

NOTES ON AN EXPLORATORY JOURNEY IN SOUTHEASTERN VENEZUELA*

Desmond Holdridge

Brooklyn Museum

AN exploratory journey into the country west of Mt. Roraima¹ was made by the writer in 1930. As this is practically virgin territory to explorers the following notes may be found useful

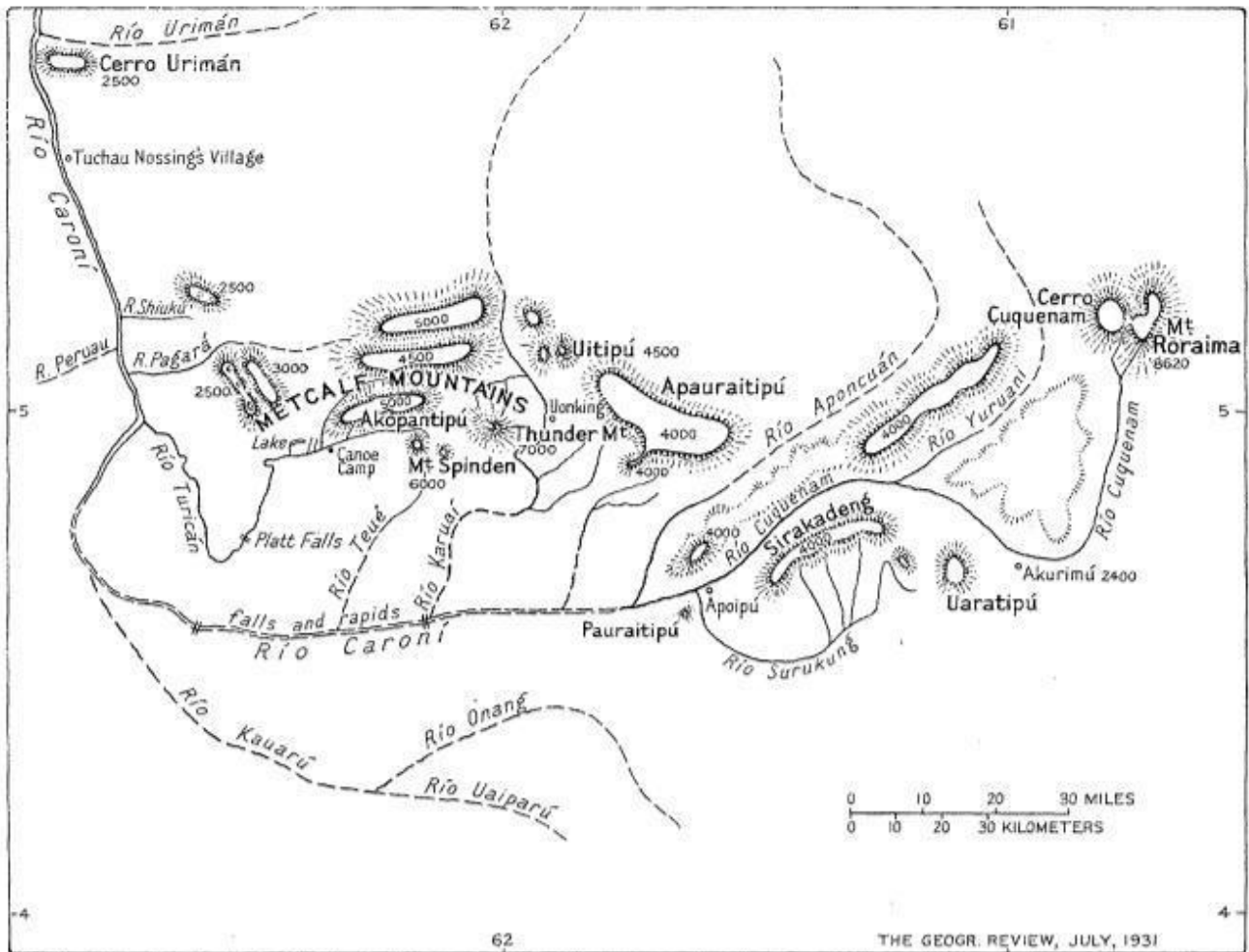


FIG. 1—Sketch map of the upper Caroní region. Rivers in solid lines from author's field sketches; courses in broken lines from local information. Altitudes in feet. Scale of map 1 : 2,500,000.

by subsequent expeditions. The writer's objectives, it should be observed, were mainly ethnological and archeological, and he was accompanied solely by Makushi and Arekuna assistants.

