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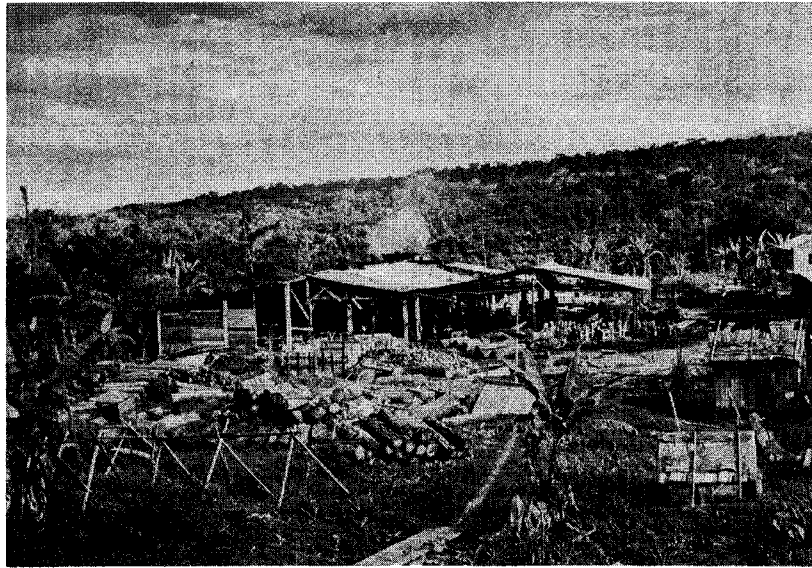
WHM - 21  
Quincemil and  
Maldonado

Hotel Ferrocarril  
Cuzco, Perú  
October 29, 1955

Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

I've got jungle sickness. The disease produces feverish dreams wherein the victim fancies himself walking in the dense beauty of the forest, panning gold in the rapids of a stream or riding a balsa down a big river. The montaña bug bit me during the five days we spent in the Quincemil-Maldonado region, and its poison will take a long time to wear off. Even though we are back in Cuzco breathing thin air and looking out on almost treeless land, I still have visions of the rainbow flight of parrots in the brush, of tapir tracks seen by a forest pool, and of the green inscrutability of the jungle. There is, I'm afraid, nothing I can do to cure the fever.



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The Triplex sawmill: Quincemil  
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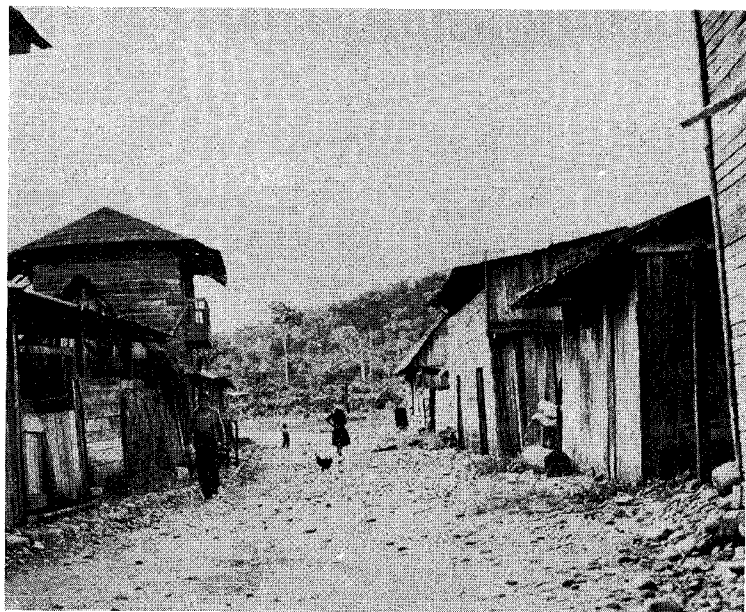
It all started when we made the short flight by DC-3 from Cuzco to Quincemil. During the space of forty-five minutes, we angled past the sawtooth peaks of the western cordillera, then left the deep canyon of Paucartambo behind us, and dropped in slow circles into Quincemil and the deeply ravined slopes which mark the beginning, the "eyebrow", of the jungle. Winds blowing in from the great basin of the Amazon had stacked layers of clouds against the eastern wall of the mountains, so that we had to swing in a wide curve to the east to find a hole in the overcast. In one minute there was the milky cotton of the cloudbank under the wings and in the next the unbelievable green of the forest stretching away into the far plains of the Amazon.

