

Fantastic Lost World In Mexican Valley

By DOUGLAS NELSON RHODES.

No superlative invented by Hollywood can match the reality of the Barranca de Cobre (Canyon of Copper), forgotten valley of nine-foot-tall blond giants and flying snakes in south-west Chihuahua, Mexico.

How this primitive area—larger than the American Grand Canyon, with waterfalls up to 1175 feet high—has escaped scientific attention so long is a mystery only slightly less astonishing than the place itself.

This lost world hit the headlines recently as a result of a six-man expedition that explored a small segment of the barranca during a gruelling 58-day pack trip. Sponsored by the Los Angeles County Museum and under the leadership of an ornithologist, William J. Sheffler, the exploration team was the first well-equipped and qualified group of scientists to penetrate deep into the Barranca de Cobre.

Sheffler and his companions found that many of the "legends" of the fabulous canyon were factual. For instance, they verified that cliff-dwellers do exist there much as did



William J. Sheffler.

their ancestors of 25,000 years ago—veritable Stone Age tribesmen living with their families in caves along the steep canyon wall. They also explored the steaming barranca itself and declare it wider and deeper than the Grand Canyon, with countless millions of giant orchids, larger than cabbages, growing in wild profusion on every side. They found evidence of great snakes that "fly," mammoth nectar-eating bats that flit swiftly through the jungle, scores of new kinds of birds, toxes, squirrels and mice. All these and many other wonders were



these and many other wonders were verified by the Sheffler party.

BECAUSE of overwhelming transport difficulties, only a few living specimens of animal life were brought out, but enough to cause a real stir in biological and ornithological circles. These included a dozen unclassified pigmy owls, no bigger than a man's thumb; and a pair of weird blue-jays, one with yellow bill and eyes, the other with black bill and eyes — a condition none of the ornithologists can explain. Many other small specimens of flora and fauna,





A view looking down into Mexico's Barranca de Cobre—Canyon of Copper. The canyon is thought to descend to about 8000 feet, but little is known about the great valley.

including many kinds of strange birds' eggs, snakes and rodents, were brought out in an embalmed state. Nearly £2300 worth of film was used to photograph the barranca's wonders, and thousands of feet of tape recordings were made of wild jungle sounds, primitive music of the human inhabitants, and the unidentified cries of unseen animals.

"But we didn't really scratch the surface of exploration," Shefler said. "A dozen scientific parties could spend a decade in the Barranca de Cobre and still not exhaust half its possibilities."

Only a handful of white men have ever penetrated the barranca at all. One of these is Paxton Hayes, Los Angeles scientist-adventurer, who made a lone expedition into another part of its mysterious fastness in 1934. He returned with photos and archaeological specimens that set the scientific world agog.

Hayes' original purpose in braving the ruggedness of the barranca was to investigate the reports of

ing the ruggedness of the barranca was to investigate the reports of the cliff-dwelling aborigines and the legends of the flying snakes. He set out alone, except for a native guide, to find out for himself if these things really existed, but he was soon sidetracked by even more amazing discoveries and never did reach the area where the cave people live. One day, he and the guide passed through a slot in a rock through which a river once ran in ancient times. Close inside they came upon ruins of what once had been a capital city with giant buildings.

"They were constructed of a cement-like masonry mixed with bamboo. One of the mosque-type buildings still stored particles of grain," Hayes recalls.

Strangely, Hayes found no other traces of the lost civilisation. There were no burial grounds in the city, but his guide volunteered the information that he knew of some strange caverns about 45 miles north. Hayes persuaded the Indian to lead him there. He describes

north. Hayes persuaded the Indian to lead him there. He describes in the following words what he found:

"We finally came to a deep canyon with slides sloping upward to a series of mesas. On the skyline was a rock formation which resembled a cathedral in ruins. It seemed symbolic of what we sought. The cave began with a tunnel and ended in a chamber about 50 feet high, 25 feet deep and 20 feet wide. We dug down through the eight inches of dirt and then struck a foot of volcanic ash. Below that were 34 huge burial baskets made of mats woven from fibre and bound with twisted yucca rope.

"Every basket contained a body wrapped like a silkworm. Of the 34 bodies, two were women. