Medical adventures in Ethiopia

My experiences as a medical missionary in western Ethiopia have been so varied and at times so exciting that it is difficult to choose between travel, medical work, big game hunting and other possible topics for this article.

But first I wish to make it plain that I was not expelled from Ethiopia as has been erroneously stated. I left my station at Gore in the western part of the country when it seemed to me that the local authorities would not be able to keep law and order much longer, though they were urging me to stay and assuring me that if I were killed they would die with me.

But most of my friends were urging me to leave, my furlough was already eight months overdue, and the only dependable chief was leaving. It was quite a while later that Italian troops arrived in Gore.

Travel during the dry season is always interesting, especially over roads one has never traveled before, and at times it has all the elements of adventure, including danger. During the rainy season it is just as much of an experience or an adventure, but usually it is not so pleasant.

Here you are loath to leave the pavement when it rains; there we had no pavement to leave. Here, when your car does get stuck in the mud, you get someone to pull you out; there when our mules or horses get stuck belly-deep in mud we get off and struggle out while the animal does the same.

And if one is caught on the road in one of Ethiopia's torrential tropical rains it is definitely unpleasant—a raincoat makes one uncomfortably warm, and the slippery roads not only slow one's progress but cause the four feet of one's steed to go in four different directions at the same time, the trails being mere paths which are usually going up or down but seldom on the level except through swamps or bogs. And in such places they are deeply corrugated, which makes travel miserable.

Camp sites during the rains are either corrugated, which makes travel miserable. And in such places they are deeply corrugated, which makes travel miserable. Camp sites during the rains are either wet or muddy, and often both, as well as on a slope which keeps one crawling up in bed all night.

As long as I live I will remember my first big elephantiasis operation. I had been charging a dollar and a half for operations of this sort, but this patient looked more prosperous than the others and so I charged him two and a half; but I became suspicious when he thanked me for making the fee so low.

Later I found that he was not only a witch doctor but also a chief of no mean rank and withal quite rich.

The operation was a nightmare. I had been doing these operations under local anaesthesia and made the usual injections in this case. But it brought no appreciable diminution of sensation. A second time I went around the entire field with the same result. A third, a fourth and a fifth time I repeated the injection but always the result was the same. Finally I called a colleague who was superintending the construction of a building nearby and had him administer chloroform.

It took an abnormally large amount of the drug to anaesthetize the patient and when he was ready for operation I soon found he was dangerously deep in the anaesthetic state. When the mask was removed he seemed to come directly from the danger zone up to where he was kicking and yelling. The tumor which I was attempting to remove was a huge one—I had never seen one in this country or in London while in school there and the tissues were all so abnormal that I had to work very slowly and carefully to avoid cutting into some vital structure.

I began about seven in the morning and finished about one in the afternoon. If that old man had died I think I never would have done any more surgery. But he had an amazing vitality and not long after he was jumping and dancing like a boy—happy to have been relieved of such a weight. And I went on with surgery.

When this witch doctor returned to his home about a week's journey away, the people whom he had been deceiving and robbing all the years were so glad to see the old rascal back again that they gave him a thousand dollars—not counting the small coins, the chickens and other gifts.

A doctor's work in Ethiopia is much different from what it is in our own country. To begin with a doctor must be something of a pharmacist and conditions in western Ethiopia made it almost mandatory to lay in a year's supply at a time.

Some diseases which are fairly common here are not seen there at all; and the reverse is also true. Oriental sore and relapsing fever are not uncommon there, and malaria and amoebic dysentery are more common than in this portion of our own country. Worm infestations seem to be practically universal among the Ethiopians. But acute abdominal conditions are comparatively rare.

Especially in medical practice there is still a great deal to be done to win the confidence of the natives. Surgery is more dramatic and seems to be more readily comprehended by the natives, but most surgical cases are from three to seven years old when they finally come for treatment.

The native puts a great deal of faith in the native witches (witch doctors), who are usually men, and a recent patient of mine had spent $125 for sacrifices and...
gifts to the witch in his district before he came to the mission where the operation he needed cost him $5.

There are also native doctors who have a rather large empirical knowledge of various roots and herbs, and these are often tried also before consulting the foreign doctor. And some remedies are known to everyone.

Thus far I have had to do all operations on the veranda of the clinic, the clinic being a room about fifteen feet square with two doors and one window. It serves as office, dispensary and examination room, and into it have come thousands of interesting people.

With as many as eight or nine thousand patients a year I had practically no time to record information and observations, but a few people stay in my memory. One man whom I vividly remember was a surgical patient. After making the usual pre-operative anaesthetic injections I pricked him with a needle and asked him if it hurt. He replied in the affirmative so I repeated the injection two or three times but after that, having no one to administer a general anaesthetic, I told him it would be impossible for me to operate on him, and I went on about my clinic work.

