

1933...a radio talk given by Melbourne Armstrong Carriker in Philadelphia titled: *Outstanding Events In the Life of a Field Naturalist*. The manuscript, found among his papers after his death, has been edited to preserve the style of his speech. The account gives us a view of what he experienced during his bird collecting expeditions. He was 30 years old and unmarried when these events took place.

My work, over a period of many years, has been the collecting of birds and mammals for most of the large museums in the United States, with my field of operations located almost exclusively in Central and South America.

December of 1909 found me with a native helper in Maripa, the last small village at the upper end of the great "savannas" covering the lower Caura and Orinoco valleys of Venezuela. Our work at Maripa was finished by Christmas, and I had planned on ascending the river after the holidays to the vast, uninhabited jungles which extended unbroken to the frontiers of Brazil.

However, neither I—or anyone else—had dreamed that the price of crude rubber would rise suddenly to unprecedented heights. The news arrived shortly before Christmas, brought by one of the little schooners which ply the Orinoco River between Ciudad Bolivar and Caicara. Due to this startling information, the Christmas festivities in Maripa were reduced to a single hilarious dance, where "aguardiente" flowed like water and the conversation was confined to what each man would do with the fortune he would soon possess after selling the rubber he was going to cut.

Immediately following the dance, frenzied preparations commenced for the exodus to the wild jungles on the upper Caura where rubber trees abounded. Canoes were overhauled, new paddles made, and provisions gathered—since the only food obtainable in that wild region was game birds and animals. It was a Klondike gold rush repeated, but there were no "cheechakos" here; all the men were raised and trained to live and work in the jungle. At the end of three days there remained in the village only old men, women and children. The only canoes left on the beach were too small, or too old, for the strenuous trip to the rubber forests.

All my attempts to hire a canoe and boatmen for my own trip up river were fruitless. It seemed that I was doomed to failure—until a boy told me about an old canoe which might serve my purpose. On inspection it proved to be not only old, it was waterlogged—and minus a large piece of

one gunwale. Nevertheless, Manuel, my helper, and I hauled it out onto the beach, cleaned the bottom and caulked the cracks. We decided that we would make the trip alone, under our own steam.

I had considerable experience in handling a canoe, both in Costa Rica and northern Canada, while Manuel—who was accustomed to oars—had never handled a paddle. But he said he was willing to try. After a few practice runs with the old tub, we loaded up our collecting equipment and enough provisions for several weeks, then pulled out amidst the "despedidas" of the friendly villagers.

Unquestionably, the canoe was too heavy for two men to handle on such a long and hazardous trip, but I was determined to make the attempt. The region we were going to cover had never been explored by an ornithological collector and, most certainly, numerous species—new to science—would be secured. We were fresh and filled with enthusiasm when we started, and the first day passed very well. At sunset we made camp in the forest at the rivers edge; tired, yes...but filled with hope.

The following forenoon I developed a disquieting diarrhea, but thinking it would soon pass, we continued on our journey. The river current in this section was not very swift and, by hugging the shore and taking advantage of all the eddies, we made good progress. However, my diarrhea got worse. When we made our usual camp at sunset, I was too tired to eat much and turned in early, hoping that a good night's rest would help me.

On the third day I became gradually worse—and was passing blood. I realized that I had amebic dysentery, not simple diarrhea. At that point we should have returned to Maripa, but mule-headed pride kept me going. I had been told that we would reach the first rubber cutter's camp in four days, and little by little we crept up the river. Although I managed to eat something that day, by nightfall I was completely exhausted and fell into my cot as soon as it was erected, thinking that—after all—it might be best to turn back the next day.

Dawn brought renewed hope and quieted my fears, so now there was no thought of turning the canoe downstream. We strained every muscle that day, hoping that by nightfall we would reach the rubber cutter's camp. When the sun finally dropped behind the curtain of jungle, there was no clearing, or camp, in sight. I don't remember much of what passed that night—or the following forenoon—but we must have started again. Where I found the courage and strength to continue, I will never know...but continue we did.

At midday we reached the rubber cutter's camp. Manuel

was the first to note the clearing, but there were no canoes tied up at the river bank. When we pulled into shore my heart really sank. No smoke issued from the little shacks, and nobody approached the landing to welcome us. The camp was deserted; the cutters had exhausted the region and moved further up the river.

Manuel tied up the canoe while I stared stupidly at the deserted camp, not knowing—or caring much—what we were going to do. I told Manuel to select the best of the "ranchos" and move our cargo into it, while I lay in the shade—too exhausted and disheartened to think. After a while my thoughts cleared somewhat, and I tried to find a solution to my problem. Manuel had hung my hammock in the shack and I moved into it, trying to remember what I had learned about amebic dysentery.

