

The Orinoco Country

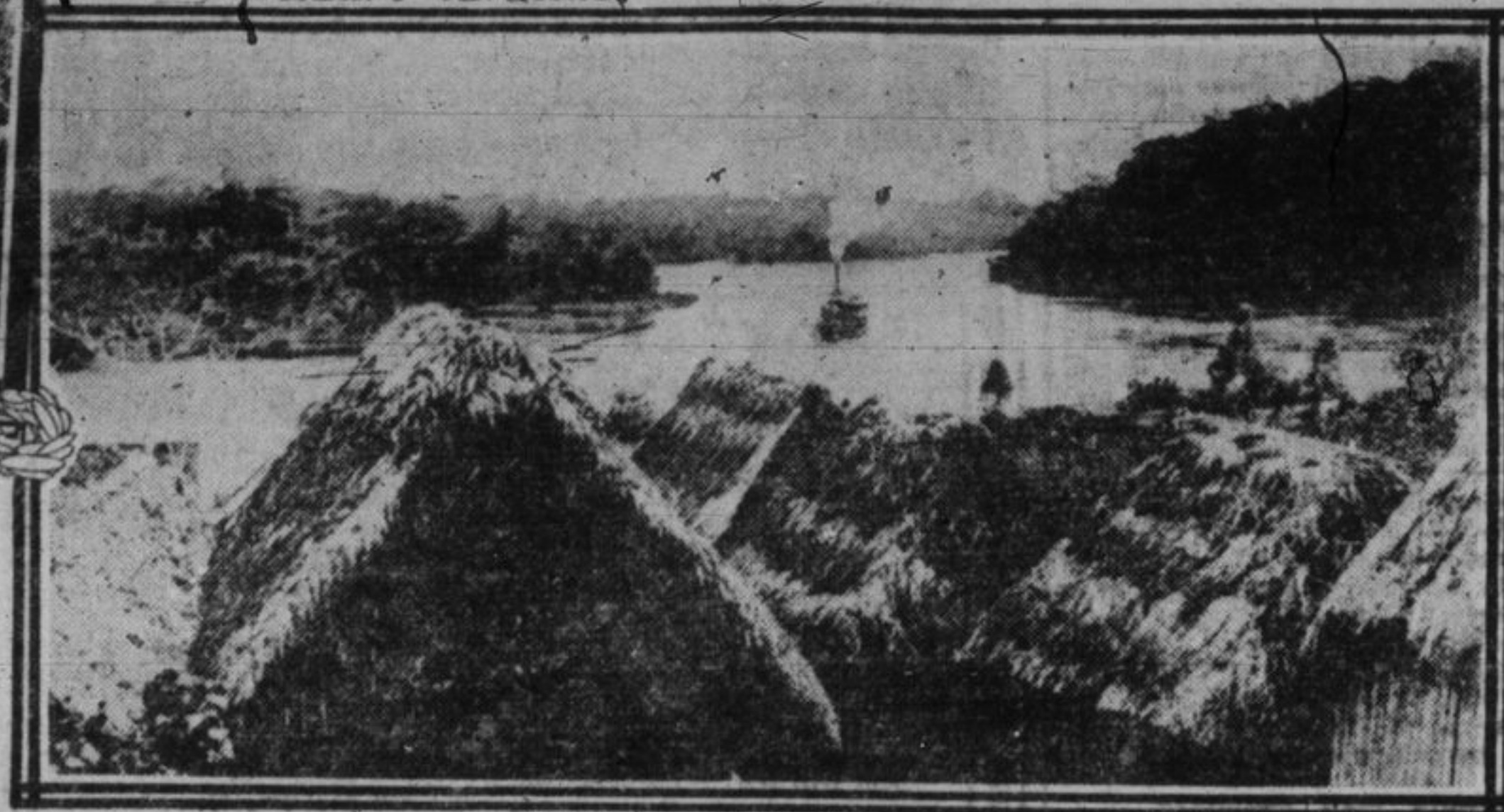
By Forbes Lindsay



A Venezuelan Peasant's Home



A Native Cavalero



A Village on the Orinoco River



On the Upper Orinoco



Coffee Plantation

Enclosed along the south by the Sierra de Parima, on the north by the Lateral Range, which flanks the Caribbean Sea, and on the west by the Andes of Colombia, lies an immense valley, 400 miles in breadth and stretching westward fully 1,000 miles from the delta of the Orinoco. This vast plain, not unlike our prairie country, is composed of llanos, or level grassy, exposed, broken at intervals by forest tracts. It is more than twice the size of Texas and includes the greater part of Venezuela and the eastern portion of Colombia. The mighty Orinoco, fed by 400 navigable streams which rise in the surrounding mountains, drains this territory, rendering it the best-watered region in the world. At the height of the rainy season the main stream rises sixty feet above its low-water level and floods considerable extents of the llanos, so that they are traversable only in canoes. After the subsidence of the waters, a deposit of rich silt is left upon the land—and thick herbage springs up with magical rapidity.

At the southwestern corner of this great alluvial depression the retaining wall is absent and in the break the tributaries of the Orinoco congregate with those of the Amazon. Except for short portages around cataracts and rapids, an inland canoe journey might be made from the mouth of one river to that of the other.

The slight elevations of these two areas—the basins of the Orinoco and the Amazon—is one of the most remarkable physical features of South America. Referring to it, Humboldt said: "If from the effects of some strange attraction the waters of the Atlantic were to rise fifty fathoms (a fathom is about six feet) at the mouth of the Amazon, the floods would submerge more than half of South America. The entire eastern declivity, or the foot of the Andes, now 600 leagues distant from the coast of Brazil, would become a shore beaten by the waves." And, it may be added, the Orinoco country would be converted into a great inland sea.

It is possible to go from the mouth of the Orinoco almost to Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, by way of the main stream and its affluent, the Meta. A paddlewheel boat operated by an American company runs as far as Ciudad Bolívar, where the traveller is transferred to a smaller steamer, which burns wood and runs on a very flexible schedule. The way is through a region as rich as any on the earth, and blessed with a great variety of resources, but as sparsely inhabited as the deserts of Africa. Large areas

have not even been explored, and little more is known about them than that they harbor wild and savage Indians who dwell in the remotest recesses of the forest and avoid contact with civilization.

