

CHOCO INDIANS OF THE UPPER SINÚ

During the Annual Mission Meeting in December the Colombian Mission family discussed the possibility and the problems of work among the Indians that are found in the upper San Jorge and Sinú, recognizing them as part of the L.A.M.'s responsibility in Bolivar, and going on record as favouring investigation.

Mr. George Dahl, an Ichthyologist who has been doing collecting and research work on fish of these two river systems, had previously offered to take in a representative of the Mission to meet and get acquainted with these Indians. As he has lived for long periods among them, is well acquainted with their customs and knows considerable of their language, we were glad to have the advantage of a friendly introduction, and the help of one who is accepted among them. We corresponded with Mr. Dahl and arranged for the trip for the only dates this time of year when we would both be free to go. Because of his classes in the Liceo Bolivar in Sincelejo he could only go at this time during Easter vacation. He managed to secure an extra week, so we planned to leave the 1st of April and return immediately after Easter to Sincelejo.

Because of recent clashes between Indians and soldiers in the upper San Jorge he advised against visiting the Indians of Urê at this time, suggesting rather that we go in by way of Tierra Alta, up the Sinú and Río Verde to the group living there.

Dennis Crespo was moving to Montería to take Bob Reed's place while the Reeds are away, so we travelled together with Jeep and trailer to Sincelejo where Mr. Dahl joined us and accompanied us on to Montería. The morning of April 2nd. Mr. Dahl and I boarded the Oneyda (bus) with our equipment and started for Tierra Alta. It was an all day trip, winding in and out through people's pastures, with dozens of gates to be opened, some times following along the bank of the Sinú, and crossing it twice on ferries made of dugout canoes with a platform laid over them. It was nearly 8 o'clock when we finally reached Tierra Alta, and were let off at Hotel Campestre.

Mr. Dahl had previously arranged with a friend of former trips, Diego Fernandez, to have mules and all ready for us for the 1st or 2nd of April, but when we went to look for the old man he wasn't home. It turned out that he wasn't at all anxious to go because of ominous rumors of banditry and of severe reprisals by troops that had been dispatched to the upper Sinú. In fact we had a hard time getting him to go once he did get back, but when we finally secured a certificate of safe conduct for him from both the Mayor and the official in charge at the Barracks, he at last agreed to go. Lots of rumors were brought to us, too, and the man who was to have rented mules to us backed out fearing he would lose his mules, but at last rather late the morning of April 5th we secured one mule for our equipment and set out on foot.

We skirted around the edge of low hills called Cabrero, passing through rice fields and pastures and small farms, stopping occasionally to chat and rest and have a friendly cup of coffee in one or another of the thatched houses along the way. Some places the people were frightened and ran as we came near, and in fact Mr. Dahl badly frightened the folks who were to be our hosts for the night when he shot at a parrot towards evening.

About the middle of the following day we came to El Paraiso, a large house on the bank of the river where a couple of canoes were tied up. Every one had fled when we got there, but some came back when old Diego called, and there we hired one of the dugout canoes and an extra man to help pole and paddle it up river.



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We were glad to have old Diego along both for his skill with a canoe and knowledge of the river, and for the entrance it gave us to all homes along the way. The old man seems to be the kind that minds his own business and consequently highly respected by all, whatever their politics.

All that day we kept on up river, stopping off once at a little hut on the bank to have a cup of coffee and get some plantains at a place called Llavisa. Once two canoes of soldiers drew along side, asked for my permit for the gun I was carrying and passed the time of day with us, but <sup>there was</sup> no hint of giving us any trouble. In fact they told us the troop was already out of the Upper Sinú, and said they were going to try to get the people to forget their fright and go back to their farms. Several times Mr Dahl and I had to get out and walk around rapids while Diego and his companion poled the "Loca", as they called the canoe, through the rapids with a good deal of effort. At times they had to jump out and steady it through by hand, a maneuver only possible when the river is low as it was at that time. By night we were out of the plains country and making our way between high banks with heavy walls of jungle rising away from the river on either side. We spent that night in an abandoned hut of one of Diego's friends. He watered and fed the pigs that had been left penned up, and threw out corn for the chickens and turkeys. Apparently the flight had been hasty, probably frightened by the proximity of the troops. Incidentally, in spite of all the rumours, in all the trip we saw no signs of any houses burnt by either bandits or troops, and we personally were never molested in any way by either one. We frankly doubt the reports of bandits in that area. At least we neither saw nor heard any conclusive evidence.

Following our night at Zumbona in the abandoned hut we continued on up river all day, with more detours around rapids for Dahl and me, and stopping once at a cane farm where we had a refreshing drink of cane sirup and lemon. That night we stopped near the mouth of <sup>the</sup> river or stream Nain at a little group of huts called "La Lucha" where again we found only the man of the house, and all the women folks had fled. Later on in the evening they came and got us a meal. We managed to shoot a few wild doves to add a bit of interest to the menu, and the shooting apparently frightened another family near by so badly that they spent the night in the bush. They told us about it later when we passed by that way and spent the night again on our return. Here, as at other places where we had stopped or passed the night, we tried to pay for our food and the privilege of hanging our hammocks under shelter, but at that point Diego told us that the folks along the river don't like the idea of being offered pay for overnight hospitality. However, as we found sickness or physical need of some kind that we could minister to in an unobtrusive way in most of the homes, we were able to repay in some degree, and at the same time form friendships that we hope may open the way for further opportunities with the Gospel in the future. I had many, many opportunities to talk with different ones, and probably gave out a couple hundred of tracts in the course of the trip in definite personal contacts, not just handing them out promiscuously.