My father was a doctor and I had absorbed not a little information from him about many kinds of human ailments and their remedies. At that time not a great deal was known about the cure of amebic dysentery, and I realized that I was in a very grave situation. The nearest doctor was in Ciudad Bolivar, a ten day journey down the Caura and Orinoco rivers—which was utterly impossible. We always carried an adequate supply of medicines for ordinary ailments, as well as antiseptics and surgical dressing, but there was absolutely nothing which seemed useful for my condition.

I knew that the amoebae which caused the trouble were located in the lower part of the lower bowl, and I racked my brains in an effort to hit upon some feasible manner of destroying them. I always carried an antiseptic for sterilizing wounds—one that was in general use at the time. Namely: 5 grain tablets of Bichloride of Mercury and Muriate of Ammonia, one tablet to be used with a pint of water. My mind kept toying with the idea that perhaps it could be used—if only I knew how. If the antiseptic could kill microbes of infection externally, they would, most certainly, kill the amoebae.

Naturally, I was aware that Bichloride of Mercury was a virulent poison if taken orally; however, I also knew that there was practically no absorption through the walls of the large intestine. The only danger lay in the fact that I had been passing considerable blood for more than two days. Finally, I said to myself: it seems to be a case of either dying from dysentery, or being poisoned by Bichloride of Mercury...and there was more chance of survival from the latter than the former.

I always carried an ordinary fountain syringe in my luggage, and while Manuel heated some water, I dug it out,

along with a tablet of antiseptic. Then came the five hundred dollar question: what strength should I use? I decided on a half tablet to one quart of water, then prepared the solution and injected about a pint of it into my lower bowl. This was immediately ejected, followed by terrific cramps which left me writhing on the dirt floor. I thought—this is it.

Gradually the pain lessened and finally ceased. The reaction, from frightful pain and fear to blessed calm, cannot be described. I lay in my hammock and slept.

Two hours later I arose and went outside. The dysentery was cured—absolutely—and never returned. Taking my shotgun, I followed one of the rubber cutter's trails and soon shot three birds, the first I saw. Manuel cleaned them and made a stew with rice, which I devoured with no ill effects. The following day we organized our camp and started collecting birds.

Ten days later we broke camp. After a long day's paddle upstream, we arrived at the rubber cutter's new camp and were warmly received. I was soon convinced that the location was an excellent one for our work. The following day, with the help of several cutters, we built a one room shack with a lean-to kitchen, palm leaf roof and walls—and set up housekeeping.

A week later, after I had returned early from a successful hunt, I changed clothes, unpacked my birds, sat down at our little table facing the door, and started entering the specimens into my field catalog. A slight noise in the roof caused me to turn my head and look upward. For a few seconds I stared—too paralyzed to move. Less than a yard from my head hung the enormous snout of a huge anaconda snake; its seemingly endless body was coiled around the poles which supported the roof.

A sudden movement on my part was impossible; the forepart of the snake's body was arched—ready to strike. A blow to my head from that massive, bony snout would have been fatal. My loaded shotgun stood against the wall, within reach. Slowly...oh, how slowly, I stretched out my hand to grasp it. Once grasped, it was even more nerve wracking to raise the gun slowly and aim it at the snake's head. The gun was a hammerless type, on safety, and once it was in position, I pulled the trigger. Fully aware of the terrific damage the thrashing coils of the dying snake could create, I leaped for the open door, upsetting my chair and table, and sprawled full length on the ground outside.

There followed a scene so terrifying that, had I not seen it myself, I would never have believed it. The walls

and roof of the shack fairly exploded. The din of breaking poles, cots and boxes was indescribable. Finally—I'll never know how long afterward—there was quiet. With the assembled people of the camp, we peered inside the ruins of what had been a well organized shack. To state that it was a shambles would be putting it mildly.

The shack was a complete wreck and had to be rebuilt. Fortunately, most of our possessions—being in stout chests on the ground—were not damaged beyond repair. We did lose a considerable amount of food supplies, but I was able to replace them at the little trader's store.

The anaconda measured twenty two feet in length and eight inches in diameter. It was carefully skinned at the rubber cutter's camp and later tanned for me at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Later, it hung for some time, like a frieze, around two walls of my study in Beachwood, New Jersey.

