Chapter IV

THE COATZACOALCOS BASIN

In the earliest reports of the Conquerors we find mention of the Coatzacoálcos River. Grijalva passed the mouth of the river, and Bernal Diaz speaks of it as follows: "As we sailed along we noted the position of the great river, Coatzacoálcos, and we wished to enter the bay (not merely) to see what it was like, but because the weather was unfavourable. Soon we came in sight of the great snow mountains which have snow on them all the year around, and we

Fig. 54—Puerto Mexico, Ver. The mouth of the Coatzacoalcos River.

saw other mountains near the sea which we called the range of San Martín, and we gave it that name because the first man to see them was a soldier from Havana who had come with us, named San Martín."*

The snow clad mountains here mentioned are undoubtedly the peak of Orizaba, which can sometimes be seen from the sea, and the San Martín mountains are those which the Tulane Expedition had just traversed.

Later, when Hernán Cortes had arrived at Tenochtitlan, we again hear of the river. He was looking for a port more favourable

*Bernal Diaz. Maudslay translation. Vol. I., Page 50.

than the anchorage off the coast at Vera Cruz and men were sent along the coast guided by Indians, and with a map drawn on agave cloth. The leader of this expedition was Diego de Ordaz. They followed the coast until they reached the mouth of the Coatzacoálcos without finding any other suitable port. Montezuma had told Cortes that he did not reign over the tribes living along the river, and he gave an order to the chieftain of his garrison somewhere near it to aid the Spaniards as much as possible.

When Ordaz reached the river the local chieftain, Tuchintecla, gave the Spanish explorers canoes so that they could make soundings (fig. 54). "They found the shallowest part at its mouth, 2½ fathoms in depth, and 12 leagues up the river they found the greatest depth of 5 or 6 fathoms. From their observations they judged it had about the same depth for 30 leagues up from its mouth. On its banks are many large towns with an innumerable population, and all the province is level, and rich, and abundant in produce."*

Bernal Diaz further writes: "When Ordaz had taken the soundings he went with the Caciques (chieftains) to the town, and they gave him some jewels of gold and a very beautiful Indian woman and they offered themselves as servants of his majesty, and they complained of Moctezuma and some of his warriors."†

A little further in the same narrative it is told how the inhabitants fought the Mexicans and killed many of them. The place where this battle was fought they called *Cuylonemiquis,* which in their language means "where they killed the Mexican profligates." This may be the place named "Cuilonia" today?

Still later, Cortes sent another expedition to the Isthmus and Bernal Diaz joined this. Now the Spaniards found the natives hostile to them. The ill feeling resulted in a battle, in which the leader of the Spaniards surprized the principal town at night, and seized a woman "to whom all in those parts obeyed and everything quieted because she sent to call the chiefs and ordered them to observe whatever was commanded them." The Spaniards then founded the town of Espíritu Santo, and many of the Conquerors received grants of land along the river.

From Bernal Diaz's accounts we constantly hear of fighting with the natives in the district, and also that Doña Catalina Suárez, the wife of Cortes, landed on the coast in a place called Ayagualúlco, and passed through Espíritu Santo on her way to the capital.

The old soldier, Bernal, finally grew tired of fighting and wanted to settle down on his properties, but the Indians did not leave him

*Cortes' Second Letter. Edition MacNutt, 1908. Page 245.
†Bernal Diaz. Maudslay translation. Vol. II., Page 132.

alone. In one of the fights against them he was wounded in the throat by an arrow; then he got orders to join Louis Martín on an expedition to Chiapas, where he underwent more hard fighting. Finally in November, 1524, Cortes came to Espíritu Santo on his way to Naco, in Honduras, and he ordered Bernal Diaz to join him.

This is all the early information we have about the Coatzacoálcos basin. Up until around the year 1800 we hear little about it. Humboldt states that the climate of the area is very unhealthful.*

In 1829 and 1830, several ships left France with colonists for Coatzacoálcos. They had been tempted by a get-rich-quick scheme which quickly broke down. Another ship left in 1831, and one of the participants in this expedition, Pau Pierre Charpenne, tells us about the total failure of this colonization scheme. Most of the French colonists died from fever and several of them committed suicide. Now only a few place names remind one of the struggles and hardships these people went through.†

Cortes was the first to propose a communication between the Atlantic and the Pacific by way of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. After him came, in 1774, a reconnaissance for a road made by the engineer, August Cramer, in the times of the Viceroy, Antonio Bucareli.

In 1842 a contract was made between the Mexican Government and the Louisiana-Tehuantepec Railroad Company for a steamship line from New Orleans to Minatitlán and a service of coaches over the Isthmus. This road was much used during the California Gold Rush in 1849, and many were the eager gold hunters who died here of fever, on their way to the promised land.

The Louisiana Company did not fulfill its contract, and prolonged discussion followed between it and the Mexican Government, resulting in a new contract of 1852.‡

The famous Americanist§, L'Abbé Brasseur de Bourbourg, crossed the Isthmus in 1859-60. He has not much good to say for the way in which the American company managed the transportation. In his book on this voyage he gives a charming report of his experiences, and also a large amount of interesting historical data.§

A more serious study of the Isthmus was made by the U. S. Government engineers, at the direction of the Secretary of the Navy in 1870. This survey was conducted in order to see if it was practicable to make a ship canal from coast to coast. Various methods of crossing the higher points of the Isthmus were proposed,

*Traite Politique de M. de Humboldt sur la Nouvelle-Espagne, 1811.
†Charpenne, 1836.
‡Williams, 1852. Supremo Gobierno, 1853. Ramirez, J. F., 1853.
§Brasseur de Bourbourg, 1862.

such as locks, hauling the ships over on tracks, and a tunnel through the mountains. A very instructive report with many maps and cross sections were presented to the Senate, but no definite steps were ever taken to execute this plan.*

Finally, around the year 1900, a railroad was run across the Isthmus, and a few years later a British firm built huge port works at the mouth of the Coatzacoálcos on the Atlantic side and at Salina Cruz on the Pacific side. For a few years an enormous quantity of merchandise was hauled over this road. Coatzacoálcos, formerly a settlement of a few Indian huts, grew into a town and was named Puerto Mexico (fig. 55). The revolution against President Diaz was a blow to this project and finally the opening of the Panama Canal entirely killed it. Now the magnificent wharves at Puerto Mexico are rotting away, and the Pacific Ocean is building a bar of sand across the mouth of the port of Salina Cruz.

FIG. 55—Puerto Mexico. Ver. Street.

The northern part of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec is watered by the Coatzacoálcos river and its numerous tributaries. The climate is sub-tropical, the year being divided into two seasons: a rainy season from June to the middle of December, and a so-called dry season, during which small showers are frequent. During the months of October and November, strong northern winds, called "Northers," bringing cold and heavy downpour, occur several times a month.

