

# The Daily Astorian.

**CATCHING SEA-COWS.**

How the Natives Capture Them in South American Rivers.

It was the good fortune of an *Enquirer* man early last week to run across John G. Gonzales, a native of Venezuela, who for the past ten years has been employed upon an English steamer running up the Magdalena river as far as Honda, at the foot of the Andes. This route is the most convenient to Bogota, the capital of the United States of Colombia, or New Granada, as it is called in some geographies. Among other interesting matters pertaining to the country Mr. Gonzales describes a tribe of savages called Ottomacs, or Dirt Eaters, whose habits and mode of life are something more than passing strange. They live on the banks of the Orinoco river, a short distance above the point where the river makes its second great turn to the east. "They are a horrid-looking set of people when in full dress," he said, "and their full dress means no dress at all. They first give themselves a priming of red which consists of a dye called 'annatto,' and is obtained from a plant. Over the red ground they form a lattice-work of lines or blocks, with a dot in the center of every little square or diamond. Their long black hair is well oiled with turtle oil."

"Do they live upon dirt entirely?"

"Oh, no. They are passionately fond of sea-cow, which they call manati, because its fins bear a faint resemblance to the hands of a human being. It has also nails well developed upon the outer edge of its fins or forearms. It is a large fish, usually about twelve feet in length, and weighs from five to eight hundred lbs. Its body is shaded something like a huge seal, it has a large, flat rounded tail, set horizontally, which serves the purpose of a rudder to direct its course in the water. Behind its shoulders appears a pair of flippers—for you cannot call them fins—which look all the world like a pair of hands set into the body without arms. The fish uses them for creeping along the banks of the river, and to assist in carrying her young. The lips of the fish are covered with bristles or hair, giving to the countenance a sort of human appearance, which accounts for the name sometimes given it by sailors—woman fish—since it has large mammae, or breasts. It does not look like a mermaid, if such a fish could exist. The fish, strange to say, lives upon grass, which it finds along the banks of the river, and of this it eats an enormous quantity, usually browsing at night, when all is quiet.

"The season for manati hunting or fishing is after the floods, when the waters are falling rapidly. When the inundation is at its height the manati pass out of the channel current of the great river, and in search of grass find its way into the great lakes and surrounding marshes, and remaining to browse upon the grasses, is an easy object captured. Sometimes and more commonly, perhaps, the Indians assemble in a large body with their canoes and hunt the 'cowfish' in a wholesale manner. Sometimes the monks who have charge of the Spanish missions lead these hunting expeditions, for though it is a mammiferous animal they find it very convenient to style it a fish during Lent. A camp is formed near shore and large scaffolds are erected for sundrying the flesh and skins, and pots and kettles are brought for rendering the fat into oil, which is called manati butter. The oil is used in the lamps of the mission churches, as well as in cookery, as it possesses none of the fetid smell peculiar to whale and salt-water cetaceae. At the proper time the fisherman starts off in his canoe or dug-out, which is hauled out from a single trunk. On seeing the cowfish resting on the surface of the water, the Otto-

mac paddles toward it, using, however, the greatest caution, for though the fish's organs of sight and hearing are externally very poorly developed, yet it hears and sees well, and on the slightest approach of danger will dive out of sight. The animal is very timid and never shows fight, yet sometimes in his splashing about he upsets the canoe. But this is nothing to the Ottomac, who is nearly as much of a water bird as the fish itself. When near enough he takes good aim with his harpoon, which, piercing the animal's body, sticks fast. To the harpoon a cord is attached with a float, and the latter, remaining above water, indicates the direction the fish has taken. When it has wearied of struggling, the Indian proceeds to haul in the cord, drawing the fish to the side of his canoe. He rarely kills it outright until it is safely landed in the boat, and this he does by driving a wooden plug into the creature's nostrils. The most curious part of this fishing procedure is the Indian's method of getting the huge fish, which may weigh a thousand pounds, into the canoe, and his method is as original as it is ingenious. Of course no single person could lift such an enormous weight, so the savage sinks the canoe below the carcass by first filling the vessel nearly full of water, and when he has got his freight aboard hauling the canoe out with a gourd. The fish thus secured he paddles to the rendezvous with his prize, not carrying it, however, to his own house, but to that of the chief, who apportions it out, according to the number of families in the tribe. The hide of the sea-cow is used for many purposes, both for coverings to their tents and beds to lie down upon. The stratum of fat, or blubber which lies beneath is removed to be converted into oil, while the flesh, which is esteemed equal to pork, both in delicacy and flavor, is cut into thin slices. This is broiled and eaten at the time, or cured, but not by salting down, but by sun-drying and smoking over a slow fire. This dried fish thus cured lasts for a long time. The alligator's flesh is similarly cured, though this is an animal that few tribes of even savages will eat, yet the Ottomacs relish it."

"You say they are dirt-eaters?"

"Yes, sir; and I mean it in its literal sense. You know the French traveler, Macroix, who explored the sources of the river Amazon, found a tribe of Indians so infernally lazy that having eaten up all the four-footed animals in their reach, including parrots and monkeys, snakes and creeping things, were reduced to living solely on bugs and insects. These Ottomacs are fully as bad. They live upon mudballs when the river is high and fishing ceases. It is a sort of unctuous clay of a peculiar kind, which they find upon the banks of streams. It is soft to the touch, like putty. In its natural state it is of a yellowish-gray color, but when hardened before the fire it assumes a tinge of red, owing to the oxide of iron that it contains."

