

GLIMPSES OF THE GUIANA WILDERNESS - 1918

By A. HYATT VERRILL (1871-1954)

Your Excellency, Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a great deal easier to show interesting pictures than to say interesting things, and I have no doubt you would rather see my pictures than to hear me talk, so I shall try to show as many slides as I can and say just as little as possible.



MALALI PEOPLE GOING TO CHURCH.

(1)



GOLD DIGGERS LEAVING BARTECA.

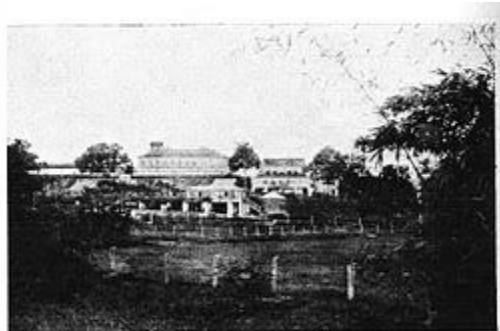
(2)

The only trouble has been to select the pictures, for there are so many interesting and remarkable places and things to be seen in this colony that it's a mighty difficult matter to pick out the most interesting. Moreover, I have had but four days in which to select my views, have the slides made and colour them, and hence I am limited in the number I can use.

Every part of the interior is so different from every other part that in order to obtain an intelligent idea of the country, one must travel here, there, and everywhere. So I shall give you glimpses of various places and shall jump from spot to spot, regardless of time or distance.

It may be just as well to begin near home and I will start with the most important river, from a commercial viewpoint,—the Demerara. My first view is a typical scene on the Demerara River, a timber raft floating past Christianburg with its saw-mill in the distance. The only motive power of this craft is the tide, the long sweeps being used merely to guide the raft, and by this slow and tedious method the lumber is floated down to the coast from the distant forests of the hinterland.

The next slide shows a man felling a greenheart tree. Note the staging built about the tree so the chopper may work above the out-jutting, buttress-like roots. As yet the timber resources of British Guiana are scarcely touched, and there are vast forests full of valuable trees which are now worthless, owing to the difficulties of transportation, and which would prove a source of great wealth if railways were in operation.



PERAL SETTLEMENT.

(2)



RUNNING A RAPID.

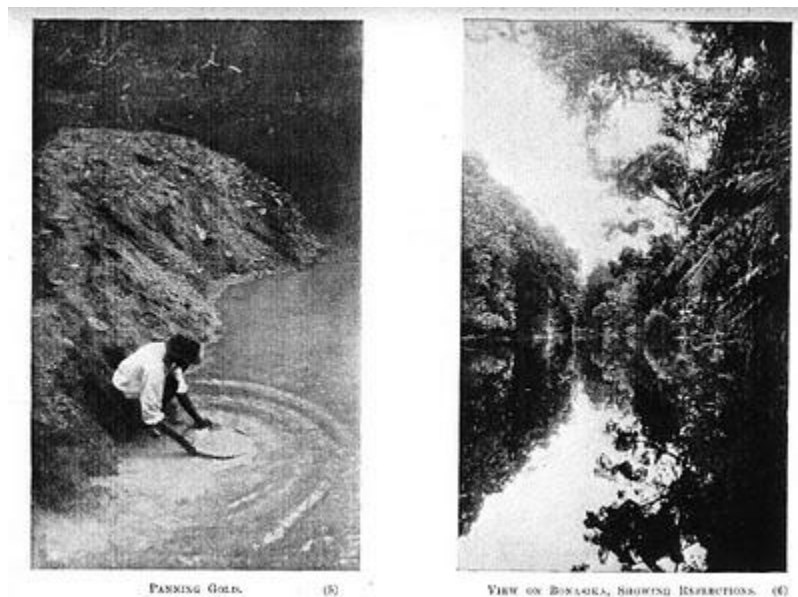
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Another picture shows one of my camps in such a section. From my hammock in this camp I counted 55 greenheart trees, every one of which would have squared to 18 inches or larger.

This next picture is not a parody of "Washington crossing the Delaware," but shows the people of Mallali going to church. For some unknown reason the church is on the opposite shore of the river from the settlement and the devout Mallalians risk a ducking every time they attend services. It looks as if these people had solved the problem of getting a quart into a pint, even if their pint is a punt.

