

VILLAGE VIEW

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Some years ago I read the book entitled, "North With the Spring" and found it delightful. Setting out for Florida at the end of October, I fantasized about writing a column describing "South With the Autumn," but it didn't really turn out that way.

Fall foliage, this year on the Cape, was as lovely as I've seen it, I think; in fact, the whole of southern New England put on a better show than the mountains and fairly glowed with color. On departure day as the Mid-Cape Highway uncurled in the misty dawn, however, most of the deciduous trees had lost their leaves, and those leaves still clinging to their twigs were past their prime. It was the same story all through Rhode Island, Connecticut, and into New York State, but the Poconos were ablaze with scarlet and gold. An overnight in Pennsylvania was welcome after eight hours on the road.

Next day the maps of Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia were folded away one-by-one; once North Carolina's state line fell to the rear, it was time for another night's rest. In none of the states covered during the second day was the foliage particularly impressive, although there were stretches of beautiful scenery. Route 301 through Maryland cuts across large farms with open corn fields reaching from horizon to horizon. Huge old farmhouses rise three stories high from the flat plain. How different it must look in summer before the hundreds of acres of corn have been harvested!

Route 95 through North and South Carolina is probably the least scenic part of those states, but it's the fastest. By nightfall only ten miles remained to be travelled before Georgia began. The foliage colors in the Carolinas were delicately muted; the maples were pinkish red rather than crimson; the oaks lacked those rosy russet hues we expect to see in New England this time of year.

Along the coast, Georgia is more marsh than upland, more swamp than solid ground. Flat, it is, and dull. Two hours and 112 miles later, the map of Georgia joined those of its northern sisters. Only Florida stretched ahead, mile after mile of it.

Through the Carolinas, lacking any gorgeous foliage displays to contemplate, my attention was caught by a graceful shrub that grew, apparently wild, along the fringes of the highway. Some plants were no more than a foot tall; others stretched skyward ten or fifteen feet. Most grew along the edges of swamps, but some had climbed to higher land and seemed to be thriving there. At the motel just north of Georgia, I found a specimen growing near the roadside and took a good look at it.

Its soft, grey-green leaves were about 4 inches long and quite narrow; the ends of each branch were laden with a feathery-soft white fuzz, less than half-an-inch long; tiny bunches of these were held to the branches in small cups. These were not blossoms, as I had supposed when I saw them from the highway at 55 miles an hour, but seed cases. When they fully matured, the downy tips would make the seeds airborne. In principle not too different from milkweed fluff, but in miniature.

Risking wet feet, I plucked a few and took them into the motel where I asked the clerk if she knew the plant's name. Once she'd determined I wasn't asking about a cultivated bush on the grounds of the property, she dismissed me with the words, "It's just a weed." It was as though a Cape Codder didn't recognize bayberry. I don't yet know what this pretty shrub is called, but I hope to find out. I still have my sample; someone will know.

Florida put on a sub-tropical show as Jacksonville slipped to the north. Skies were alternately sunny and heavily clouded. Rain sheeted the windshield for three minute periods, only to give way to brilliant sunshine again and again. In the distance, the rain showers approached visibly, fogging the view of pasture lands half-a-mile away, moving swiftly across the path, and disappearing as quickly as they came. Much of Florida's interior is cattle-country; you half expect to see cowboys riding the range, but I never have. On the Cape we say, "If you don't like the weather, wait a minute." That goes for Florida in November, as well.

Two-thirds of the way down the peninsula lies the village I'll call home this winter. Parts of the area are still typical of Old Florida, though in recent decades it's become modernized with new construction, shopping centers and malls, and well-populated with retired people. In winter, so-called "Snow Birds," like me, come to escape New England's weather from Christmastime until after Easter.

The Indian River lies just to the east, separated from the Atlantic Ocean by Hutchinson Island, a barrier beach that protects the mainland's coast from ravages of the open seas. Once deserted and covered with mangrove trees, the long slender island now carries a highway down its back, and high-rise motels and condominiums rear on either side of the road.

In nice weather, it would be idyllic to have the Atlantic at your front door and the broad Indian River at your back. In times of hurricane winds or stormy seas, however, I'd choose to live on the river's west bank and leave the barrier beach undisturbed to do its protective duty.

Developers are concerned, here as at home, only with building, selling, and moving on to the next income-producing area. Since Hutchinson Island's mangrove forests have been largely destroyed and the roads and buildings constructed, no hurricane has struck, full force. But this is hurricane country, and I'm not sorry I own no property on the barrier beach.

This is a lush but foreign-seeming land. One day, it's 85° and very humid; next morning the thermometer stands at 54° and the air is dry and clear. Except for a few pine trees, nothing about the landscape is familiar. I'm ignorant of the names of everything growing around me. Even the grasses look like strangers.

Of course I know a palm tree when I see one, but I've been quick to discover there are estimated to be 3,000 species of palms growing in Florida, divided into two principle categories: "pinate" or feather-leaved and "palmate" or fan-leaved. What a lot I have to learn!

"South with the Autumn" proved less than successful as an experience of viewing foliage displays en route, but the one thing that surprised me most was the abrupt change in climate and flora occurring between leaving South Carolina and arriving in Florida. The hundred or so miles of Georgia marsh and swamp seem inadequate to accomplish so radical a difference, yet it happens. Leaving South Carolina, you're obviously in the temperate zone; entering Florida, you're equally obviously in a sub-tropical one.

The reason, of course, is solar energy; yet even I, a strong proponent of harnessing the sun's power, am unprepared for the sudden change and the important influence of the Tropic of Cancer on this part of our United States.