

Backeberg Expedition

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Backeberg Expedition

THE following letter has been received from Herr Curt Backeberg written to us from Lima, during his present collecting expedition.

Central Peru,
March 1933.

DEAR CACTUS FRIENDS,

Many of you will perhaps be surprised to hear that I have so suddenly and secretly vanished into South America. But there were good reasons. For the last two years various ideas have been going round in my head concerning the distribution of Cacti, regarding the correctness of which I cannot yet make any definite statement. The only one I have so far confirmed is that the *Binghamias* described by Dr. Rose are nothing of the kind, but have spread from Ecuador to Central Peru; (on account of their rotate flowers which do not arise from areoles furnished with a true cephalium, I have designated them *Haageocereus* g.n or subg.n). Further, that Peru harbours at least three different species of *Melocactus* and these together with *Haageocereus*, inhabit the low Cordilleras of the western coast. Also it should be mentioned that the true *Espostoa* (*C. lanatus* and *sericatus*) extend far to the south and that the Central Peruvian species, *C. melanostele*, (the fleecy, white species) is rather local and must be separated off as *Pseudoespostoa* (on account of its more lateral cephalium). It is no *Cephalocereus*, as Dr. Werdermann calls it in my book, but on account of its flowers, fruit, seeds and habit, a species closely related to *Espostoa*, which has been further evolved by change of climate and restricted occurrence, but which has originated from the species of the High Cordilleras.

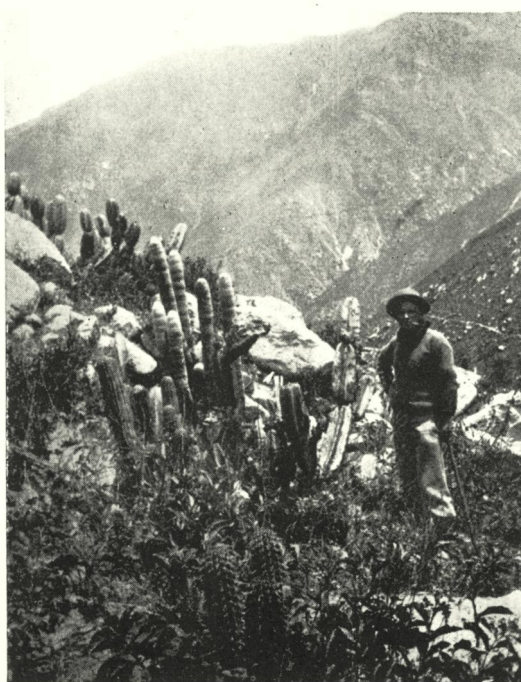
As you know, it is my hobby to study the wanderings of the Cacti and in this case, where the *Cephalocereus* cannot possibly have migrated up the valleys of the Cordilleras the establishment of the relationship of *C. melanostele* is of great interest to me. And now what next? I myself must also wait for that.

Perhaps I shall see many new things and perhaps we can then get a clear picture. Perhaps one day it will be clear too, whether the submerging of the land in the Gulf of Mexico was not a "flood" for the Cacti, which annihilated many old traces, as the invasion of the waters of the Mediterranean did earlier for neolithic and heliolithic Man.

All this is still castles in the air, and the

further pursuit thereof is the aim of my journey. Since I know nothing for certain, I have not alluded to it. . . . I will do that when I can really confirm something interesting. All this does not matter so much to you as to hear what I can tell of my trip up to now.

Well, it was full of variety! At one time I was hunting over the coastal Cordilleras in northern Peru and found three new species and one new variety (it appears) and also a rare *Melocactus* which in old age becomes spherical without ribs and has a cephalium like a lamp chimney. A very peculiar gentleman.



Pseudoespostoa melanostele.

In Central Peru in the higher districts it was the rainy period. What that means, I had the pleasure of experiencing to the full for the first time. On the shore it was the hottest summer weather, when I started upwards; at 2,000 m. it began to rain really hard and when I had reached about 5,000 m., seven hours later, a snow storm howled through the high valleys, together with thunder and lightning, so that I only ventured into the open with the greatest hesitation. It so happened that, because of the necessity of saving time, I got up to 5,000 m. in the course of six hours, without being able to acclimatise myself, and next day, was back

at 2,000 m. This means a very considerable strain on the body, when one cannot sit still, but must go out collecting. And on this occasion we had to work quickly. Hardly half an hour after arrival, I was already starting down again; after an hour and a half, the snowstorm stopped, thank goodness, and then the snow began to melt. Really not very pleasant!

And just think, *Opuntia floccosa* grows in such a site, damp with snow and water, and at this time of the year is shining a beautiful snow-white like its surroundings; it grows its purest and most splendid new coat of hair at this period. The large groups look marvellous. But one had to consider the packing very carefully. Would they arrive sound or rotten? I had no time to think about it, the most important thing was that the seeds were full ripe. It must be left to the ventilation holes to do their duty properly.

