

# Feasting on Rapa



Preparing a South Pacific Feast.

(Prepared by the National Geographic Society, Washington, D. C.)

OF THE Austral or Tubuai group, in the South seas, the most fascinating island is Rapa, which lies detached from the others, well beyond the Tropic of Capricorn.

Rapa was discovered by Vancouver in 1791. For the next 35 years the native savages had little contact with the outside world, but about 1825 they began to be Christianized through the first intercourse with Tahitian missionaries.

In later years Rapa became a favorite port of call for whale ships, because the men of the island were peerless boatmen, but with the decline of whaling, the curtain of isolation once more descended. Now Rapa is visited only two or three times a year.

Members of a scientific expedition which visited Rapa recently tramped off across taro fields and through coffee groves toward one of the ancient and mysterious forts that top the ridge of the island. Climbing through ferns knee deep, they soon reached the crest. Four distinct levels on the ridge had been protected by built-up rockwork, and at the highest point a massive wall had been constructed as a last stronghold. On a leveled terrace just below was a small rainwater cistern.

Four miles away in an air line, two other forts stood up against the sky. These were so built that a small force could defend itself against a host of besiegers as long as food and water held out. The only approach was by way of the ridge, for the adjacent sides of the mountain were too steep to scale.

Down to eastward the beautiful harbor of Ahurei, with scattered taro beds about its head, showed clearly, while high above the village wild goats could be distinguished along the craggy ridge. South of the fort the hill rose to nearly 2,000 feet, forming a backbone of unclimbable cliffs, while toward the west and north other ridges divided narrow valleys and cut the island into sharply defined districts.

## Rather Too Hospitable.

The party discovered that one of the grave difficulties in visiting Rapa is standing up under the hospitality extended by the natives. They were invited to a Sunday feast by the native chief's son. As they entered what was at first supposed to be the residence of the chief's son, one member, who knew the customs of Rapa, warned all the strangers to eat lightly, as they would be expected to partake of food at several additional homes.

Fresh banana leaves had been laid in a row across the mat-covered floor, and at each place was a plate containing one or two whole fish, another with several large pieces of juicy pork, and beside the plates a taro root. Seating themselves on the mats, the diners ate with their fingers.

When the first few pieces of fish gave way to the pork, the serving maids brought in the poi, the Polynesian staff of life resembling sticky, yeast dough, neatly wrapped in the broad leaves of the rauti plant.

While they were still eating, the son of the chief appeared again and advised them to hurry, as dinner was awaiting them at his home. So leaving the untasted residue of the first banquet, they walked to the scene of a similar repast. In addition to fish, however, they here found a whole lobster at each place, and two taro roots instead of only one.

Before this meal had proceeded far, the ship captain leaned back from his partly eaten lobster, which was close to two feet long, and in deference to his example the other guests first slackened their pace and then ceased.

They next passed along a lane to a thatched cottage smaller than the others, and encountered a repetition of what had gone before, except that deliciously cooked chickens replaced the poi. They were again reminded to eat sparingly, as a hearty appetite should be reserved for the chief's home, to be visited next!

When the party finally strolled over to the large dwelling of the chief, his wife and three or four girls welcomed them in the open yard before the door.

## The Chief's Banquet.

In this house, lobster, pork, and chicken were in readiness as a last test of gustatory capacity. The taro had been increased to three big roots, although a small bit from the end of

one root would easily have sufficed for a meal.

Besides the staples, the chief had supplied coconut milk in which to dip the meat and roots, a rare beverage in Rapa, as coconuts can be obtained only from ships coming from more northerly islands. They were served also with molasses made from the roots of the rauti. The sirup was placed on the plate with the poi, enabling the latter to go down more easily than when it was lubricated with water only.

At the conclusion of what, fortunately, proved to be the last meal, bananas were passed around.

On another day, a few of the hardy, energetic native fishermen made a trip to the lobster beds at the entrance of Ahurei bay, and brought back 100 lobsters for the visitors. Practically every house in the village entertained one or more of the schooner's crew during the entire stay.

At the captain's suggestion a case of kerosene was presented to the church, the light of which shows up brightly as vessels enter the harbor.