Another glimpse of the Demerara River, shows a scene near the source of the river above Canister Falls and where the broad river, which flows past Georgetown, dwindles to a mere brook which one may step across.

But the Demerara is one of the least interesting of British Guiana streams, so we'll step across to the Essequibo and take a flying trip up the Mazaruni. Everyone who goes up the Mazaruni starts from Bartica and in this picture we have a couple of gold-diggers' boats preparing to leave Bartica for the placers far back in the interior.



PANRING GOLD.

(5)

VIEW ON BONAKA, SHOWING REFLECTIONS.

(6)

The next picture shows one of the gold-diggers or "pork-knockers" at work washing out gold from the gravel of a placer. This particular pan rewarded the pork-knocker with over a pennyweight of gold, but often they work for days without getting a cent's worth. Pork-knocking is no "get rich quick" scheme and an average of one dollar a day is doing very well.

After leaving Bartica the first interesting spot we see is the Penal Settlement. Every inhabitant of Georgetown should envy the prisoners their situation. It's a great pity that the capital was not built on this high, fine spot or on some similar spot instead of on the mudflats.

Here is a view of the settlement while in the next we see the popular superintendent, Mr. Frere, being "filmed" for the motion pictures with the prison quarry in the background.

The Mazaruni is a very beautiful river; to my mind the finest in the colony, but navigation is slow and difficult owing to the numerous falls and rapids. Going up stream the boats must be hauled through the falls by means of ropes, except at Caburi, which is shown in this slide. Here a portage has been provided around the cataracts and the boats are hauled overland, as illustrated in the next picture.



VIEW OF A WATERFALL IN THE MAZARUNI.

(7)



ALTERNATE VIEW OF THE FALL.

(8)



THUNDERBOLT FALLS, FROM EAST SIDE.

(9)



A WARNING AT THUNDERBOLT FALLS.

(10)

Coming down the river, however, is far more exciting, and progress is swift, for unless the rapids are very bad the boats are run through them as illustrated in this slide. Marvellous skill is required on the part of captain and bowman when the boat dashes with express train speed through the rock-filled, tumbling waters. In a few hours going down one often covers the same distance which required days of toil in going up.

This is a famous landmark on the Mazaruni, known as "Crapo Rock" or "Frog Rock." Many of the rocks in the rivers are worn into grotesque shapes by the water and many strikingly resemble the forms of animals. Note the high-water mark far up on this rock and which indicates the rise of the river during the rainy season.

Between the rapids are many long stretches of still water such as in this scene. The marvellous reflection of the foliage in the dark brown water is the greatest beauty of such spots, for every detail is mirrored to perfection and it is almost impossible to say where water ends and land begins.

The Mazaruni is one of the best rivers of the colony for fish and game, and in the forests along its banks one sees many striking and beautiful birds and strange animals. One of the most remarkable of these is the giant ant-eater or ant-bear. This chap has an enormously long tongue with which it laps up the ants, as shown in this photograph. The queer creature is impervious to ant bites, and many a time, when I accidentally have stepped in an ants' nest, I have envied the ant-bear. He's a pretty formidable beast, too, and when angry or wounded can inflict terrible wounds with his powerful hooked front claws. Even the jaguar gives the ant-bear a wide berth.

But to me, the human denizens of the bush are far more interesting than even the birds and beasts, and it was for the purpose of studying the Aboriginal Indians that I have made my numerous trips into the interior. On the lower Mazaruni there are few Indians but above the falls, and back in the bush on the small creeks, are numbers of Indians living as primitively as did their forefathers before Europeans stepped ashore on the New World. My picture shows an Indian shooting fish, with bow and arrow, the common method of obtaining fish, and very expert the Indians become in this art. The most remarkable part of the feat is their ability to see the fish in the foaming water of the rapids. Sometimes, when no fish are visible, the Indians call the fish by beckoning with their hands and whistling. I don't pretend to say why this attracts the fish, but it usually does so, nevertheless.

