

## 2ND DRAFT — WITH CORRECTIONS

We left [Puerto] Santa Cruz on the Atlantic coast about the 15th of February 1905 — a party of six — 3 bosses & 3 peones, with 75 horses that I had bought there, all of them the good criollo breed, exactly the same as "Gato" & "Mancha" — unbeatable.

I had been commissioned to explore & report on 400 square leagues of mountainous country extending from [the] Chilean-Argentine boundary to the Pacific Ocean. It is the valley of the Río Baker which is the outlet of Lago Buenos Aires, the largest lake in the Argentine Republic — 30 miles long E-W by 5 to 6 wide N-S — the E point runs right into the high tablelands of the Argentine & the W point right into the heart of the Andes. At the SW corner the Río Baker starts: the first few leagues are through very deep cañons, & in only 3 or 4 places is [it] possible to see the water below at great depths — by the noise, it must be nearly all rapids & waterfalls. After the confluence with the Río Chacabuco (the river we had to find at the top of the Cordillera) the Baker runs a very deep river between high mountains, all wooded, & for miles it was then impossible to get down to the water's edge.

Between this part of the river & the Pacific Ocean there are 4 big rapids — the longest & steepest 700 metres, ending in a waterfall 10-12 metres high. Two of the rapids we could tackle with our very good whaleboats, at the other two we had to make a portage, one of 700 metres & one of 300 metres.

The Company that sent me could only give the vaguest information as to how to get to the Baker from the Argentine side & the only maps available [were] almost useless — 10 to 20 leagues was more or less the same to them. However, at [Puerto] Santa Cruz I found a boy Carlos that had gone part of the way, 4 years before, with the Argentine engineers studying the question of the dividing line between the Arg. & Chile. This boy (now only 22 years old) had only been within a very long sight of the Cordillera. He made no mistake and took me to the exact spot, putting his hand upon it, where they had lighted the last fire on the day they turned back east with their cart to return to Santa Cruz. We had been by this time 21 days on the march in open country. Next morning at sunrise we could see in the far distance the snow-clad mountain tops, and nearer to us a glimmer of a red mountain. This red mountain had been given to me as a safe direction: we had to go either to the north of it, or to the south. From the little I had gathered, I had decided to go to the north: this opinion was confirmed by Carlos, who also warned me that from that spot it was at the least 18 leagues to the nearest water.

We gave the horses one whole day's rest & next morning about 2.30 a.m. made a good start. We did not find anywhere to camp down until 9 p.m., having travelled 20-25 leagues without sign of either grass or water all the way; we made 3 halts to change our mounts and the 8 pack horses. Here we found a spring bubbling out of the side of a hill with green grass for about 120 metres down hill, below that it was as dry as the rest of the Santa Cruz desert. That night we had no need to take precautions about the horses straying: their hoofs were so hot, after all day travelling over the hot desert, that not one

took his feet out of the wet, cool grass. At this "manantial" we lost a small tin spoon (one of the set in our canteen) & of course ever afterwards we called it so & today, 34 years after, it is still known by that name "El Manantial de la cuchara".

In this way, most places in the outside world (God's own country) get their names. There is another spring, more or less on the same route, known as "El Manantial del Arroz"; the tale goes that somebody was bucked off his horse there one morning and spilt all the rice he had in his saddle bags; the name sticks and will do so for many years.

The Baker Company had sent from northern Chile a man that had been in the Baker country with the Chilean engineers, with a whaleboat & 5 men & provisions to wait for our arrival. They were dropped by a local coasting steamer at Hale Cove in the English Narrows, 50 miles from the mouth of the Baker River. They were to row up the river as high as they could get, and sit tight until we turned up.

The only sensible information I could pick up about where we had to find [our] own way across the Andes at the right spot was — You will find, somewhere to the west of the red mountain, two rivers right up on the top of the watershed on a medium flat bit of land, that run parallel to each other towards the south and about 200 metres apart; almost at the same spot, one turns east and runs into the "Lago Resumidero" in the Argentine: the other turns west, and is called Río Chacabuco and is a tributary of the Baker; if you can find this spot you are all right, if not your party will have to return to Santa Cruz — This would have been a tough journey because we should not have given up until our provisions were almost finished: from the top of the Cordillera it is 90 leagues to the nearest toldo or rancho, and several more to the first pulpería on the Río Chico, where we might be able to buy something to eat — in this bit of the world there is no game.