That this courtesy was appreciated by the inhabitants was shown by their gifts on the day of leaving. A count of the acquisitions on deck, after the departure of the pilot, showed 5 sacks of taro, 18 packages of poi, 19 packages of rauti leaves, 19 boxes of taro and poi, 15 bunches of bananas, 22 rabbits, and 14 goats. Very few of these items had been purchased; the greater number were presents from the most hospitable people in the Pacific.

The girls and younger women at Rapa do most of the labor in the taro fields, while the older women attend to the housekeeping. The exemption of the men from agricultural labor allows them more time for fishing, and as a result of their sea experience they are much sought by captains of sailing vessels at Papeete.

## Feats of the Oarsmen.

The constant demand for Rapa men during a period of nearly a century has led to considerable preponderance of women in the island population. The men are excellent physical specimens.

On one occasion when the schooner of the visitors was three or four miles from shore, a boat came out. The men had made no allowance for the fact that an engine was adding the sails, and within a minute they were left 100 yards astern. But when the cabin boy, a native of Rapa, called out to them to catch up and be towed, they bent their oars and showed what they could do. The schooner was progressing at a rate of about six miles an hour, but the boat was going at twice that speed when it neared and overtook her.

On another occasion a Rapa crew rowed five miles to an inlet on which certain sea birds were nesting. Two of the members of the crew were only thirteen years of age, but when a heavy storm arose these lads stood the test of pulling for hours against a head wind and a rising sea, even though the poorly balanced, homemade oars weighed close to 50 pounds.

The girls of Rapa are scarcely less skillful in using their unstable looking outrigger canoes. At evening they would frequently pass the schooner on their way home from taro fields on the far side of the bay, with heavy loads of the roots weighing down their narrow dugouts almost to the swamping point.

From babyhood these people become familiar with the sea. At all hours the children can be seen playing in the water or paddling tiny canoes along shore.

The whole population of Rapa, exclusive of a few lepers confined in another valley, now lives in or near the village on Ahurei bay. Five or six valleys that formerly supported villages (and which may have warred with one another in their oceanic microcosm from immemorial time) are now deserted.

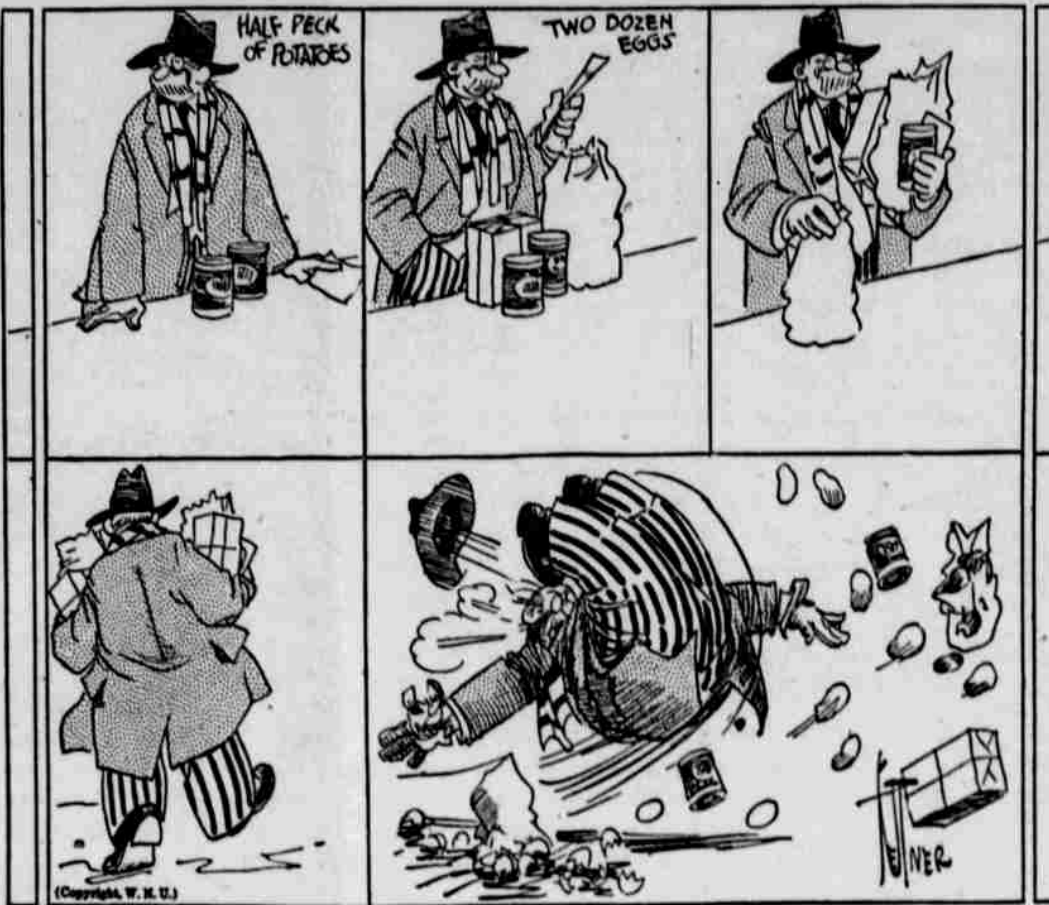
Only the lofty stone forts, last refuge of the inhabitants of these communities, still stand as monuments on the hilltops, and can be discerned from far at sea.

