

In the fall of 2004, I remember first writing about my experience driving from Minden to Tilden, Nebraska, to celebrate Rita's dad's birthday. In that particular year, Mike Qualset was celebrating his 81<sup>st</sup> birthday. In the years following, and nearly the same time of year, I wrote a few more articles about this exciting, autumn pilgrimage. In each article, I wrote about the splendor Mother Nature provided us as we made our trek along the Platte River Valley, crossing the Loup River Valley and finally entering the Elkhorn River Valley. In each article, I would comment how great it was to be alive! Not only did I have the opportunity to enjoy the beautiful color changes in the autumn landscape, but also I looked forward to reaching our destination and experiencing the joy of celebrating another of Dad's many birthdays. On those jaunts, Mother Nature always treated us to a kaleidoscope of yellow, golds, browns, greens, reds, oranges and taupes.

This past week, we once again took that same journey but sorrowfully this time it was for a different reason. It was a "highway blues" drive. Mike passed away on September 3 at the age of 93, and we were on our way to prepare for a funeral. Furthermore, adding to our blue feelings, Rita's mother Ruth had preceded Mike's death eleven months earlier. It was obvious; after losing such wonderful parents, the joy of this once highly anticipated annual pilgrimage was gone. For years, when we made this road trip, we enjoyed the assorted autumn colors. This time we mostly noticed the blue.

Although they had likely been growing in the roadside ditches in years prior, now, due to the sad occasion, the color blue was the only color that seemed to stand out. Scattered throughout the ditches were blue flowers. Although beautiful, seeing the blue color simply reinforced the "blues" we were feeling in our hearts.

One of these blue flowering plants was *Cichorium intybus*, commonly called chicory and sometimes-called coffee weed. The sky blue flower of this plant is small and daisy-like in shape. Chicory is an herbaceous, non-woody, perennial plant. Chicory belongs to the family



*Asteraceae*, the same as the common dandelion. Chicory grows throughout road ditches and meadows. History reveals that chicory was once used as a coffee substitute. Particularly, in the South during the Civil War, coffee was scarce, and a beverage brewed from the roots of chicory was made. After noticing this delicate blue flower, I immediately thought about growing it in our flower borders in memory of Mike, but through my research, I discovered this plant does not do well under cultivation. Mother Nature remains its best caretaker.



The other blue flowering plant we saw was *Salvia asurea* often called giant blue sage. Blue sage is a perennial wildflower. It belongs to the mint family and is native to Nebraska. It is a tall, delicate plant with large, two-lipped, blue flowers, whorled around a square stem forming a terminal spike-like cluster. Giant blue sage is a widespread perennial of the Great Plains and often found growing in roadside ditches. It reaches heights of three to four feet. It begins to flower in late summer and continues into the fall. I am quite sure the Nebraska Department of Roads has planted this particular plant due to its outstanding ability to withstand an

assortment of growing conditions.

Rita's brother Ronn and wife Deb, continue to reside in Tilden along with children and grandchildren. I know in the future, Rita and I will be returning there often. Although we now hold only memories of Mike and Ruth, I am certain, in time, our "highway blues" will dissipate. When they do, I can only hope I will be excited to make that trip, no matter what the season. Hopefully, then I will repeat, "It's great to be alive!"