Dr. Onelli in his delightful book "Trepando los Andes" says "I think the Almighty must have been taking a siesta when the north of Santa Cruz Territory was made". It is better to be born lucky than rich, we struck the two rivers and followed the right one into Chile and after several days picking our way mostly along the river bed of the Chacabuco, all stones and bogs, then along the bank of the Baker, we found Borques with his boat and provisions. After exploring several of the very fertile side valleys, we pushed off downstream [to] the mouth of the Baker, which is called on the map Puerto Bajo Pisagua. From there we had 50 miles of a row, through deep channels between mountainous islands (the Andes run right to the Pacific coast here) to Hale Cove in the English Narrows, there to wait until some steamer happened to pass. Again we were lucky, on the ninth day a steamer came along going north, the way we wished to go, to Puerto Montt. Two of us boarded the steamer and sent the boat back to the rest of our party that had remained behind up the river, where they started to make a clearing and build a wooden house; also to do their best to open up the worst of the pass across the Andes in preparation for the arrival of the cattle that I meant to bring from Argentina, I having promised them to return before the next winter from the Argentine side, bringing some cattle with me.

The contrast between the east and west side of the Cordillera is too great for words — the east is a horrid, stony, hot, windy desert and the west a well-watered, beautiful country covered with forests and grasslands with an excellent climate and very little wind in the valleys.

Nearer the west coast in the lower reaches of the river there are millions of cypress trees in perfect condition, straight as a line, many of them 30 to 40 feet high & still 10 ins. in diameter at that height. There are also unlimited millions of bamboo canes[?] 3-4 ins. at the base and 1 in. thick at 6 metres high.

The water of the river is very cold and none of us ever saw any sign of fish until near the mouth, where it is affected by the tide.

When we first entered the Baker country we saw plenty of guanaco & ostrich in the open valleys but they very soon cleared out. Of pumas there must have been plenty when we first arrived but they soon disappeared when their natural prey had gone to where they would not be molested — there was plenty of room for them on every side. There is a very fine specimen of mountain deer called "huemul", but as there is so much cover they are seldom seen: [it] stands 11 hands high, well covered with good flesh that is really good eating. Their coat is of long, thick, close hair something like a reindeer, and makes a good mattress by themselves. They have one great drawback — the hair never stops coming off. There is very little bird life on either slope of the Cordillera. Fleas cannot live up the river. I took dogs from Valparaíso full of fleas; on the steamer I intended to disinfect them, but having so much to attend to didn't do so; to find that it didn't matter, because the fleas even at the mouth of the river were looking sorry for themselves & by the time we got to the cattle camp (7 days' rowing against the stream) there was not a single live flea on any of the dogs - they had all turned yellow and dropped off.

Cattle After I had seen the well sheltered valleys covered with good natural grasses with water everywhere, I was sure that fair class Shorthorn cattle would do well there: therefore it would be foolish to start with poor class stock and breed up. This was proved later on when the 2,000 head of breeding cows bought in the Province of Buenos Aires did very well there & within 6 weeks of their arrival on the camp over 1,000 calves were dropped. This mob of cattle was bought in Saladillo, Prov. of Bs. As. — entrained to Neuquén in 5 special trains, taking 30 to 35 hours on the journey. They were unloaded at Río Negro Station, near the banks of the river of that name. Unluckily, before all the troop was on the spot & ready to be swum across the river, a big flood came down from the mountains that covered most of the islands in the river & it was about 30 days before the crossing could be attempted. Even then it was difficult enough, and if it had not been for the help of an old Indian living on the banks, almost impossible. This Indian had a bunch of well trained decoy cattle "un señuelo" it is called here: they were like ducks in the water and gave my cows a good positive lead off when crossing the main stream, which is over a mile wide & the current is so strong that cattle are carried over a mile downstream before getting across. I do not think we lost a single animal by drowning. Even the smallest calf that went into the water got safely across:

they (the calves) have a way of swimming alongside their mothers, touching their head now & then, & seem to get carried along with the bigger body. Any losses we had were in the quicksands, of which there were many in & about the islands, & as these had been so recently entirely under water, were extra dangerous.

Once on the south bank, we gave the troop 2 days' rest and feed (there was no pasture for longer as the valley is very narrow on the south bank). In front of us we had a "travesía" of 34 leagues across a waterless, desert tableland. We took them over in troops of about 500 head, and got the whole lot over with the loss of about 60 head. At the first sign of any animal giving in, it was allowed to drop out - it was useless trying to urge it along. Not a single animal that dropped out on the march died on the high tableland; all of them struggled back to the river. Here they rushed in to fill themselves with water, many falling dead with their feet still in the water, all the rest collapsing not far from the water's edge.