Rivers flowed out from the ravines to merge and merge again until they grew into the big water of the Inambari far off to the east.

As the plane came in low on the long approach to the Quincemil landing strip, we could see the individual trees of the forest: águano (redwood), oak, laurel, mahogany - these were the giants ranging over the lesser growth and spreading their tops horizontally to catch the sun. In a few clearings banana plants showed a darker green, and in others there were piles of lumber and sawdust. Then the plane was below the treetops and bouncing along the grass strip of the town.

The first impression we received when we climbed down from the cargo hatch was that it was hot - almighty hot - at two thousand meters altitude in the montaña. Sweat started after we had gone a few steps, and the muggy air clung to us like wet cloth. It was not yet mid-morning, but the little town of board shacks baked and steamed in the wet heat. The sound of the Araza River behind the town was a sick

pulse in the still air. We left our gear at the rambling board structure that served as Quincemil's hotel and went out to survey the town.



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Street scene: Quincemil  
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stores a glass jar stood beside a pair of delicate scales. The bottom of the jar was covered with platelets of gold surprisingly heavy for their size. The price of the metal was twenty soles (US\$ 1.03) per gram, said the proprietor, and it was not unusual for a man to pan up to eighty dollars a day if he hit a good stretch of water.

It was difficult to see how the alleged population of two thousand could squeeze themselves into the huts along Quincemil's one street. The majority of the buildings were stores stocked with a variety of foodstuffs and hardware brought in from Cuzco by truck. Signs hung above the doorways with the words COMPRO ORO (I buy gold) in large letters. Quincemil is the center and supply point for some four thousand hardy souls who make their living panning gold in streams located many kilometers back in the forest. In one of

The town market was full of local produce - alligator pears, pineapples, limes, and a long line of oversized vegetables too numerous to mention. In the stalls Indian women, obviously Quechuas from the sierra, bartered noisily and suckled their babies. Throughout the town, prices ranged as high as double those of Cuzco for goods imported from "outside."

We were to stay at the company house of the Triplex plywood factory; when we returned to the hotel, a war surplus truck was waiting to take us the two kilometers out of town to the sawmill. Aboard the truck was Juan Neuenschwander, the manager of the sawmill, a man who had spent a good many years working in the jungle area. In reply to

CORRECTION: Throughout this text, "carnero" should read canero.



my questions about the lumber business, Neuenschwander said that Triplex held a concession on some 1,200 hectares of land which they had just about logged over; the company was considering the purchase of a new concession to raise its monthly output of plywood to about 250,000 square feet.

The entrance to the sawmill was still muddy from the past week's rains.. It was getting close to the season of heavy downpours, said Neuenschwander. That meant hours and days of rain, flooded logging roads, and added difficulties in almost every phase of operations.

From the window of the company house we could see the work going on in the sawmill. A continuous thin strip of wood was being peeled from a butt log by a giant lathe. Workmen ran up and down a long table breaking the strips into lengths and keeping the machine from jamming. From these strips the finished plywood product wood come. In the various layers of laminated and glued wood would be peelings from redwood, mahogany, laurel, and jungle woods which have no English name. -Triplex is selling its products as quickly as they are made - doors and windows to contractors and builders, seats to moving picture theatres. With the demand far exceeding the present supply, the company can look forward to a continuing market in the future.