The whole Isthmus is low and swampy, cut by many rivers and dotted with lagoons. The ground is covered with thick, luxuriant, tropical bush, here and there alternating with open savannas. The soil is, for the most part, very rich, though only sparsely cultivated. It is said that some places will give as much as three crops a year.

The town, Minatitlán, was originally the port, exporting mahogany. When oil was found in the region, and a refinery built, the town gained new life. Puerto Mexico now has tank farms and is

*Schufeldt, 1872.

the shipping point for the oil refined at Minatitlán. Though extensive drilling has been conducted, no great quantities of oil have yet been found in this district. All wells seem to produce small quantities of paraffin base oil of very high grade.

Formerly mahogany grew in great quantities along the river bank, but cutting was so thorough that now it is rare to see a mahogany tree.

The Spanish and Mexican population reside in towns, and there are also several large Indian villages, though a great part of the population lives scattered in clusters of small huts along the river banks.

As the archaeological and ethnological material of this area has never been collected, we will give some extracts of notes made by the writer during his stay in the Isthmus in 1920-21.

Mr. Ismael Loya has already been mentioned as the one who first ascended the San Martín Pajápan volcano. He formerly lived in the small town, Jaltipán de Morelos, on the Tehuantepec railroad. Having traveled widely over the area and also having married an Indian woman he possessed a great amount of valuable knowledge. He was the first to draw attention to the monuments at Piedra Labrada, and also spoke of burial mounds in the vicinity of Santecomapa.

Near Los Cerritos, at a distance of about 20 kilometers from Puerto Mexico, Loya had seen some hills which appeared to be artificial and on which are traces of walls. These hills are entirely surrounded by swamps and would form an excellent stronghold.

From the railway station to the town of Jaltipán is a short distance, which now is covered by truck. Just as one enters the town, to the right of the road lie several artificial mounds, the largest of which is called the "Cerro de Malinche. It is said in Jaltipán that Malinche, the famous interpreter of Cortes, was born and raised in the town. All the early chronicles disagree as to the place where she was born. The tradition which still persists in Jaltipán about Doña Marina, the Spanish name for Malinche, has previously been reported by Dr. C. H. Berendt.*

Brasseur states that the Islands of Tacamichapa formed by two branches of the Coatzacoálcos river, was given to the family of Doña Marina by the Spanish crown.†

Mr. Young, of the International Oil Co., which has its offices in Frontera, Tabasco, told us this year that some lands near Chinameca were given to the family of Marina, and remained intact until

*Icazbalceta, Page 178, Note 2.
†Brasseur, 1862. Page 57.

the year 1687. This land was called Chamulco. The owner of it, a woman named Ana Tobar, sold parts of the property in that year. Mr. Young stated that he had seen the documents relating to this property a short while ago.

Doña Marina is one of the most outstanding personalities of the Conquest of New Spain, and the Spaniards would undoubtedly not have succeeded if it had not been for her. It is said that she was born in the province of Coatzacoálcos, and that her mother married a second time, and gave birth to a son. When this son was born she agreed with her second husband to dispose of the daughter, and therefore, sold her to some Indians from the town of Xicalango in Tabasco. As a slave she was sold several times, and finally she was presented, together with nineteen other girls, to Cortes.

In her home she had been brought up to speak the Aztec language, and in Tabasco she learned the Maya. In Cortes' retinue was a Spaniard, Gerónimo de Aguilar, who had lived among the Mayas, and who had joined Cortes when the latter landed on Cozumel Island. Thus, at the beginning of the Conquest, Cortes gave his orders in Spanish to Aguilar, who translated into Maya to Malinche, who again translated into Aztec to the Mexicans. In this way, she was of prime importance to the Conquerors. She soon learned enough Spanish so that she could dispense with Aguilar, and as she furthermore became Cortes' mistress, she was really the one who held the fate of the Spanish army in her hands.

After having risen to great power she again happened to return to her country, where she met her mother and her young half-brother, whom she recognized. Her mother was afraid of her revenge and asked Doña Marina for forgiveness. This was granted and at the same time Doña Marina loaded her family with gifts of jewelry and land. This is the land mentioned in the traditions of the town of Jaltipán.

There are now considerable numbers of Spaniards and Mexicans in the town. They live in houses of brick with tiled roofs, and along the edges of the settlement are large Indian quarters. The surrounding country is likewise inhabited by Indians who all speak the Nahua language, and still maintain many of their old ceremonies. The ancient custom of dancing before the village saint is one of those which has thus survived.

After the Conquest, the friars noted how fond the Indians were of dancing. In order to divert their attention from the idols to the saint, the priests arranged dances in honour of the latter. The Saint-feast of Jaltipán is held on the 30th of August. The Indians from the vicinity take possession of a square in front of the church.

The men are dressed in their ordinary cotton cloth garments, but on their faces they wear masks carved out of wood and painted red and green (fig. 56). Some of these masks have moustaches made of horse hair and we saw one which had a small pair of deer's antlers on the forehead. On their heads they wear bonnets covered with feathers of fowl and the long red tail feathers of the macaw terminating in small tufts of cotton (fig. 57, a, b, c). They all carry hooked sticks and in the middle of the procession walk two drummers, one carrying a small drum, the other a large double drum. These drums are made out of hollowed tree trunks. The small drum is covered with deer skin on both ends, while the large one has skin only on the top (fig. 57, d). The drummers are followed by three

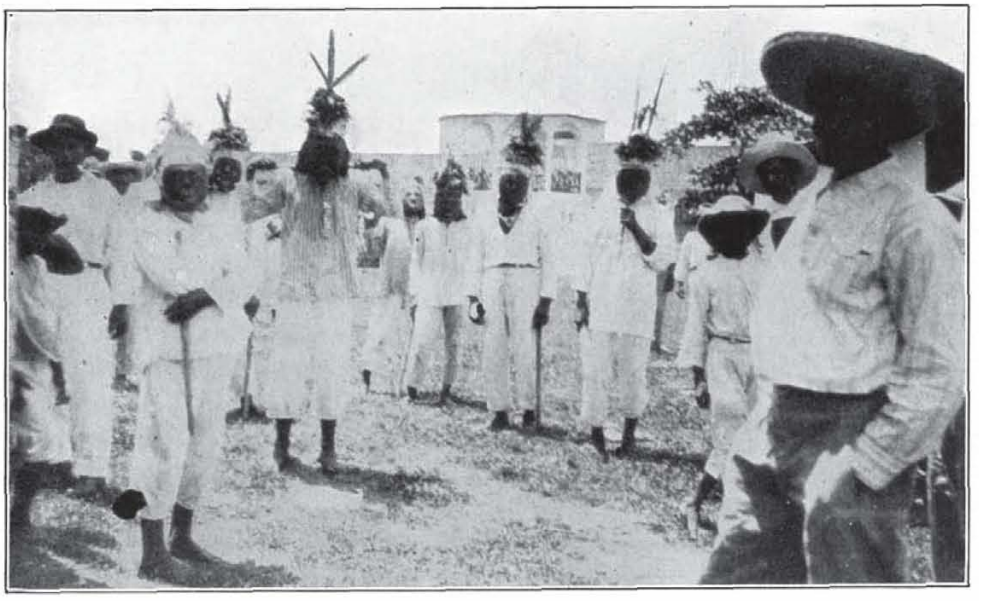

FIG. 56—Jaltipan, Ver. Indians dressed for dancing.

men playing flageolets. After the men come a procession of women, all carrying lighted candles and small Mexican flags.

