



IBERIA, near Peru's borders with Brazil and Bolivia is the country's most important center for the collection and production of natural rubber. All photos Nadel PERUTIMES

## Tapping wild rubber on the Rio Tahuamanu

Three quarters of Peru's natural rubber production comes from a small jungle outpost connected to the bigger towns only by air. Half the rubber trees are owned by the Banco de Fomento Agropecuario which also controls all rubber purchases and sales. A report by L. Nadel.

IBERIA, a small outpost near Peru's borders with Brazil and Bolivia is nonetheless the country's most important center for the collection and production of natural rubber. Its annual output of 300,000 kilos accounts for nearly three-quarters of the country's production — around 450,000 kilos a year.

Iberia is not connected by road with anywhere else apart from a few local jeep tracks into the bush, but there is a regular air connection with Puerto Maldonado and Quincemil that brings in kerosene, food, trade goods and so on and takes out the rubber. Under good weather conditions, flights from Maldonado are frequent and last only about 40 minutes, but in the rainy season, flights are often cancelled. One reflection of how much this service means to Iberians is that the airstrip cuts right through the middle of the town.

As I climbed out of the plane, someone shouted "Watch out". I quickly stepped aside as about 25 balls of pure 'goma' — natural rubber — came hurtling along the tarmac for loading into the plane at what seemed like a fantastic speed — a vivid introduction to the main business of Iberia.

The purchase and sale of the rubber is controlled by the Banco de Fomento

there for more than twenty years. As well as protecting the price of the goma, which is used entirely in industries on the coast, the Banco de Fomento owns about 50% of the siringa (rubber) trees which provide the basic 'leche' — sap, which is later smoked into hard goma — much of which ends up in made-in-Lima tyres. In Peru, as in most other countries, the tyre industry remains the leading user of natural rubber. Synthetic rubber, apparently more expensive to produce, is used for tyre treads, but natural rubber is used for the tyre itself.

FROM Iberia I wanted to travel on to either Brazil or Bolivia (I needed to renew my tourist visa!). First of all I had thought of going to Iñapari, which sits on the triple Brazil-Bolivia-Peru frontier about 45 kms. north. I was told, however, that there was no regular transport to Iñapari, though I could walk or hire a horse. A better prospect seemed to be a canoe ride downriver, along the Rio Tahuamanu to a place



RUBBER is smoked into hard balls of goma. spitted on a long pole over a con-



SHACK used for smoking the goma.

called Extrema, in Bolivia. I assumed it was suitably named. A short, fat man introduced me to Walter Polanu, 31, one of the rivermen of the town.

Walter said he'd take me, 150 soles the round trip, and that we would be leaving 'any moment now' and that we'd be able to get there and back that day. So I left my baggage with a friendly family nearby and after a banana-and-fariña meal at Walter's riverside house climbed into the canoe and we moved off downstream.

Several pleasant hours passed by as we made our way down the little river with no particular sign of life apart from the brightly-colored birds and butterflies that flitted across the river, and the occasional huge tortoise sunning itself on the bank.

Suddenly we pulled into the shore and tied up to a bamboo pole.

Two kids standing on top of a hill waved to us, but they ran away when I climbed up and stood next to them. Walter led me through a steep, hilly section of jungle and after about 20 minutes, we arrived at a group of five huts in a clearing. "San Lorenzo!", Walter announced. On the other side of the clearing I presented my passport and answered the usual questions about nationality, purpose of visit, and the heat. The Guardia Republicana handed back my passport and told me I would have to check in again when I returned from Bolivia.