A few days later we sat amongst the red hot rocks of the lower Cordilleras and took films. This will also be of interest to you. This time I am taking a film of my whole collecting expedition, and if all the strips turn out well and I return home in good health, I hope to give you the opportunity of repeating the journey by means of the film, and to show in moving pictures the beauty and the thrill of such a cactus hunt. We pulled ourselves across a rushing torrent by means of a wire rope, searched the wildest fissures of the mountains with the rope, and like the Guachos drove our asses and mules back home again.

But all this is only the prelude. The majestic beauty which calls me ever onwards to yet more distant Cordilleras, I hope to capture in even larger measure, so that you, too, may fully appreciate what I have hardly had a chance yet of realising. The work and the continual necessity of altering arrangements prevents me. Really to appreciate all the new and beautiful things that I keep meeting out here will only be possible for me when I can see the finished film in peace from an armchair.

I have photographed old Inca towns and in many places I was astonished to find behind the dead landscape of the sandy coastal strip and the foothills, where there is little water, a fertile land with innumerable flowers, cattle and pasture grounds.

And yet one thing more. Above in the Sierra I found a series of new succulents. I must study them further. Little alpine creatures of the plant world, with round leaves, sometimes beautifully striped, others

again decorated with diminutive sprays of flowers like little garnets. Then again, hairy cushions of little flat green groups with comparatively large purple flowers, plantlets with small bulbs and beautiful mallow-like flowers, in fact, the stony High Cordillera is a rock garden, and a more beautiful one cannot be imagined. Previously I had paid little attention to this, because my chief thought had been to establish many species of cacti. This time I already knew the country. I reached my collecting sites more rapidly and with greater certainty and could therefore turn my attention to the many little floral treasures which Nature has strewn amongst the wonderful cacti across this beautiful mountain world.



Haageocereus acranthus.

But, nevertheless, we found something new. A new *Mila*, with straw-yellow spines, which makes large free-flowering groups and then—yes, the new *Cereus (Borziacactus) Faustianus* which must have managed very cleverly to have escaped discovery till now. I, myself, went once down through the great Quebrade, amongst whose higher rocks it grows. It was only because I wanted to take films amongst the romantic rock walls with my boys, that we found it. It grows in coils like a snake,

has fierce, dark yellow spines, sometimes reddish, and flowers from the old areoles, often on young growths, a bright cinnabar red. It is a most gorgeous sight, since it opens its flowers by day, in contrast to *Haageocereus*, which then has its flowers half-closed, to open again towards evening. Unfortunately, on account of the heat and because the plant grows in unattainable rock crevices, I could not collect much seed, but I hope that the two mother plants I have will set seed during the coming summer.

Now I am cleaning seeds and thinking of my next journey. Much must be considered and arranged. So far I have only been able to develop a couple of pictures, so the supply is meagre, but I hope to bring back a good collection of them. And probably I shall be able to report again shortly if the Editor of the Journal will allow me further space.

In the meantime, many greetings,

Yours truly,

CURT BACKEBERG.

[A provisional list of plants already collected on this trip may be obtained from Messrs. W. T. and H. E. Neale, Newhaven, or from C. Backeberg, Im Sorenfelde 15, Volksdorf, Bz. Hamburg.]

Mammillaria Hahniana, Werdermann



This beautiful *Mammillaria* comes from Queretaro, Mexico, and was only discovered in 1928. The plant body is almost entirely hidden by the long white spines and by the bristles in the axils of the tubercles, these bristles sometimes reaching a length of 4 cm. It grows easily, sending out side-shoots from the base, so that large groups are formed. The flowers are small, crimson, and borne in a circle round the top of the plant. *M. Hahniana* was described in the *Monatschr. d. D.K.*, 1929, p. 77. We are indebted to H. Winter, Frankfurt a.M.-Fechenheim, for permission to use this photograph.

Meetings

THERE was no special subject arranged for the Meeting held on March 7th, members having been asked to bring plants for exhibition, naming, etc., and a number of interesting specimens were shown. Some of these aroused considerable discussion, but it was possible to name quite a number of those exhibited. It is felt that such a meeting affords an opportunity for members to get to know each other's tastes and interests; regular attendants at the Meetings will remember an earlier occasion, in June last, when Mr. H. G. Harrison initiated the first discussion meeting by telling in a most interesting manner why he grew Cacti, and inviting other people to give their experiences. The Meetings in London are always well attended, which makes it the more regrettable that distance prevents many of our members from taking part; the Council is ready to assist in the formation of local branches, wherever there are a few members who could meet together, and are glad to say that one such branch, the Liverpool and District Branch, has already been formed.

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Correction

In the article by Mr. Boarder, on *Raising Cacti from Seed*, Vol. I, No. 3, p. 34, the size of *M. dioica* should have been "2 in. across," and not 4 in., as stated; we regret that this error was allowed to creep in. For the photograph illustrating the article, we are indebted to the courtesy of *The Middlesex Advertiser and County Gazette*.—EDITOR.