

The Lakeshore Guardian, 2004 June
Thumb Habitats
C. K. Dodge - Botanist Advocate of Port Huron, Michigan
by Bill Collins

As mentioned last month, botanist Charles K. Dodge of Port Huron was first to document Painted Trillium in Saint Clair County, and probably in Michigan since it has otherwise been found only in Sanilac County and destroyed shortly after. Native Americans and a few settlers likely saw the magenta-streaked white petals of Painted Trillium as it emerged in mid-May, nearly a month after other trillium. But, Dodge seems to be the first botanist to identify it in our area around 1900.

Charles Keene Dodge was born on April 26, 1844, north of Jackson, Michigan, and grew up on a nearby farm. Attending the University of Michigan, he had a botany course, required for both classical and scientific studies, back when nature was still a foundation of higher education.



Charles K. Dodge circa 1900, age 56.

After graduating in 1870, he taught for 4 years in the Upper Peninsula, was then employed by the law firm of Hubbell & Chadbourne in Houghton, and admitted to the bar in 1875. Impressed by the appearance of prosperity, he moved to Port Huron to start his own legal practice. But the depression of 1876-77 gave him a tough time as an unestablished young lawyer of "average ability", as he humbly described himself, and he was "... lucky to get a five dollar case with a thief for a client".

About this time, his interest in botany blossomed. Dodge wrote, "Without any apparent mental effort I took to botany and was never able to let it alone. Everything described within the limits of Gray's Manual [then the leading floral guide for our region] interested me. Woods, trees, fields, all formed an irresistible attraction." I have held Dodge's own copy of Gray's Manual, kept at the UM Herbarium. He consecutively numbered every species, intent on collecting them all as herbarium specimens, pressed plants mounted on paper with labels indicating the species and location.

Dodge told Cecil Billington, the curator of the University of Michigan Herbarium, "... how at first, he would go to the woods or fields, bringing in a few plants carefully hidden under his coat so that his friends and neighbors could not see them. They nicknamed him 'Posy' Dodge, which name he did not relish and tried to avoid occasion for its use as much as possible. However, this feeling gradually wore off, and Mr. Dodge, carrying his much-battered vasculum [specimen case], was a familiar figure on the streets of Port Huron, particularly those streets leading to the country."

He preferred to travel on bicycle, rather than horse and buggy. Apparently, this was somewhat unusual at the time, but allowed him to cover a large territory. Dodge wrote an article for the *Asa Gray Bulletin* in 1896 entitled, "The Bicycle and Botany".

The Bicycle and Botany.

CHARLES K. DODGE.

At present my efforts are all exerted to find out what grows in my county of St. Clair, Michigan, and Lambton Co., Ontario, the county in Canada just across the St. Clair river.

These counties extend up and down the river and on the Lake Huron shore about 40 miles, and back from the river at least 20 miles each. This makes a territory 40 by 40 miles, or a tract of 1,600 square miles. At the same time I am preparing specimens for exchange and increasing my herbarium. In 1895 without aid from others I collected and dried over 6,000 specimens. Of these I sent over 3,800 to the University of Minnesota for exchange, and now have a credit there of over 2,900, as Prof. Edmond P. Sheldon has just reported to me. This was accomplished mostly with the aid of the bicycle in economizing time. I am quite sure I could not have done so well with a horse and carriage. Any point within 12 or 15 miles of Port Huron, Mich., or Sarnia, Ontario, could be easily reached. When the place to be visited was at a greater distance, I would take a boat or railway train, carrying my wheel along. I use both vasculum and portfolio and

find no difficulty in carrying both of them at the same time on my bicycle. The vasculum I generally use is 6 by 9 by 18 inches, much larger than the standard size. Rather than a smaller, I would prefer one of twice the capacity given. I use the portfolio for rare species and all plants that are liable to crumple and wither too much in a vasculum. It does not seem to me necessary to enter much into detail. Every one will be ingenious enough to devise means to carry these implements. No doubt it is better not to have the handle bar of the bicycle very crooked, and it should be raised high enough to enable one to sit upright. I slip the strap handle of the vasculum over the end of the handle bar, hold it there, and have no difficulty in carrying it that way on a journey of 12 or 15 miles out of town and full of plants on my return. The portfolio is always strapped on in front of the handle bar. Unless the strap handle of the vasculum is too slack, the box will be raised high enough to avoid coming in contact with the knee in riding.