The procession stops in front of the church and while the women go inside, the men form a circle and commence to dance. About twenty take part in the dance. Carefully following the rhythm given by the drums, they commence very slowly, little by little gaining momentum. Then again they slow down. Sometimes they dance in a circle, one moving behind the other, and sometimes they divide into two parties, each party attacking the other with their staffs. Again they return to the dance in a circle, changing the staff from one hand to the other. The man wearing the mask with the deer antlers leaves the men in the circle, and goes into the center. Then

the man wearing the mask with a moustache also leaves the circle, chasing the person representing a deer. The deer dances inside the ring, sometimes fleeing outside, continually followed by the huntsman, both moving to the rhythmic beat of the drums. The huntsman tries to catch the deer by its left heel in order to throw it, and the deer defends itself with its antlers.

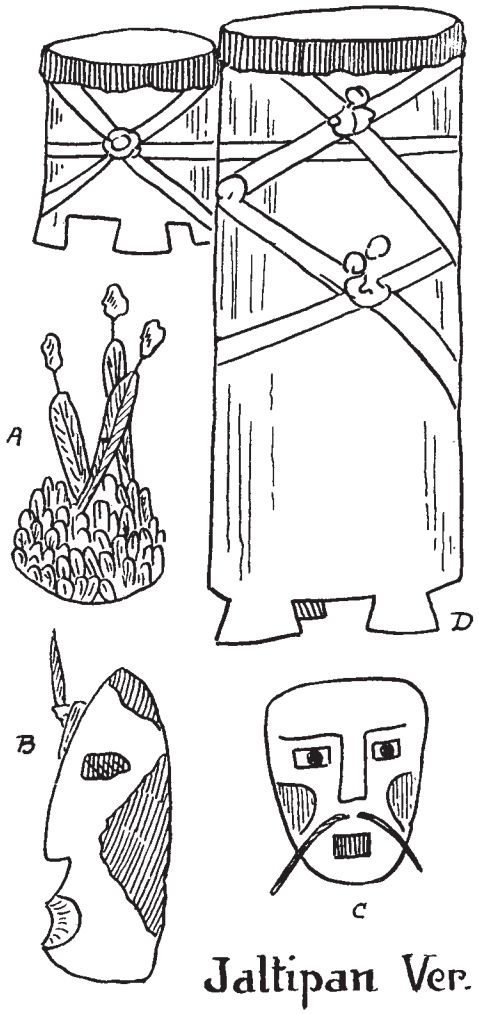

FIG. 57—Jaltipan, Ver. Drum and masks used by the Indians when dancing.

Finally, the huntsman catches the deer, throws it on the ground, and goes through the motions of cutting off its left leg. Then the deer frees itself and quickly crawls away on all fours. The huntsman sneaks after as it tries to escape, and it is caught at last. Then the huntsman cuts off its head and skins it, ending the dance.

During the whole of this pantomime the rest of the dancers have been circling around the two chief actors, moving now slowly, now quickly to the tunes of the flageolets and to the beat of the drums.

After a short pause the Indians begin another dance, a more common one called "Moros y Cristianos," wherein both Cortes and Montezuma, as well as parties of Indians and Spaniards are represented. After finishing this dance, the men also go into the church to worship the Saint of the village.

In Jaltipán the remnants of a collection of antiques made by J. M. Rodriguez was found in 1922. A few words should be said about this man. It is believed that he was of pure Indian descent. He was much given to the study of the antiquities, and eagerly collected the ancient artifacts from the surrounding country. His daughter married a Spaniard named Villegas, and when the old man died, his collections were put

in sacks and moved with the family from one house to another. The greater part of this collection was naturally soon broken to pieces. What survived was given as toys to the children of the family. The only object saved is now in the possession of Señora Villegas. It is a clay bowl (fig. 58). In the house was found the greater part of the old man's collection of books. Among them was a nearly complete set of the "Anales del Museo Nacional" of Mexico, on the pages and covers of which the old man had made a lot of valuable notations, as well as many pencil sketches (fig. 59).

FIG. 58—Sayula, Ver. Aztec clay bowl. (10 cm. high).

Mr. Ansell, an Englishman, living in Jaltipán, says that the greater part of the above mentioned collection came from Tesistepec and Sayula, both indicated on our map. The small bowl from the collection indicates that these objects must have been of Aztec origin.

The most important town of that section of the country is Acayúcan. It is said that a colossal stone figure is found approximately three hours ride to the northwest of this town. This figure is called "La Piedra Colosal de Hueyapan," and cannot be the same as the head described by Melgar and Seler (see page 21). It was removed from its original position before the work of bringing it to the museum in Mexico City was abandoned due to the Revolution in 1911.

If we follow the river Coatzacoálcos upstream from its mouth, we will see some hills on its right bank near Nanchital. Here an ancient mound has been used as base for an oil tank. There are some oil drillings about fifteen kilometers inland towards the east of this place.

A short distance further up the river lies the ranch Tuzantepe, and near by, is a low hill with some large blocks of stone on it.

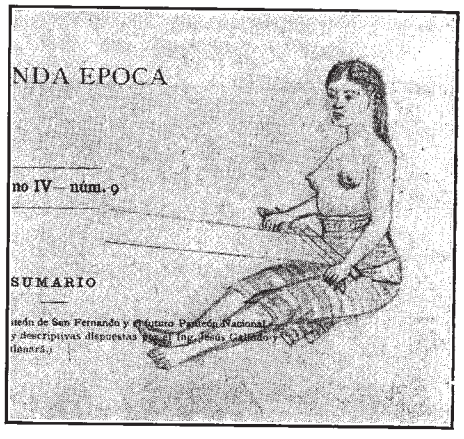

FIG. 59—Jaltipan, Ver. Drawing of Indian girl, made by Rodriguez.

The Indians of the region state that these stones were brought there by the ancients, "Los Antiguos"; that they found these stones far away and moved them by touching with a magic wand. These stones have the appearance of being an outcrop of rock.

From this place runs the main trail to the large Indian village of Ixhuatlán (fig. 60). The inhabitants of this village speak Nahua and Spanish. The proximity of the oil camps is having a disastrous influence on them. They are acquiring all the white man's vices and getting thoroughly unreliable. The chief product of the village is pineapples, which are carried down to the river by the women and from there rowed to the market in Puerto Mexico by the men. Near the trail at a short distance from the village used to stand an idol, about 75 c.m. high, carved in igneous rock, and representing some kind of an animal (fig. 61). It is now said to have been removed to the village square.