Another method of hunting employed by the Indians, is by means of the blowpipe and deadly poisoned arrow. With this silent weapon the Indians kill both birds and animals. They are incredibly accurate marksmen, and I have seen an Akawoia put five darts into a visiting card at 50 paces. The basket on the man's side contains the poisoned darts which are very carefully guarded, as cold or damp injures the poison. The Wurali, as it is called, is prepared with a great deal of secrecy and ceremony, and the exact method of its preparation is known only to a few individuals. It kills almost instantly, a bird struck by the dart usually fluttering but feet before it falls, but it is not poisonous to eat. It is said that, by administering doses of cane juice and salt its effects may be overcome, but I have yet to find an Indian who would demonstrate this antidote on himself.

Most of the Indians now use guns. Here is a husky Indian hunter of the Waika tribe bringing in a bush hog or peccary, but ammunition is expensive and far back in the interior the Bucks still use the blowpipe and bows and arrows to great extent. The hunter shown in this picture was a wonder and he performed one feat which still puzzles me. He started out with seven cartridges and returned with four bush hogs, two akuries, a parrot and three cartridges!

This picture shows an Akawoia in full dancing costume, feather crown, feather mantle, necklace and dance trumpet. The object on the end of the trumpet is a bit of wood carved to represent armadillo. Each dancer bears a different animal and in the dance is supposed to go through the antics and make the noises typical of the creature he represents. One can imagine the difficulty this man would have; think of trying to make a noise like an armadillo, or a lizard, or imitating a sloth!

Here is another Akawoia in a very different costume, that of the parasara dance, and which is made of palm leaves. This is probably the only photograph ever taken of an Akawoia wearing this costume. During the dance the head covering is turned down and conceals the wearer's face. The object in the left hand is the dance drum and that in the right is the rattlestick. After the dance the suits are hung upon fallen trees in the rivers or on stumps in the fields to keep off evil spirits.

But dancing is only a very small part of an Indian's life. He must hunt and fish, fell trees for fields to plant, build his houses, make baskets and weapons and perform many other duties, for despite popular belief, the Buck is not an idler until he is Christianized and civilized, and the women do no more than their share of labour. It is their duty to till the fields, prepare food, spin cotton, weave hammocks and rear the children. The principal food is cassava and the preparation of this staple is very interesting. In the picture is seen the first step in the process, a girl grating the roots on a grater made of a board into which bits of stone are fastened with cement-like wax.

The next step is to remove the poisonous juice from the pulp, which is done by means of the metapee, as illustrated in this photograph. The pulp is placed in the metapee which is then suspended and is stretched out by means of a lever and a woman's weight. The juice extracted is preserved and used in making cassareep and starch.

Next the compressed material is broken up and made into a coarse meal by rubbing it through a basket work sifter, as shown here, after which it is spread in round, thin cakes on a stone or iron and baked over a slow fire, as is illustrated in this picture.

How the Indians first discovered that a deadly poisonous root could be transformed into a nutritious food is one of the unsolved puzzles of Indian history. Certainly it could not have been by experiment, for the experimenters would have succumbed to their experiments long before they discovered the process.

This slide shows another Indian woman at another of her daily tasks, squeezing sugar cane in a primitive mill consisting of post and lever.

The women also do a great deal of the droghing and they carry as large or even larger loads, than the men. Here is a girl with a 140 lb. load ready for a 20-mile jaunt over a mountain. I was anxious to see how she descended the steep mountainside, bowed under her load, but she soon outdistanced me; the load apparently not inconveniencing her in the least.

To many people all Bucks look alike; but in reality, every tribe has distinct characteristics by which its members may be recognized. The pictures I have shown are all of Akawoias, a tribe peculiar to British Guiana. Very different are the Caribs shown in this picture. In many ways the Caribs are superior to all other tribes of Guiana. Their women are the only ones who do not wear the bead aprons or queyus, but instead use cloth laps. The men's laps are also distinctive, being ornamented and fringed, but the most characteristic mark of the true Carib is the tuft of white King Vulture down worn on the forehead, as may be seen in this photograph.

Returning to Bartica, we'll start off on another trip up the Essequibo. Nowadays few people travel up this river from Bartica on account of the dangerous falls between Bartica and Rockstone. It was to avoid these that the railway was built from Wismar across to Rockstone. But I have made the trip several times without mishap and think it one of the most interesting and exciting trips in the colony. When Mr. Runcie was here I carried him by this route to Kaieteur Falls, for one of the principal objects of his visit was to film the boat trip through the Essequibo rapids, which I described in Harper's Magazine for January. This slide shows how our boat was hauled through an enormous whirlpool, while the next view shows the men building a rude palm-leaf shelter or "bush-tent" over the boat.