The great advantage I found in the use of the bicycle in botanizing is in saving time, both in the start and on the road; while after a tramp of from three to eight or more hours in searching for plants, it is only a rest and pleasure to mount the wheel to ride home. Without the wheel I could do very little in exploring these two counties.

Port Huron, Mich.

By 1880, Dodge was city attorney of Port Huron. He later served as circuit court commissioner for two terms, another year as city attorney, and one year as city controller.

In 1893, Dodge was appointed Deputy Collector of the United States Customs Office in Port Huron, and largely retired from legal practice, which afforded him much more time for botany. This same year, he tossed nearly his entire herbarium collection out the back window of his house, dissatisfied with his work. He then wanted to collect the entire flora of North America. This was about 2 years after he returned from a two-year stay in the west. But, he soon realized the task was too huge and decided to concentrate on Michigan and adjacent areas. He eventually collected about 40,000 specimens, now held by the UM Herbarium.

Charles married Millie Burns in 1897 at 53. They lived at 2805 Gratiot Avenue in Port Huron, a few blocks north of the present Blue Water Bridges. The modest two-story wood-frame house is still there, and in their time was a "...pretty, quiet home with ample grounds of about four and one-half acres, garden, fruit trees and opportunities for botanical experiments".

In 1900 Dodge published "Flora of St. Clair County, Michigan and the Western Part of Lambton County, Ontario". In the preface he wrote, "For the last twenty-two years, as spare time would permit, I have been interested in studying and identifying the plants of this locality, including only flowering plants, ferns, and their allies. Outdoor recreation being with me a necessity as well as a great pleasure, and desiring to have an object in view in my various wanderings on the wheel, at the suggestion of a friend, about six years ago, I undertook to find and examine, during my leisure hours, all the plants referred to, growing wild in [the region]." His primary interest became "finding out what grows wild in Michigan", and he often expressed his wish to live long enough to survey the entire State.

FLORA OF ST. CLAIR COUNTY, MICHIGAN,

AND THE

WESTERN PART OF LAMBTON COUNTY, ONTARIO

BY

C. K. DODGE

OF

PORT HURON MICHIGAN

Dodge was particularly drawn to native trees. From 1901 to 1909 he made detailed studies of the complex hawthorn genus *Crataegus* throughout Michigan, but especially Port Huron and Sarnia. Partly due to his work, type specimens (basis for species descriptions) of 52 hawthorns are in Michigan, several in Saint Clair County. He even has a species named for him, *Crataegus dodgei*.

