

DIGGING IN YUCATAN

By Ann Axtell Morris

*Decorated by Jean Charlot and
illustrated with photographs.*

WHEN the Carnegie Institution, in 1924, sent Earl Morris to Yucatan as head of an archeological party, Mrs. Morris went along and shared in the expedition's great labor, which was the reërecting of the Maya Temple of the Warriors at Chichen Itza. This is her vivid and informal account of a work that occupied a period of six years and contributed materially to scientific knowledge of the first known civilization on the American continent. Amusing and informing anecdotes of contemporary Maya workmen and stories from legend and history color the narrative and give it the excitement of fiction.

As a small girl, Ann Axtell wanted to grow up to "dig for buried treasure, and explore among the Indians, and paint, and wear a gun, and go to college." Strangely, she grew up to do every one of those things and now, as an archeologist and the wife of an archeologist, she considers archeology "a lot of hard work and even more fun."

The fine drawings by Jean Charlot, who worked with Mrs. Morris on the Temple murals, match the distinction of the text.



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YUCATAN*



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Axtell
Morris

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DORAN



DIGGING IN YUCATAN

BY ANN AXTELL MORRIS

DECORATIONS BY JEAN CHARLOT

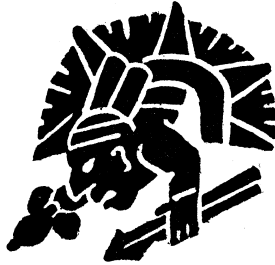
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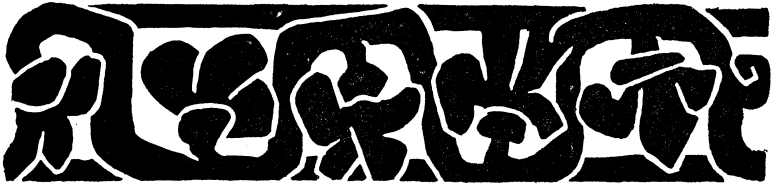
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INTRODUCTION

TO MY way of thinking, archeology is the most interesting and exciting career in the world. You go places and do and see things at which no one else ever gets a chance. It means exploring and digging up buried treasure, traveling to strange countries, meeting delightful people, and best of all, finding out what was happening in the world before the first page of your history book starts. I don't care how long that volume is or how thick. Page One is no more the first page and the beginning, than W is the first letter of the alphabet. For even as the oldest pyramids of Egypt are just about twenty times younger than man-made flints found in the desert sand at their foot, so also 1492 could with more reason be used as a date for the last chapter of American history than the first. I know I used to hear so much about Columbus discovering America that I began to believe Columbus *invented* America. Not until recently did I realize that America had been a flourishing institution for centuries before Columbus was ever born, that millions of Americans had lived and died surrounded by

fear, and finally failed only because of the astounding courage with which they were fought by Spanish and Christian gentlemen.

Such gods are well lost, no forest can ever bury them deeply enough. But there is another and better way to read the great story of ancient times, and it is taught to us by archeology.

In this book I wish to tell something about those years spent in Yucatan and the things I learned there, for maybe you too would like to become one of those people who study archeology, finding out things about the life of ancient man that no one in the world now knows, and following the old trails over land and sea, desert and forest, canyon and plain—a life that is hard, sometimes uncomfortable, more often laborious, but one that is far too much fun ever to be called work.





CHAPTER I

Is There Treasure In Your Own Backyard?

A GREAT deal can be learned from the top of the ground at locations where man has once lived, when a trained and practised eye is brought to bear on the situation. Of course more can be found out by digging, just

adapt his living needs to what his horse or his auto or he himself can carry. If he has an established base to which he returns year after year, and if this base can be reached by reasonably passable roads, then he can rig up living quarters that nearly approach the civilized life he has left behind. But when this is not possible, a frying pan and a blanket must stand for his hearth and his home.

