

Exploring up-stream Río Cachirí, Perijá Mountains, in 1945

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One morning in July 1945 we had, already for quite some time, been studying rock exposures up-stream Río Cachirí, mostly wading in the water or jumping from stone to stone. Finally, we stopped around noon for a brief rest, as I had slipped again on a particularly slimy surface of a boulder, falling with a splash into the water; this to the amusement of H.P. SCH. from the Maracaibo head office, who was to introduce me into the work of a "jungle geologist". By examining the soles of my new boots, I was slightly astonished to see that most of my boot-nails were already gone, the soles themselves felt rather pulpy and almost had the appearance of a sponge. That was not an encouraging prospect for our further excursion and also for my future work which, as I had been told, would mainly follow the river-beds and thus mostly in the water!

Only about two weeks ago I had arrived in June 1945 at Maracaibo, coming from Europe all by plane, a trip which had lasted six weeks, along a route of some 17'500 Km over western Africa and Brazil. At the beginning of July my colleague and I had left Maracaibo by truck travelling via La Concepcion and La Paz, and then in the direction towards Inciarte. By night-fall we had pitched a provisional camp near El Laberinto. Driving on the next day along some kind of track through the bush, we finally got stuck rather early in the day and had to unload our entire equipment. Furtheron, mule transport had been organised beforehand at the office, but I still to-day puzzle my brains how the "mulero" with his beasts found us in the jungle within a couple of hours.

After checking our gear, food-supply etc., all the material was loaded on the mules, while two of them had to serve as riding-mule for my colleague and myself. Fortunately, at home I had had the opportunity to practise some horse-riding! After a few hours of following some kind of foot-path, which most of the time I could hardly recognize as such, we arrived at the bank of Río Cachirí, along which we pressed on a little more until the terrain proved to become rather densely covered. It was decided to pitch camp here, which would have to serve as a base for cleaning the brush and for surveying. As it was already getting dark, again a preliminary camp only could be set up; various tents and further requirements were to be fixed by the workers the next day or two.

Thus, my colleague suggested that we two would leave the following morning on our own. We at first would have a look along the river-sides at the geology in general, but mainly at the stratigraphy of the formations I had to study during the entire assignment, namely: the Eocene Third Coal, the Paleocene Guasare and the Cretaceous Colon, La Luna and Cogollo formations. This general examination might take us a whole day walking continuously upstream Río Cachirí. On the second day we would try to see as much as possible of the Paleozoic formations, whereby very thick Devonian beds were believed to be exposed in the stream and on the banks over long distances.

My colleague had a keen interest in having this opportunity to study all these rocks, he had not seen yet in this area.

The Río Cachirí is one of the various rivers in the northern Sierra de Perijá, which had already early attracted the interest of geologists. Apart from a few expeditions in the 19th century, these rivers were explored more thoroughly during the first decades of this century because these streams often have cut deep valleys before entering the plain of the Maracaibo basin, thereby frequently exposing continuous rock sequences of geological formation ranging in age from the Paleozoic up to the Tertiary, comprising some 400 Million years of sedimentary rocks.

At our Maracaibo office I only had been able to have a very superficial look at a few relevant Company reports and at some publications, mostly dated from before the war. According to the information available, the formations of our interest comprised rocks of varying lithostratigraphy of a cumulative thickness of over one thousand meters, exposed in natural outcrops along Río Cachirí, and other rivers, but extending over many kilometers of the stream-course. And only still further up-stream, the older beds, the Permo-Carboniferous, the Devonian, interspersed by intrusions of some igneous rocks, could be seen.

While walking on a ordinary road, in about ten minutes one usually covers the distance of one kilometer. In a riverbed, it will take three times as much, up to more than one hour, depending on the local conditions. Thus one can easily be deceived by underestimating the travelling time for such a traverse. This I had to find out the hard way later on more than once.

Back in Río Cachirí, which became wilder every kilometer, we progressed satisfactorily, walking and stopping for observations the entire afternoon. In the meantime, I had learnt that during this kind of field-surveying one could not help getting rather wet which, however, was not very disagreeable due to the elevated temperature. Dusk was nearing which, as I had seen already the days before, lasted only rather briefly and therefore my colleague quickly selected for our camp a site sufficiently high above the river. After a quick and frugal meal, we both started to prepare our night-stay.