When I had finished clinic and was going home for lunch, this man followed while under my care, even though through it I realized that should Dejazmatch die I knew before I started out, and knowing long time; he had lost a lot of weight; he was superstitious than the usual Ethiopian.

They were also very loyal to him; less and daring men to be found in Ethiopia. His soldiers, I knew from a former visit, were some of the most reckless and daring men to be found in Ethiopia. They also keep cattle, sheep and goats. It is thought to have supernatural powers. They now have six children—two boys and four girls—and recently have been visiting relatives in Oklahoma City while on furlough. The education of the children is their greatest problem, and they believe this is the point at which the greatest sacrifice is demanded of missionaries.

When their ears have become opened they learn the stories and teachings of the Bible quite readily and they are able also to make their own applications of Christian truths and ethics to their own lives and problems.

The people living on the Ethiopian plateau are chiefly agriculturists but they also keep cattle, sheep and goats. It is in their homes that I have had some of my most enjoyable times. And while on hunting trips with them as my carriers and guides I have learned a great deal more of native life, and especially of folklore, than I ever have in performing my medical and other duties in the town.

I have been especially interested in folklore, but space permits only a brief example. According to this story, God one day called all His creatures to Him. The Snake obeyed very promptly but man was rather tardy and the other animals still more so. God rewarded the snake for his promptness by giving him immortality and that is why the snake sheds his skin each year and so renews his life.

This story has more point to it when it is explained that these people worship the snake—one black variety in particular. It is thought to have supernatural powers.

The pagans, and most of those who have recently come out of paganism, as well, also worship certain mountains, trees and rivers as well as certain other animate and inanimate objects. And very reluctantly, indeed, do they part with their belief in malign creatures very similar to the werewolves which plagued some of our ancestors not so far in the past. And many marvelous and fanciful tales are told of the activities of these creatures.

It is difficult to realize what a large part in their lives is played by fear. The ordinary peasant, under native rule, lived in fear of the chiefs over him for there were no set taxes in our province and each chief took as much as he could get. He lived in fear of evil spirits which could bring sickness to men and cattle.
IN NATURE'S PATH

A good deal of what we call invention is imitation of nature.

The aeroplane is a man-made bird. The submarine is a mechanical fish. The locomotive has been called "The Iron Horse."

So countless objects follow nature's patterns, and in the matter of mechanical principles there is little chance if anything that we know which wise Old Mother Nature has not always practiced.

What we require in scientists and engineers is, then, not so much their ability to create things essentially new, as their skill in searching out old but hidden principles, and their remarkable ingenuity in applying these principles to new uses.

There are very few more interesting examples of this skill and ingenuity than the modern automobile.

And there are very few more skilful "imitations of nature" than are represented in the many and varied functions performed by the thousands of parts that go to make up a modern motor car.

There is the basic function of movement. Hence, wheels, and the gearing of power into the wheels.

There is the function of changing direction of movement, and that of moving over various surfaces, on level ground, up hill and down hill.

There is the necessary ability to stop movement. All these require such devices as steering apparatus, brakes and methods of controlling power and speed.

Then there is the function of carrying passengers, and this involves supplementary functions.

One of them is to provide comfort for the passengers . . . to minimize the shocks of travel which would otherwise result.

Now nature, too, has had the problem of producing shockless movement. In the human body, for example, many devices are utilized toward this end.

First, there is the soft pedaling of the soles of the feet — the cunning arrangement of the foot arches — the manner in which the ankle is constructed.

Nature, next, conveys that important factor — the structure of the knee. The easing of shock is also served in the fitting of the spine to hip bones, and thence to the legs, in the marvelously efficient spiral column itself with its cushioning pads of cartilage between the vertebrae, in the manner of balancing our heads on our shoulders; and finally, the muscles and tendons employed as an elaborate system of springs and shock-absorbers.

Now see how automobile construction parallels nature's plan. The foot-paddings of our cars are their tires. The counterpart of the ankle arches are the springs between axles and frame. The self-adjusting nature of the ankle is imitated in the universal joint. Rubber cushioning serves purposes similar to the cartilage pads between vertebrae. Shock absorbers have restraining effects like those of muscles and tendons.

One major item of nature's provisions is omitted from this list . . . that important structural joint we call the knee. And in certain cars, even this is present in the properly-maintained "Knee-Action."

And so we have a partial glimpse of automobile construction — an imitation of nature, better than nature itself. The more we succeed in parallelizing nature's methods, the better the car — and the more efficiently it performs the functions for which we prize it.

In the automobile . . . as in all matters of mechanics, the job of the engineer is not so much to blaze new trails as to find his way . . . with the trained eye of the frontier scout . . . along the paths of nature.