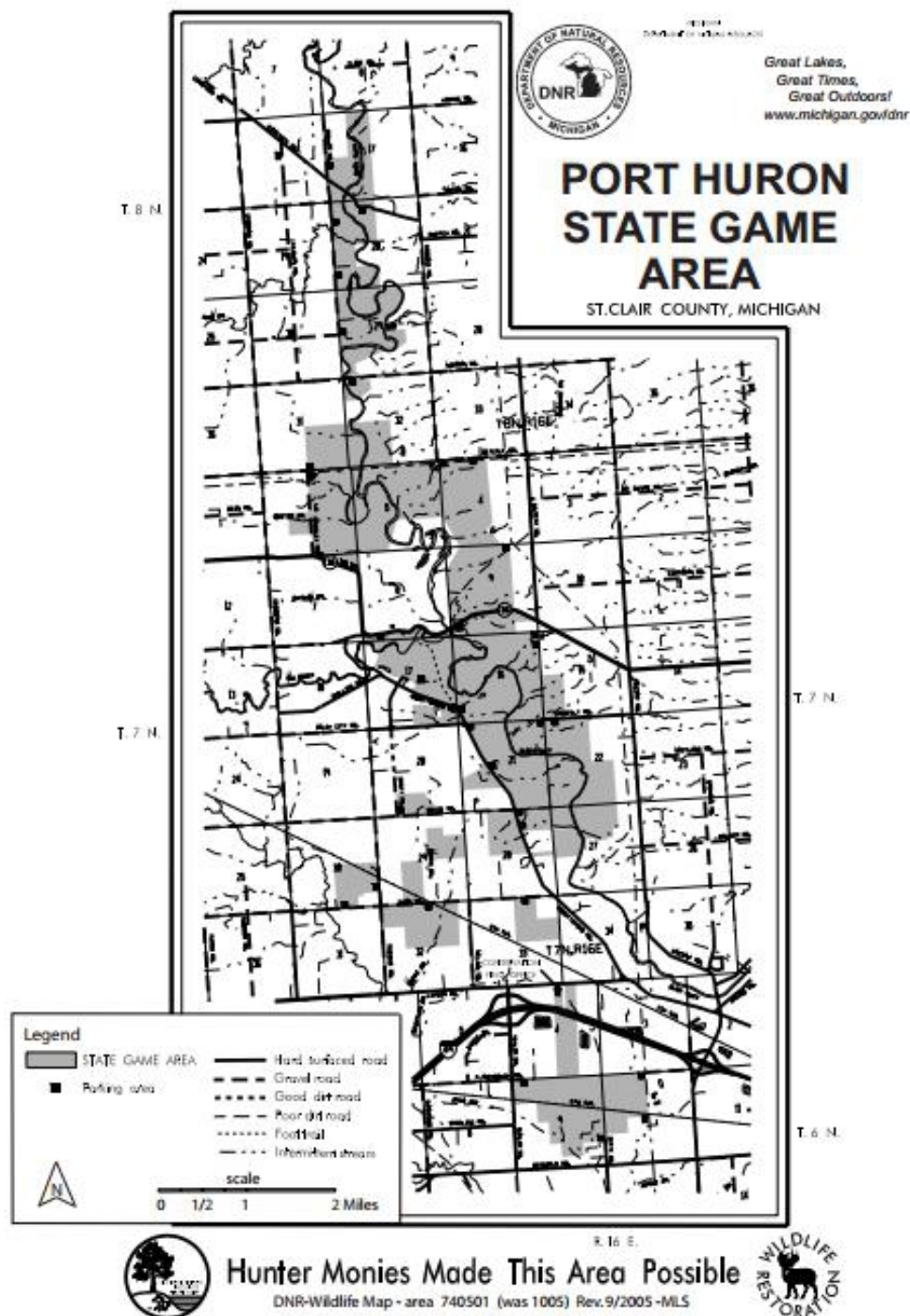


Dodge's Hawthorn (*Crataegus dodgei*). Photograph by P. G. O'Hara from University of Michigan Herbarium *Michigan Flora On-Line*: <https://www.michiganflora.net/>.

Edward Voss mentions Dodge in his book, "Botanical Beachcombers and Explorers", an excellent history of 19th Century botany in the Great Lakes region. Voss says Dodge was "... a collector who was particularly obsessed with citing his home town almost every time he used his name. I have seen labels on which he did it three times, but usually it was printed neatly twice ...".

Dodge was often at odds with "... interests in Port Huron which sought to destroy in a measure the beauty of his home city". In 1911, Dodge wrote the Flora of the County section of "History of St. Clair County" by William Jenks, and took this opportunity to lament the loss of native habitat in the area even then. He wrote, "It seems to the writer it has been established beyond cavil that a country cannot be stripped of its trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants without the greatest danger to its welfare. It is a matter about which, in this country, there is widespread and almost universal popular ignorance and unpardonable apathy."

In the same publication, Dodge proposed the creation of a large "... public reservation of 3,000 or 4,000 acres in one piece for St. Clair county" to preserve native flora and fauna of the region. He wrote, "The very best place for such a proposed reservation in this county is in the township of Clyde where Mill creek joins Black river". This is the present location of the Port Huron State Game Area.



Starting in 1908, at 64, Dodge made many expeditions through the Upper Peninsula with the Michigan Geological and Biological Survey. He explored the western shoreline of Lake Huron from Bay City to Saint Ignace, and was very familiar with the Thumb. His observations of Tuscola County and other regions were published by the Geological Survey in 1920. In 1917, his final year of life, at 73, he began investigating the flora of Berrien County.



Charles K. Dodge in 1918, age 73 or 74, the last year of life.

Cecil Billington accompanied Dodge on some of his later excursions, and wrote, "... Mr. Dodge could hold his own on a tramp with most of the younger men of a party ... work far into the night putting up his specimens for drying, and seemingly be as fresh as ever for the next [day]".

Dodge was a kind and generous man, often making long excursions with beginning botanists through territory he knew would provide no new plant species for himself. He left nearly a complete set of the roughly 3,000 species he knew to grow wild in the region to the Port Huron Academy of Science for "... those who care to know anything about the plants of their vicinity."