

*Annals of Surveying***Rhus Horribilis**

by ANDREW GIBSON

When Julius Caesar liberated Britain, he is said to have remarked, "Veni, vidi, vici"—an alliteration worthy of Spiro Agnew, and thought by the herd to have been a slighting reference to the angular British maidens. In fact, it means, in the Neapolitan dialect used by Julius, "When you sit on this weed, you scratch for a week," and he was referring to the above-mentioned plant, known, to those without botanical training, as poison ivy. By the way, the blue woad, with which the Britons painted themselves, had no religious significance. Woad was simply a primitive calamine lotion, and so thick was the poison ivy on the British moors, fens, ups and downs that the people kept woad on all the time. They only removed it before battle, the better to go into a frenzy. The Druids, or ministers, in our parlance, had got the woad monopoly from Queen Boadicea, and used it so liberally on themselves that their blood became blue. Such tinted blood has indicated, ever since, both aristocracy and haemophilia. There are frequent classical references to poison ivy. I don't want to bore you with erudition, so I will mention only one. Lady Macbeth, when she said, "Out, cursed Spot!", is popularly thought to have been putting the dog out. In fact, she was exclaiming about a fresh case of poison ivy, which she had got while picnicking in Birnam Wood.

My researches suggest that Rhus is not native to Canada. It was introduced by the missionaries, to repay the Indians for tobacco, and, within a few years, had brought the natives to a most gratifying state of penitence. But enough of history. My purpose in writing this is simply to implore you not to play loose with Rhus, especially in the Ottawa Valley, where it flourishes with an opulence equalled only by deadly nightshade and toadstools. Not only are the woods full of it, but it frequently brazens it out on lawns, ever alert for unsuspecting humans. I myself have observed it leaning at 60°, in an effort to get at my ankles.

The weapon used by Rhus in its vendetta against us is a kind of penetrating oil, stored in its leaves, berries and roots. This oil isn't really a poison. Cows and rabbits eat it all the time. But about 30% of people, generally, I understand, the more ethereal, intelligent and good-looking ones, react violently to it. Our bodies simply can't stand ivy oil, and, to combat it, rush antibodies in battalions to the spot, and thereby make a wasteland out of the battleground. I appreciate this devotion on my behalf, of course, but would prefer a more cautious response, as of a politician confronted by the truth. Some people are proud of their exquisite sensitivity. One man I know claims that he has merely to be downwind from it to start scratching. Another insists that if exposed to the smoke from burning rhus,

he will immediately lapse into unconsciousness, covered with pustules. But he is a lawyer, and accustomed to — er — hyperbole. In any event, the reaction is severe, and scientists disagree about the reason for it. Recent investigations into the psychology of plants may point the way. It is now commonplace that you can get your African violets or gerania to bloom by speaking softly to them. These are domesticated plants, seeking only to please. Rhus is wild—has, in fact, run amok. It is the psychopath of the plant world. It hates us. It is useless to speak gently to it, for such weakness only enrages it. It only understands one thing—force. If you meet it, threaten it. Promise to come back with 2-4-D, if you, or any of your friends, are afflicted.

Fortunately, it is easily recognized. I myself can't identify it, but anybody who has ever written a book on plant identification should have no trouble. In the first place, out of all the colours of the spectrum, it has chosen green. Next, of all possible shapes of leaves, tetrahedrons, parallelograms, conic sections, it has chosen a simple, rather elongated triangle, pointed at the end away from the twig. Then again, the leaf can be distinguished by having a central vein, with other veins leading to both sides. And the number of leaves is a dead giveaway. They are in threes, although occasionally in ones and twos. Seven is unusual, and the record is fifteen. It usually lurks along paths, in clearings, or in deep shade—wherever there is sufficient light to see it, there it may be found. To absolutely ensure identification, it is from one to twenty-four inches in height, depending upon conditions, and is practically never encountered before March, or after December.

Land surveyors like myself are particularly susceptible to Rhus, because we are forever tearing about in the woods, loaded like pack-mules with chain-saws, iron bars, and lunch. At a moment's notice, we may collapse from sheer physical and intellectual effort, and, as likely as not, will land on poison ivy. If that should happen, we can expect short shrift from the medical profession, at least as long as we are still recognizable as human beings. I myself was recently in such a pitiable state with Rhus that the very thought of it, even now, brings tears to my eyes, although my wife has remained stoical throughout my sufferings. She is a brick. But, to continue, I was sure that I would be an object of pity to all who saw my condition. So, anticipating sympathy, I tottered to the clinic. I immersed myself for a half-hour in a 1967 issue of *Chatelaine*, and was then ushered into the doctor's office.

I could not but be conscious of my lamentable appearance, and so, looking at the doctor in mute appeal, I stretched

out my arms so that he could see the heart-rending eruptions on my normally alabaster skin. To my infinite chagrin, he gazed impassively at them, and then asked if I had, anywhere on my body, a serious outbreak. In a small, yet dignified voice I admitted that he was looking at my best effort. He snapped shut his casebook with an air of finality, and, in a voice fairly dripping with suspicion of hypochondria, he informed me that, in this area, a rather serious case of Rhus was one which required hospitalization. All others were considered to be but a momentary inconvenience.

With a trembling upper lip, I left, large-eyed and disillusioned. I have not been back. I have bought the large economy barrel of calamine lotion, and have filled the bathtub with it. I sleep there, and am no longer dependent on the medical profession. If the Druids could do it, so can I.

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