The starting point of the expedition was São Marcos at the junction of the Takatú with the Rio Branco, five to six days by river

*The expedition was made under the auspices of the Brooklyn Museum and was jointly financed by that institution and Rowe B. Metcalf, of Greenwich, Conn.

¹ Compare the preceding articles, "The Pacaraima-Venezuela Expedition," by H. E. Anthony, H. A. Gleason, and R. R. Platt, and "Problems of the Bird Life of Roraima and Duida," by Frank M. Chapman.



FIG. 2—The Metcalf Range from Uonking. On the left the eastern end of Akopantipú.

steamer from Manáos. Thence we proceeded on horseback northward through savana country to Akurimú, a matter of eight days. It was July, the height of the rainy season, which apparently extends from April to September; but the rainfall apparently is never particularly heavy, and the climate would be described as semiarid.

WEST OF AKURIMÚ

Akurimú, at an altitude of 2400 feet, is within plain sight of Roraima. It is the place marked Akurimupongong on Koch-Grünberg's map. The inhabitants are Arekuna, of the Taulipang branch of that nation. The chieftain, or tuchau, of the district is Andre, a cousin of Isaac, the Roraima chief, well known to all recent visitors to the Roraima country. He is thoroughly unscrupulous and not overfriendly. Akurimú is a station of the Seventh Day Adventist missionaries. It is difficult to obtain porters here, since the missionaries have preached against working for whites who do not keep Saturday as the Sabbath. Of the nine or ten hundred people under Tuchau Andre's sway none speak English and only two speak Portuguese, although these two speak it well. Cassava, yams, sweet potatoes, plantains, and sugar cane are obtainable, and likewise meat, as there are a few head of cattle stolen from Brazilian ranches.

The maps of the area west of Akurimú are quite useless. We proceeded to Apoipú, a village two days west of Akurimú. The route led through a country that was about one-third forested. The land gradually rises to an altitude of 4000 feet near Sirakadeng, the Mountain of the Stars. To the southwest the low mountains of the watershed are visible. Sirakadeng presents high cliffs to the observer from the south but drops down gradually to the bed of the Cuquenam on the north. It is an exceedingly trying country for horses: we were forced to abandon two.

Apoipú is a small village ruled by Tuchau Jach, a corruption



FIG. 3—The Karuaí Valley. Figure 3 forms a panorama with Figure 2.

of the English name, George. He is an amiable man of advanced years who is easily persuaded to secure bearers and supplies for such travelers as present him with a few yards of calico. Nevertheless, in 1926 he attacked and drove out a large party of Brazilian balata bleeders. The village is situated in a large, open plain, which affords a good landing place for an airplane since the ground is free from boulders and termite nests.

THE METCALF RANGE

From here we caught the first glimpse of a long wall of high cliff-faced mountains to the northwest, all reminiscent of Roraima. The highest of these is 7000 feet above sea level. The main part of the wall is called Akopantipú. The two mountains just to the south of Akopantipú I named Mt. Spinden and Thunder Mountain, respectively. The cordillera as a whole I termed the Metcalf Range. In regard to this nomenclature I would point out the extreme difficulty of rendering the native names in English phonetics with sufficient accuracy to make them recognizable when repronounced by a subsequent traveler. Furthermore, the place names change from generation to generation. The mountain Sapão is an excellent example of this, for a generation ago it was called Chakbang, according to the natives, and is so marked on older maps. It would be advisable to give all mountains and rivers that have not already become known by native names European names of one kind or another.

Apoipú is in latitude $4^{\circ} 38' N$. This, as well as other latitudes along the route, was determined by observation with a sextant and artificial horizon.² Longitude was established by cross bearings of distant peaks whose positions had been fixed by observations from the

² Shortly before the writer's return a sketch map of the upper Caroní, made by Juan Mundo in 1927-1929, arrived at the American Geographical Society's headquarters, and while it furnishes only a crude pictorial idea of the country, without astronomical observations, it affords a good check since most of the newly added mountains and rivers appear on the Mundo sketch.



FIG. 4



FIG. 5



FIG. 6

FIG. 4—Tabular mountains, resembling Roraima, look down on the black waters of the upper Caroní.

FIG. 5—The western end of the Metcalf Range from near Uonking. On the right, Mt. Spinden.

FIG. 6—Another view of the Metcalf Range with Thunder Mountain in the foreground.

