
WHITE INDIANS

By

ENRIQUE NARANJO M.



Reprinted from *The Hispanic American Historical Review*,
Vol. XIV, No. 1, February, 1934.

WHITE INDIANS

When I first read about the discovery of a tribe of white Indians in the northwestern part of Paraguay, the matter did not interest me in the least, for I am accustomed to these notices of discoveries which are never confirmed, and which are nothing more than the fantasy of gullible explorers. But now that Harvard has repudiated the story of this discovery of the young ethnologist, who has been called an "inexperienced amateur", and papers like the *Transcript* have had editorials on it, it has occurred to me that further annotations apropos of this legend of white Indians, which not for the first time has appeared in print, might be of interest.

Virgin America has always been full of the most fantastic legends—the fountain of youth, which Ponce de León sought; El Dorado, in the search for which so many audacious Spanish conquistadores died; the Amazons, those warlike women, lost in the jungles of the river which today bears their name; and the white Indians, all of which have filled innumerable pages of our history.

The fountain of youth, according to the commercial propaganda of certain sections, like Florida, has been found in the excellence of their climates; some hygienists have found it in their systems, while others claim that Dr. Voronoff, with his transplanting of glands has at last found the origin of that "divine treasure".

El Dorado was nothing more than a product of the torrid imaginations of the Spanish conquistadores. This legend had its origin in the religious ceremonies of the Guatavita Indians of the Chibcha nation, in what is today Colombia, when, in their offerings to their gods, they immersed one of their "caciques", his body dusted with the precious metal, in the limpid waters of the sacred lagoon. A description of this fantastic and primitive ceremony can be found in the chronicles of the conquistador Juan Rodríguez Fresle, to whom the story of this tradition was passed on by the descendants of the Guatavitas.

The legend of the Amazons is one which many of the historians of the Conquest dwelt upon, but the origin of which really cannot be traced, and which is paralleled only in Greek mythology. By an inexplicable coincidence, the primitive inhabitants of America, long before the Spaniards crossed the ocean, talked of the Amazons, fabulous, white women, whom they called "Comapuyares", that is, "women with one breast mutilated". Other Indians called them "Cuñantenfecuina" ("women without husbands").

Colombus heard very vague reports of these women in the Caribbean Islands; Orellano, one of the first explorers of the Amazonian regions, said he found these women coming down the Marañon River. When he arrived in Spain, there was so much noise made about the discovery of these fabulous women, that in Europe they ended by giving the name of the Amazon to the great river in South America, instead of the name of its discoverer. The Jesuit Christoval de Acuña left a little book with delightful details about this matter. Speaking of the Amazons he says:

They are women of great valor, who have always kept apart from the ordinary contacts with men, and although they have agreed that men should come to their lands once a year, they received them with weapons in their hands—namely, bows and arrows—and do not loose their hold on them until they are satisfied that the men are known to them and had come in peace; and leaving their weapons, they all get into the canoes or boats of the guests, take their hammocks, carry them to their houses, hang them where the owner knows he is received as a guest, and after a few days they return to their country; but they repeat this trip every year at the same time. The daughters that are born from this union are kept and brought up, but it is not certain what they do with the boys who are born to them.

Antonio de Herrera, in his *Décadas de la Conquista*, speaking of these extraordinary women of aboriginal America, says:

Padre Fray Gaspar de Carvajal affirms that he and the others saw ten or twelve Amazons fighting at the head of the Indians as captains, so courageously that the Indians did not dare turn back, and he who fled before the Castilians was beaten to death. These women seemed to them very tall, robust, and white, with very long hair, braided and coiled about the head, naked, their secret parts covered, their bows and arrows in their hands.

Indians in America who look like the Japanese or Malayans do not surprise anyone. There have been many conjectures regarding the origin of these races. Nor do the white Indians surprise us. We have

seen them right here at New England fairs. They are "mestizos", halfbreeds, who exist in all parts of this continent, absorbed by civilization, and there are others who, for explicable reasons, may not be connected with civilization, but they never form compact and extensive tribes. Ever since the first days of the conquest there have been extraordinary cases of white men lost in the jungles who have gone native and mingled freely with the Indians.

Solis, in his admirable history of the conquest of Mexico, tells us how Cortés, upon arriving at the Isle of Cozumel, on his way to the conquest of the Aztec Empire, heard of the existence of white men in Yucatan, a territory which had not yet been visited by any Spanish expedition. Some days later he succeeded in redeeming Jerónimo de Aguilar, who was such a help to him later as an interpreter in the conquest of Mexico. This Aguilar was from Ecija, in Spain. With twenty other companions he crossed from Darien to Santo Domingo, lands already settled by the Spaniards, but they were shipwrecked, and were washed to the shores of Yucatan, where they fell into the hands of cannibal tribes. Most of them were sacrificed to idols, and were later eaten. The leaner ones, among them, Aguilar, were separately put into a sort of cage, where they were fattened for a second festival. Aguilar escaped, fled as best he could, and came to an enemy tribe, and as he was very useful to them, he gained their confidence and saved his life. When the Spaniards found him after eight years of living in the jungles, he was a completely primitive man, painted like the other Indians, carrying his quiver of arrows and speaking Castilian with great difficulty.

Another Spaniard, Gonzalo Guerrero, one of Aguilar's companions, refused to join his compatriots, and preferred the primitive life of the forests. Believing that he was lost forever, he had married a wealthy Indian woman, and had four children by her whom he loved and to whom he preferred to be faithful.

In Colombia, my country, we also have the legends of white Indians. It is about the indomitable Motilón tribe who live as independently as in the days prior to the conquest. They live on the slopes of the Andes, between Colombia and Venezuela, a little to the south of Goajira and not far from the Lake of Maracaibo, where large oil deposits have been found, and their deadly arrows shot from the

mysterious forests make them feared even today by the oil men there, who have to exercise great care and precaution in those regions.

The Motilón Indians are tall and robust, and many of them have brown eyes and light hair. They have an ineradicable hatred for the white man, who has not yet been able to tame them. The reasons for these physical characteristics is clearly found in the pages of history: The Motilones, like many other tribes, fell unexpectedly, like an avalanche, upon several Spanish settlements. They killed the men, stole all they could, destroyed everything that was left, and dragged the women and children off with them. No one ever heard of those unfortunates again, who, like Aguilar and Guerrero in Yucatan, having lost all hope, ended by adopting the life of the savage and even came to love the jungle and their primitive companions.

This explains the present story of white Indians. They are mere incidents in the process of the human race. The paternity of these discoveries is like innumerable others.

ENRIQUE NARANJO M.

Honorary Consul of Colombia,
Boston, Mass.