In the evening we sat in the Quincemil hotel drinking cold beer (the town recently installed a municipal electric plant) and swatting at the dancing layers of insects that swirled around the light bulbs. Neuenschwander began talking about the future of the montaña and the Quincemil area. Although the region of Maldonado in the flat country to the northeast offers a more abundant and diversified supply of timber, said the Triplex manager, the lumber industry in Quincemil is sure to figure in the development of the town. There is some experimentation in cattle going on, mixing cebú cattle from India with the local stock, and the results have been excellent. Tea and coffee plantations have produced a superior product in a few years of experimentation, and cotton and truck farming have shown surprising results in a short time. The soils around Quincemil are not particularly good, said Neuenschwander, owing to constant leaching caused by the heavy rains. Farther downstream in the flatlands, though, the soils are excellent. To populate the richer areas, the government began a colonization program. However, most of the projects failed due to lack of good judgement. One of the biggest failures was an attempt to start a colony of Russian Cossacks in Quincemil. Needless to say, the colony didn't last long.

According to Neuenschwander, the greatest problem in the development of the area is transportation and not, as I had thought, the clearing of the land. Once cleared of jungle growth, he said, a field would produce a volunteer crop of

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Rubber from Iberia at Quincemil  
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wide-bladed grass which makes excellent forage for cattle. This happened when the land outside the town was cleared to make the landing strip. The grass grew in, and the jungle was not able to reclaim the field. Ploughed and harrowed, such a field would be ready for the planting of a commercial crop. No, the greatest problem is transportation, said the Triplex manager. There is a road from Cuzco into Quincemil but none extending to Maldonado and the rich flatlands to the northeast. There is nothing but one DC-3 connecting Maldonado with the outside world, and for that reason the heavier produce of the area cannot be exported at a substantial profit. The construction of a Quincemil-Maldonado highway would unstopper the transportation bottleneck. Some eighty kilometers of road have already been built out of Maldonado, but the project was discontinued years ago due to a shortage of funds. Over one hundred and seventy kilometers of solid jungle lie between the Maldonado road head and Quincemil.

The hotel proprietor brought in more beer and sat down at the insect-littered table. He was a cuzqueño by birth but he had spent most of his life in the jungle, fourteen years of it in Quincemil. A lot of men had come in trying to make a quick fortune, he said, and most of them had changed their ideas after a few months of heat, insects and snakes. Years ago a company had moved into the jungle and had lost fifteen thousand soles (at that time the equivalent of US\$ 75,000) in short order. With a wry touch of humor, the men had named their camp Quince Mil - fifteen thousand. On the other hand, there had been men who had made a killing in gold mines or had cashed in during the area's brief rubber boom. In between the failures and the successes there was a large group of adventurers bitten by the montaña bug, eking out a living by panning gold or hunting for precious barks, tied to the forest by their dreams.

#### ..... Clearing the river trail .....



Neuenschwander, the proprietor, and practically everyone else I talked to in Quincemil and Maldonado had their private get-rich dreams. Neuenschwander talked of completing the work on a small airfield started by a large mining company in northern Perú. He had helped build the landing strip and knew how much it would cost to complete construction. Then he would buy a light plane and fly provisions in to the thousands of gold panners in the area. He began to quote the profits he would make year by year if he "only had the money to start working!". He looked at me as though he expected me to throw a few hundred thousand soles on the table. That statement and look became familiar after a few days of talking to men who had worked long and hard in the jungle. Strangely enough,

visions of preposterous bank statements and pockets full of bills began to dance in my head as I listened to more and more of these schemes.

For all his dreams, Neuenschwander is a practical man. In all his conversations with me he argued for the construction of a railroad into the area to induce big companies with plenty of financial backing to come in and build up the cattle and agriculture industries. A politician friend from Cuzco had told him that an American company with seven million dollars worth of working capital was coming to Quincemil next year. Rumor or not, he said, that was fine by him. Capital was the thing that beat the heat, the rain and the jungle. The rich company could afford to take the initial setbacks that would ruin the little fellow.