## Acted the Part

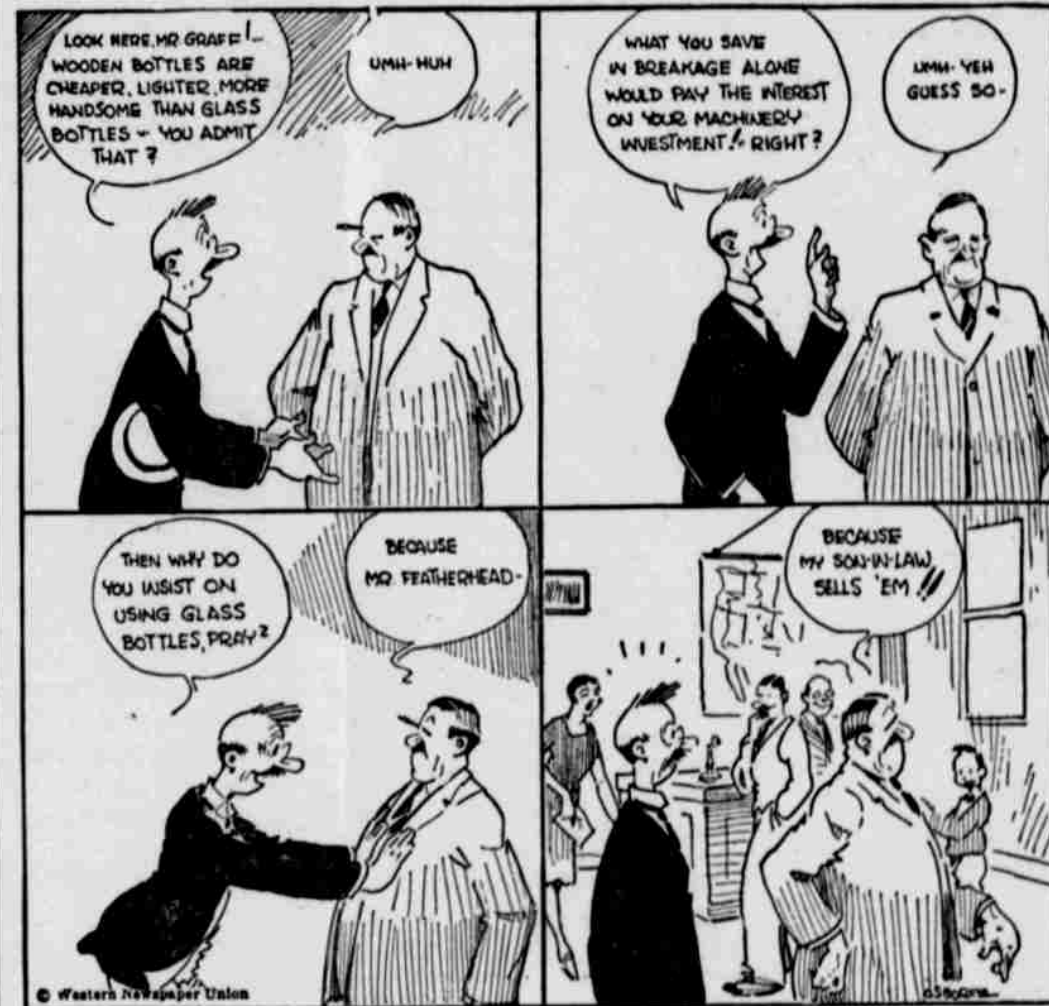
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