An archeologist must know how to draw and to make maps, and he must be an expert camera man. He must understand the processes of preserving fragile specimens; he must have a knowledge of the physical characteristics of man, and of the geology of his district. Even botany, zoölogy, and chemistry are sometimes needed. He must have a sharp eye and a practised one for clues as to where to dig, and beyond all that he must have that feeling or sixth sense which has mysteriously directed so many archeologists to the one spot where treasure may be found. But when this faculty is dead or temporarily asleep he must show the perseverance of the steadfast ant, in trying and trying and trying yet again, until the coveted finds are turned up by shovel and trowel which neglect not a single inch of a possible site.





CHAPTER II

What Is Archeology?

ARCHEOLOGY is a word that is packed as tightly full of meanings as a can is of sardines. I don't know of any word in the dictionary that has so many ideas squeezed into so tiny a space. Of course, all words are little suit-



CHAPTER III

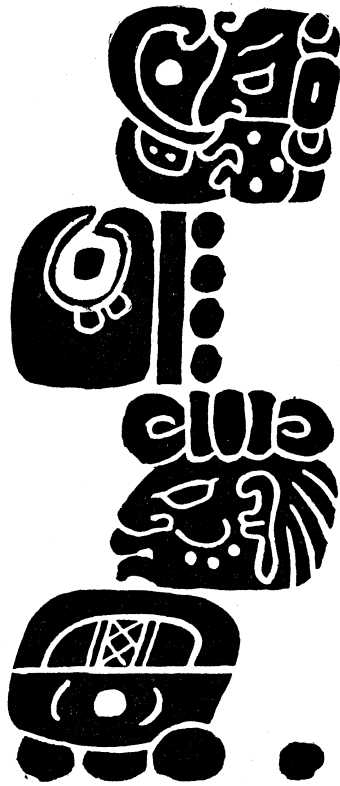
The America Columbus Just Missed

COLUMBUS discovered America, and Columbus died without knowing that the land he discovered was a great, new, and wealthy half-world. That much is history. Columbus's diary of his voyages is a historical

months carried fifteen million dollars' worth of gold in thousands of back-breaking loads to his ships. Cortez landed in Mexico with 450 men, sunk his ships so there would be no turning back, and in a few months' time a million Aztecs and all Mexico fell under his rule. These Spaniards were brave beyond anything ever seen in this world. Greedy they were and sometimes cruel, but as an example of sheer courage they have to be admired. Luck played mightily into their hands, but it was their own wits which knew how to take advantage of such amazing fortune.

America in their hands was a treasure house to be looted, and painfully thorough they were about it. Whole kingdoms and empires were wiped from existence that the Spanish king might triumph. The recovery of the history of these lost rulers and their people, the folk who were truly Americans, is of intense interest to us secondary Americans of to-day, and to this task the American archeologist has dedicated himself.





CHAPTER IV

Why We Went to Yucatan

WE BEGAN learning things about the archeology of Egypt a long time ago—about the Pyramids and the mysterious Sphinx and the tombs of kings. We were even more interested in Greece and Rome, perhaps be-

Back in 1912, he and Dr. Morley had dug together in the Maya City of Quirigua in Guatemala. So one day a letter reached our camp, which was beside a great pueblo ruin in New Mexico, offering Earl Morris a position as Director of Excavations on the Chichen Itza Project.

In December, 1923, we went to Washington, for where Earl went I went also, preparatory to outfitting for the first season's work at Chichen Itza. Just then another revolution broke out. Days became weeks and weeks lengthened into months while we cooled our heels and devoured the newspapers for word of the Mexican struggle. Eventually the revolution failed, leaving in power the faction which had signed our concession; the concession, therefore, was still good. One day at the end of April the glad news came in a wire from Dr. Morley:

Leave to-morrow on Crescent Limited for New Orleans to outfit for Yucatan.





