Venezuelan journey

A Sooner geologist goes where arrows sprinkle

BY ROLF ENGLEMAN, '21

EDITOR'S NOTE—Mr Engleman is in the heart of the Venezuelan wilds at present. Due to certain political complications he regrets that for the present he will be unable to complete the articles. At the earliest possible moment, however, we hope to present the concluding instalments.

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FOUR of us, Lou, Avery, Fred and myself, two in front and two behind (for there was a chance that the Indians were still present and still had arrows and might try to cut us off from camp), went out with the party. We were on foot, for we didn’t want to be bothered by slow, bulky, bulky mules. At intervals along the trail we found arrows stuck upright in the ground. The idea in thus prodigally giving away these precious carefully-made arrows seemed to be to impress us with their bravado and also with the fact that there were many more where those came from. When I was told that they sometimes covered such souvenirs with their arrows and lay in wait for the curious I found their playful habits to be less innocent, however. At last we reached the scene of the ambush. Here was the pitiful little dog in the middle of the trail with its entire jaw cut out, and standing alongside the inevitable arrow. This seemed a stage set for a second ambush, so the four of us gingerly surrounded the spot, facing outward with revolvers quite dramatically unlimbered, and Fred jerked the arrow out. Nothing happened. The watched pot. We returned to camp not at all disappointed.

Abandoned wildcat derricks are dismal misplaced objects as a rule. Skeleton steeples of strange cathedrals, the creed they celebrate is “I believe in me.” The high priests of this natural religion are the drillers who take materials they know, combine them into devices they can see to fulfill a need they have foreseen. Supreme on his rig, like the captain of a ship, is the driller, master of realism. But the stepple without its priest is a defeated outpost waiting solidly for the return of the warming steam, the low-roaring boiler, the obscene endearments and poetic jargon that fit it as a bolt fits its nut, the unafraid hands that direct and justify it. Wasps build their nests on its girts, buzzards rest on the crownblocks, wastrels pointless life pushes through its rotting termite-filled floor. Except for a stray geologist who may climb it for the view, it is a resented anomaly in the jungle.

But not this derrick. When I went to the bath house I found a hot shower, an unknown luxury in camp, unless there is a steel tank to catch the sun, or steam. The well had failed to find oil but from our standpoint was a great success, because they had encountered hot water under considerable artesian pressure.

The afternoon we spent resting. The next day was the Fourth of July, and we celebrated by sipping scotch and soda and playing bridge. The fifth arranging equipment. The sixth booted and with our packs cut down to essentials (including a little of the densest most durable reading matter), we reviewed our motley motley army of forty, who with six mules and ten burros were to carry on their backs all they would need plus our material. In addition there were four mules to carry the Americans: Saturn, Lou, Mac and myself. Mac was the youngest of the engineers, mature and handsome in a manner to delight Whitman; heir of a business in Philadelphia, aviator during the war, he revels with unobtrusive gusto in the unending novelty of these explorations. With ease and tact he avoids most of the difficulties that harry the nerves of the less fortunately endowed. He might be considered insensitive by the more hysterical; the fact is that emotionally adult, civilized, he is merely able to focus on the new and the important his sensitive curiosity.

We straggled along the narrow trail, cut through the brush. At first it was flat and uniformly muddy, then hummocky with sandier stretches; but always a tunnel with dangling vines arched over the mule, avoiding the deeply churned middle of the trail, persistently carry one. Then finally we came to the precipitous 600-foot ridge which marks the vertical dipping east flank of the anti-cline. We soon were forced to dismount to struggle up the slippery switch-back trail. The men with their heavy loads, additionally hampere[d] by the unaccustomed rifles, sweated and strove and clung to trees. Now more than ever we were apprehensive of an Indian attack, and began to grow used to the feeling that we were being watched. The high ridge was even more difficult, as usual, in the descent, and the slippery clay made dizzy slides from one fortuitous tree to the next. Now the jungle, even better watered, was a thick curtain fifty feet and more high, beautiful ferns and palms to twenty feet, and above, the rich dangling vines and moss hanging from great trees. We descended to a dank perpetually dewy valley and were soon at a former camping-ground known...
as Rancho Quemado camp, on the banks of a cool rocky brook, the Juan Pablo. We had covered about twenty-two kilometers from eight-thirty to two o'clock in the afternoon.

While the men unloaded themselves and the mules, and built additional palm shacks for the greater size of the party, Mac and Saturn scouted around and soon called us to look at a very recent camp, probably of the party that had ambushed Fred and Avery. It was a simply built lean-to made of the long stalks of the fern-like palm which grows everywhere here in the moist jungle; beneath it was a very uncomfortable-looking hammock made of bark, and in front of it the charred wood of a fire with a tin can pilfered from one of the old campsites. All this could be improvised in a few minutes. Later I was to see our party build a complete camp with eight or ten thatched houses, framework of poles cut in the jungle and lashed with the ever-present rope-like vines, in half a day. The type of palm used here is most admirably adapted to rapid construction. It consists of a cluster of stiff woody stalks ten feet and more in length, with thick-spaced ribbon-like leaves up to two feet long on each side. Split down the middle, these natural curtains strung on poles are laid like great shingles on the pole framework. This is the best and most rapidly laid of the many natural roofs found in the prodigal tropics, but is abundant only in the moist dense jungle.

Mac advanced the theory that the curious character of the arrows was due to the fact that they had been little changed from their original form as spears. They are long and heavy, and the bows are extremely stiff, so much so that it is generally believed that to bend them the Indians sit down and extend the bow with their feet. A strong man can bend them with his arms a little, but hardly enough to project the arrows very far. All the arrows of different types are about six feet long.

The Indians are small in stature, making the length of arrow and bow all the more curious. I have never seen an arrow from this tribe tipped with steel although the Indians who sell arrows to oil employees and are consequently in touch with civilization include in their sets several with thin blades as much as two inches across. They cut up the thin cheap machete (machetty) of commerce to get this steel, and the effect is most incredibly fierce. The tip of the war arrow, like all those of this hostile tribe, is of hard tough black palm wood beautifully and painstakingly worked. The length of this tip varies up to two feet and more; the length which is triangular and barbed ranges up to eighteen inches, and the rest is round. Of two that I have, one has four barbs on each of its three edges, the other six. Most of them have many more barbs. The body of the arrow is made of a sort of smooth bamboo into which the tip is inserted and lashed. This tip is so keen and hard that tossed upward into a soft wood ceiling it will stick and quiver. Being over twice as great in diameter as the heavy hardwood head, the light shaft requires no feather.

They also make “bird arrows” of the same over-all length, but with a tip eight inches long consisting of three slightly spread points of black palm with barbs on the inside. The war arrows are also used to kill jaguars at need, and monkeys, which are one of the main articles of diet. The red howling monkey is one of the most abundant, in all respects the most conspicuous. The older ones attain a weight of thirty or forty pounds; they are clean and well-groomed, languid and contemptuous of groundlings except when aroused when they fiercely shake the branches and utter their howl, the loudest and most carrying sound in the brush. Or they may slyly and silently take a position above the intruder, who is puzzled at the sound (unless a direct hit is scored) as of dropping twigs, until he looks up or is warned by an offense to his olfactory nerves. Their resonant orthophonic roar, more like a lion’s than any lion’s is, resembles everything from a distant waterfall to a very insistent static. Small and large are almost equally gifted vocally; their powers are due to an elaborate bone soundbox in the throat. This monkey has never lived long in captivity, on account of the delicacy of its digestive processes and its diet, confined to mild tropic fruits.