Late next morning, Neuenschwander took us out along a little used river trail into the monte - the forest. We loaded our equipment (including an ancient, rusty Winchester .44 carbine) into a company truck and swung out onto the main trail leading into the maze of logging roads that looped through the Triplex concession. Even in the dense brush there was little shade. The sun was a heavy weight on our backs. Sweat poured, and the devilish little gnats swarmed out of the mud by the roadside to attack us. The truck jolted over stream beds and chuckholes, throwing us around like so many sacks of potatoes. Lianas, palm leaves and thorny vines lashed us as the truck forced its way along the brush-choked road. The Triplex manager had travelled over this trail a month ago without difficulty; now he had to stop every hundred meters or so to clear branches and vines from the roadway with his machete. During the frequent halts we could hear the Araza River roaring off to the right. Above the treetops the white peaks of the eastern Andes loomed in the haze.

At intervals along the trail, the truck dipped into streams of crystal water so clear that the minnows and shiners in the pools seemed to be darting in bright air. Yellow-tailed buste birds swooped through holes in the foliage, and occasionally we saw the color burst of a parrot in flight. Huge butterflies danced in the sunbeams, and in places the ground was patchworked with the brilliant wings. In the air there was the odor of rot and the sweet smell of the living jungle.

When the road pinched out in a maze of saplings and lianas, we left the truck and went on foot along a trail which followed a stream to a great pool lined with giant trees. Neuenschwander took a .22 rifle, gave the .44 to one of the boys, and the three of us set off up the slope. We passed a jumbled group of tracks by an isolated pool, and Neuenschwander read them for me. There were the giant three-toed tracks of the sachavaca, the forest tapir, six inches across at the tip. Off to the left were imprints left by big cats - jaguars and ocelots. And at the edge of the bank were the marks made by a nutria as he slipped into the water in the night. The sun was high now, and the forest was filled with the sleepy sounds of the cicadas. We left the pool and followed a dry stream bed up the slope, walking in a dark tunnel cut from the solid vegetation by the water. Neuenschwander placed his feet carefully, for the coral snakes and bushmasters like to lie in cool places during the heat of the day. The tapir tracks went on before us, deep holes in the mud. We rounded a sharp bend and came to the end of the stream bed. The ground here had been



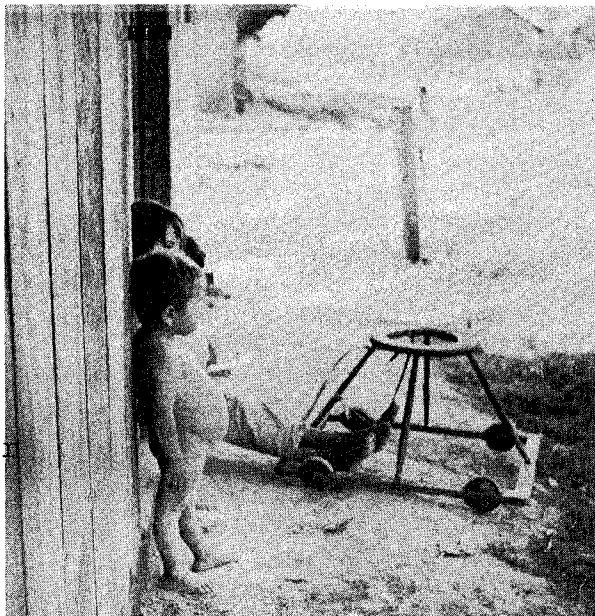
freshly trampled by two tapirs, but the great beasts had evidently forced their way through the underbrush to bed down deep in the forest. Machete or no machete, it would be impossible to follow them into that tangle of vegetation. We returned to the pool and jumped in clothes and all. I lay on the bottom where the water was cold and listened to the pebbles clicking together in the current.

On the way back to the sawmill, Neuenschwander pointed out some of the more valuable trees to me: the águano, the oak, the rubber tree, and the catawa, a light-barked giant with a flat top. From the catawa bark comes a caustic poison somewhat like barbasco, which is used in the manufacture of insecticides. In the jungle, catawa and barbasco bark are used by fishermen to poison their prey.

That night we talked with the Faucett DC-3 pilot, a Californian named Don Houck. He had flown for Faucett for four and one-half years, most of the time in DC-4's. He had flown the DC-3 in from Lima to check the performance of a new engine and would serve the regulation two week hitch of jungle flying before returning to the big ships. Rain was his big worry now. He enjoyed flying the tight schedule of freight hops between Quincemil, Iberia and Maldonado, but when rain grounded him for several days, all he could do was sit in the rickety hotel and wait for the downpour to stop. Houck did a ticklish bit of flying during his last hitch in Quincemil, trying to lift his plane above a storm to return to Cuzco with a boy dying from a bushmaster bite as his passenger.

