

Estados Unidos y de muchos países sudamericanos. Pero estoy seguro que los que más le gustaron e impresionaron, fueron los de Costa Rica, país éste altamente reconecedor de los trabajos no solamente de sus hijos sino de todos aquéllos que contribuyen en el adelanto moral, cultural y científico de su territorio, así como del mundo entero. En esta notable ocasión el gobierno costarricense, la ciudadanía, las escuelas hasta de los más retirados rincones de Guanacaste y El General, rindieron a Pittier el homenaje que rara vez le haya rendido aun a hombre nacido en el país.

HENRI PITTIER: A MAN WITH A DREAM

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THE SECOND HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY was tense with rapidly occurring scientific events. Karl von Martius was publishing his monumental *Flora Brasiliensis*, which was to constitute the bible of the naturalist in interpreting the plant world of the American tropics. The spirit of adventure was taking possession of scientists. Spruce explored the hot wet forests of the upper Orinoco and the Amazon and the high cold summits of the Andes, carrying back to Europe numberless rare plants new to science. Like a flash of lightning came the theory of organic evolution as a result of Charles Darwin's observations on his trip covering the entire length of South America. This was the atmosphere in which Henri Francois Pittier grew up, and he was deeply influenced by it.

He was born in 1857 in Bex, a little Swiss town near the Italian border. The son of mountaineers and reared in the mountains, he grew tall and strong. By the alpine landscape there was impressed on his character the strength and austerity of rock.

But the mountains shut off the wider horizon; he felt oppressed in the narrow alpine village. What was behind those high peaks? He must find out. He went to the University of Lausanne. There the names of Darwin, Martius, and Wallace became familiar to him. As he read books on scientific exploration, he began to dream of himself exploring new worlds.

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Especially was he attracted by the tropics, with their exuberant vegetation, their immense climbers, and their rare orchids.

He left the university and began work on a map survey of the alpine flora. Here, in daily contact with plants and small animals, he found himself free. Then occurred an unfortunate accident which resulted in a fractured leg. During the days of inactivity that followed, he devoted himself enthusiastically to reading and meditation on everything dealing with natural sciences. The articles of Haeckel, then professor in the University of Jena, fell into his hands.

Attracted by the vigorous personality of Haeckel, the young Pittier went to the University at Jena, Germany. There, while he learned the rules of scientific method and the technique of investigation, he became acquainted with his own mental powers. His personality, to which he was later to owe a large part of his success, expanded into vigorous power.

From Jena he received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy; from Zurich, Civil Engineer; from Lausanne, Doctor of Science. In the University of Lausanne, he taught natural history and physical geography from 1882 until 1887.

In that year he accepted a proposal from the government of Costa Rica to direct an educational mission in that country. This was an opportunity to become acquainted with the tropical jungle which, as he read the descriptions given by scientific explorers, had colored his early dreams.

Because he needed social and political influence for the success of his mission in Costa Rica, Henri Pittier set out to secure friends who could lend prestige to his project and who were associated with that country's progress. In a short time he presented himself at the Ministry of Education with a report and plans for the creation of the Institute of Physical Geography of Costa Rica, one objective of which was to make a map survey of the republic. The Institute was to have a meteorological observatory and, among other departments, a section of natural sciences. His dream of exploring in the American tropics was to be realized.

By this time Pittier was thirty-odd years old. He was well over 6 feet tall, with a powerfully muscular and agile physique, keen intelligence, and a passion for work.

There followed long years of exploration in the interior of the country. From these years came a national map of Costa Rica and an herbarium of more than 15,000 plants, duplicates

of which he distributed to the principal herbaria of Europe and the United States. This collection was the basic material for *Primitiae Florae Costaricensis*, the work on plants of Costa Rica which he published in three volumes between 1891 and 1901, in collaboration with Théophile Durand, of the Brussels Botanical Garden. But most important of all, during those years when he was studying the secrets of the tropical jungle, he became possessed with the spirit of the forest. From that time on, Henri Pittier would be a professional botanist.

Early in the 1900's, Dr. Pittier went to Washington. Seventeen years of service with the Department of Agriculture gave him the opportunity of exploring parts of Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Panama, Colombia, and Venezuela, where he made valuable botanical collections. During this period he made more than 50 contributions to scientific literature, including revisions of genera, monographs, and descriptions of new species. He was an acknowledged authority on tropical American flora.

At the age of 62 Pittier was still feeling the call of the tropics. Besides, he did not like cold weather. In Venezuela the vegetation was little known; a great task was there to be done. He would go to Venezuela and there establish himself definitely.

He accepted a call to Venezuela as Director of the Commercial Museum. There was no school of agriculture or well organized herbarium; natural sciences were not taught in the university. Pittier worked hard to establish an agricultural experiment school on the outskirts of Caracas, but was successful only in gaining acceptance of a plan for the foundation of an office for the investigation and exhibition of raw materials of vegetable origin, a plan which tied in with commerce and industry.

From the time he first went to Venezuela his greatest desire was to make a survey of the flora of the country and to leave a permanent record of his work. With that purpose in mind he explored the interior of the country, collecting plants and data on their use. Out of these explorations grew one of his greatest works, *Manual de las Plantas Usuales de Venezuela*, published in 1926, with a supplement in 1939. This publication was a master stroke, for it aroused the interest of the public in its native plants. From that time the people of Venezuela were with him in his work.