CHAPTER V

New Orleans to the Temple of the Plumed Serpent

BY THAT time the season was so far advanced that we couldn't hope to do very much work that year, but it was a splendid opportunity to get things started for the years to come. We knew that Yucatan doesn't have a

Chichen Itza and the end of the road at last! This was what the Spaniards had seen! No wonder they had written letters full of superlatives, in a vain attempt to describe what was indescribable. And in the future it was to lie with us to search with the eye of scientific archeology till we might see more than the Spaniards ever had in 1500. At the moment we didn't know it, but we were to turn back the pages of time from that date and find that city after city had been built on this same ground. We were to uncover temples which lay in ruins before Columbus was ever born, and to find treasure that had been buried and forgotten while the Roman Empire was falling into decay. And we were to bring to people who could never go to Chichen Itza a knowledge of its beauty and its wonder.



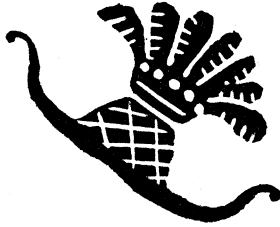


CHAPTER VI

The House of the Three Kings

MY DILEMMA at this point is like the one that troubled me the day I first arrived at Chichen. For while now I do not know what to describe first, then I did not know what to see first.

for the three kings, with three little bedrooms just alike and a long hall which they all used together as a throne room and judgment hall. The three brothers are long ago dead, but the wide-open doors and the clean bare rooms are still waiting and ready in case some day Chichen Itza's beloved kings come back.





CHAPTER VII

What Happened in the Court of the Thousand Columns

THE most interesting part of archeology lies in the things you have to dig up for yourself. Fascinating as the Monjas and the House of the Three Kings were, the fact remained that there was not enough left to find out

heap of rock where his palace walls had collapsed into the midst of the carefully tended garden.

Earl turned to me. "This court must have been wonderfully beautiful once. I wonder what it was used for."



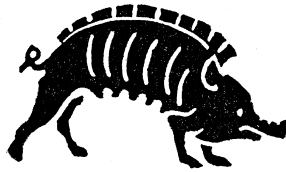


CHAPTER VIII

Our Workmen

As a first step in our excavations, the two gates were cleared in order to facilitate the traffic movements of trucks and wheelbarrows. While this was in process Earl and Dr. Morley carefully went over the entire

to the dirt hopper, the pig scampered after his new companion with an enthusiasm and persistence worthy of a better cause. Finally the heat and the terrific pace began to tell and he took advantage of the brief halts at the two ends of the line to get forty winks on the side. But as soon as the car started, with an answering grunt he was off after it. As the hours went on, the mechanical perfection of Mr. Ford's handiwork began to triumph over his piggish locomotion, and the poor beast would lose ground until he was completely off schedule. Finally, when the evening bell rang, I believe we were as relieved as the pig, who wearily fell in behind his owner for the long trudge home. We may imagine his mother saying to him, "Why, Piggie dear, how slim you have become!" and his futile explanations of the wonders of the great outside world to a narrow-minded and untraveled elder generation.





CHAPTER IX

Rebuilding Stone Serpents at the Temple Door

THE first season at Chichen Itza, short as it was, well fulfilled our desire. We knew now what we were up against. A beginning at actual excavation had been made, giving the feel of the matter, the major domo had

overflowed at the top, and we knew that when it had set, that which had been a continuous hole would become a rigid bar which would tie the whole column to the foundation beneath.

As a final touch, a slot was cut around the tip of the rod, a steel plate was fitted over its threaded top, and a heavy nut was drawn tight. This was then covered with cement, so that not a single trace remained of the fourteen-foot bolt which united capital, shaft, and foundation into a solid unified substance.

When after some days the tackle was removed, the column stood firm and steady, a triumph to archeological imagination and engineering skill—the first great step toward the final goal.





CHAPTER X

Finding the Altar of Sacrifice

AFTER the erection of the two serpent columns, our diggers felt a great relief at not having to work under those shafts of toppling stone, so they fell like busy moles upon the interior of the temple. They found rows

Medicines from plants; foodstuffs from wild animals and birds and reptiles as well as from the soil and the sea; dyes from shells and trees and earths; wood and palm for houses; lime and stone for temples; clays for pottery; reeds for baskets, wild fruits, gaudy feathers, homemade cloth and shoes, precious stones and metals—all these lie ready for the taking, for him who knows where to search.