FIG. 60—Ixhuatlan, Ver. The Village.

Further inland is the Indian town Moloacán, where the Indians likewise speak the Nahua language. These Indians have been exposed to influences from the outside much less than those of Ixhuatlán, and do not look kindly upon strangers who stop over night in their village.

Half way between this last village and the ranch San José del Carmen, on the Tancochápa river, some idols are reported near Paraje Solo, where there is also an outcrop of volcanic rock. Oil seepages are frequent throughout this region.

Several mounds lie scattered over the savannas around San José del Carmen, and J. J. Williams, who worked on a survey of the region in 1852,* tells us the following:

"It seems important to state that in connection with the finding of precious metals in these streams, that among the many remains of the indigenous people who formerly occupied this locality, there are a number of artificial wells on the west bank of the Tancochápa,

*Williams, 1852.

which seem to be rather huge jars of earthenware, four or five feet high and three in diameter, buried in the ground, and which correspond precisely to those now (1853) existing in Sonora and other gold districts of Mexico. The peculiar construction and locations of these receptacles, and the abundance of drinking water in close proximity, justify the conclusion that they were formerly used for washing gold . . .

"The number and variety of mounds found near San José render it a place of considerable interest. These are scattered over various points and generally composed of chalky earth, alternated by various coloured clay, beneath which are fragments of ancient vessels. In examining some of these mounds, several copper hatchets and other antiquities have been discovered. The banks of the arroyos exhibit great quantities of plumbic ocre, and usually intersect strata of variegated clay suitable for purposes of pottery."

FIG. 61—Ixhuatlan, Ver. Idol found near the Village.

Mr. Williams states that gold has been washed in the rivers of the district. Now and then a few grains can still be washed out of the river sand, but the amount is so small that it has not been found profitable. This view is confirmed by the reports of the Conquerors, who tell us that they found only gold of poor grade in this district.

Unfortunately the writer was not acquainted with the Williams report when he, in 1921, passed through San José del Carmen, so that he was not able to investigate the wells which are mentioned.

Returning to the river, we continue upwards until we reach Paso Nuevo. It is the tradition that the town Espiritu Santo, the first town founded by the Spaniards, was located here. Now one only sees a few wretched huts on a hill. The surrounding corn fields, though, are full of potsherds and obsidian chips.

Thirty kilometers up the river from its mouth we pass the Uspanapa river, one of the main tributaries to the Coatzacoálcos, and shortly afterwards we reach the large oil refinery at Minatitlán, and the village supported by this industrial plant. It is an unattractive place, and the native inhabitants are more so.

Antiquities have been found in a multitude of places along the Uspanapa river. At Filesola, pottery was found; in Ribera del Carmen and Tecuanapa, large quantities of pottery in streams; in Cascajal, a pottery stamp of Aztec type (fig. 62). Arroyo Mancuernillas is well known among the Indians because they have found many ancient corn-grinding stones (metates) at this place.

FIG. 62—Cascajal, Ver. Clay Seal. (Half Size).

The area is of importance, as the contact line between western civilizations, such as the Totonac and Aztec, with the eastern, the Maya, must have been here.

A small clay figurine such as the one found by the oil camp near San Cristobal on the Coachapa river suggests Maya influence (fig. 63). On the other hand, the clay seal from Cascajal further east is purely Aztec.

Puerto Mexico has nothing attractive about it. Some high sand dunes face the Gulf, and in the lee of these lie a few streets of miserable houses (see fig. 55).

The greater part of the houses are built of board and corrugated iron; only the offices and quarters of the oil companies are built of brick. When it is dry and windy, sand blows into everything, and when it rains the streets turn to rivers which carry the refuse of the town out into the big Coatzacoálcos river.

In this hole we stayed for ten days waiting for a boat to take us to Frontera in the State of Tabasco. Telegrams received told us that Director Gates of the Tulane Department of Middle American Research, as well as the members of the Tulane Botanical Expedition to Tabasco, Messrs. Haskell and Hartenbower, would soon arrive by steamer from Vera Cruz.

FIG. 63 — Coachapa, Ver. Clay figurine. (Half Size).

On the Expedition schedule was a visit to some ruins reported near Tonalá, five hours ride from Puerto Mexico, so for several days we tried to get animals in order to ride eastward along the coast to Tonalá, and from there search for the ruins. But the recent De la Huerta revolution, of which Puerto Mexico was for some time the headquarters, had done away with nearly all private animals, and the horses available cost up to $7.50 a day.

However, we were able to charter a small sloop, and boarded it in the belief that such a small craft could go and come as it pleased;

but no, both customs officials and port captain had something to say about it, and as the port captain was going on a picnic, he would not give us clearance papers to leave port on Sunday morning.

At last on Monday morning we hoisted the Tulane pennant on the good sloop "Lupata," and sailed out into the Gulf. We followed the low coast towards the east. With all sails set and a small auxiliary motor running we made good progress, and after four and one-half hours we entered the mouth of the Tonalá river.

Tonalá means "hot place" in Aztec, and the sun certainly was blazing down on the sandy "streets" of the small cluster of palm huts which forms the town.

The little settlement lies picturesquely hidden behind sand dunes beside a shallow bay formed by the river, which is the boundary between the States of Veracruz and Tabasco. It was here that Bernal Diaz landed in 1518 when he was on Grijalva's memorable trip of discovery along the coast of Mexico. Let us use Bernal Diaz's own words: "There came many Indians from the town of Tonalá which is at a distance of about one league from here, and they were very peaceful, and they brought us bread of corn, and fish, and fruits, and they gave it to us with good will, and the Captain flattered them much and told them to give green beads and diamonds, and said to them through signs that they should bring gold for exchange and that he would give them of the things we had for exchange, and they brought jewelry of low grade gold, and he gave them beads for this. And also those from Guazacalco (Coatzacoálcos) came, and from other towns around and they brought their jewelry, which was not very much, because in addition to this exchange all the Indians of these provinces usually brought some hatchets of copper, very brightly polished for refinements or adornment with handles of painted wood, and we thought they were of low grade gold. We commenced to trade for these, and I tell you that in three days we got more than six hundred, and we were very content believing them to be of low grade gold, and the Indians still more with their beads, and we all came out empty handed for the hatchets were of pure copper and the beads a little or nothing. And one sailor had bought seven hatchets, and was happy about this, and I also remember that one soldier by name of Bartolomé Pardo went to a house of idols which was on a hill, and of which it is already said that they are called Cues, which is as much as to say House of One's God, and in that house he found many idols and much copal, which is like a rosin with which they fumigate (the idols), and knives of flint with which they sacrificed and circumcized, and in a chest of wood he found many bits of gold which were diadems and collars, and two idols and others as cast beads, and the soldier took the gold for himself, and

the idols and the other objects of sacrifice he brought for the Captain, and it did not miss that somebody saw this and told it to Grijalva, and he wanted to take it, and we prayed him not to do this, and as he was in good humor he ordered that the Royal fifth should be taken and the rest was given to the poor soldier and it had the value of 150 pesos.

