

Terrell County Memorial April, 2014
Sanderson, Texas

Museum News

Lechuguilla ... Daggers of Death!



Photo: TCMM Sanderson Times Collection

M. R. Lattimore ran a Terrell County lechuguilla-chopping crew in the 1940s. In this photo, half his men are eating at the headquarters camp somewhere near Dryden. The other half of the crew worked while this shift ate. Kneeling, l-r, Celso Perez, Pablo Fuentez, Gabino Jaso, ___ Celaya, Agapito Lopez, Santiago Rodriguez (the foreman,) Eutimio Rodriguez, Cruz Lopez. Standing, l-r, Manuel Celaya, Erineo Lopez, Isidro Veliz, Ruperto Perez, Presciliano Cqstro, unknown, Armando Flores, Jose Garcia, Jose Angel Flores, Lattimore, Jesus Celeya (waterboy,) Alberto Iturbe, Jose Veliz (cook.) It is not known if this was a commercial operation for gathering the plant, or just the clearing of fields.

Sensational headlines aside, most people today would consider the lechuguilla a fearsome foe. With hardened spines that can puncture thick leather or vehicle tires, traversing a lechuguilla patch can be a

dangerous, or at the least, a painful endeavor for man and beast.

Horses and cattle have been known to be crippled by lechuguilla, and the poisonous toxins that coat the tip of the spine



Photo: Norman G. Flaigg, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center

cause excruciating pain to those who are unfortunate enough to receive a stab from them. And, the wound can take months to heal because of the toxins.

As if that were not bad enough, sheep, goats and cattle that have the misfortune to eat lechuguilla often die a painful death. Goats, especially, are susceptible to so-called "lechuguilla fever" in which the animal can ingest as little as 1% of its body weight in lechuguilla fiber, and within a week exhibit a light-induced photo-reaction (swelling of face and ears) to one of the two toxins at work. Death follows, usually within two weeks, of severe kidney and liver damage. Lechuguilla is *not* the rancher's friend.

Lechuguilla (*Agave lechuguilla*), which translates to the woefully misleading "little lettuce," is the smallest of the agaves. The curving leaves possess spiny edges and a wicked, hardened point. The leaves can grow to 20" in length, and at 10 to 15 years, the plant matures and sends up a 12-foot+ stalk that bears the

flowers. After pollination, the plant dies. It is propagated by seeds, but more often by offshoots from the parent, often growing in thick patches. It is abundant in the Trans Pecos of Texas, thriving on the calcareous, limestone soils.

For millennia, Native Americans, and later, Mexican peasants, used the lechuguilla fiber, known by the Aztec word "ixtl," for baskets, ropes, sandals, twine and sacks. Chemicals in the fiber can be

GRAHAM SAYS LECHUGUILLA MAY BE GOOD STOCK FEED

Lechuguilla, a native plant of the cactus family, may be used by stockmen for feeding purposes, according to A. G. Graham, county farm demonstrator. This plant grows on the plains of the southwest and will probably be used as a war crop feed for stock.

Recently Mr. Graham asked the Agricultural and Mechanical college of Texas for an analysis of samples of the plant he sent. He has received the following report which, he said, indicates the plant will make a good feed for stock: Protein, 1.63; fat, 0.78; crude fiber, 2.84; nitrogen free extract, 19.52; water, 65.11; ash, 3.11.

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Large areas in Mexico are given over to the raising of the lechuguilla plant, which produces a large percentage of the fibres exported by that country.

The claims of Southwest Texas abound in the lechuguilla, thousands and tens of thousands of acres are going to waste annually for the mere lack of initiative in the establishing of a highly profitable industry within our own borders.

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used for soap. The Aztecs mixed lechuguilla juice and salt to use as an antibiotic and balm.

The Tarahumara Indians and others of northern Mexico used the toxin to make poison-tipped arrows, and brewed a solution that could be dumped into ponds to stun fish and make them easy to collect.

And, lechuguilla can be the only source of wood in our dry, treeless environment.

