

SKETCHES IN THE SAND



“Sketches in the Sand” for this issue is devoted, in one way or another, directly or indirectly to strawberries. Botanically speaking, strawberries are aggregate fruits and not berries at all. With that technical detail disposed of, let us now turn to appreciation of that gastronomic delight, the straw-aggregate fruit. Having mentioned appreciation, I must commend the local committee of the 12th Annual Ethnobiology Conference in Riverside especially for the seemingly unending supply of enormous and incredibly delicious strawberries at the Poster Session on Friday evening and at the break on Saturday morning. Now on to other vignettes (an interesting word which you might wish to investigate).

On April 29th, my 39th (don’t I wish) birthday, I was in Bisbee, Arizona, and my friends, in commenting that I seemed a somewhat atypical Taurian, asked about my rising this and descending that, all of which is dependent upon the time and place of birth. Well, I know exactly where I was born (plus or minus a square foot or two) but I don’t know with any precision the time of my birth. Some twenty years ago, when another set of friends were having their astrological charts prepared, I asked my mother about the time of birth and after thinking about it for several minutes (I was the eighth of twelve children) here’s what she told me.

It must have been in the late afternoon. Yes, it had to be. You had to be the one who was born on the day the strawberries were in full flower. I remember we had had some nice warm days and this caused the strawberries to bloom. You see, the house was then on the north side of the maple trees, much closer to the road, and we had a strawberry patch for early berries on that southwest facing slope. After moving the house back from the road¹ we’ve always had that whole area in flowers. If you’ll remember, we planted glads² there on the day your youngest sister was born. Anyhow, I remember sitting at the window admiring the strawberry patch and thinking they should ripen early this year when the weather suddenly began to turn cold. There I was, about to give birth, but I wasn’t about to lose those early berries.

School had been out for about a week (in those days rural elementary schools closed their doors for the summer around April 20) so I showed two kids how to cover the strawberries plants with newspaper, then straw then more newspaper and to weigh it down with boards, and told another one to find your Dad and tell him it was time to get Doc Bell and your Aunt Eva—no, it was your Aunt Maud because Eva, who usually helped was living in West Virginia because John

had finally gotten a job with that railroad bridge over the Ohio River. Anyhow, the strawberry plants got covered and after Doc Bell and Maud arrived, you were born lickity split. So it had to be late afternoon that you were born.

Yes, it had to be your Aunt Maud who helped bring you into the world because that's why you don't have a middle name. We decided that your first name should be your Dad's middle name and we couldn't decide upon a middle name for you. Finally your Aunt Maud (who was an immensely practical woman—herself a mother of many children and a widow) announced that Willard Van Asdall is a long enough name for anyone. (You know, she was correct.)

So you can see there is a connection, however tenuous, between strawberries and my birthday other than I often enjoy strawberry shortcake or pie on this occasion.

Although I have several other vignettes about strawberries I shall allow these tales to illustrate several points that we ethnobiologists can bear in mind. Many of the rural areas where ethnobiologists work are in about the same level of development as was much of rural America before World War II and I and prior to the virtual take over by agribusiness. People who are close to Nature often associate unusual events that occur in nature with events in their families—births, deaths, illnesses, etc. If we can develop a genuine interest in the families of the communities in which we work, then make interested, unobtrusive inquiries about family events, this may trigger all sorts of information about past climatic or other events. An ethnobotanist may have no inkling about a flood of 50 years ago, but it may be mentioned in connection with some event in the family, if we ask in a loving, gentle, genuinely interested way.

Thus, in asking about the time of my birth I not only found out about a late frost that year, I also was given information allowing me to hypothesize that everbearing strawberry varieties were not common then and was told about a change in land use as well. Clues of this type can be of great help in making sense out of puzzlingly contemporary situations in our field studies. Undreamed of connections can be revealed when we learn to better relate with those with whom we work.

—W.V.

¹The original house was small and without a basement. A basement was dug large enough to accommodate both the old house and a large, entirely new section of house. Both the interiors and exteriors were coordinated giving the appearance that the entire structure was new. See "Sketches," Volume 3, Number 2.

²Gladiolus

NOTE: For an interesting, easily understood account of the strawberry, please see: Wilhelm, Stephen. 1974. The garden strawberry: A study of its origin. *American Scientist* 62(3):264-271.