

IN THE WILD NAPO COUNTRY, 1889-1893 ¹

Text by John Randolph Spears

AN AMERICAN PROSPECTOR'S EXPERIENCES IN ECUADOR.

Dense Tropical Forests in Which C. B. Dugan Encountered Primitive Indian Tribes with Varying Traits of Honesty, Treachery, and Cannibalism—Tracts Where the Sea Rolled in Ancient Days—Slave Trading on The Amazon—The Stories of Wonderful Gold Placers are Mainly a Myth.

One of the most interesting experiences of my sojourn in Panama was a talk with an American prospector named C. B. Dugan. I had heard of Mr. Dugan before I met him. While talking with Consul-General Adamson one day, Mr. Adamson said:

"I wish you were going to Ecuador instead of Central America, because I should like to have someone learn the fate of an American who disappeared there some three years ago. He was a prospector from the Rocky Mountains, a sensible, methodical, capable searcher for precious metals, I should judge from his manner and talk. He called on me and said he was going to look for placer gold on the east slope of the Andes, in Ecuador; was going to the Napo country; in short, where no white man had been, and see if the traditions of great placer wealth there were true.

"I have seen a good many Americans start after the gold of South America. I saw, for instance, a young man who was *en route* to develop the riches of Peru with a capital of \$500, and afterward earned his eternal gratitude by getting for him a chance to work his way home in a Pacific Mail steamer. But this prospector was of a different style. He had an outfit that was just right for the work, and he had plainly had experience in wild life. So, I tried to persuade him not to go; I was convinced that he would be killed and eaten, and I did not like the idea of the States losing such a valuable fellow. However, he landed at Guayaquil and that was the last I heard of him. I have no doubt he is dead, but one would like to know where he was killed and eaten and what he accomplished first. He was really as much of an explorer as a prospector."

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The next day after this talk with the Consul-General, I was sitting with a new-found American acquaintance smoking beside the hotel door and looking at the heterogeneous population of the town that passed to-and-fro, when one of the throng in some way evolved himself, and stopped on the steps.

He was rather tall and slender, had well-knit muscles, clear blue-gray eyes, and black hair and beard. He was good-looking in fact, in spite of the quality and condition of his clothes. Moreover, he carried himself like a man, even though his clothing was like that of a man away down on his luck.

"*Aren't you two Americans?*" he asked, in an eager voice.

"*We are,*" said my friend, putting his hand into his pocket for a quarter.

"*Well, I'm d—d glad to hear you say it,*" he said with emphasis. "*I've been three and a half years out of the world, and you don't know how much good it does me to meet one of my own kind. What will you take?*"

My friend drew his hand from his pocket quickly without the quarter, and without attracting the stranger's attention. Then we all shook hands and called for a mixture that contained the juice of limes fresh from the tree. For a half hour we two were kept busy answering questions about matters in the States, and then the stranger said:

"*Well, say, I'm so glad to see you that I've forgotten to be courteous. My name is C. B. Dugan, and I'm a prospector. I guess they'd remember me in half a dozen old mine camps in the States, but I did not mean to take up all your evening. Oblige me by taking another drink and then I'll hunt a clothing store.*"

The next day, changed in appearance beyond recognition by his visits to barber and clothier, he came to me again, and here is the story of his wanderings:

"With one of Barrera's old maps of Peru and Ecuador for a guide—it's the best, though a very erroneous map of the country made, but long since out of print—I left Guayaquil in October, 1889, *en route* to Quito. As the roads to that city have often been described, I need only say that I went by route to the north of Chimborazo, where the trail rises 14,000 feet above the sea and at that elevation crosses a moraine—a bed of sand that is as level as a race course, and over which one must pass before 11 o'clock in the morning to avoid freezing to

death. Men have actually been found there, frozen dead astride a mule. I might add, too, that the trail passes through the great quinine district, and that Quito has about 45,000 inhabitants, instead of 60,000, as commonly reported.

"At Quito one gets good horses to carry him to Papallacta—i. e. the potato land, but never a potato could I get there. It is a journey of two and a half days through a beautiful country. From the Guamani pass, thirty-three miles from Quito, one looks down into the valley of the Amazon. Two or three villages are passed *en route*, and Papallacta is found about forty miles in a line east-southeast from Quito.

"So far my journey had no real hardship in it. I found that Papallacta contained about forty well-built houses. It stands on the slope of Mt. Antisana, 1,000 feet above Quito. The climate is exceedingly cold, and the principal features of the scenery are the basalt and sandstone precipices and ledges.