"And I also want to tell how I planted some seeds of an orange next to another idol house, and this happened in this way: Because as there were many mosquitoes in that river, ten of us soldiers went to sleep in one of the tall idol houses, and next to this house I planted the seeds which I had brought from Cuba because it had been told us that we were going out to settle, and they grew very well because the priests of those idols cultivated them and watered them and cleaned them as soon as they noted that they were plants different from their own, and from these came all the oranges of that province . . ."*

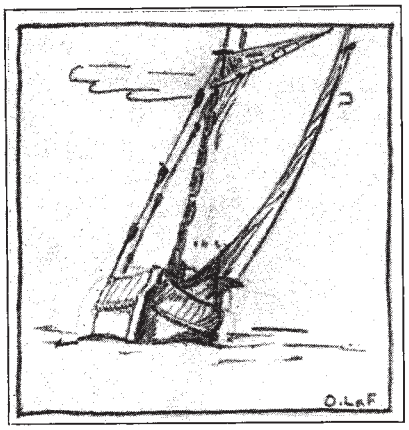

FIG. 64—Sailing Vessel on the Gulf Coast.

In this narrative are several points that interest us. First, the ruins, described as located about one league from the mouth of the river, were undoubtedly those which we were in search of; secondly, the small tale of the planting of the orange seeds. Here is then the place where the first oranges were planted on the American continent (and not in California).

We anchored near the settlement for a time and went ashore to procure guides and food. The guides told us of two ways by which to reach the stone monuments reported at the ruins. The one was by a dugout over the river and then following a small stream, a little more than a league from the Tonalá river. The other lay up the Tonalá river and then in through a tributary, the Blasillo river. This last route would give us a shorter distance to walk and to carry our equipment, so we decided on it.

With our motor going and the sail stretched out to protect us from the sun, we then proceeded up the Tonalá river. This river has several names. At the mouth it is called Tonalá, further up from the tributary Zanapa, to a place called Buena Vista, its name is Tancochapa, and from this last place it splits into two rivers, the Rio de las Playas, which runs nearly due south, and the Pedregal,

*Diaz, Bernal, Garcia Edition, 1904. Page 46-47.

which runs more to the southeast, and together with the Tancochapa and the Tonalá forms the boundary between the States of Veracruz and Tabasco. The two rivers above the place where they join are swift and narrow with many small rapids, but along its lower reaches, the river is slow and deep.

The section we followed was broad, and the banks were covered by a thick growth of mangrove. Here and there white herons would be frightened up by the noise of the motor and fly along the river in front of us. After two hours and a half we reached the mouth of the narrower Blasillo river and turned into it (fig. 65). We had to progress with care as snags were plentiful. In some places huge

FIG. 65—Rio Blasillo, Tab. The Sloop Lupata chartered by the Expedition.

trees had fallen into the river and nearly stopped our advance. At last towards evening we reached a small Indian ranch called Blasillo, where we remained for the night.

One of the first things we did was to hang up our hammocks and mosquito nets. The place was infested with these bloodthirsty insects, and when we went to rest we heard millions of them sing woeful serenades outside our nets.

We were up before dawn, and after a meal set out for the ruins. Leaving the river, we had to cross low ground, so low in some places that we had to wade along in water above our knees. Our guide told us that La Venta was an island entirely surrounded by swamps,

the island itself being covered with low hills, with soil excellent for growing all kinds of plants. The land is divided into lots, each lot belonging to one Indian family.

As we neared La Venta we met several Indians on their way to their corn fields or going hunting. We stopped them and persuaded them to help us as guides, and to clear the thick growth which we were sure would cover the monuments.

After an hour's brisk walking from Blasillo, we at last turned off from the trail and stood in front of the first idol. This was a huge stone block, 2.25 meters high, 86 c.m. broad, and 72 c.m. thick. It had fallen on its back and showed us a human figure carved crudely in deep relief, the deepest carving being 14 c.m. (fig. 67).

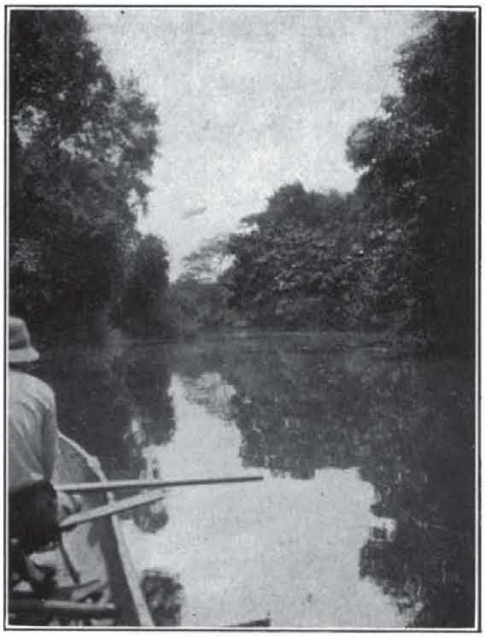

FIG. 66—Rio Blasillo, Tab. View of the River.

Our jack was not strong enough to swing this huge block, so we could not see if it had carving or inscriptions on its back. There is no distinct style to this figure, though its general appearance may be said to give an impression of a slight Maya contact.

Close by, in a northwest direction, we saw a long row of stones like small pillars, averaging 80 c.m. high with tops broken off, set in the ground in a row and close together, forming something like a fence (fig. 68), and in the center of these to the east, a huge block, probably an altar (Altar 1), rough on the under side and with figures engraved on the smooth upper surface. This altar is approximately circular, between 1.5 and 2.0 meters in diameter, and has rolled over so that it stands at an angle where it is impossible to get a good photograph of it. Moreover, the Indians have had corn fields here, and after cutting the bush they burned it off, thereby badly damaging the stone by heat. There was no hope of turning it without a large gang of workmen and some ropes, so we had to content ourselves with making some drawings of the best preserved of the figures engraved on the surface.

From this monument we went back over the trail to a pyramid about 25 meters high, which was facing south. There was no sign of a structure on its top, and if Bernal Diaz really was at this place, the idol house he slept in must have been a palm-roofed building possibly with adobe walls.