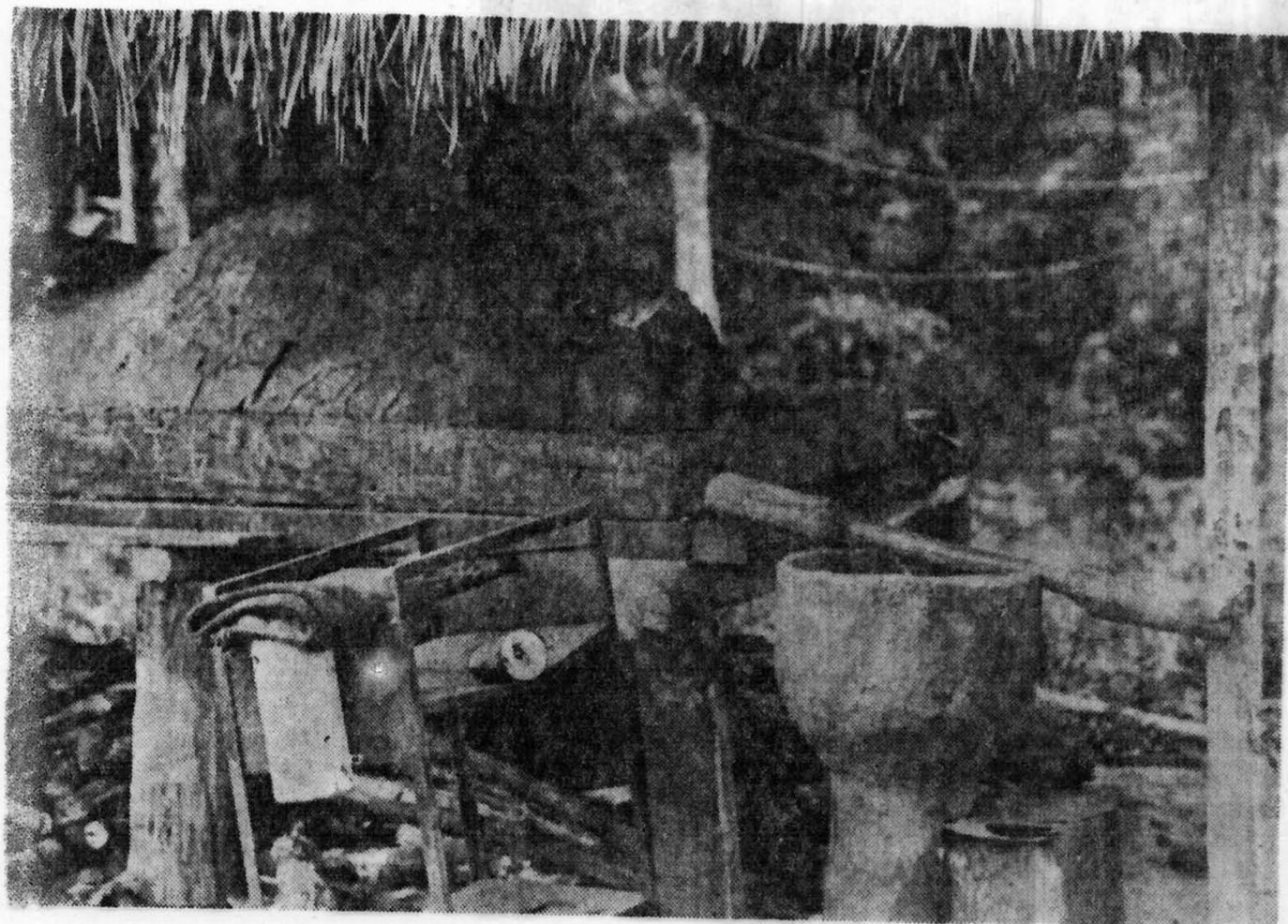
A brisk wind came up as we started upriver again. The sun began to set, and the fading light streaked the clouds and sky brilliant shades of orange and purple. Up ahead, where the river bent sharply, a fog of smoke drifted over the trees, filling the air with a sweet, stinging aroma of burning wood. Walter guided the boat to the center of the

smoke and tied us to an overhanging branch. "We'll sleep here", he said.

I DIDN'T like the idea of spending a night out in the jungle, but clearly there was nothing I could do about it. After picking our way through the trees for about fifty yards we arrived at the source of the smoke. Seated on a bench in an open thatched shed, a bearded man was rolling a white ball, spitted on a long pole, back and forth across a conical oven. Walter explained that this was the way the rubber is smoked into the hard balls of 'goma' which I had seen at the airstrip earlier that day. He greeted the man, as Don Felipe, and asked his permission for us to spend the night. We walked up hill to his wooden hut, which like Walter's own was built on stilts, but unlike it, had a door that only partially covered the entrance.

I asked Don Felipe, who said he was 48, how long he had been working in the rubber business, and he explained that he'd come from Arequipa 26 years ago and was now one of Iberia's 300 siringeros. With his son Geraldo, he works a natural grove of about 120 siringa trees.

One or two trees are as far apart as 500 meters and it usually takes three to four hours to cut about 120 of them, he said. The lower you cut the trees, he continued, the more 'jebe' is collected. In the summer as much as six kilos is collected in one grove each day, but in the winter the average daily collection is only three kilos. Each day, Don Felipe explained, a different row is



THE small hard drops of rubber which stick to the tree are moulded into a coagulated mass used for fuel when no kerosene is available. A home oven used for smoking the rubber into the hard balls.

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Twenty-five balls of  
natural rubber came  
hurtling along the  
tarmac....

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opened up and a small metal cup called a 'tisielina' is placed at the bottom of the cut to collect the sap. When the 'tisielina' is removed, a small hard drop of rubber sticks to the tree. This too is collected by the siringeros, and moulded together into a coagulated mass called 'cernambi'. The texture of 'cernambi' is hard and spongelike, and its used



TOP: A siringero. RIGHT: A tisielina collecting rubber from a siringa. BELOW: Rubber smoked into goma. BOTTOM: Setting the tiesielina below the cleft which has been cut to let the sap flow.

for fuel when no kerosene is available. The poor quality of 'cernambi' when compared with 'goma' is reflected in the prices on the market. While goma is sold for 26 soles a kilo, cernambi per kilo is worth only 19 soles.

CLEARLY the collection and production of natural rubber is a lengthy business. And the subsistence level nature of the cultivation is a handicap in increasing production. Unlike large-scale producers, small rubber cultivators like Don Felipe have often not had access to up-to-date technical equipment or information. In the case of the Iberia siringeros, one example of inappropriate methods is the continued practice of 'low tapping', which though guaranteed to collect more sap more quickly is considered by FAO experts and others to be counter-productive in the long term. Instead the FAO recommends the introduction of 'high tapping' wherever possible, for with this method the productive life of rubber trees extends from an average of five to seven years, which is coincidentally the same time span needed for a newly planted seedling to grow to maturity. This means, FAO experts maintain, "that with a proper replanting program", the rubber cultivator is guaranteed no loss of income in the process of replanting his groves.

Don Felipe inadvertently echoed the experts view, when he told me on leaving, "Things used to be better. Prices were lower but production was better. The wood was virgin, untouched. Now we have to work harder and the trees are tired. I too am tired".

I shook his hand and set off for the Bolivian frontier. As I reached the 'monte' I turned to look back. Don Felipe was still sitting on the steps of his house, an old man holding a tin cup, looking across the water.