The following day we kept on up the Sinú till we came to the mouth of the Río Verde where we turned in, as Las Pulgas, where the group of Indians we were to visit live, is up that river some little ways rather than on the Sinú itself. In the rainy season, or even when the river is little higher in the dry it would be possible to canoe all the way up to Las Pulgas, but the rapids were shallow enough to offer somewhat of an obstacle and menace at that season. Consequently Diego left the canoe in the care of his sister who lives near the mouth of Río Verde. There at her house we repacked our stuff, leaving behind jars of fish specimens Mr. Dahl had caught, extra clothes and anything we could spare, as the next part of the journey was to be on foot.



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While we were there two Choco Indian, a man and a woman, came in and were around quietly watching all that was going on. Mr. Dahl talked with the man for a while. The Indian seemed pleased to hear him speak in their tongue. These were the first Choco Indians I had seen.

Shortly before noon we were on our way, the two men carrying packs. We walked some distance up the bank of the Verde after we left the house, ~~and crossed.~~ Along in the afternoon we came out of the <sup>from</sup> jungle where we veered away from the river, and came to a place where there <sup>were</sup> two canoes tied at the opposite bank. A young fellow in a purple canoing skirt came down soon, and ferried us across. (These lengths of heavy bright material put together something like a crude short skirt seems to be the accepted garb ~~for~~ poling. Apparently gives more freedom of movement for the long quick strides part way down the length of the canoe at each poling stroke). He took us to a house nearby, and as that would be the last place to stay for some distance we stopped there for the night at "CarambaMacho" as the place is called. During the chat with the older man and his wife in the evening we learned she had been closely associated with some of the Presbyterian folks as a girl. We found many sympathizers, and perhaps two or three real believers in the course of the trip. Mr. Dahl, who is not himself a believer, remarked ~~on~~ more than one occasion that the area seems ripe for the Gospel, and he seemed quite enthusiastic about the idea of our making some effort to get in there and minister among those people as a Mission.

The morning of the 9th we started out on the final lap of our trip, crossing over some quite steep country and finally dropping down again to the Río Verde. Here on the bank we called for some time for Ricardo, the young Indian we were to visit. The old Indian, Enrique, whom Mr. Dahl had been eager for me to meet, had left on a trip. The folks who live along the river had told us that, but thought we would find his son. Finally the young fellow came strolling slowly out of the forest and made his way down to where his canoe was tied, and in a few minutes had us across.

He was dressed in the conventional working Colombian's pants and shirt when he came down to get us -- probably partly what took him so long, -- but he soon shed the shirt when we got to his house.

The house was only a few yards back in the forest from the river. It was a big, roomy, thatched house, round, built on piles, with a cane floor some seven feet above the ground, and no walls around the sides. Fartherest from the notched-log ladder by which we entered were various baskets and bark containers of grain and other produce, with a pair of doves strutting around at will among them, and a little spider-monkey alternating between a desultory investigation of everything and sundry spells of slyly teasing the doves.

Over near the pole ladder, to one side there was a patch of clay piled up on the floor for a cooking hearth with three or four small logs lying along on the floor and converging into a few smoldering coals ready to <sup>be</sup> fanned up at any time. Baskets and pots were hanging from vine or bark cords from the smoke blackend roof overhead. About halfway back and on the opposite side from the hearth ~~as~~ one entered from the ladder there was a raised platform, and Ricardo led us over to it to sit down beside us on it while we sat and got acquainted with the place and exchanged a few words with him. After a while he turned and looked toward the river, and in a few seconds his little wife came out of the trees and up the path to the house.



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Up to this point the conversation had been chiefly in Spanish, as Ricardo both speaks and writes it well. But as the little Indian woman's head and shoulders appeared above the level of the floor a different conversation began in which as far as I was concerned we might as well have just arrived on another planet.

Later a girl about 10 and a smaller boy came up from the river and joined the company, the boy's only article of clothing being a little loin cloth. The women and girls wear a long piece of material wrapped three or four times around their hips, giving the appearance of a rather short skirt, and often a sort of cloak or apron over their shoulders. The men some times throw a length of material around their shoulders, cloak fashion, too.

There seemed to be a very sweet, companionable spirit between the little couple. ~~(They all seem rather small, short-legged).~~ We gave Ricardo a friendship gift of a knife with a chain on it, and soon he had put it around her neck like a pendant. Next day she had a bouquet of white flowers tucked into the ring of the knife, and had made a garland of white blossoms for his hat.