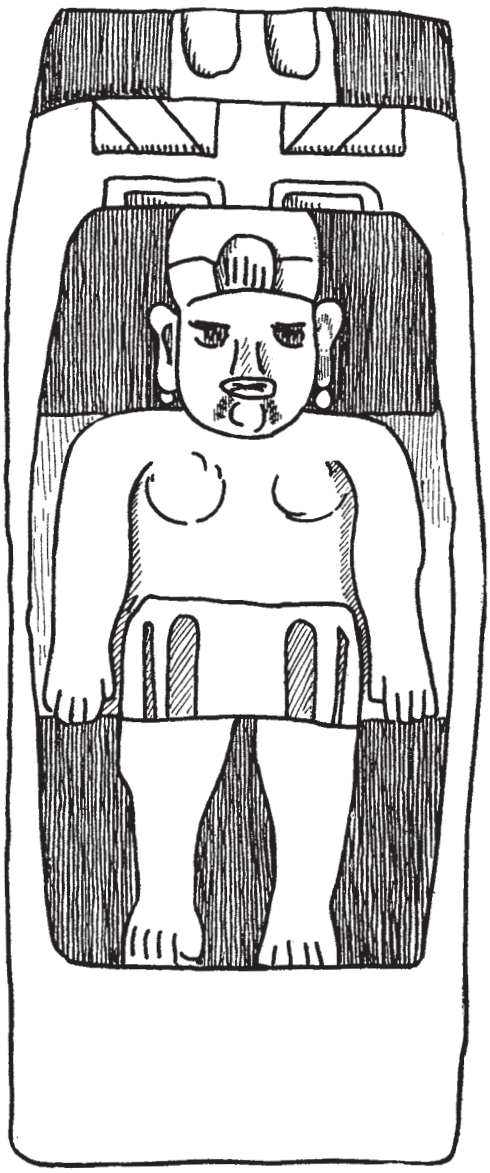

FIG. 67—La Venta, Tab. Stela No. 1.

The next monument found by our guides we named Stela 2 (fig. 69). This was a large monolith, 3.20 meters high and 2.00 meters broad. Fortunately, it also lay on its back, showing us a standing human figure with a large head-dress and holding a ceremonial bar diagonally across its breast (figs. 70-71). It is a full face figure, carved on the somewhat rough surface of the stone, standing out boldly against a set of three smaller figures on either side. These are carved in low relief following the irregularities of the stone. They turn their knees towards the main figure, heads away, and also hold staffs in their hands (fig. 72).

There is no doubt that this figure is strongly influenced by Maya art, if it is not really Maya. The ruins of Comalcalco, the nearest Maya city previously reported, lies 100 kilometers to the east. The crudity of some of the La Venta figures must undoubtedly be ascribed to the hardness of the material in which the carving was done. All the monuments at La Venta are of igneous rock and are all of great size. Inquiring of the oil geologists who work for the Cia. Mex. de Petroleo El Aguila, we were told by one of these, Mr. N. F. Keller, that rock of this kind could not be quarried nearer than 100 kilometers up the river at a place called La Laja. At Paraje

Solo, on the trail between the Nahua speaking village of Molocan and Rivera del Carmen, is an igneous outcrop, and another geologist of the same company, Mr. S. W. Lesniak, reports an idol at that place.

Here again we stand before one of the amazing riddles of ancient engineering. How did the Indians transport these large blocks of stone over a distance of more than 100 kilometers, across swampy ground or along the rivers?

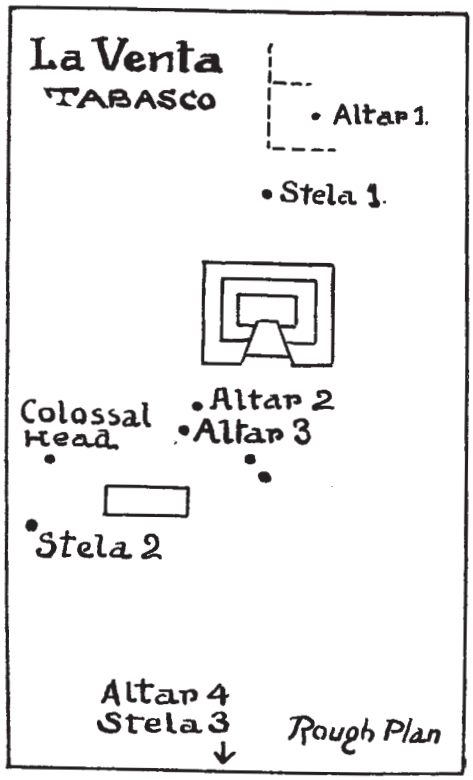

FIG. 68—La Venta, Tab. Rough Plan of the Ruins.

We had bad luck at La Venta—one whole pack of film, the one containing our photographs of the most interesting monument, Stela 2, turned out totally blank, so we can only present some of our drawings of this monument.

After having worked Stela 2, monuments appeared in rapid succession. Altar 2 is located at the foot of the pyramid, to the south. It lies with face up, and on it is carved a crude figure sitting in a niche with legs cross Turkish fashion (fig. 73).

Altar 3 is a square block standing close by, carved so that it gives the appearance of having a cushion on its top. On its north side, i. e., facing the pyramid, is a deeply carved niche in which a figure is sitting bent forward with legs crossed. To the left of the niche is a panel on which a standing figure in low relief is engraved (fig. 74). A similar panel was probably also on the right side, but this side of the altar has been damaged. The southern side of the altar is plain, but on the western side two sitting figures are seen engraved (fig. 75). They face each other and appear to be in some kind of dispute. We had to dig a little in front of this altar in order to get a photograph.

After this we came to the most amazing monument of them all —a huge bell-shaped boulder. At first it puzzled us very much, but

after a little digging, to our amazement, we saw that what we had in front of us was the upper part of a *colossal head.* It had sunk deep into the soft ground, and it was out of the question to expose it (fig. 76).

The visible part of the head measures 6 meters in circumference, and protrudes 1.35 meters from the ground. In the lower right hand corner of the photograph which we made of this monument one

FIG. 69—La Venta, Tab. Stela No. 2.

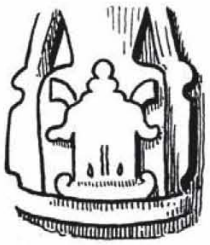

FIG. 71—La Venta, Tab. From head-dress of main figure Stela No. 2.

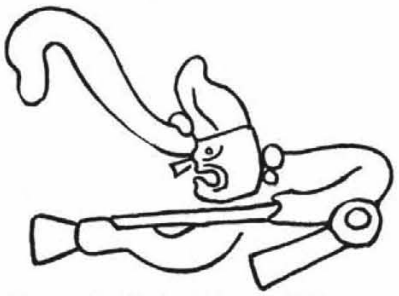

FIG. 72—La Venta, Tab. Small figure on Stela No. 2.

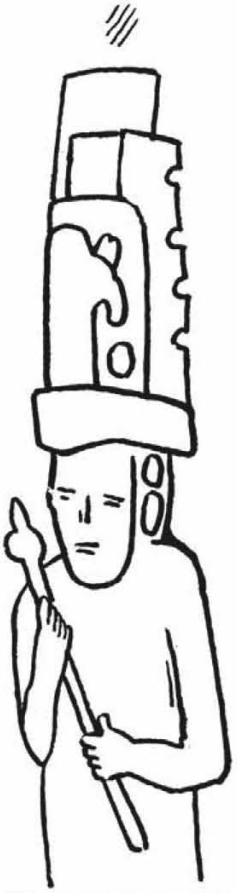

FIG. 70—La Venta, Tab. Detail of main figure Stela No. 2.

sees the left eye of the head. The colossal head reminds one of the one found by the Selers between Los Lirios and Tres Zapotes in the Canton of the Tuxtlas. La Venta is certainly a place of many puzzles, and further work should be done there in order to ascertain more definitely where this ancient city should be placed in our sequence of cultures.*

*Seler, C., 1922. Plate VI.