The next morning we were waiting on the tiny airfield to make the flight to Maldonado. Houck had already made two flights in the early morning and he would make at least two more during the day if the weather held. Lying on the ground were balls of smoked rubber brought in from Iberia and next to them a pile of cedar planks fresh from Maldonado. Now the plane was being loaded with cases of beer. In an area where most water is infested with amoeba, beer is a sort of coin of the realm. Without it, people either go thirsty or drink sickeningly sweet soft drinks. The beer was carefully stacked amidships, and then the passengers were allowed to board the plane.

Houck lifted the plane off the short strip, and we headed away from the mountains toward the flat sea of jungle to the east. Below us the Inambari River meandered among its islands, and the monotonous forest slipped away under the wings. Somewhere in the green haze were the villages of Filadelfia and Baltimore; relics of the rubber boom days. Occasionally I caught sight of a stand of oil palms, the only species of valuable jungle tree which seems to be content to grow side by side in a grove. I thought about the money that lay hidden in the wide fronds and the fact that land can be purchased here for



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The distended stomach  
of this child is a sure  
sign of worms picked up  
by bare feet in the dirt  
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CORRECTION: Throughout this text, "carnero" should read canero.



two dollars and sixty cents per hectare, and my wallet itched.

The plane banked steeply over the muddy swirls of the Madre de Dios River, coming in fast and low to the landing strip. Maldonado stretched out on the point of land between the Madre de Dios and the Tambopata, a collection of cane and thatch huts, five thousand inhabitants, and a few trucks that had been flown in from Quincemil or rafted down the river. Along the grass roads cebú steers pulled wooden carts loaded with alligator pears, Brazil nuts and lumber. A truck took us from the plane to the Banco Agropecuario and unloaded us together with the cases of beer in a cool warehouse.

As usual in jungle towns, we were treated with exceptional kindness by the local officials. The manager of the bank (who doubled in brass as the Faucett agent) took us to the hotel, made sure that our rooms were satisfactory, and sat with us over a few precious bottles of beer while we plied him with questions. Maldonado is situated at under two thousand feet above sea level, a fact which makes it an ideal center for castaña (Brazil) nuts, rubber and cedar wood. Each year the agents of the foreign export companies advance money to local men who, in turn, open up roads into the jungle to collect the castaña nuts and bring them back at the end of the season. Lumber is rafted down the Madre de Dios and Tambopata rivers, and rubber is brought in regularly to the collection center. The DC-3 is the only means of exporting these goods to the outside markets, and until the road is built to Quincemil, the riches of the region will remain unexploited. The bank manager echoed the sentiments of the other townspeople with whom I talked. There are two subjects of conversation in Maldonado: the beer supply and the road.

The bar in which we were sitting was built of fine-grained, smooth cedar planks and furnished with cedar chairs made at the local vocational school. The proprietors were two ancient brothers, one of whom shuffled about his chores accompanied by a pair of baby carpinteros or pileated woodpeckers, who rattled and made messes on his shoulders. As to be expected in a town supplied only by air, prices were high. Beer, which costs fifteen American cents a bottle in Cuzco, sold for forty cents. Food prices ran even higher. Living in Maldonado was an expensive proposition.

