance their own fame, always willingly give others the benefit of the knowledge they have acquired. It is not too much to say that but for him considerable of

value would have remained unknown of the flora of his district; grateful acknowledgments of this have come from European as well as American botanists.

"Dr. Mellichamp was an ardent lover of nature, with a poetic and artistic spirit, and his letters teem with fine descriptions of the various objects which attracted him in his professional drives about the country. He was wont, as the spring approached, to speak of the exceeding beauty of the young flowers of *Pinus Elliottii*, as they expanded their cones over the trees, crowning their robes of green with a haze of purple. His letters show the keenest sense of the loveliness and delicious warmth of a spring in the pines with flowers opening everywhere, the fragrance of the woods, of jessamine and of magnolias filling the air made vocal with the songs of mocking birds.

"But best of all, he was a man to be loved for his qualities of heart and mind. A magnetic and attractive man, his friends and correspondents cannot forget his ready kindness and words of cheer, and will cherish his memory. He was loved by the poor people of his district, who, in a touching way, mourned the loss of their 'old doctor' as his body was borne to the grave. As might have been supposed, he was intensely Southern in his feelings and in his love for his native State. He now rests in her bosom; and the well known lines, slightly altered, may well be applied to him: 'Little he'll reck if they let him sleep on in the grave where a Southron has laid him.'"

The following notice appeared in the *Botanical Gazette* for November, 1903: "Dr. Joseph H. Mellichamp, an ardent student of the Southern flora, died October 2, in James Island, S. C." He was buried at famed St. Luke's churchyard, about five miles from Bluffton, S. C.

Here it seems fitting to give the background of Dr. Mellichamp's home town, which is so ably described in the book, *Glories of the Carolina Coast*, by James Henry Rice, Jr., second edition, and I quote: "Picturesqueness and variety, which characterize the lower coast, reach

perfection at Bluffton on the River May, lauded by all travelers from Jean Ribault down. All the country, indeed, from North Edisto to Savannah, exhibits the same richness and variety in its flora, the same opulence in its fauna, save for regrettable waste places here and there; but, at Bluffton, the live oaks are uniformly larger and more symmetrical in the unfolding of their mighty crowns. The limb-spread is enormous, one limb measuring recently eighty-four feet two inches. Underneath these giant oaks vegetation runs riot.

"Bluffton is the 'Appleboro,' made famous in the novels of Marie Conway Oemler. She has a home there now, and it is literally true that 'home is where the heart is,' in her case. (Note: The novel *Purple Heights*, by Miss Oemler, and the novel *One World at a Time*, by Margaret Fuller, were written at Bluffton and in both instances the main characters were subjects believed to be inspired by Dr. Mellichamp.)

"White cottages nestle beneath the live oaks, each with its clean swept yard, bordered and dotted with evergreens, among which the Sabel Palmetto and the

Magnolia grandiflora are conspicuous, though the azaleas and the camellia japonicas may not be slighted with their shy and impelling lure.

"Two miles below Bluffton is Hunting Island, now called Palmetto Beach, the favorite collecting ground of Mellichamp, through whose labors it is known to the world, for Mellichamp belongs to the nobility of science, as my friend, Dr. William Trelease, calls them, and is known and honored by every biologist in the world, some of his greatest panegyrists being the foremost botanists of Europe. But for what Mellichamp, Ravenel, and Porcher found in our native plants, the Confederate Army would have lacked medicine, particularly quinine."

Here in Bluffton live more "specialists" per square foot, according to Dr. G. Croft Williams, Professor at the University of South Carolina, than in any spot on earth. "Everybody owns his home, an automobile, and a boat, humble as they be, everyone pays taxes, and none work nor give a damn what goes on in the rest of the world." Among them rests in peace Joseph Hinson Mellichamp, beloved medical physician and world-famed botanist.

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