INDIANS THAT NEVER STEAL.

"From Papallacta the journey has a serious aspect. One must travel from thirteen to fifteen days to reach Napo, including four days for rest. It is a journey on foot over an Indian trail where one fords rivers and wallows through swamps and bogs, using a machete most of the time to cut away the vines that obstruct the path. I had seventeen loads of cargo—that is, it took seventeen men to carry my outfit, but the trail was so vile that some of these had to be dropped by the wayside, and I did not recover them until three months after. That I got them at all may astonish the reader, but those Indians never steal.

"Fourteen days from Papallacta I reached Archidona, the capital of what the Ecuadorians call their Provincia Oriental. It has a population of 2,000, all Indians, and ten soldiers, besides some Jesuit priests and four Sisters of Charity, who conduct schools for boys and girls. It is a town not often seen by white men. It stands in a plain on the Misawalli River 2,000 feet above the sea. The rains fall from January to June almost steadily, and showers come during the rest of the year. The thermometer stands at 77° Fahrenheit almost without change. It is a healthy place, but the sandflies are a plague and the leaf-carrying ants are not much less. The people—they are Quito Indians—are an interesting race, the men being tall and slender, the women short, wide-hipped, timid, and homely, and both of a dark red color.

"From Archidona a good road runs to Port Napo, sixteen miles away on the Napo River. One passes on the way Tena, a thriving village on the Tena River, which has eight families of Ecuadorians, besides its Indians. No one can tell the exact population of Napo. The Napo Indians are not wholly trustworthy. They sometimes attack white men, but I saw forty or fifty houses in the settlement. The Napo River is there over eighty yards wide and has a five-mile current.

A HERMIT FROM CONNECTICUT.

"A mile away from Port Napo, a tributary, the Yusapino, flows into the Napo River, and in the forks between these streams lives a remarkable hermit, Mr. George Edwards, formerly of Connecticut. He has been there for thirty-five years. He formerly cultivated vanilla beans, but in 1867, when there was a violent eruption of Cotopaxi, the lava melted such immense quantities of snow that a vast flood came down the river. The water rose to the second-story of Mr. Edwards's house. He took refuge in a tree, and was for a time in great danger. He lost 5,000 vanilla plants in the flood, and abandoned the business. He now raises plantains, yuccas, potatoes, corn, rice, cotton, cane and onions. Good coffee grows nearby, although Napo is but 1,450 feet above the sea. Tobacco, various fruits, and the best of pineapples grow there with little care. I was two weeks with Edwards, and I can assure any American going there that a royal welcome is in waiting. Port Napo is the head of canoe navigation, and can be reached, of course, by way of the mouth of the Amazon.

"While I was there the smallpox broke out, and the Indians fled to the mountains to build huts and wait till Mongi, their evil spirit of the disease, goes away. Their homes are called tambos, and are huts built of canes lashed together with vines over charred posts thrust into the ground and roofed with a thatch of palms. Edwards has a two-story house, as an Ecuadorian family named López have in Napo, but the Indians have only little ones. Four times a year a priest comes to hold service and perform the marriage rites. There is a grand fiesta then, but the Indians are more afraid of their own gods than they are of the perdition the priest tells about. No matter, they are strictly honest.

"Leaving Napo, I went downstream by canoe 180 miles or more to Lacoca [*modern Coca, Ed.*], where Señor Javier Moran, the principal rubber merchant of the Napo River, lives. The Payamino and Lacoca rivers flow into the Napo here, and it was at this point that Pizarro built a brigantine and sent Lieut.

Orellana in it down to the Amazon. Moran has some old tools which he found near his house, tools undoubtedly left by Pizarro where the vessel was built.

GREAT PLACE FOR SNAKES AND LIGHTNING.

I began my prospecting at this point by going in a canoe for two and a half days up the Payamino River. I found nothing, so I went for eight days up the Punino, a sluggish stream that comes from a spur of the Andes. I found a wild region at the head of canoe navigation. I was there in April, the season of the greatest rainfall. The flash of lightning and the roar of thunder were almost continuous. I saw many trees struck and destroyed by lightning. It is without doubt, too, the worst place for snakes in the world, and I had great difficulty in persuading the Indians to take me there, and greater difficulty in keeping them when once we had arrived. It is wholly uninhabited, though turkeys and other equally easily obtained game and fish are found in the greatest abundance. The Indians say it is the home of the devil. I prospected over the Wagra Urcu range, which, traditions say, is full of coarse gold. I remained thirty-five days, working faithfully and I found only thin, light scales of gold, here and there a color, in the sandbars of the stream. There was not enough to pay even day wages and I had to give it up. I was not dry for a minute during that whole trip, which lasted to the middle of June. A side excursion on another stream brought a like result.