Two young natives at "Anaconda Camp," who had been very friendly with us and helped rebuild the shack, as well as assisted us in many small ways, left to make a lonely camp higher up on one of the tributaries of the river. A week later they returned for supplies and told me that they were in a place fairly swarming with birds and mammals. I was much interested, since we were about to leave "Camp Anaconda." When they offered to help us build a shack near theirs, I jumped at the chance. They stayed at our camp an extra day, which gave us time to pack before we returned with them.

The specimens which we had gathered thus far were carefully packed in chests and left in "Camp Anaconda," to be sent to Maripa at the first opportunity. After buying more food supplies at the little store the next morning, we left. It was a hard day's paddle to the young rubber cutter's location, but Manuel and I managed to keep up with them—although I always thought that they slowed down their speed considerably on our account.

We decided that it would not be advisable to build our shack alongside theirs—which was on the river bank—because we would be absent from the camp for several hours before noon, and not all the men who plied the river were to be trusted. We chose a small creek, about a mile below their camp, and forced the canoes up it for perhaps a half mile. There we cleared an area and partly completed our shack, merely a large room with a palm leaf thatch and no walls. Our friends spent the night with us, and we finished the "rancho" before noon the next day. The rest of the day was spent setting up housekeeping.

We began collecting again the following morning. It

proved to be a grand place, birds and mammals really did abound, and we were busy from before dawn to sometimes late at night. With all this good fortune, one little thing disturbed my contentment—the place was infested with mosquitoes, many of them the deadly "anopheles" that carried malarial fever. I had previously suffered many attacks of malaria, and felt that I was perhaps immune, but poor Manuel had never had it. He was from Trinidad Island, where there is little malaria.

We always slept under nets, but were exposed to the pests in the evening before retiring, and in the forests during the day. If we escaped it would be a miracle. Sure enough—eight days after our arrival—Manuel returned early from shooting with a terrific chill, which was followed by the usual high fever. The standard remedy for malaria in those days was sulphate of quinine and phanacatine, of which we carried a good supply. As soon as the fever abated, I started him on the quinine, giving him ten grains in the morning and ten at night.

As usual in such cases, he felt quite well the next morning, so I went shooting. But lady luck had ceased to smile upon me. I returned to camp with a chill, and Manuel was also having another chill. We sure were in a jam, both practically helpless, in the center of a vast jungle. Our only hope of help was from our two friends up the river, but they were busy and might not think to visit us for a week. It was not a pleasant thought.

We passed a miserable night, without food, our heads roaring from the quinine we had taken. In the morning neither of us felt well enough to get up and build a fire to make coffee. About ten AM I woke from a short doze at the sound of paddles striking the sides of a canoe. Shortly afterward our two friends appeared, full of condolences and wishes to help us. They built a fire, made coffee—which we drank with condensed milk, and put a kettle on the fire to cook rice and a piece of fresh meat they had brought.

They had not heard any shooting and had decided to come over and see if we were in any trouble. I shall never forget the kindness of those two poor, unlettered men; and I think I have never been so glad to see anyone as I was on that day when they entered our camp. They brought us fresh meat the next day, and two days later made a final visit, since we were on the mend.

A severe attack of malaria leaves the victim weak and devoid of energy, and it was more than a week before Manuel and I were able to continue our labors. Our outlook was anything but bright, buried as we were in the heart of

the jungle, without proper food for convalescents, and with no possibility of returning to a semi civilized community except by actually "paddling our own canoe." Nevertheless, we kept going, since idleness under such conditions can very easily breed despair. It was not long until we had recovered our strength and energy.

After ten more days of collecting we found that our food was getting low; also, the ammunition was practically exhausted. So we rapidly packed all of our specimens and equipment, and slept our last night in camp. Early the next morning we loaded our canoe and shoved off.

The trip downstream was very different from our heartbreaking ascent. The canoe was light, and so were our hearts. And Manuel had now become an expert paddler. We yelled like drunken cowboys—from pure happiness—as we sped down the river. We had lunch at "Camp Anaconda," then continued on and slept that night in the old, abandoned first camp. Two days later we pulled up on the shore at Maripa, where we were most warmly received, since rumors had drifted down river that we were ill. Not a few have left their bones in that inhospitable jungle—felled by fever and dysentary.

The specimens I had dispatched from "Camp Anaconda" were there in Maripa, all safe. We had accomplished our mission to my great satisfaction, knowing that the collection we had made was very valuable from a scientific point of view, and that it would very likely contain quite a number of new species.

And lastly, I had discovered a most efficient remedy for amebic dysentary, of which I have availed myself many times since that memorable day, both for myself and others. If any doctors should chance to read this account, they will most likely hold up their hands in horror, as have most to whom I have related my experience...but there it is.