Amazon side of the watershed. They are approximate only. The whole course of the westward-flowing section of the upper Caroní is some thirty or forty miles south of its previously supposed position. The Aponcuán, Karuaí, and other right affluents of the Caroní are thus made very considerable rivers, while the left affluents are correspondingly diminished.

The Caroní, between the Kauarú and the Urimán, is inhabited by the Pishauko, a tribe of the Carib group with whom the Arekuna, Kamaragoto, and Maionkong are almost always at war. As a result, it is very difficult to obtain porters to undertake a journey to the main river. However, Tuchau Joaquim, who lives at the base of Apauraitipú, enjoys the confidence of a number of the Pishauko and carries on trade with them. Since the Pishauko are exceedingly suspicious of strangers, the penetration of the country between Apauraitipú and the Caroní is best made under his guidance. *Carte blanche* from this chieftain is of inestimable value. He is of a friendly disposition

and has probably traveled more widely in the region between Roraima and Duida than any other living man. He has trade relations with the Pishauko, Maionkong, and Kamaragoto by whom he

is well received and he commands a large labor supply.

The land between Apoipú and Apauraitipú is interrupted by low ranges of hills between the streams that cross the trail. The average height of the extensive plain is 2500 feet. About Apauraitipú the grasslands are more or less level and free from boulders and other impediments to the landing of aircraft. The pasturage on these empty plains would support an enormous herd of cattle, and the country is certain to be a great meat supplier in the not very distant future. In the native villages supplies are readily obtainable; corn, bitter cassava, sweet cassava, purple yams, sweet potatoes, tancias, bananas, plantains, honey, and other commodities are to be procured in considerable quantities. The writer's party, which numbered about ten as a rule, was able to support itself entirely by provisions from the villages, procuring from the outside world only coffee and sugar; even tobacco was obtained from the natives.

The largest village in the district is Uonking, on the banks of the Rio Karuaí, a large affluent of the Caroní which rises in the same range of mountains as the Cuyuni. From the top of a range of hills in the vicinity it is possible to view the surrounding country for some



FIG. 7



FIG. 8



FIG. 9

FIG. 7—Porters resting on the trail. Mt. Spinden in the background.

FIG. 8—The Karuaí, a large affluent of the Caroní, near Uonking.

FIG. 9—Platt Falls, a 260-foot drop in the Turicán, tributary of the Caroní.

fifty or sixty miles. The savana ends between Mt. Spinden and Thunder Mountain, the forest boundary thence sweeping southward until it crosses the Caroní. From there it swings to the east and in the main follows the foothills of the north side of the Pacaraima watershed. To the west the forest stretches uninterrupted to the head of the Paragua, covering a gently rolling plain whose average height is 2500 feet. I doubt if any savana except small, isolated patches exists between Mt. Spinden and Mt. Duida.

With the exception of the mountains about Roraima and the Metcalf Range and one low, saddle-shaped mountain far to the west-southwest near the head of the Paragua, the whole plain was devoid of conspicuous hills. Even the Pacaraima range dwindled away into low ridges. I do not believe that any large mountains will be discovered between the upper Caroní and the upper Caura when that area is examined.

THE TURICÁN RIVER

From Uonking we proceeded westward to the Turicán River, which rises just north of Akopantipú and enters the Caroní in about latitude $4^{\circ} 58' N$. Not far beyond the beginning of the forest near Mt. Spinden the land drops nearly a thousand feet at a steep angle, and the character of the forest also changes sharply. Instead of the dense jungle of the highlands we encountered the large trees characteristic of the Guiana lowland, mora, balata, and greenheart being abundant. On the same day that we left the savana we reached and camped at the junction of the Turicán and the Parutling.

The Turicán is a considerable stream about one hundred yards wide. It was descended to Platt Fall, where the river plunges 260 feet. Above the river is choked with rapids and falls, many of which are dangerous to canoes: below, it is slow and deep for the most part.

The Caroní is entered a day's journey below the mouth of the Kuarú. The river at this point is nearly a mile wide, and the water is black as that of the Turicán. Thence we continued to the headquarters of Tuchau Nossing, a short distance from the mouth of the Urimán. Two rapids had to be shot en route, both dangerous.

Our return to São Marcos was made over practically the same route. Tuchau Nossing's village is within nine days' travel of the mouth of the Paragua, and from the near-by town of the same name there is a line of motor trucks making frequent trips to Ciudad Bolívar. The route via Manáos, São Marcos, and Akurimú, however, is recommended as a means of reaching the Roraima country. The ascent of the Caroní is a difficult matter owing to the numerous rapids and falls.