

Mrs. Wills trip across the Isthmus of Panama in 1850

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There were 600 passengers on the boat from New York to Chagres, but these were sub-divided into little parties for the convenience of travel. Thirteen persons were in Mrs. Wills' company and of the number three were ladies.



Panama Route

At 9:00 o'clock A. M., our party of thirteen procured boats to go ashore and we embarked, leaving one of the gentlemen in charge of the multitudinous baggage, which was to be sent after us. As the clouds looked threatening, we took our umbrellas and before we were half way there, down came the rain, as the rain comes only on the Isthmus, in sheets, torrents and cataracts. Our umbrellas, of course, were of no more use than so many sheets of letter paper, and the only difference made by being under them was, that the rain was green, blue or black, according to the cloth through which it was filtered.

Saturated and dripping half the colors of the rainbow, we arrived at the steep, muddy bank, which one of the gentlemen ascended by running violently up, after several false starts, and then pulled each lady by the arm, while some other gentleman pushed behind.

We arrived at the hotel, it was two lower rooms, of bare boards and beams, overflowing with wet, perspiring men, ravenous for food and in the greatest hurry and flurry to go on their way up the river. The ladies of the party made our way up-stairs to improve our toilet. The three ladies of the party used the one bowl of water and the single towel provided especially for our convenience.

At last a bell, which might have served in a church steeple, announced that breakfast was ready, and my heart misgave me when I heard it, for I have often noticed, in many places of more pretension, that the scantier the meal the more noise was made about it. My fears were not unfounded in this case – cold, pale coffee without milk, fat bacon swimming in grease, and half boiled wet potatoes, with hard bread, formed the tempting meal set before us, for which each was charged one dollar.

The scenery about Chagres is too familiar to many of our readers to render a description of it interesting. We will therefore pass over the comments upon swamps, and the style of dress of the native women, neither is it of importance to state the dangers of the river navigation. Suffice to say, the party obtained a boat and with their baggage proceeded up the Chagres River, and on the evening of the first day arrived at a village called Gatun.

We immediately engaged a furnished house for our night's accommodations. This sounds quite magnificent, but those who crossed the Isthmus as early as 1850, know that it generally means a hut made by driving canes into the ground, and tying them together, leaving an opening on two sides, without doors. Three small stones for a fireplace, a hammock, a bench three feet long, a bucket, a gourd, and two stew-pans or pots, made of clay.

Weary and hungry, supper was the first thought of and we started out through the village on a foraging expedition. Fortunately, we had brought some substantials with us. But we wanted bread, eggs, milk and butter and we searched the town to find them, but it seems the natives lived entirely on fruit, for we could find nothing else except one dozen of eggs and a little rice boiled in the milk of the cocoa nut. We returned, however, with plenty of delicious bananas, oranges and cocoa nuts.

One corner of the house was occupied by the mistress of the house, a really beautiful native girl, about fourteen, lazily swinging her mulatto baby in a hammock. Another corner was disputed territory between a flock of hens and four starved little pigs.

Our chef, one of the gentlemen of the party accomplished a meal where a world-renowned caterer would have hung himself in despair. First the three stone fireplace was arranged, some brands lighted, and one stew pot set on to boil some rice; then coffee was made in the other, and afterwards poured into a jar which in the morning had contained brandied peaches. The coffee-grounds rinsed out of the stew pan, the ham was put into fry which being done made a way for the eggs. Now, this was quite a comfortable meal, if we could have eaten the components parts together, but, as we had no plates, and but one knife, fork and spoon, we were forced to eat a spoonful of rice and pass it around; two tin cups served us all with coffee,

and each held a slice of ham in one hand and an egg in the other. 'Tis wonderful how little we need if we only knew it.

After this repast, we heard the music of the natives, at a kind of Spanish wake, nearby, and went to visit the dance. The native all danced quite gaily before the corpse of a child some two years old. They drown their sorrows in the dance and the aguardiente (a distilled liquor resembling brandy made from sugar cane) – a custom of the country.

No longer able to bear the stony gaze of the little corpse, we retired to our casa for the night and with no little difficulty ascended our log stairs, hung our wet clothes of some wooden pins, and lay down to sleep on a pile of damp rice straw. No, not to sleep, for we were still too near the fandango, which was kept up till two in the morning. Then the pigs and the gentlemen below were constantly falling out, notwithstanding the rooster in every corner every five minutes gave warning, in his most prolonged notes, that it would soon be day.