KAIETUEK FALLS

(12)

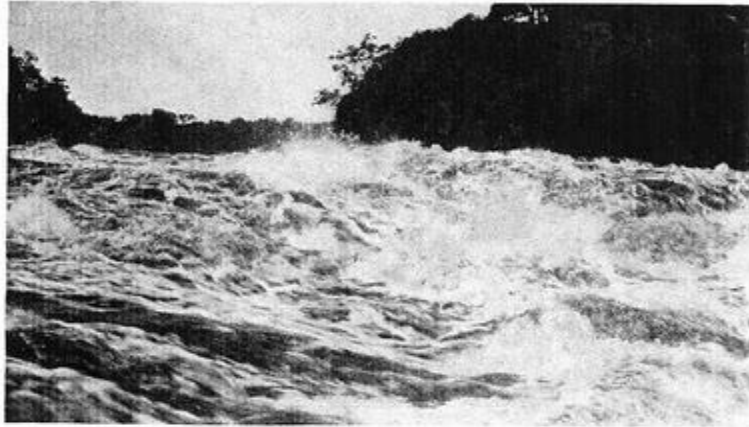


KAIETUEK GORGE FROM BRINK OF FALLS

(13)

On the islands in the rapids of the Essequibo are many beautiful orchids. Here is a photograph of a fine specimen with over 180 flowers on one plant, while the next view shows a spider monkey on a dead tree being "filmed." A nearer view of the unwilling subject shows it trying to "look pleasant."

Among the most striking and typical features of the tropical forests are the "bush ropes" or lianas. The picture shows how large those vegetable cables grow and also how they are attached by roots to the trees and grow downwards. How these gigantic vines grow is often a puzzle to those unfamiliar with them. One gentleman told me he couldn't understand how slender vines could sprout straight up through the air and catch hold of a tree a hundred feet above the earth.



POTARO RAPIDS.

(14)

Having passed safely through the falls the traveller arrives at Rockstone, of which I show a view, and here I obtained some very remarkable pictures on my last visit, for I had the good fortune to see Indians eating "Cooshie ants." These ants swarm but once a year and the Indians consider the big, winged females, or queens, a great delicacy. It was a wonderful sight to watch the Indians hopping about among the ants, their legs streaming with blood from the bites, while they caught the queens and pulled off wings and jaws. When a good supply was gathered they retired to a safe distance and munched the ants in comfort. It was a sight few men have witnessed for queen Cooshie ants are so rare that only a few specimens are preserved in the great museums. To find a nest of swarming Cooshie ants and Indians on hand to eat them, was a coincidence little short of marvellous. The ants taste like condensed milk I discovered.



(15)



(16)
15. CHAGALLI ROCK, MARABOU RIVER.
16. MAKUSHIE IN FULL DANCING COSTUME.
17. MAKUSHIE IN PARABOLA DANCING COSTUME.



(18)



(19)
18. INDIAN LOOKING DOWN FROM VERGE OF
KAIETUEK FALL.
19. MAKUSHIE DANCING MADE IN THE
FOREST.

At Rockstone we were joined by Father Cary-Elwes and his Makushie Indians who accompanied us as far as Kaietuerk where he left us and continued on to his distant mission.

Never have I travelled with a more enjoyable companion, for Father Cary-Elwes is a most lovable, a most human and a most remarkable man. Throughout his wanderings in the wilderness he has not missed Mass in seven years and every morning a rude altar was erected, and Father said Mass for his three Makushies. Very impressive was this simple service in the dim forest with the pink sky of dawn overhead and the silvery chimes of the Bell birds ringing from the tree tops.

My next picture shows a bit of the Potaro River from the Tumatumari rest-house. Tumatumari is a beautiful spot with the four cataracts, separated by wooded islands, just beneath the rest-house windows. It could be made into the most attractive winter resort in the tropics, and if provided with adequate accommodations and easy and rapid transportation, it would draw countless visitors from the north, especially if a road was constructed from here to Kaietuerk.