We spent the rest of that day with them, receiving other visitors who came, taking pictures and trying to catch and put down all we could of their conversation in order to try to <sup>learn</sup> ~~catch~~ something of the <sup>PHONETIC</sup> ~~sound~~ pattern. When night came we hung our hammocks along the sides of the house, and they, the Indian family, all curled up under a net on the raised platform that had been our chair or bench earlier in the evening.

The following day we all went with Mr. Dahl up one of the streams to collect fish, and later I had an opportunity to converse alone with Ricardo. He gave me quite a few additional words and phrases besides what I had previously gotten from Mr. Dahl. I told him that long ago in my land across the sea God had spoken to my heart, telling me that there are many people hidden away here in the forest whom He loves very much, and for whom he has paid a great price just as He did for me, and that He was asking me to go and help tell them of His love and of His call to them. I told him that some day my wife and I with the children would like to come and live among them and tell them more about it. He listened quietly and made one or two short friendly comments. That evening which was to be our last with them, the little Indian woman and the girl were chasing around and under the house, and when they asked her what it was about she said she was catching one of the chickens to send to my wife. Mr. Dahl commented later that that was a good sign that I was "approved" and that we would be welcome.

During the day we visited another group of Indians up river a ways. There were quite a few women and children there. Four little fellows were lying on the floor fast asleep, and though we stepped all around them and over them, and a gang of dogs came up and played and fought around and over them, too, they didn't budge or wake. Finally the women got tired of the dogs, drove them all to the ground and turned the log notch side down, ~~slid side up~~, so that they couldn't get back up. One little fellow about 2 years of age was very much awake, and was playing around as cute as he could be, with every one thoroughly enjoying him. They were calling him Tibi-Tibi, apparently his baby name. Mr. Dahl says they are given successively some three names till they reach maturity and by some prowess earn their permanent name. Old Enrique's wife lived nearby there, but was not at home, as she was busy scaring the birds away from the ripening rice patch across the river, but she came to greet us at about 11 o'clock at night when every one had gone to bed. She stayed the rest of the night, but early in the morning she was gone before the rest of us were up, probably off to her rice patch again.



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The morning of the 11th we packed our things and got ready to take our leave on the raft the two men had made the day before. When we were already, we gave some parting gifts in return for the hospitality, the food and all. Just before we left, the Indian lady brought a couple of ears of corn for her chicken to eat on the way, and then with a few parting words we backed down the pole ladder and took the path to the river.

Three of us rode the raft, and the other man brought the canoe with some of the supplies. The trip down was pretty uneventful except for the brief excitement of running the rapids, and the few animals we saw along the banks. We stopped at some of the same places on the way down where we had visited before, passing the night again at "La Lucha" and "El Paraiso". Already the rains were beginning to close in, so we had made our trip just in time. It began raining in the afternoon just as we reached "El Paraiso", and rained through the night, and of course the next day the river was raised somewhat.

We came away from the region with a burden for all those folks along the river as well as for our Indian friends. We trust the Lord may open the way for a witness there. The Presbyterians have a work in Tierra Alta and Nazaret, and the Baptists in Quebrada Honda and Tierra Alta, but apparently do not get up that far.

My wife and I are eager to try living and working among the Indians when the propitious time comes, and are looking to the Lord in regard to whatever problems there may be involved. Mr. Dahl says that here in Río Verde, rather than in the Uré district, is the largest settled concentration of Indians, though he says there is possibly a greater number of them scattered widely in the Uré district. No one seems to know how many there are of them in those areas, though we know of some 8 or 9 families along the Río Verde near Ricardo's place, with other families scattered along some of its tributaries. The tribe as a whole is quite extensive, covering the Choco territory and reaching on down into the isthmus, and with one language --- dialectical differences, but not involving any radical <sup>changes</sup> ~~differences~~, so goes the report. To have an intelligent bi-lingual like Ricardo, who even writes Spanish, would be a big advantage in learning and reducing the language to writing, as well as in the formulating of primers and grammars in the two languages to use in teaching them to read and write. It might be possible to establish traffic with the other groups and get them ~~to~~ coming in frequently to that area as a center.

However, I would want to make a more extensive survey, and spend a longer time among them before any definite plans or decision should be made as to where would be best to settle. I hope to take an extended trip with Dahl in December, January, and possibly on into February if at all possible, to get a better picture of the whole matter.

There is of course the problem of whether we will be permitted to carry out these or similar plans. All we can do about that is to lay it before the Lord and leave it to Him to take care of if He is truly asking us to reach these people with the Gospel. We already know from what bit of experience we have had before that it may well be a long, patience, trying, and for some time apparently fruitless task, but we are willing to leave that in His Hands, too. It will be costly financially, at least at first, and may be costly otherwise, ~~As well~~, Six years among the Motilones cost the life of one missionary, a national, and some little ones, and we don't look at that possibility lightly or flippantly, but imploring the Lord's own grace to meet it if He should see fit to permit it so. As to the financial part, once we have concrete plans to <sup>present</sup> I believe friends will help, but first of all, again in that, we <sup>are</sup> obliged to look to the One Who has given the Commission.