When a people live on the land, and from the land, far from great markets and stores and factories; when their very life depends on what they can gather from raw Nature with their bare hands—it behooves them to study and to know what their land can give.





CHAPTER XI

Field Headquarters

WE SET up housekeeping our first year in a rather primitive manner. The big hacienda house and all of the smaller outlying buildings had been rented by the Carnegie Institution, but they were in wretched repair and

sult of the great hail. Then the vital life-force of tropic growth inexorably covered the trees once more with green and threw out tangled nets of vines again to shroud the nakedness of a land which had long forgotten what it was to be clean and bare.





CHAPTER XII

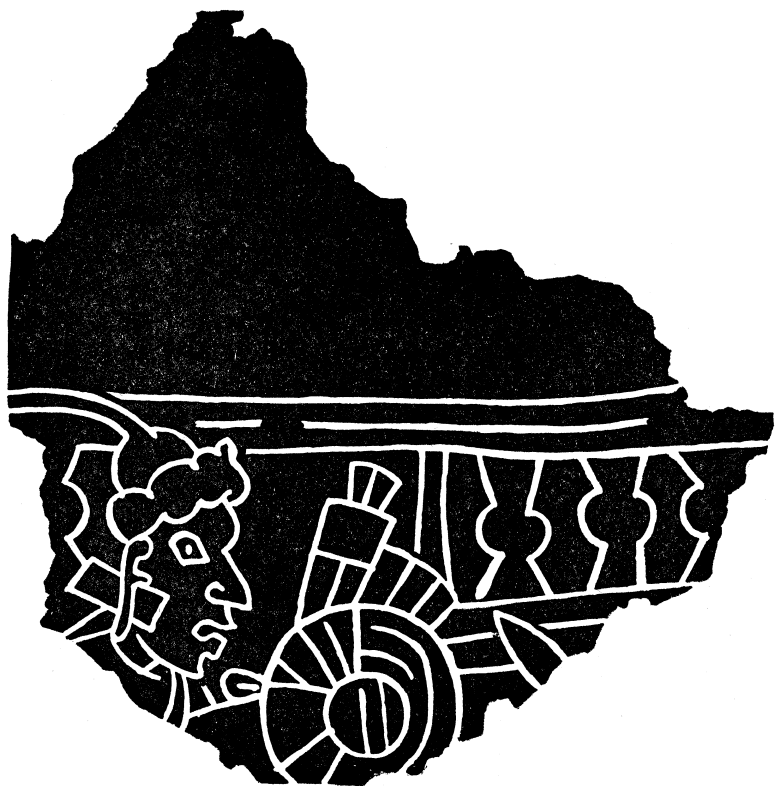
I Excavate a Temple Myself

SOON after the finding of the Sacrificial Altar in the Temple of the Warriors, the workers most unexpectedly came on a trace of a fresco painting which had one time adorned the temple walls.

The plastered floor was removed, and two covering stone slabs were found beneath. When these were pried up, our eager eyes peered into a roughly lined small stone vault about two feet deep. Filtered dust obscured what might be laid there, and as Earl gently fingered it through he drew up one tiny bone, then another, and yet a third. In the failing light he carefully scanned them—then pronounced his dictum: “Human.” “But . . .?” I said. “Yes,” he answered slowly. “They are the bones of a baby.”

Wordless, the three of us crouched there as the dusk closed in, each of us thinking his own thoughts about a race of men who could construct and adorn a temple with consummate artistry, and yet would sacrifice a baby to that temple’s gods.





CHAPTER XIII

I Become a Painter

MY LITTLE temple was done in record time, so after the report had been written, I moved back to the Warriors' Temple to find Earl distracted over a new complication. The painted stones which had been set as an

picks, and found the arduous labor quite worth our while.