"I remained in what you might call Moran's region on the Napo in all four months. The streams all show a little fine gold, but there are no hills for hydraulics, no amount of gravel, but only little sedimentary deposits washed down from the Llanganates Range.

LOST TREASURES.

"There is, of course, gold in quartz there, but if any man can get to the range he is a good one. The Llanganates Range is a spur of the Guamini, a great mountain. There is a lake somewhere in there. They wanted me to go to it for the treasures of which Hassaurek's *'Four Years Among Spanish-Americans'* tells. The place is sixty miles east of Ambato, if you want to make the trip at any time, but it is the most broken, mountainous region in the world, and covered with solid woods without food or inhabitants. I would have tried it, however, had I believed the yarn.

THE SEA ROLLED HERE.

"It is worth noting that in my explorations in this region I found plenty of ocean shells. That was once the bed of the sea, as was also the region of the Tigre River. From Lacoca, where Moran lives, a four-mile current helped us along for four days to Tiputini, where I found a white man in the rubber business, and then I went on for eight days to the mouth of the Aguarico, where I found an English hermit raising cane and making rum. He had bought a machine from the Marshalls of New York City, but a gear wheel had been lost on the way, and he did not know what ailed his outfit, and was having no end of trouble.

HABITS OF THE INDIANS.

"A few days more brought me to the Curaray, which, like the Napo, rises on the flanks of the Cotopaxi volcano. Below that I did not see a human being till the Amazon was reached. I was twenty-one days paddling from Lacoca to the Amazon, and it was a journey well worth making by any tourist. Turkeys and other game abound, and we had plenty. I shot a big owl, which my Indians ate. There are plantains and yuccas everywhere in patches where they have been planted by the Indians, and grow without care. The yucca is a root superior to the potato. We caught plenty of fish, some of which were equal to trout. The sábalo is a splendid fish. Turtles are found in great numbers. The Indians get from 75 to 125 eggs from a nest and preserve them in salt. They also catch and smoke a kind of fish called piche, that is better than codfish. They use spears, hooks, and nets, which they get of the whites, for fishing. My Indians made a curious drink of the yucca. They chewed the boiled root into a paste, spit it into a trough, put it into pots covered with plantain leaves, let it ferment three days, and then, as they wanted it, mixed with water in a gourd. It made a drink that tasted like fresh buttermilk. It is a drink on which one can travel without other food.

"At night, when we camped, the night birds came like moths to the fire and alighted upon us as we tried to sleep. The jaguars came about the camp and roared, whereat the Indians became entirely silent. They believe that the spirits of the bad men of their own tribe pass into the jaguars, or become jaguars at death. We were never attacked by these beasts in camp, but the hot-mouthed ants drove us away more than once.

"Although I saw no inhabitants during many days along the Napo many wild Indians live there. The worst are the two tribes called Santa Marias and Aguteros, from the tributaries of the Napo, on which they live. They are the remnants of a great tribe once called the Omaguas. They often kill all the people of an up-bound canoe to take its cargo.

"The Napo is a mile wide where it empties into the Amazon. I went to the house of a man named Parker, who is married to a native woman there. A negro was stopping there with six Orejones Indian girls from 6 to 10 years old. He was going to take them down the Amazon, he said, and sell them at from \$60 to \$100 each, according to age. Parker confirmed this statement. I said that if the Indians caught the negro he would be killed in hard fashion. Parker agreed to that, but said if I informed, my life would not be worth ten cents.

WHERE FOOD COST SOMETHING GREAT.

"It is sixty miles, two and a half days' travel, from the mouth of the Napo up to Iquitos, a thriving town of 6,000 people, on the Amazon. Branches of wealthy European rubber houses are located there, and many steam launches are employed gathering rubber from the forests along the many streams of the river. They get the white rubber, the best quality, there. Food probably costs more there than at any place on earth, but everything was particularly high when I was there because of a flood that had destroyed many plantations. Thus, a bunch of plantains cost \$1, which in ordinary times brings 10 cents. But the ordinary prices are the highest I know of. A can of condensed milk sells for 70 cents, fresh meat for from 25 to 35 cents a pound, and bad butter for \$1.25 a pound. Fish swam in the river, but a pair of sábalos brought a dollar. It is a coffee country, but a pound of coffee brings 80 cents; it is a region of sugarcane, but sugar fit for coffee is sold for 35 cents a pound. And yet a laborer can get only one dollar a day for wages.

