

## THE TRAVELS OF A BOTANIST IN VENEZUELAN INTERIOR

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(Editor's Note:—Mr. Williams, currently on leave of absence from the Museum to assist Dr. Henry Pittier, government botanist of Venezuela, in extensive exploration of that country, has sent the following account of his recent experiences.)

I have returned to Caracas after a four months' expedition to the Venezuelan Guayana, principally in the upper and lower reaches of the River Caura. This was the most difficult and dangerous trip I have yet undertaken, but was well worth the effort.

Collecting equipment was sent overland to Ciudad Bolivar, and I followed two weeks later, partly by road, chiefly by flying over



Tapping a Cow Tree

This photograph, made on an expedition to Costa Rica several years ago, shows a botanist obtaining "milk" from a tree similar (though of a different species) to that encountered by Curator Williams in Venezuela.

the "llanos" (extensive plains). It takes three days by road, but one can traverse the distance by air in two hours. In Ciudad Bolivar I was joined by Captain Felix Cardona, of the Venezuelan Frontier Commission. Because of the heavy load of equipment and provisions, we hired a sail boat. Sailing up the Orinoco for three days we reached the estuary of the Caura, then followed the latter for three more days to Las Trincheras, the last sizable village. There our cargo was transferred to "curiaras" (large canoes), and in these we then ascended the Caura, notorious for its many dangerous rapids, for two more weeks until we arrived at the Salto de Para, a large waterfall, where Cardona and I separated.

At one time our party included thirty-two individuals—seven Venezuelans (or

"rationales" as they call themselves), seven Macuchies (Indians from the Grand Sabaña to the south), a Carib, a Jindus, and sixteen Maquiritares (also called Mayongkongs).

Two days before we arrived at the Salto de Para, it began to thunder and our oarsmen, the Macuchies Indians, told us this meant that "the Indians (meaning the Mayongkongs) were coming." The following morning as we moved up river, the Macuchies shouted, "Here come the Indians." We, *rationales*, could not spot the Maquiritares, but our forest-bred friends have a highly developed sense of sight and smell. The Macuchies were excited and one of them blew his shell. This was a sign of friendship and the Maquiritares, recognizing the call, advanced from their hiding places behind a large rock some 500 yards away. They advanced rapidly towards us in three canoes, led by their *caciques* (chieftains), Cardier, and Chauran. Cardier and his men decided immediately to return with us, but Chauran and his group insisted on continuing down river. However, when we reached the Salto de Para, Chauran arrived simultaneously. Asked why he had changed his mind he replied in one word: "*Canaima*." In Indian lore this means the devil in the form of revenge, and Chauran and his followers had feared we would attack during the night to punish them for not returning with us.

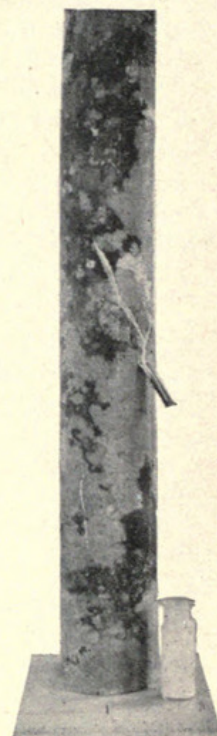
### CUSTOMS OF THE INDIANS

Except for a narrow loin cloth, dyed red with "achote," these Indians live in the nude. Both men and women bob their hair in a fashion practised since time immemorial. Another beautifying process, practised by both sexes, is plucking the eyelashes and eyebrows. The Mayongkongs are expert hunters, fishermen, and builders of canoes. Their principal weapon is the bow and arrow, but in late years they have adopted firearms, principally for defence. They have two great fears—the Salto de Para waterfall, and the Shirishana Indians, their bitter enemies who inhabit the region along the Brazilian frontier. Almost every year, during the dry season, these Shirishanas attack the Maquiritares, burn their huts, and carry off prisoners. Cases have been reported of groups of Shirishanas led by an old woman more ferocious and cruel than any known male *cacique*. The Maquiritares believe that the Salto de Para is inhabited by "Makoi," a form of devil. For this reason, while we were below the Salto they kept aloof and spoke little, but once they arrived above the falls they became congenial. Money has no value to them, and all business is done by barter, a hunting dog being traded for a canoe, for example.

For about three months I lived alone with the natives in the forest, cut off from the outside world. We had to shoot rapids, which is far more dangerous than ascending

them, and fight the heat, rain, and malaria. But we came through without serious mishap, bringing a collection of thousands of herbarium specimens, about 400 samples of woods, and textile fibers, gums, resins, oils, and hundreds of photographs. This collection is the first of its kind so far made in the vast Venezuelan Guayana, although some famed botanists have visited parts of it.

The region is a botanist's paradise, whose variety of plant-life is amazing, ranging from tiny orchids with exquisite flowers to giant trees, often reaching 140 feet in height. Some of the trees have straight, cylindrical trunks, up to six feet in diameter and clear of branches up to about eighty feet. One of the most interesting of these trees is the *cajiman*, also called *vacuno*, or *palo de vaca*. Incisions in the bark of this "cow tree" yield a sweet latex. It is a common practice among those who travel through these forests to drink this milk. I have now done so myself and can vouch for its excellence. The best way to use it is to add five parts of water to one part of the latex, and boil slowly until a scum is produced. This can be added to coffee or tea without fear of any ill-effects. If there is no immediate need of using it in coffee, it forms an admirable material for caulking canoes. When the latex is boiled, without the addition of water, it coagulates readily, is pliable and can be kneaded into any desired shape. The pulp of the fruit provides an exceedingly sweet and savory food relished by man, as well as by birds and quadrupeds. "Cow trees" were first discovered by Alexander von Humboldt, and described by him 140 years ago.



Cow Tree in Museum

A trunk of the Guatemalan species, presented to Field Museum by the United Fruit Company, and exhibited in Hall of Foreign Woods (Hall 27).

### FOR AMATEUR COLLECTORS—

The BOOK SHOP of FIELD MUSEUM has added to the books, and other merchandise such as animal models, map-globes, paper weights, etc., available at its counters, specimens of rocks and minerals approved by the Department of Geology for the use of the amateur collector and lapidary. Many are ornamental.





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