The troop passed the winter months from April until October on a camp called "Sierra Colorada" belonging to the Argentine Southern Land C°.; the rent paid for this was 1,000 pesos.

In the early spring every animal in marching order was put on the trail — (not a single bull was in a fit state to march, but they had done their duty) — and before the end of May arrived in the Baker country, having crossed the Andes as a last effort.

Three thousand head were bought, 700 were sold on the journey and 1,984 cows arrived in the Baker & within 6 weeks over [1,000] calves were dropped. Of the 316 head that were lost many were afterwards gathered by my head drover Don Lino Jirado — they could not have fallen into more deserving hands. The whole trip took 18 months. After leaving this troop in charge of Lino Jirado, a real camp man of the old school, I pushed on south to the Tecka valley where I had been offered a large rodeo of native breeding cattle. I had made up my mind that the Buenos Aires cattle, never having seen anything but flat open country, would have great difficulty in a mountainous district that never had had any stock on it, therefore without cattle tracks or marked drinking places. The Tecka cattle, born and bred in the mountains, knew all the dangers & would prepare the country for the better class stock. Also I was keen on getting something to eat into the Baker before the winter, as I had promised the men I had left behind. I bought at Tecka 2,100 head at the price of 19 pesos per head with about 200 small calves thrown in, all in most excellent condition, in fact not a thin animal in the rodeo.

They were fine specimens of criollo cattle, having been well fed from birth; they were perfectly wild, never having been handled except to be mustered onto the rodeo by a pack of 30 dogs a few times a year. Having bought them, the next trouble was to get a correct count of them, to know how many I had to pay for. Luckily there was a man Juan Ramos, in charge of a neighbouring camp, that had worked with me at "Estancia La Curumalán" in the Province of Buenos Aires, quite capable of counting the rodeo. The seller was useless, so named Ramos to count for him. By careful handling of the mob (which means by keeping them quite cool) both of us got a good count, each of us

putting down our total on paper without speaking; Ramos had 11 more than my total, we split the difference and were all fixed. What luck — to count again that day would have [been] almost impossible as by this time the mob was excited and hot. On the spot we herded them day and night for 48 hours then marched with them. They were so wild that it was impossible to get a count without causing a stampede until they had been 10 days on the march, under control night and day. Half an hour's neglect & off they would start at a quick walk along the trail for home, keener on returning than feeding — if they had once stampeded & got away at the gallop (& this class of stuff can race as fast as any horse) nothing, not 100 men would have stopped them — in fact, the more the men, the more the cattle would have split up once they got going.

The handling of this troop of really wild cattle in their own wild broken country, where one mistake meant complete disaster, was one of the greatest pleasures of my life. Even the landing of a big and difficult fish only lasts a few hours at most. I played my fish for 6 weeks, night & day; of course, the first week was the most exciting. Where the Río Chálía joins the Río Mayo, a gang of 5 Chileno peons turned back, saying their horses were too thin to go further south. When their leader shook hands and said "Adios Patrón", he added, "Señor, it has been a great pleasure to accompany you and your troop so far, but I must get back to my rancho and family before the snow comes. If we go further south, we might get caught and be obliged to remain away from our flesh pots all winter. When I joined up with you, I didn't expect the work would last more than a few days before there would have been a stampede, & half the troop would have escaped, & then all we poor people in the Tecka district would have had all we needed to eat for years, living off your cows. But, as I have already told you, it has been a pleasure & an honour to work with you, a foreigner, "un gringo", that has shown us real criollo camp men how to handle a troop of cattle." He was so pleased with his speech that he would have embraced me for two twos. Every one of the 5 were wanted by the police up north. Where we then were, the only authority is yourself & each man is only as big as his own feet, helped by a smile.

At the time it didn't strike me but, after it was all over, it was quite plain that any one man in one minute, especially at night, could have upset the whole concern with a few high pitched yells and revolver shots. When the troop was rounded up and resting, especially on a frosty night, [that noise] would have stampeded them for good and all, and nothing would have prevented them returning straight to their "querencia" — the place where they were born. Cows in the state of nature never forget this spot; a cow that has not been interfered with by fences and gates will travel great distances to drop her calf close to the same spot where she was born.