On our way to the next monument we stopped by an Indian hut to get something to eat. We were received in a friendly manner by an old Indian woman dressed in a white cloth wound around her waist. Long flabby breasts were hanging down beneath her belt line, and flowers were in her hair. Another woman with a face like that of a horse apparently was overcome with shyness, and rushed out to get a chemise with which to cover herself. But the loveliest member of the family, a young girl of about 15 years of age, appeared in the doorway in all her golden brown glory, plus a white cloth around her waist, and some red flowers in her hair. She was beautifully built, with laughing eyes, and the most exquisitely shaped breasts.

FIG. 73—La Venta, Tab. Altar No. 2.

We stayed for lunch, enjoying a dish of black beans, tortillas and coffee, as well as occasional glimpses of the young Venus walking to and fro inside the hut, now and then stealing up to the door to get a look at the strangers outside.

The old lady told us that her father came to this place from Jaltipán, on the Tehuantepec railway, and that all the inhabitants around La Venta speak Mexicano, i. e., Nahua. This settlement is

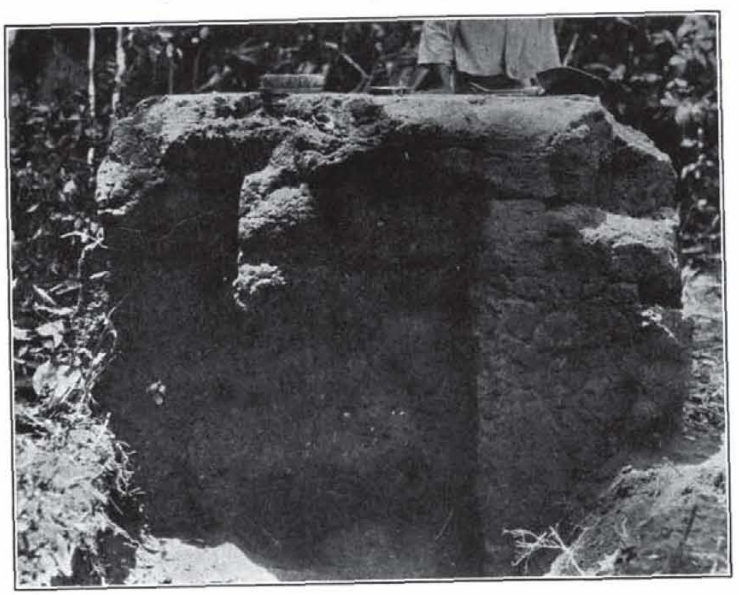

FIG. 74—La Venta, Tab. Altar No. 3.

undoubtedly recent, as are also the Nahua settlements at Moloacán, Ixhuatlán, and Chichigápa, all on the Coatzacoalcos and its tributary, the Uspanapa.

FIG. 75—La Venta, Tab. Incised drawing on side of Altar No. 3.

After our meal the guides brought us to a lot of land owned by an Indian, Leopoldo Sarabia, and here showed us another huge altar. This, Altar 4, was a large square block of stone, 3.15 meters long along the top, 1.90 meters deep, and with about 1.5 meters exposed above the ground. We calculated the mass of this block to be at least 9 cubic meters. On its north side is an incised ornament along the upper rim of the table, and under this is a deep niche in which sits a human figure, legs crossed Turkish fashion. The front of the altar had sunken into the ground, and only with some difficulty were we able to expose enough of the ornament to get a fairly good photograph of the figure (figs. 77-78).

There is a strong Maya feeling about this monument. The person in the niche resembles figures on Stela E at Piedras Negras, and the design above the figure undoubtedly represents a conventionalized animal's head.

FIG. 76—La Venta, Tab. Colossal Head.

FIG 77—La Venta, Tab. Altar No. 4.

FIG. 78—La Venta, Tab. Altar No. 4.

For many years two large stone monuments have stood in the yard of the Instituto Juarez, a school in Villahermosa, the capital of the State of Tabasco. Reports differed as to where they had come from. Some people said that they came from Blasillo, others that they came from La Venta. We were able to get the history of these monuments and to ascribe them definitely to the ruins of La Venta. About twenty years ago Don Policarpo Valenzuela, of the well-known Tabasco family, had a concession for cutting lumber in the territory along the Tonalá river. He found these monuments and removed them from La Venta to Blasillo on the river with the help of the oxen he was using in hauling lumber. We were told that he had likewise tried to remove Altar 4, for which purpose he had dug a trench in front of the monument, but found it too heavy. He was unable to haul away the altar, and it sank down into the trench. The idols now found in Villahermosa are carved out of fine-grained sand stone just as the majority of the other idols of La Venta. The larger of these represents a sitting figure resting his hands on his feet. The smaller of the two has four faces, and is badly weathered. These two figures we have numbered Idols No. 1 and 2, number 1 being the larger (figs. 79-80).

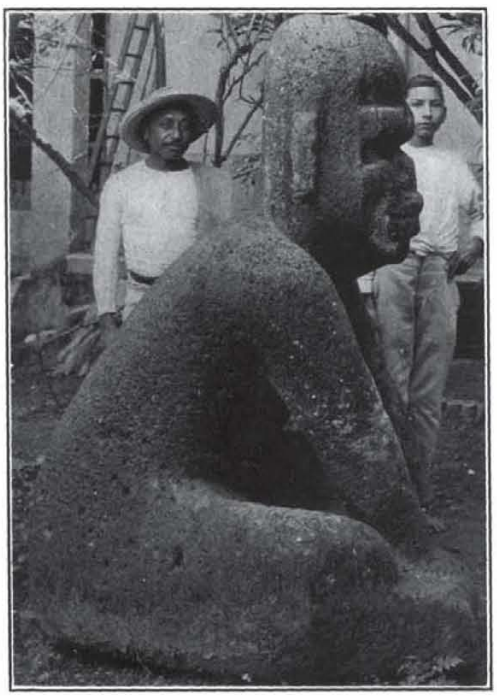

FIG. 79—La Venta, Tab. Large Idol, now in Villahermosa.

The last monument shown us was a sand stone block, 2.10 meters broad, 3.70 meters long, and 1.30 meters thick, lying on the side of a small hill. It may have fallen face down, and as we were not equipped to turn such a huge block of stone we could not see whether it had carvings on its under side. On the back of the stone are some incisions made in recent days with steel tools. The Indians told us that they had tried to break it to see what was inside it, as they often had seen smoke rising from the stone. I think this smoke can be explained by the fact that the sandstone is porous and soaks up water when it rains, and when heated by the

sun, the evaporation would look like smoke. This monument measures at least ten cubic meters.