A LONG CANOE JOURNEY.

"After remaining at Iquitos for six weeks to rest, I started up the Tigre River. An American named William Mosier, who has been twenty years in Iquitos, and Joseas Deagula, a son of old Don Joseas Deagula of San Regis, whose name appears in a book or two on the Amazon, went along. The old Don has a whole tribe of Indians at work for him, and the young man talks the Indian languages well. We went four days up the Tigre to one of the old Don's trading posts in a

steam launch and there took two canoes and nine Colamas Indians to shove them, and we kept shoving for forty-seven days up the Tigre when we at last arrived at the mouth of the Pintoyacu. There we rested several days and then went for seven days up the Pintoyacu to a pass called Baradero—which means pass or carry.

"Leaving the canoes and some provisions here we started overland through the forest carrying our outfit, and after marching five and a half days, during which time we forded or crossed on trees twenty-six streams, we reached the Bobonaza River, our destination, in good health, although rain fell continuously. Traditions said the stream was marvelously rich in gold and we did not mind the discomforts, you know.

"On reaching the stream we struck a trail and followed it down to an Indian settlement called Juanquire. It was a new town, and had been made by six or seven families of Canelos Indians, who had come to that wild region to escape from a priest they did not like.

"We found there only two people, two young married women. They gave us yuccas, corn, and chicha, set apart one side of their house for us, and did everything possible to make us comfortable, though at first, they were much frightened. Mosier and I were the first real white men they had ever seen. They were surprised at the sight of our beards.

SAVAGE MURDERERS.

"After breakfasting on a good soup, they told us how they happened to be there alone. A party of Huambisas had come up the Morona River on a foraging and killing expedition. Reaching a small tributary from the north they turned and came overland to the Bobonaza, arriving opposite this little village. There they called for canoes, and the husbands of these two women, being the only men in the town at the time (the rest were hunting), went over with canoes and brought the party, eleven men, armed with iron-pointed spears, across the stream. They said they were out hunting wild hogs, which abound there, and acted in a most friendly fashion.

"So, the women prepared a great feast, and for several hours the strangers ate and drank and smoked. Then, at about 3 o'clock P. M., as all sat in a circle about a fire in the house, two got up, as if to stretch themselves, and, without any

warning grasped their spears and stabbed to death the two men who had made them welcome. Then they cut off the heads of their victims, and, with these and such spears, nets, &c., as they could find about the place, they went away up the stream in the canoes that had brought them over, leaving the women to dig holes in the earth, wrap the headless bodies in rude cloth of their own weaving, and bury them.

"As they told their story the women moaned and sobbed in a most pitiful way. We were armed with four Winchesters and as many six-shooters, and Mosier wanted to chase up and annihilate the savages, but Don Joseas would not let us. He said we would be ambushed and destroyed. *'Besides, it's none of our business,'* he added. We had a notion to go anyhow at that, but as the war party had three days' start of us, we let them go.

"The Logroños and Huambisas Indians of that region are implacable desperadoes, while the Muratas are almost as bad. They kill whoever and wherever they can out of pure love of slaughter. The Moronas, on the contrary, are and have been always friendly to the whites. For this they were almost annihilated and would have been entirely destroyed, but the whites came to their rescue by providing them with rifles. They are now turning the tables, and will probably exterminate the fierce tribes in a few years.

DEAD RIVERS FOUND.

"After four days of rest with these Canelos Indians we obtained canoes from others of the settlement who came in from the hunt, and started up the stream. On every sandbar we found fair prospects of gold, but none in the banks. There was just enough to make us sure we would find it in the next bar above, but not quite enough to pay for working the one we were on. We kept on up as far as the village called Canelos, the site of an ancient town that was destroyed by the Indians a long time ago, and prospected the hills all around there. We found many beds of streams that in a former age ran at right angles to the currents of the present streams: that is, north and south. Those old rivers were full of gravel; the gravel beds we found varied from 30 to 100 yards in width and from 10 to 30 feet in depth. They are all covered with a thick forest now. There was gold in every one of them, as there is in the bars of the Bobonaza—a plenty of fine gold, but it will float in the current of an ordinary flume. We sat one up and tried it. I had the finest of French scales, but no weight that I had would measure

even the coarsest particles. Work as we would, we could not save enough for day wages.

"The Bobonaza comes from Lake Bobonaza, near Pico Llanganati, where the fountainhead of this fine gold is found. The trouble with the placer proposition is that these streams run through a sedimentary formation. They have no holding ground, no hard-pan bottom to retain the gold. The old dead streams with their beds lying north and south were also in sedimentary formation.