But, in spite of its toxic qualities, lechuguilla was an important food source for Native Americans and, still today, for certain animals.

Javelinas (collared peccaries) are immune to the toxins and a high percentage of their diet comes from lechuguilla. Mule deer consume the blossoms of the plant with impunity.

Native Americans learned to bake the fibers, breaking down the toxins and producing a sweet, bread-like concoction that, when dried, could last for months.

The Mescalero Apaches made a fermented drink from lechuguilla called "Clandestino," similar to *mescal*.

Even today, in Mexico, harvesting of

LOOKING FOR LECHUGUILLA FIELDS
Plant Under Proper Treatment Yields a Valuable Fiber.

lechuguilla fibers provides work for some 200,000 people every year. By the year 2000, upwards of 10,000 tons of lechuguilla fiber was being harvested annually.

But, in the United States, lechuguilla is considered a pest and worthy of extermination.

Early in the 20th Century, Texas newspapers touted the benefits of lechuguilla and promoted expansion of the industry into the U. S. Machines were invented to speed the extraction of fibers, and state lands were leased to lechuguilla harvesters, who had hopes of creating a new cash crop. The lechuguilla-harvesting industry never took off, however, and in the years after 1940, the only mention of lechuguilla in the press was the effort to clear it from pasturage.

Although lechuguilla-harvesting is dead as an industry in the U. S., at the moment, one may find lechuguilla products for sale. Fine paint brushes of *ixtl* are available, as well soaps that reportedly leave the skin soft and the hair shiny. And, of course, ropes, cords, baskets and other folk products from Mexico are available.

With untold acres of *Agave lechuguilla* covering the land surrounding Sanderson, you would think someone would get the point (so to speak.)

THE SALE OF LECHUGUILLA

is a Profitable Deal for The State.

June 21, 1938.

G. J. NORD
PROCESS OF AND APPARATUS FOR ISOLATING AND TREATING THE
FIBERS OF LECHUGUILLA PLANT AND RELATED SPECIES
Filed Jan. 22, 1936

2,121,210

2 Sheets-Sheet 1

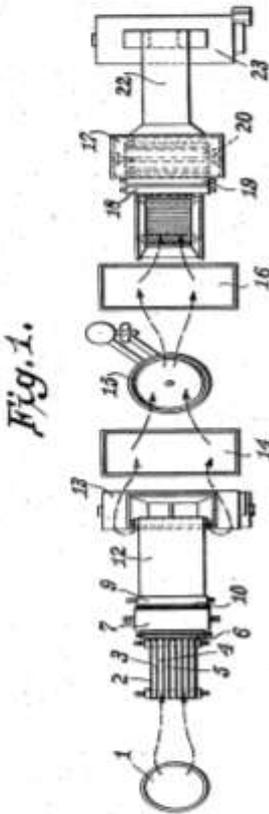


Fig. 1.

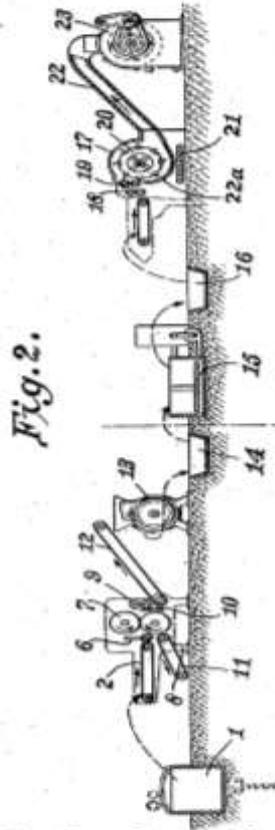


Fig. 2.

Inventor:
Gustav Jean Nord,
Parker Cook
Attorney.

Patent drawing for a complicated device that would process and treat the fibers of lechuguilla and other related agaves, eliminating the labor-intensive process used for centuries by Native Americans and Mexican peasants of boiling/cooking, hand-scraping and separating the fibers from the chemicals. No machine invented to date has been as effective as the time-honored, manual method. Some processes simply can't be mechanized.

References

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