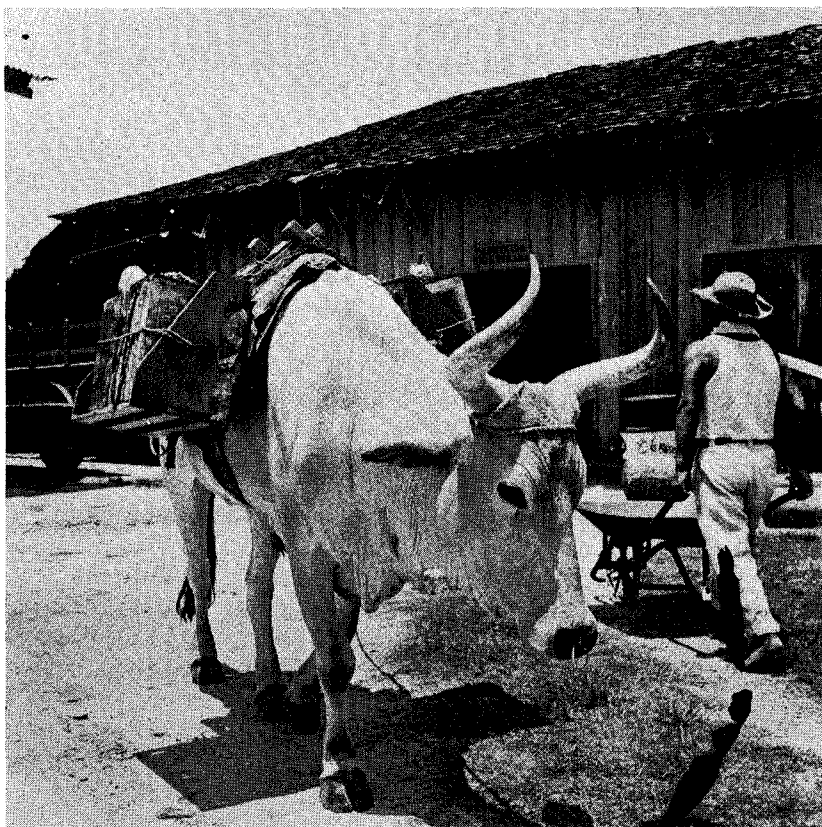
A fat, bespectacled man came in during the conversation and sat down at our table. He was the owner of one of the ancient boats tied up by a mudbank below the town. He began to tell us about the wonders of river life. The Madre de Dios is filled with giant fish, he said, some of them weighing more than one hundred kilos. Then there are the piraña and carnero. The piraña, or "paña" as it is known in Maldonado, is a small carnivorous fish with teeth that would put a tiger shark to shame. A school of piraña can reduce a man or animal to clean bones in the space of a minute. The carnero, a thin, cylindrical fish, has the nasty habit of entering any orifice in the body of a swimmer and holding himself in position with his sharp fins while he dines on the tender flesh. In many cases, only a surgeon can remove him. Accidents with the two little monsters are rare, said the boatman; no one has been attacked since last August when a bathing woman was invaded by a canero. The bespectacled man left us with an invitation to take a trip upriver.

Sr. Stein, the Prefect of the Department of Madre de Dios (of which

Maldonado is the capital) is new at his job and, like all good politicians, took great pains to show off to the visiting gringos the improvements he had effected in his short term of office. He took us to Maldonado's vocational school, pointed with pride to the freshly cut grass on the walks and, wonder of wonders, a new loudspeaker in the plaza which was blaring forth Beethoven's "Eroica" into the sun-baked noon. As there were no babies around to kiss, Sr. Stein did the next best thing. He stopped before the doorway of a cane hut and fondled two naked children, pointing with a sincere show of pity to their swollen bellies. The two kids were riddled with worms, the result of poor diet and walking barefoot in the jungle.

Back in town, we found to our dismay that the supply of beer brought in with us that morning had run out. Everywhere men were questioning store owners and receiving the same answer: no beer! There might be another flight into town before dusk, but if not the men would have to drink Coke and like it. As I waited in one store to find out more about the crisis I saw an old political poster on the wall. It read: LT. COL. LEON VELARDE IS THE CHAMPION OF OUR MEANS OF TRANSPORTATION! With the thought of going thirsty for several hours in mind, I would have gladly stuffed the ballot box for the good Colonel.