In two or three days the party arrived at Gorgona, dismissed the boat and prepared for land travel to Panama. The party rested a day to recuperate.

The ever to be remembered next day rose bright and clear, and greatly refreshed by our sumptuous night's lodging, we prepared gaily for our journey. My two lady friends had brought side saddles with them but I unfortunately had none and was now provide with the first man saddle ever used on the Isthmus if I might judge by its impenetrable hardness, and the polish of the glassy surface.

Our provisions for the journey and our clothes for the three or four days before our trunks could reach Panama, were nicely packed on a little white mule, which was then securely fastened to the fence before the hotel, where perhaps he yet remains, for none of us ever saw him from that day to this.

About ten o'clock the cavalcade set out, and a very funny company it was. Two or three small men of the party were mounted on the largest animals and were quite to be looked up to while those of longer limbs bestrode little rats of mules. A young lawyer of the party, some six feet six could only keep his feet off the ground by crossing them under the diminutive animal he rode, and when the road proved too rough, stepped down and allowed the mule to walk from under him. Some of the mules reared up, some kicked up behind, occasionally varying this playful sport by wheeling round and round like a kitten after its own tail.

Having climbed a stump in front of the hotel, I mounted with some difficulty upon my perch, but that was nothing to the difficult of staying there, for on putting my right knee over the high pommel of the saddle it threw me entirely off poise backwards. To restore my equilibrium, I was forced to bend at an equal angle forward and there I sat, a living cork screw, to the eminent peril of my neck and my spinal column.

O, the feats of balancing I performed that day! My mule walked stubbornly off some distance down the road, when coming suddenly upon a precipice of fifteen feet. I cried out to stop him

supposing he had mistaken the path, but muley, paying not the slightest attention to me, prepared for the slippery descent by placing all his four feet together for a slide. Finding myself perfectly helpless, I dropped the reins, shut my eyes and resigned myself to destruction, but was brought suddenly back to the realities of this life by a broad splash of mud in my face as we came plump down into a deep hole at the bottom. This soon became the experience of every half hour, till, after riding in torture for about eight miles, my lovely mule, in clambering up a sharp ascent, lost his footing, sliding back down and down the hill, till he finally sat down on his haunches and slipped me off over his tail - waist deep in the mud.

I dripped mud from every pore. Desperate and horribly provoked by the mirth which my appearance irritably excited, I now announced my intention of riding astride for the rest of the journey, even if I became a spectacle for the world. A large blanket being found, I seated myself on one half, folded the other half back over my lap, and then made myself as fine a pair of grey pantaloons as you would desire to see.

O, the ease and comfort of riding "en cavalier" - I was now determined I would never ride otherwise, and my spirits rising in proportion to the safety of my position, I trotted, cantered and even ran races caring nothing for the mud but only to the detriment of my bonnet and veil, made triumphant entry into Panama. But alas, there my triumph ended, for upon being lifted from the mule, my strength failed entirely, and I sank fainting on the sidewalk.

When I recovered I found myself in a huge unfinished chamber, lying in a hammock, with several friends standing about me sprinkling me with water, the only restorative at hand. There I lay unable to move for two hours.

Our baggage not making its appearance, and finding it impossible to wear our clothes, saturated and stiffened with all the mud we had contracted on the road, except what we were able to wash off by swinging our dresses in the rivers we crossed, one of the party sent to a Spanish lady whom she knew, to ask for charity's sake, the loan of some clothes. A scant supply arrived, and when the other ladies were dressed, which they accomplished during my repose in the hammock, the only garments left for me were a flannel petticoat and a green calico dress, made for a person much shorter and smaller than myself. This was abundance for warmth, but a scant measure for comeliness, and I was inducted into them by main force. The shouts of laughter with which I was greeted were anything but flattering. The skirt of the green frock came far above my ankles. The shirt, very plain and very short was fastened in front with enormous hooks and eyes, set far apart betraying gushes of white flesh between and so tight that by night I was completely printed with hooks and eyes.

Here was a dilemma, for we were obliged to go to the hotel for our meals. At last, it was found that a black silk bertha (a wide collar, often made of lace, that covers the shoulders of a dress) belonging to one of the travelling dresses, could be worn, and by pinning it well, and holding the deep fringe carefully down with my hand I think I made quite a figure - indeed, I am certain of it, as I frequently caught the gentlemen observing me with great admiration if I could judge by the pleased expressions of their countenances.