One more monument was reported by the Indians, but as it was said to be far away, and as we were anxious to get back to Puerto Mexico in order not to miss our boat, we did not see this.

It might be well to summarize the discoveries at La Venta. We have here a collection of huge stone monuments, and at least one large pyramid. Some features of these monuments are similar to things seen by us in the Tuxtla region; other features are under strong influence of the Maya culture to the east. The Maya features in Stela 2, the standing figure with diagonal ceremonial bar and huge head-dress, and in Altars 3 and 4, are so strong that we are inclined to ascribe these ruins to the Maya culture.

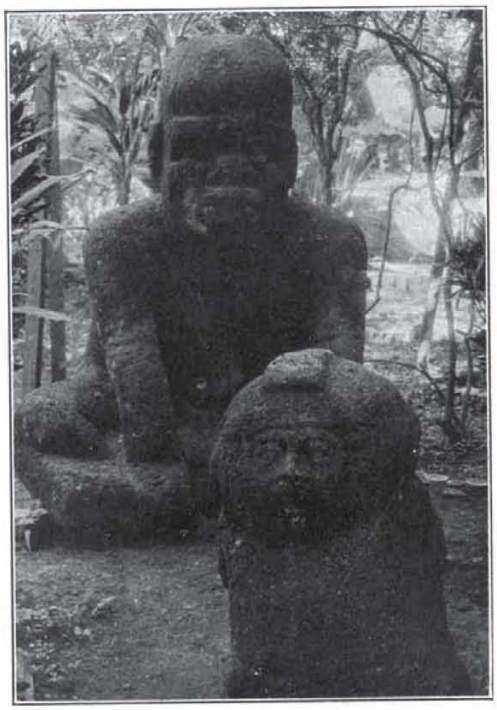

Fig. 80—La Venta, Tab. Two Idols now in Villahermosa.

Upon our return to Blasillo our boatman had a good meal ready for us, and as soon as it had been consumed we started downstream towards Tonalá. The ebb and flood is very noticeable in these rivers during the dry season, and salt water runs far inland during flood tide. The Indians always take into consideration the ebb and flow when they travel on the rivers in their dugouts.

It was after dark when we reached Tonalá and went ashore to sleep in one of the Indian houses, and early the next morning we returned to Puerto Mexico.

Several times the steamer for Frontera was reported delayed and when it finally arrived we were more than eager to leave.

We had the choice of two boats for leaving Puerto Mexico, either the National steamer, "Jalisco," on which Mr. Gates and his party were to arrive, or a large twin screw motor boat "Reina" belonging to the Aguila Oil Company. The "Jalisco" plies up and down the coast, and does not enter the port of Frontera, but anchors outside the mouth of the river. This means that equipment has to be un-

loaded into barges and brought into Frontera by that means. The "Reina," on the other hand, was scheduled to go direct to the wharf of Frontera and from there up the Grijalva river to Villahermosa, for which place we were bound. We, therefore, chose the latter for our trip.

Mr. Gates and his party arrived in due course and brought us mail from home, and the following evening the "Jalisco" and the "Reina" left Puerto Mexico, both of them carrying Tulane scientists.

The "Reina" is a big tub with a heavy mast set right in the middle of the boat and a tremendous cabin and bridge tacked on clear aft. The crew consisted of twelve Mexicans and the passengers, two geologists of the Aguila Oil Company, Messrs. Campbell and Reed, the two Tulane men, a Mexican Government oil inspector and his huge revolver, and a family, or rather a litter, of Mexicans consisting of a man, cheerfully drunk, who spent his day spitting on the deck, and smoking cigars as near the gasoline cargo as he could get, a woman lying on the deck groaning with seasickness, and a half dozen kids who took turns in howling at the top of their voices.

We strung our hammocks on the boom, and the Mexican family camped right below us. It was an unattractive lot to look upon from our lofty position, and we could hardly get out of our hammocks without stepping on at least one of the youngsters.

About dawn we had a cup of coffee to drink, and a coffee cup full of water to wash ourselves in, whereafter we returned to our hammocks. During the early morning we made good headway towards the east, with the low sand dunes of the coast in sight all the time, but suddenly the boat started to travel around in figure-eights and circles, as if the captain had gone mad and were chasing porpoises. At first nobody knew what was the matter, but eventually it was discovered that we had only lost our rudder. For a short time the captain tried to sail without it, but at last he gave this up and issued orders to anchor in sight of the Tupilco lighthouse.

Tupilco is probably the place Cortes mentions in his fifth letter to Charles V. He describes the crossing of a river at Cupilco, and this is probably identical with this place.*

The captain sent two men ashore, ordering them to try to get through to El Paraiso and from there to communicate with Puerto Mexico and instruct the oil company to send out a tug boat to rescue us.

*Cortes, MacNutt Edition. Vol. II., Page 234.

All day long we watched the coast to see if our messengers were coming back. Darkness fell, and then we saw some lights on the shore, but after some discussion it was decided not to send in our boats, as those signalling might be bandits. At dawn the next morning we finally saw a large fire, and the boat was sent in, bringing back our two messengers. They had gone to the lighthouse on foot and from there in canoes to Paraiso. In this place they stayed for an hour, sending off telegrams and getting a little food, whereupon they immediately returned. They were not the people who had lighted the fire the previous evening.

By noon the crew had rigged up a new rudder made out of a pipe and some boards, and, steering with this, we again started on our way to Frontera. The rudder worked quite well, but progress was slow. Fortunately for us the sea was quiet, as in case of a storm we would undoubtedly have been swept up on the coast.

Several times we sailed through large schools of porpoises, and once we saw a shark chasing a big fish. It was a great battle, the shark churning the sea and spinning around, the fish sometimes jumping clear out of the water across the shark. We did not linger to see how the struggle ended.

Towards dark a wind began to blow, the waves were crested with white, and as night fell the water was shining with a bluish green phosphorescence. It was very beautiful and strange. The moon rose fiery red, and everybody was on constant lookout for the low coast, as for a long time we could not see the lighthouse of Frontera. At last it came in sight and at about 10:00 p. m. we anchored, as it would be too dangerous to try to enter the river at night.

The following morning we had to wait a long time for the pilot boat to come out, and when it arrived, it was only a small launch. They tried to tow us, but did more damage than good, and finally left us to zig-zag our own way up the river to the town.

Frontera is the only port of the rich State of Tabasco. Formerly it had a large trade in the agricultural products of the State. Its main exports were cattle, cocoa, coffee, bananas, and mahogany and cedar wood. As the State is rich, it has been a "happy hunting ground" for rebels and bandits.

The town is more attractive than Puerto Mexico, having many red tiled brick houses, and a pretty park. Today its trade is small. A few mahogany companies still receive rafts of logs which come drifting down the river from Chiapas, and an oil company has its headquarters here, but the banana companies have all withdrawn, partly due to the uncertain conditions as to delivery of fruit, and partly to the rulings of the labor government of the State.