When the heat of the afternoon had abated a little, we walked down the steep bank to the municipal pier, a mud-bank sloping sharply into the brown water. Secured to the bank by lines were two boats: a vintage stern wheeler belonging to the government public health service and a forty-foot river cruiser, the property of the bespectacled man. That worthy was applying a blowtorch to his engine and tinkering around with the spark plugs. After a few explosive failures, the motor caught. We headed up river, hugging the bank to avoid the midstream sandbars. The Madre de Dios at Maldonado is about as wide as the Connecticut River by Thompsonville, Mass. or the Ohio above Louisville. The current was swift and the surface littered with rotting castaña nuts and bits of vegetation brought down by the rain-filled tributaries. Downstream the river widened as it swung east into the jungles of Bolivia and then northeast into Brazil to join the Amazon below Manaus. Upstream it narrowed and became the Alto Madre de Dios, passing close to the mouth of the Qosñipata valley (WHM - 18). In effect, we were creeping up a river which carried the drainage waters of all the

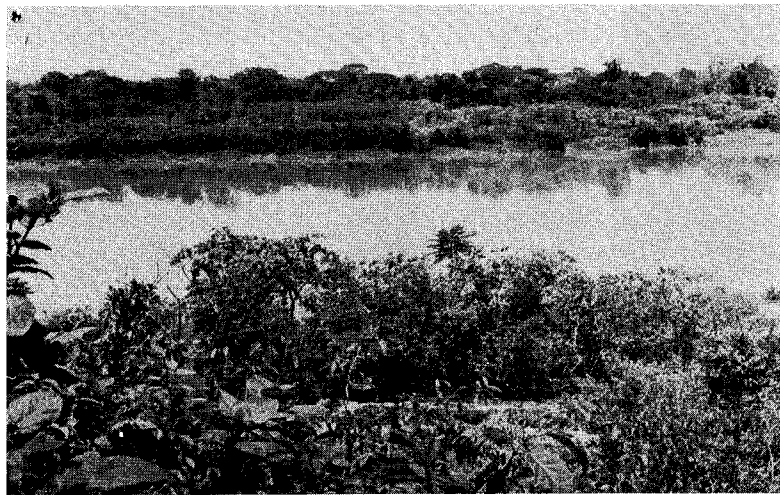


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Maldonado truck: a cebú crossbreed  
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southern Peruvian montaña and which, like other navigable jungle streams, served as the only highway between isolated points in the impenetrable forest.

Late in the afternoon we went ashore to raid an orange grove. The owner saw us from across the river and paddled over in his dugout. He was not in the least angered by our thievery, but was eager to pass the time of day with us and hear the latest news from down river. Then, when the sun was lying flush on the water, we headed back to Maldonado. The boatman knew his river well. For an hour we switched from bank to bank, taking a new bearing each time on a small banana plantation or a solitary aguano standing high on a bluff. Despite the dangers of piraña and carnero the banks were alive with men and boys diving and jumping into the swift water.

Rafts of balsa wood and cedar floated down the river in the dusk, piled high with vegetable and human cargo. The balsa rafts were practically under water, a sign that they had travelled far from the point where they first floated as buoyant logs. There were alligator tracks on the mudbanks, and big fish feeding close to shore. Night came up from the river, and the sounds of the jungle were very clear in the blackness.



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The Madre de Dios at Maldonado  
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Back at the cedar-lined bar, we found a young Englishman waiting for us. He was an agent for a New York company buying castaña nuts. And he had an advanced case of jungle fever. He talked about the rosewood oil boom in Iquitos, how the pioneer of the industry had put up a barrel of oil for four hundred dollars and sold it for seventeen hundred dollars, f.o.b. Iquitos! He had a scheme too, a surefire plan. All he needed was the sum of sixty thousand dollars.

I nodded my head feverishly and scratched my wallet. Then the Englishman crowned his arguments by producing six wonderfully cold bottles of beer from some hidden crypt.

From the loudspeaker in the plaza came sounds of Mozart accompanied by the rattling chirps of the carpintero birds behind the bar. The Prefect sent over a recording of the "Isle of Capri" guarded by his most trusted Lieutenant, and we put it on the phonograph to add to the comfortable burble of night sounds coming in through the open door.

Sincerely,

*William H. MacLeish*

Received New York 11/7/55.

William H. MacLeish