GRATING CASSAVA ROOTS. (16)



GRATING CASSAVA ROOTS. (17)



GRATING CASSAVA ROOTS. (18)



GRATING CASSAVA ROOTS. (19)

People, who have never been far from the coast, are prone to think of British Guiana as a flat country, but a trip up such a river as the Potaro will dispel all such illusions. Here great mountains rise on every hand, often with their summits hidden in the clouds.

Kukuieng (Hawk's Nest) is perhaps the most striking, owing to its castle-like form, but there are scores of others just as lofty and just as massive, and all converging to form a fitting gateway to the world's greatest cataract.

At Pakutuerk we accomplished the impossible and pulled our boat up through the falls and at Amuktuerk we found a big camudi coiled upon the rocks at the landing place as if waiting to welcome us. After being duly "filmed" he was killed and proved a good load for five husky Indians, as shown in the picture. He measured 18ft. 9in. in length, 29 inches in circumference and weighed 280 odd pounds.

Still another bit of luck was in securing this picture of a crocodile basking beside a pool, while a still more striking picture was obtained when, in hauling through a particularly bad stretch, we had as neat a washout as anyone could wish. It wasn't nearly as much fun at the time as it seems now, however.

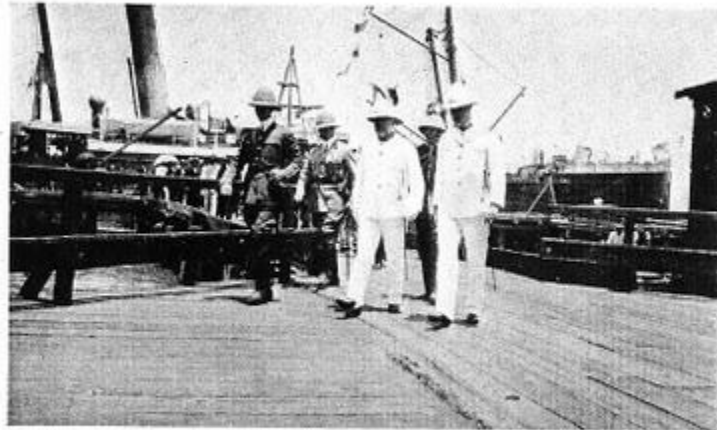
But despite such little inconveniences we reached Tukuit safely in due time. Tukuit is in the midst of magnificent scenery and directly across the river from the rest-house. A cataract springs from the verdured mountain crest and plunges down for hundreds of feet to the forest above the clouds. This in itself would be considered worth the entire trip in most parts of the world; but in the presence of mighty Kaietuerk it pales into insignificance.

It's a fearful climb up the mountain-side to the plateau, and it's a shame that the way has not been improved and a road built from Tumatumari to the falls. Even a decent path from Tukuit would be a great improvement. As it is, one has to scramble and even crawl for several miles up a stony, slippery, log-choked, fissure-filled gully at an angle of about 60 degrees. In Kaietuerk you have an asset worth millions, a sight which should attract visitors from every corner of the earth, and yet, nothing to speak of has been done to exploit it or to bring it within reasonable reach of Georgetown. To be sure, Sproston's have advertised it and have attempted to attract visitors to it, but the service is so poor and the cost of the trip so unreasonable that it is practically prohibitive and only a man who has unlimited time and money at his disposal, and doesn't mind discomforts can afford to undertake the journey under present conditions. With a decent road Kaietuerk is scarcely two hours by motor from Tumatumari, and yet one must travel afoot and by boat for two or three days to cover the distance. Moreover, if modern fast steamers or launches were operated on the rivers and a motor road was built, these stupendous falls, which have no equal in the entire world, could be brought within a day's travel of Georgetown. And it wouldn't cost a fortune to do this; fifty thousand dollars would be amply sufficient, and a mighty good investment it would prove. Imagine leaving town at 7 a.m., travelling through marvellous tropic scenery and dining on the plateau beside the falls at 7 p.m. the same day!

As a money maker I would rather have Kaietuerk than all the gold and diamond claims or all the timber lands, in the colony.