Of frosty nights we had plenty and good ones at that. One night, one of the men went to the spring about 100 yards from where we had camped down; in filling the canvas bucket, he slipped in up to his waist & his clothes were frozen on him before he got back to the fire. After the 5 Chilenos left, the others began to talk and said there was no doubt of it, because they had mentioned the fine idea when first we left the Tecka valley. The whole trip took 6 weeks travelling every day & we only just managed to get over the Cordillera before the snow blocked up the passes. As it was, we were caught by the first

snow storm — luckily not a very big one — & it took us 4 days with snow above the horses' knees to get over the "cumbre" into the valleys on the Chilean side. I can assure you, it is a great proposition camping down in over a foot of virgin, unfrozen snow that not even a bird has trodden on. Getting over, we lost about 30 head; but several small lots, about 15 in all, turned up after the storm on the track of the big troop: the wilder the cattle, the less they like to be away from the main herd. These wild cows did exactly what was needed in the virgin country by opening tracks through the forests on the mountain sides & across & round the swamps.

Sheep Very much against my advice, the Board of Directors in Valparaíso made me buy 20,000 young ewes from "Estancia El Cóndor" near Cape Virgins on the Straits of Magellan, belonging to Waldron & Wood. The sheep could not have been better — sound, well grown and free of scab — but the Board could not understand the absurdity of putting such a large quantity of sheep on the march at one time. There are two large rivers, the Río Gallegos and the Río Santa Cruz to cross. At these there is a cable ferry that carries 400 to 500 sheep per trip, but there are many smaller rivers that have to be forded. As is well known, sheep hate crossing water & in case of a flood at any one of them it would have been impossible to get over, and in two days the sheep would have eaten the valley as bare as an egg. They were very lucky and were not once badly held up. Thank goodness I had nothing to do with trooping of the sheep: I bought them and somebody else was put on to drive them. 20,000 ewes were bought, 12,000 arrived in front of the pass of the Andes where I met them with men to help them over. Half-way over we were caught in a 3-day storm, and 2,000 sheep were caught on a ledge over a mile long by 2 metres wide. It was impossible to move them, and they all died where they stood, and later [they] were just tossed over the edge into the swamp below.

Some day when reasonable communication with the outside world has been established, with the Baker valley will be one of the choice spots of South America. The middle and higher valleys are one and all most adaptable for both sheep- and cattle-raising — grass, water and timber everywhere enough to build many cities. In the lower reaches the good timber is unlimited, right from the waters edge up to the snow line; in the valleys there is very little wind, but of course on the tops you get all the weather to be expected on the peaks of the Andes.

The scenery is too grand and great for me even to start to describe. Going up and down the river one got a stiff neck looking up at the peaks covered with permanent snow, with lovely forest right up to the snow line. Luckily the rapid currents of the river kept one busy and helped you not to notice them. The river in itself was a great entertainment, every minute of the day — in some places over a mile wide, in others reduced to 100 yards & in parts to 50 yards. From the mouth of the river, Bajo Pisagua, to our cattle camp it took us with 4 oars, in our excellent whaleboats, 7 to 8 days' very hard rowing; of course the boats were always loaded to capacity because all stores, clothes, tobacco etc., in fact everything except meat, had to go up that way. Downstream, loaded with meat, it took 1½ days with only 3 oars pulling easily. In those days there were no motor boats or motorcars — it was all oars & horses & strong, tough men.

After 3 years' work, early in 1908, we had in the Baker over 5,000 head of breeding cattle, 10,000 sheep and more than 150,000 pesos' worth of cypress poles piled up on the rocks at the mouth of the river, waiting for a steamer to take them away. We had opened up the pass over the cumbre sufficiently to reduce the crossing on horseback from 3 days to 1½ days, therefore only sleeping one night at the top instead of two. Each month the track was shortened or levelled in some spot, as we got more & more familiar with the country.

There was no engineer or professional man amongst the lot of us. The men from the Argentine side were just plain, common or garden cattle & camp men. The men from Chile, brought by sea, were good boat men & expert lumber men — of lumber men we had up to 200 taken by boat from the island of Chiloé for the summer, to be returned before the winter to their homes. How a great calamity befell them one season & many died is a tale worth telling, but does not belong to this part of my experiences in the Baker. I was most things — boss, doctor, midwife, judge, one of the best peones, in fact everything except priest; & I learnt a lot about humans, in their true dress, and found them 95 percent good — it's the paved street that spoils them.

There is one observation I must make before I finish, which everybody finds very hard to understand — that is —

In not one single spot that I or anybody else of our people explored did we ever find a single trace of any human being ever having lived. The only signs of the outside world were the tracts and log shanties put up by the Chilean engineers sent by the government to study the watershed of the Andes when the trouble arose about fixing the dividing line between the two countries; even these only followed the courses of the main rivers.

May 25th 1939.  
William Norrils.