The effort of Blaine and Root, the operation of the Bureau of American Republics, and the prospective opening of the Panama canal, chiefly among many concomitant causes, have tended to awaken a tardy interest among our people in the countries to the south of the United States, with their marvellous natural endowments. Our trade with them has doubled in the past decade, increasing from \$300,000,000 to \$600,000,000, but as yet our knowledge of them is scanty and superficial, though considerable compared with the profound ignorance that preceded it. Less than twenty years ago a member of congress rose in the house to enquire: "Where is Venezuela, anyhow?" The query was suggested by the proposal of another beighted member to consolidate the political missions to Venezuela and Guatemala under the impression that they were contiguous territories.

In recent years, our troubled relations with Venezuela and Colombia have brought these republics prominently before our people, but it can not be long ere mutually pleasant and profitable intercourse is established between them and us. The United States must soon become a heavy importer of meat and, provided political stability is established meanwhile, our capitalists will turn to the llanos of the Orinoco country, which are the richest cattle lands on the face of the globe, affording ample pasturage—all the year round. Argentina will be the only formidable competitor, but, although there the industry is developed on a scientific basis, the Venezuelan cattle can be raised at a much lower cost and they will be substantially nearer to the market.

The Orinoco country bears some physical resemblance to the Mississippi valley, but its natural resources are much greater. It is capable of producing every known cereal in abundance and of excellent quality. The fruits of the temperate zone and those of the tropics flourish on its soil. It is the original home of the potato. Cotton, coffee and indigo are indigenous. Tobacco, rubber and cacao are among its more valuable vegetable products, and its forests abound in hardwood timber and trees that yield medicinal and other extracts of a commercial character.

The region is surpassingly rich in beautiful forms of animal and vegetable life. It has long been a re-

sort of collectors of rare flowers and feathers, Orchid hunters, employed by the dealers and millionaire fanciers of the United States and Europe, range through the forests of the Upper Orinoco and Mariposa, in search of choice specimens of the curious and beautiful floral parasite. Many thousands are shipped away every year, but, in order to secure them, a tree is cut down and left to rot, for every two plants that are gathered.