On the way up from Tuku it we stopped some time to admire and study those wonderful birds, the Cock-of-the-Rock. Several specimens were obtained for the purpose of preparing a group for the museum, which is now on exhibition, but we saw over 20 of the birds within a distance of half a mile. Their presence here was particularly interesting, as they were supposedly extinct, save in the most unfrequented and distant parts of the Colony. Since then I have found them nesting within one hundred miles of Georgetown.

When at last one reaches the plateau at the end of the climb one looks upon a totally different land from that below; a barren expanse of naked rain-worn rock with great lily-like giant bromeliads, strange orchids, nodding blue hair-bells and bracken; a flora peculiar to the plateau and unlike anything else.



LANDING OF THE NEW GOVERNOR.

(22)

But all interest centres on Kaietuerk and we hurried across the plateau to the brink of the gorge to gaze for the first time upon this titanic waterfall. All my life I have prided myself upon being able to look down from dizzy heights without any sensation of giddiness or fear. I have climbed to the trucks of ships' masts at sea; I have gazed from the skeleton frames of skyscrapers at the ant-like humans in the busy streets five hundred feet below, and I have stood on the brink of many a terrific precipice; but when I walked boldly to the edge of Kaietuerk gorge I gave one glance and beating a hasty retreat sat down at a safe distance.

I expected to look down for a vast distance; but I also expected to see a slope or a precipice, or some tangible connection between the top and bottom of the gorge. Instead I gazed straight down through space for a thousand feet and I could not overcome the sensation of the entire overhanging ledge tumbling into the awful abyss beneath. The feeling soon wore off to large extent, however; but still I preferred to get down on all fours, or hold on to a bush when near the verge.

In all the pictures of Kaietuerk the falls appear dwarfed and disappointingly small, but this is due to the fact that there is nothing for comparison and one has the same feeling, the same lack of power to grasp the size of things, when actually looking at the falls. The valley far below seems clothed with soft, green moss dotted with pebbles and not until you realize that the seeming moss is a forest of giant trees and the apparent pebbles are great masses of rock weighing hundreds of tons each, do you realize the stupendous size of the falls and the depth of the gorge.

So high are the falls that not an atom of real water ever reaches the pool beneath, the falling mass being transformed to vapour long before it reaches the end of its descent and looking far more like volumes of smoke than liquid.

But to obtain a true idea of the size of Kaietuerk note the man in the picture. Once we realize that this speck is a human being the stupendously overwhelming proportions of the cataract are impressed upon us.

I mentioned my sensations when looking over the brink of the gorge but Father Cary-Elwes was absolutely unconscious of any such feelings. He was anxious to secure a picture from a certain viewpoint and approached nearer and nearer the edge, finally planting his camera with one tripod leg resting on a jutting pebble beyond the verge of the plateau. Then all forgetful of his surroundings, he stooped down to adjust his lens with his back to the gorge and actually balancing on one foot on the very brink of eternity.

I have been asked by many to give my impressions of Kaietuerk, to describe the falls; but there are things which defy description and one of these is Kaietuerk, for words utterly fail to convey any adequate idea of the overwhelming grandeur of the falls and gorge. It is one of the things which must be seen to be realized and the finest pictures seem woefully poor and insignificant after viewing Kaituerk itself. It cannot be truly described as beautiful, rather it is awe-inspiring, sublime, almost terrifying in its grandeur. It is the very epitome of inconceivable power and titanic strength, immeasurable, irresistible, incomparable. In its presence one feels puny, helpless; a mere atom, and gazing upon it, one is filled with quaking, unreasonable dread and yet is fascinated, as by some gigantic savage beast of magnificent form and perfect grace.

Perhaps the greatest attraction of Kaietuerk is that it is never twice the same. Every moment it changes; with every breath of wind, with each variation of light, with every passing cloud it assumes a different aspect and to reproduce these in photographs is impossible. And then there is the colouring, for Kaietuerk is no foam-white cataract, but plunges over the verge of conglomerate in a mass of golden brown and amber which changes to cream and pink and saffron as it falls while the rising vapours veil it in clouds of prismatic hues, or bar it with a glorious rainbow.

In some respects the gorge itself is even more beautiful and impressive than the cataract. Here is a view looking down the gorge from the brink, while the next picture shows an Indian poised on the verge of the falls and wrapped in contemplation of the wondrous scene stretched out beneath him.