Now, I was really wondering what my companion was going to do. As we both had to carry in our rucksack not only a food-supply for a few days, but also some clothes and our sleeping-outfit, we realized that each of us would have to carry a sufficient load for the kind of excursion we had in mind. After some consideration I finally chose to take along for the night a hammock, the mosquito-net, and a small, longish piece of canvas to serve as a tiny roof. Apparently, this altogether seemed too heavy for H.P.SCH., who packed only a mosquito-net for the night. While I was busy fixing my hammock with net and canvas-cover between two suitable trees, my colleague cut with the machete quite a number of large leaves, piling them up on the ground as a sort of a matress. -Not for me, with all those beetles and other animals on the

forest floor! - I thought, but still wishing him a good night's sleep. In spite of the unaccustomed and uncomfortable position in the hammock, but being dog-tired after this toilsome riverbed-walk, I quickly fell asleep.

With a terrific start I awoke in the middle of the night, due to a rumbling and crackling noise, caused by my colleague, smashing around, cursing in Swiss, English and Spanish, and running to and fro with his flash-light. In between, I only heard the often repeated word: ants, ants,... which apparently had been crawling by the thousands over his sugar-containing rucksack, over his face, hands and clothes, and biting him furiously! While the flapping and thrashing continued for a while, I quickly fell asleep again, being very glad for having chosen to take my hammock along in spite of the additional weight I would have to carry.

The next morning, while still some ants were hiding in my companion's clothes, we were steadfastly pressing on further up-stream Río Cachirí. Although the exposed Devonian stratum was reported to be fossiliferous in some layers, most of the formation we looked at proved to be barren. In spite of these beds were here known to be over two thousand meters thick, and faults and dip reversals discouraged us soon, we still pressed on like explorers, who could not stop before having reached the final goal. However, rapids, waterfalls and an often steeply inclined riverbed with large boulders blocking the way, slowed down considerably our progress. Thus, late in the afternoon, we decided to stop, camp for the night and return to our base the next morning. Preparations for the night were for both of us the same as on the previous day.

Again, it may have been around midnight when I awoke owing to a deep rumbling and rolling, which I soon interpreted as thunder. Indeed, beams of light flashed through the tree coverage, and it was only minutes before hell broke loose: one ray of lightning after another ghostly illuminated our camp-site, followed by continuous thunderclaps sounding like detonations, accompanied by a roaring, crackling, rustling and rattling of the huge jungle-trees, all amplified by the reverberation from the mountain-ridges. This fierce, but rather brief overture was followed by an enormous downpour, raining cats and dogs. Although my hammock and mosquito-net started to swing slightly in the stormy winds, my narrow canvas-roof held rather tight and I remained almost dry. Needless to describe what my companion experienced during this thunderstorm; particularly, when the jungle-floor soon was completely covered by water!

The next morning, I did not dare to bring up the subject of the wet Walpurgis night, also because myself I soon had fallen asleep again when the racket had stopped. As to-day we had to walk back the many troublesome kilometers we had covered during the first two days, we hurried to move on after a small and cold breakfast. But soon, I had to stop as apparently a small pebble had entered into my boot, hurting me rather badly. As ~~2~~ quickly found out, this

time fate was against me: I had lost the heel of this boot and some nails were sticking through the sole pricking my foot rather badly! With the help of my geologist's hammer and a suitable stone we could, after some time, eliminate this trouble. But walking back - mostly in the river - on one flat shoe was not very comfortable and lasted many tiresome hours; we finally arrived at our camp just before nightfall.

I think we both were very glad to find the much more solid tents fixed up and the more convenient field-beds ready for us, promising a good night's sleep.



Exploring up-stream, Río Cachirí, Perijá Mountains, 1945

Near El Laberinto, West of La Paz, Maracaibo District
A narrow "Road"
July 1945



Between El Laberinto and Cachirí
End of the "Road"
July 1945



7 West of El Laberinto
Unloading and checking the equipment
July 1945

6 Río Cachirí area
Mule transport
July 1945





Dr.H.P.Schaub, C.P.C.geologist †
Río Cachirí
6th July 1945

El Dibujado, Río Cachirí
Our camp
July 1945