The trade in plumage is even more destructive. Several species of birds are hunted for their feathers, but the chief quest is for the few drooping plumes that grow from the back of the egret, and the victims are killed during the mating and breeding season. An ordinary year's take for one of the many hunters in the Orinoco Basin is one hundred thousand birds. This slaughter is going on throughout the equatorial region of South America.

Ciudad Bolívar is the capital of interior Venezuela. It is the centre of trade and commerce, as well as politics, for at least half the country. Its population of about 15,000 is exceedingly mixed, including a sprinkling of almost every European race. The foreigners are hunters, or traders, who deal in flowers, feathers, rubber, tobacco, vanilla and other products of the forest.

Large quantities of gold are shipped from the city yearly. It is probable that the mineral deposits of this region have hardly been scratched. One of the workings of Venezuela—El Callao—has yielded more free gold than any other mine in the world. The mine was discovered by four men who had no suspicion of its enormous value. Three of them sold their interests for a comparatively trifling sum, the fourth shrewdly holding on. A company was formed to operate the property and capitalized at less than \$100,000, in shares of \$2,500 each. The few of these that have since been put upon the market have sold for \$200,000 a share. The stockholders have received dividends aggregating more than \$25,000,000, and the golden stream is still flowing copiously.

All that retards the development of this wonderful country is lack of stable government. That once established, almost unlimited capital would be available to exploit the Orinoco country and turn its extraordinary resources to commercial account. As it is, Venezuela, with a territory ten times as great as New England and equal in extent to France, Germany, Italy, Holland, Belgium, Switzerland and Ireland, has a population less than that of New York. Its fertile, open country is a wilderness. The merchant, the trader, the agriculturist and the agriculturist all attribute their lack of prosperity to the same cause—political anarchy, which sup-

presses domestic enterprise and repels foreign capital. During the past seventy years there have occurred seven-ty-six revolutions in Venezuela and armed forces have been in the field during nearly four-fifths of the time.

Under Spanish rule the country was much more prosperous than it has ever been since. Its centres enjoyed comparatively good trade, its haciendas produced large crops and its llanos supported two million head of cattle. "El Libertador," whose most notable

campaigns were conducted on these plains, predicted the paralyzing conditions which have befallen the country. He foresaw the sway of the corrupt politician and the regime of the Castro type of leader. On his deathbed he voiced the conviction that the infant republics of South America would for generations be torn by intestine conflict and agitated by revolutionary intrigue.

Bolívar cherished a plan for a great republic to comprise the old Spanish provinces of Guayaquil, New Granada and Venezuela, to which the present republics of Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela approximately correspond. Not a few persons who are well informed as to the situation believe that the welfare of each and all of these countries would be powerfully promoted by the union and amalgamation in the state of Grand Colombia, as Bolívar would have named it. Probably a majority of the peoples of the republics in question favor the idea, and many of their leaders are enthusiastic supporters of it. President Alfaro, of Ecuador, recently declared: "I would rather be governor of Ecuador, as one of the states of Grand Colombia, than be its president, as I now am."

There is a decided probability of the consummation of this grand project in the not distant future. The result would be a vast territory, populated by a homogeneous people, having sea boards on the Atlantic and Pacific, possessing the greatest variety and extent of resources and enjoying extraordinary benefits from the operation of the Panama canal. Such a republic, under wise and stable government, might confidently aspire to rival Mexico in power and prosperity.

In passing it may be said that the most promising solution to the difficulties and disagreements of the several small republics of Central America lies in a similar amalgamation which could hardly fail to entail the most beneficial effects.

Portuguese Women's Rights.

A judgment delivered by a magistrate of the Lisbon Civil court recognizes the right to vote of Carolina Angela, wife of a doctor, contrary to the decision of the government, which refused her the franchise. The decision is based on Portuguese law. No other woman will vote at the next elections, as the period for making claims has now expired.—Westminster Gazette.

Verandah Chat.

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