"Is it nourishing?"

"Not in the least. It merely fills up—produces a satiety and satisfies the pangs of hunger. I have been told by chemists and medical men who have analyzed the little balls into which they roll it to stow away, that it contained nothing nourishing, simply silex and alumina, with three or four per cent of lime. They call these balls *poyns*, and store them up into little pyramids, just as cannonballs are piled in a fort. Each ball is three or four inches in diameter. When hungry, he takes a ball and softens it by wetting, and eats about a pound a day. There is something in the dirt-eating habit which produces a sort of craving for it. I do not think the habit is confined exclusively to the Ottomacs, but believe that it is generally known among the Indians of the tropics. I have just

heard of a poor class of whites living in North Carolina, who, when pressed by hunger, eat the mud daubings that hide the chinks in their cabins.

"That's the country for turtles, and the mode of catching them is peculiar. There are two kinds of them in the Orinoco river—the arau and tereacy. The former is the largest, being very nearly a yard across the back, and weighing from fifty to one hundred pounds. Shy in their habits, it is no easy thing to capture them. They swim with their heads above water, exposing the soft and fleshy part of the neck, which is a fine mark for their arrows tipped, as they are, with the deadly poison, curare. The tereacy is not captured so easily. He floats in the water completely below the surface, not exposing a single portion of his body at which the marksman could take aim. The Ottomac's method of killing them is ingenious. He aims his arrow not at the turtle, but up into the air, the arrow describing a parabolic curve, and so aimed that it will fall perpendicularly upon the turtle, penetrating his thick shell and piercing his vitals.

"Gathering turtle eggs during the laying season is both profitable and fun-affording employment for the Ottomac. This season occurs in March, when the waters have gone down and left the banks bare. Then for weeks before millions of turtles are seen either basking in the sun or lazily floating near the breeding place. As the sun grows warmer the desire of the turtle to deposit its eggs becomes something uncontrollable. For weeks before the animals can be seen in a long row in the water, lifting up their heads and necks and looking at their intended nursery, as if to see if all is safe. And it is well that they act so carefully and with such caution, for turtle eggs are a delicacy that are highly esteemed by a number of animals. The jaguar larks upon some of the limbs of the overhanging trees, ready to both suck the eggs and eat the turtles afterward. The alligator has sense enough to watch the turtle lay them in the hot sand and dig them up. The white cranes love them, while the black vultures fly in a dark cloud overhead, ready to swarm down and devour. The Indians hide out of sight of the turtles and endeavor to fight off the other animals, but this they have to manage most carefully, for if anything like a panic occurs the entire herd would seek quarters for laying elsewhere. The turtles generally lay their eggs at night, for then the horrid black vulture is asleep and stupid. Each turtle scoops out a hole of nearly a yard in diameter and depth, and deposits therein from fifty to one hundred eggs. Then it covers them carefully up, smoothing the surface and trampling it firmly down. Sometimes, in the flurry and excitement, several turtles lay in the same nest, and with their unyielding bodies break each others' eggs. The shells crackle and break, sounding like the roar of a cataract on the night air. Sometimes all the turtles do not arrive on time. Then they seem to lose all the fear and timidity that they formerly displayed, and they rush upon shore and in the presence of the Indians proceed to lay their eggs with the greatest of *sang froid*, so great is their desire of maternity. The Indians call these 'mad turtles,' and, turning them over on their backs, have no difficulty in catching them. When the turtles have all gone the egg-gathering commences. The ground is staked off like an oyster bed, and each tribe works by itself. The land upon the top of the nests is removed, the canoes drawn ashore and the eggs loaded, broken and pounded and whipped about, as if a gigantic omelette were to be made. A certain quantity of water is added and the mixture poured into large caldrons and boiled until the oil comes to the top, which is skimmed off and put

into earthen pots for use and sale. While the egg-gathering goes on some of them are hatched out and tiny turtles, not any bigger than a silver dollar, crawl out of their shells, and as lively as young crickets, skedaddle over the sand trying to get to the water. Then the fun commences. Stark naked boys and girls, alligators, cranes and vultures all rush in a heap for these delicacies. It's a sort of free fight, open to savage, beast, bird and reptile, and all seem equally to understand and enjoy it. The young Ottomacs seize the little turtles and eat them body, bones, head, tail, and all, requiring no more cooking than their animal competitors. The turtle season over, these savages have a grand spree. They gorge themselves on turtle flesh and alligator steaks, washing it down with oil, manati butter and baked mud-pies. They daub themselves all over with colored mud and get gloriously drunk on a species of snuff called niopi, which has a similar effect to opium. Then they become quarrelsome and want to fight, and their mode of pummeling each other is unique. They do not use clubs or stones or weapons of any kind, but poisoning their fingernails with the deadly curare, which is one of the most mysterious and speediest of all vegetable poisons, they proceed to scratch each other. In the event of any of this poison entering the circulatory system, death by spasms ensues in a short time. And yet this same curare is said by the ablest scientists of Germany to be the only cure for hydrophobia."

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