



WISCONSIN (?) BLUEGRASS

By Monroe S. Miller

I envy Kentucky. They are known around the world for the most beautiful turfgrass growing anywhere on this celestial sphere. They are the "Bluegrass State." It's petty to be jealous, but deep down I really wish *Poa pratensis* L. was commonly known as "Wisconsin Bluegrass". What a claim to fame that would be!

It is a fact that this, and only this, grass could inspire such envious emotions. I feel about bluegrass like John James Ingalls felt, many years ago. He was a Senator from Kansas from 1873 to 1891. An extremely eloquent man, he gave an address that appeared in the *Kansas Magazine* in 1872 that I have seen quoted any number of times in the literature. Seldom have I read more lofty words on any topic, let alone on turfgrass. It was entitled "In Praise of Blue Grass". Mr. Ingalls had an almost romantic feeling about bluegrass and expressed those feelings like no one ever has:

"One grass differs from another grass in glory. One is vulgar and another patrician. There are grades in its vegetable nobility. Some varieties are useful. Some are beautiful. Others combine utility and ornament. The sour, reedy herbage of swamps is baseborn. Timothy is a valuable servant. Redtop and clover are a degree higher in the social scale. But the king of them all, with genuine royal blood, is BLUE GRASS. It has heredity title to imperial superiority over all its humbler kin."

Nowhere does Mr. Ingalls in his narrative of well over a thousand words about bluegrass refer to it as "Kentucky Bluegrass". He, in fact, calls it "the final triumph of nature, reserved to compensate her favorite offspring in the new Paradise of Kansas." Would it be surprising that Mr. Ingalls, had the thought occurred to him, likely have christened it "Kansas Bluegrass"? Not at all. And I would argue that Wisconsin easily could lay claim to the common name of "Wisconsin Bluegrass".

As settlement in our country moved west and over the Appalachian Mountains, *Poa pratensis* moved along with explorers, travellers and settlers. What they found as they moved into the region of Kentucky were forests interspersed with large open meadows. Bluegrass was not mentioned as a plant growing in these meadows, but such large open areas greatly aided the early distribution of it, once it was introduced.

Poa pratensis prefers heavy well-drained soils and a soil pH above 5.0 but below the neutral of 7.0 mark. It has relatively high water requirements when actively growing, as well as comparatively high fertility requirements, especially high levels of phosphorus. It is best adapted to productive soils of limestone origin. It is uncanny to measure these requirements against soils found in the famous bluegrass section around Lexington, Kentucky. The Maury-Hagerstown soil areas of this region have phosphatic limestones as parent materials. They are dominantly heavy textured with a high content of mineral plant nutrients and organic matter. They are medium to strongly acid in reaction. They are easily penetrated by air and water, which favors *Poa pratensis* since this grass does not do well on compacted or poorly drained soil. The annual precipitation of the area is 43".

Are the pieces to this puzzle beginning to fit? Open meadows, a grass that is aggressive in spread and prolific in seed production, the right climate and an ideal soil condition all lead us to see and understand the distribution, establishment and prosperity of bluegrass in Kentucky. Even that state's proximity to exploration and settlement helped.

And there are more reasons why bluegrass became so popular and predominant in Kentucky. Early farmers believed this grass was as good as corn for a source of protein for their livestock and opted for buying corn

rather than plowing bluegrass fields and pastures to plant it. Bluegrass was simply more valuable. It was a permanent pasture feature in Kentucky and they found it more profitable than a grain and hay type of farming. We shouldn't be surprised that the first substantial seed production of *Poa pratensis* for sale took place in Kentucky, adding yet more evidence to how their state's name landed in front of bluegrass.

My search into the heritage and history of Kentucky Bluegrass revealed two very major and significant facts. The first is that *Poa pratensis* has a multiplicity of common names and Kentucky Bluegrass is only one of nearly 30 that I found. The farm I was raised on in Grant County had predominantly bluegrass pastures and my father referred to the grass as "junegrass". Peter Miller, during the time I worked for him at Nakoma while a student at the UW-Madison, also used the common name "junegrass" for what is most often now called Kentucky Bluegrass. Tracking the history is complicated by all of these common names. The second and maybe more important revelation is that *Poa pratensis* is not native to Kentucky or America or even North America.

There have been mild differences of opinion over the years on this question. There is no dispute, however, the *Poa pratensis* is a plant native to Europe and Asia. Couple this with the established fact that few plants (or animals, for that matter) are indigenous to both the Eurasia and North America and the conclusion that *Poa pratensis* was introduced after the discovery of America is hard to dispute or refute. My former Assistant, Tom Parent, claims that the geologic theory of plate tectonics could be evidence supporting an opinion of native residence of *Poa pratensis*, but he loves to argue with me (he always loses!) and I've dismissed his theory. Obviously the plant was introduced into our country from Europe in the 1600's by the early colonists.

Journals and letters written by the earliest American explorers back to their homes in the Old World make no reference to any grasses they recognized and give no clues that *Poa pratensis* was found growing here in the U.S. As immigration increased, set-

blers undoubtedly brought seed from home to sow here. Best guess is that "English Bluegrass" came over in a mixture of pasture seed.

Poa pratensis found the climate and the soil of the Northern states hospitable and it spread rapidly in New England and along the Atlantic Coast. That spread and subsequent prosperity are probably why its origin was even questioned. Writings, journals and almanacs of the 1700's and early 1800's make frequent references to English grass, meadow grass and several other common names of *Poa pratensis*.

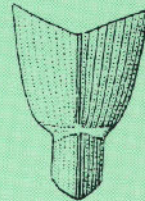
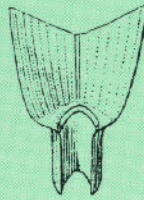
A lot of time in the library has given me a clarity of understanding how and why *Poa pratensis* became known as Kentucky Bluegrass. But I'm still jealous, especially because our Badger State could have been home and host to this grass with such "imperial superiority." We have the soils, the climate, the open meadows, the topography. We missed because of our location - if only Daniel Boone had gone north-west instead of west . . .

But if I'm disappointed, that disappointment pales in comparison to what

Rhode Islanders should feel. One of the first common names of *Poa pratensis* was "Rhode Island grass." They had it in their grasp and let it slip away. All they lacked was a promoter like me or like Senator Ingalls.

I suspect my campaign for Wisconsin Bluegrass will remain very limited and find little support, even here at home. That may give me time to find out why, with such a vivid and intense green color, it is called "Bluegrass".

Hey, I've got an idea! Let's rename it "Wisconsin Greengrass"!



"Ya know that new Scotts *Poa* product actually encourages bentgrass to move in here."

"Yeah. My mother-in-law will be here next."



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