THESE SLAVES ESCAPED.

"Well, we had to give it up. We gave good money and got experience. On returning to the mouth of the Pintoyacu we found a rubber gatherer with his peons: Peruvian workmen they were. They had surprised a camp of wild Indians and captured twenty of them, whom they were going to carry down the Amazon to sell as '*servants*'—that is, as slaves—as the little girls that I told you of on the Napo were to be sold. These twenty were nearly all men. They were entirely naked when caught: they wear no clothes whatever. They live on corn, which is found growing uncultivated in patches all over that region, and on such game as they can kill with their rude weapons. They know nothing of salt. The men let their hair grow to the shoulders and then cut it off; the women let theirs grow as long as it will. It parts naturally in the middle in both sexes. It is coarse, straight, and black. Their skins are a dark red, and in form are slender and attractive. There was nothing fierce in their expressions.

"There was one man among them who looked as if he was fifty years old or more, and had gained shrewdness with years. The night after we arrived he justified our good opinion of him by liberating the entire party and getting everyone clear and free into the forest. People may not want to believe these stories of slave stealing and of the buying and selling of Indians on the upper waters of the Amazon, but you get THE SUN to send you there and you will then see for yourself.

"When I got back to Iquitos I was disgusted, but after a month's rest was ready to try it again. This time I located the gold, but could not get it. Going up the river on the regular steamer to Yurimaguas, on the Huallaga, a tributary to the Amazon from the south, I there took canoes and went for three days up the Paranapuri, a tributary of the Huallaga. Then I turned into the Cachaco and travelled three days up that to Puerto Balsa, the head of canoe navigation.

A DANGEROUS FORD.

"There I got three peons to carry my luggage and walked for seven days to Moyobamba, a city of 10,000 people in the Andes. The trail leads over a steep range and across one of the most dangerous fords in the world. When I reached the Puma River I found that the trail crossed it on a natural dam, the crest of which was just two feet wide. On the right, above the dam, was a great pool of unknown depth. From this the water flowed over that narrow lip in a flood just knee deep, and then plunged down a high precipice that sloped at an angle of forty-five degrees. One must walk across that narrow lip, bracing himself as best he can against the current, and facing certain death if he slip. Of course, a good many people are lost there. The formation is sandstone and the dam will soon go.

"On the west side of the range one finds trachyte and porphyry, but should a white man locate a mine there the authorities would cheat him out of it. I found a good many colors along the trail, but no placer proposition worth working, even were the authorities well disposed toward white men.

"About every soul in Moyobamba makes pita fiber hats. It is a remarkable town in its physical aspect, too. The rains are very heavy there, and the water from the mountain has cut a gully 125 feet deep right through the heart of the town. This gully grows wider and deeper all the time, and now and then a house tumbles in with its caving sides. The refuse of the town is thrown into the streets, where it lies festering. It is a frightful place for a white man, but I had to stay there eight days before I could get anyone to carry my outfit.

FINE TOBACCO.

"South of Moyobamba is Tarapoto, where the best tobacco in the world for cigarettes grows. It sells for \$1 a pound in Tarapoto.

"From Moyobamba I went to Chachapoyas, over a trail in which I was several times up to my armpits in mud and slush. They have a college at Chachapoyas, and I had a talk with the head teacher. What do you think? He did not know slate from granite; he had no idea of a thermometer, and neither knew nor cared anything about even the greatest cities of America or Europe.

GOLD NUGGETS HERE.

"Eventually I reached Callao, and after a stay of some time I started by the way of Santa Rosa and Loja to Yangana in the Andes, where the engineers who were surveying a line for the intercontinental railroad had to turn back. It is a valley there, which for broken country would make any man from the gorges of the Rockies open his eyes. I got over to the Rio Caucho and found some gold, and proved to my own satisfaction that near Cuenca there are placer diggings with grains of gold as big as kernels of corn—plenty of it. But the Indians have it, and the white man that can get his spoon into that pudding is a good one."

Dugan said that on the whole he had come out loser by about \$3,500 in three years and a half, but he did not mind the loss of either time or money. He found ample compensation in the experience. He spent a good many days where even those half-breed rubber gatherers had never dared to go, and had proved the falsehood of all the tales of vast placer deposits of gold, save the one last mentioned. He enjoyed himself in the wild country among those Indians as well as he ever did anywhere, and if he ever loses his grip on civilization, he is going back [to] spend his life among the Canelos on the east slope of the Andes.