Other paintings were discovered in the Northwest Colonnade, and finally, buried in the very heart of the pyramid, an entire new lot was found by a happy accident. The telling of that story, however, belongs to another chapter.





CHAPTER XIV

The Cenote Called Sacred

EVEN archeology becomes monotonous sometimes. When one is too close to anything, real perspective is often lost, and one finds oneself in the state of the man who said, "I can't see any forest here, there's only

The very soil seemed friendly; I remember scratching up a handful of gravel and dirt with my bruised fingers and holding it closely, the way one would some priceless treasure. For those few minutes, the scales of the commonplace fell from my eyes, and I saw the earth and loved it, in the manner that one should.





CHAPTER XV

The High Priest's Grave

ANCIENT people the world over seem to have had one constant feature in their religion. This was a belief in immortality—the life of the soul beyond the grave. And almost invariably the conception seems to have

certainty in the pit of one's stomach, which has to be felt to be appreciated.

Pablo, the square little Maya chauffeur, had preceded me, and when I finally stepped out of the sling into the glorious daylight above, I found him sitting flat on the ground, his usual dark copper skin bleached to the tone of water-soaked liver. "Not for a hundred pesos would I do that again!" I heard him repeating over and over to himself and to anybody that would listen, but personally I thought that he put far too low a financial premium on the feat.





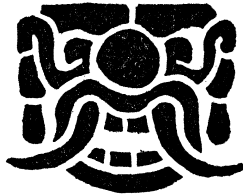
CHAPTER XVI

The Buried Temple

WITH the "day of rest" just described safely behind us, Monday morning brought again the old familiar routine.

The Temple of the Warriors appeared to be con-

exception of muffled blows still sounding in the pyramid's heart where the masons were completing their underground passages, the two buildings had been restored to him in all their first splendor. His need for us had passed, and fiercely he hoped that his secret might never be found. There had been days of keen apprehension when a dozen men had passed and repassed near its hiding place, so close that less than two inches of earth intervened between heavy boots and the hidden horde. But at last, presumably, he was nearly rid of us, and he thought us stupid dolts indeed to have let slip this greatest thing of all.





CHAPTER XVII

Altar Treasure

DEDICATION day was near at hand. The temple was just about ready to be turned over formally to the Mexican government. Various high officials were on their way from Mexico City to attend the ceremony,

the great liner. The hatches were battened down, the port holes closed, and in the close, airless ship terrified passengers dumbly waited for almost certain catastrophe. Then the lee shores of Cuba were reached and the boat slid into more quiet, protected waters. Of a sudden the hurricane abated, the rain ceased, and the sun shone again. The dreadful winds which had blown out of the skies of Yucatan were sucked back as suddenly as they had been unleashed. The old gods had been defeated of their prey.





CHAPTER XVIII

The Maya Return to the Wilderness

A FEW final surprises were still left for us. There was nothing so sensational as the turquoise disk, but none the less the material garnered those last weeks was of tremendous importance. We learned a good deal more

restlessness is the cause, the culture in question falls inevitably to decay.

With the Maya, that higher knowledge which marked them so signally as the greatest people in America had always been carefully guarded by the priest-king clan. With the fall of these leaders the peculiar genius was gone. Swiftly chaos and degeneration overtook the entire race, preparing the way for easy Spanish victory.

It is probable that the Temple of the Warriors was a manifestation of the last great building cycle of the Maya in Chichen Itza. It was constructed about 1250 A.D. A few generations of rapidly weakening Itza kings must have struggled for retention of their ancient powers, as evidenced by the construction of a few sloppily built small temples. Then an old chronicle has it (and we can read tragic defeat in the few curt words), "The Itzas moved away from Chichen Itza and returned to the land of their fathers." In the southland of Guatemala, about 1450, they set up a little island village for the remnant of their followers, but it was a poor makeshift to replace the beautiful capital of their Yucatan empire.