PRESSING CASSAVA IN MATAFER. (23)



INDIAN LEVER SUGAR MILL. (24)

And truly the scene before him is one of surpassing beauty. From beneath his feet at the base of the mighty falls, stretches the great gorge to where its sides are lost in the blue haze of distance. In the very centre winds the silver thread of river, flecked with the white of rapids, while on every side rise frowning precipices cut with black ravines and topped by vast plateaus and everywhere covered with the endless forest of a thousand shades of green; purple in the shadows, golden in the sunlight; a panorama such as few spots in the world can boast.

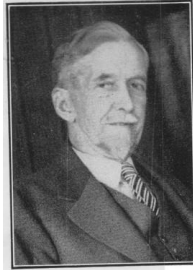
On our return journey from Kaietuerk we ran everything, even Pakutuerk, and only screamed through the very worst spots.

Some idea of our speed may be gained from the fact that it took but four hours to run through rapids where we had spent four days hauling up. So accustomed did we become to running dangerous falls that when we reached Tumatumari we ran them also, a feat never before attempted as far as I can ascertain.

But despite all the beauties, all the wonders of the interior, one is always glad to reach civilization after weeks in the wilderness, and yet there is a strange fascination about the bush, a charm about the great, silent rivers, a something that grips one and makes one long for the wilderness, for the hammock swung under the tarpaulin in the forest, for the glow of camp fires, the smell of pungent smoke and the glorious sunsets reflected in the mighty rivers. Whenever I'm in the bush I long for civilization and just as soon as I reach town I'm just as anxious to get back in the bush.

It is a marvellous, a wonderful land that you have here in British Guiana, a land of untold wealth and resources, of magnificent scenery and of vast possibilities. Development is all that is needed to make it one of the richest countries on the globe. Sooner or later that development will come and then British Guiana will take the place it deserves. Let us hope that my last picture represents the beginning of a new era of prosperity for the magnificent province.

The author: A. Hyatt Verrill



A. HYATT VERRILL

Verrill, Alpheus Hyatt, author, illustrator, naturalist, explorer and science fiction writer of the 20s and 30s, was born in New Haven, Conn., 23 July 1871, the son of [Addison Emery](#) and Flora L. (Smith) Verrill; educated at Hopkins Grammar School; Yale School of Fine Arts; spl. Course in zoology under his father; married Kathryn L. McCarthy, 21 January 1892; children --- Dorothy I (Mrs. Russell Rhodes), Eric E. (dec.), Loyola K. (Mrs F. Cintron., jr), Valerie G. (Mrs. P. A. C. Ellis) (dec.); married a second time to Lida Ruth Shaw, 11 November 1944. Illustrated Natural History department Webster's International Dictionary, 1896; Clarendon Dictionary; many scientific reports and other publications; Invented autochrome process (photography in natural colors), 1902. Extensive explorations in Bermuda, West Indies, Guiana, Central America, Panama, 1889-1920; rediscovered supposedly extinct *Solenodon paradoxus* in Santo Domingo, 1907. Resided Dominica, British West Indies 1913-1917; Panama 1917-21. Author of more than 105 books on adventure subjects, natural history, travel and books for boys, the latest being *The Real Americans*, 1954. Contributor to numerous magazines. Made ethnological expeditions to Panama, Peru, Bolivia, Chili, and Surinam, 1916-28; archaeological expeditions, Central America 1924-1927; discovered remains of unknown prehistoric culture and carried on extensive excavations, Panama, 1924-27; engaged in making series of oil paintings of South and Central American Indians from life, 1926-28; archaeological expeditions Peru and Bolivia 1928-1932; in charge of expeditions 1933, 34, salvaging Spanish galleon sunk in West Indies in 17th century; expedition to the West Indies 1948; expedition to Mexico, 1953. In 1940 he established the Anhiarka Exploratory Gardens and Natural Science Museum at the site of the ancient Indian village of Anhiarka where DeSoto made his first settlement in Florida.; in 1944 established a shell business in Lake Worth, Florida. Home: Route 1, Box 254, Chiefland, Florida. Died November 14, 1954. Buried in the Chiefland Cemetery.

From Who Was Who In America.

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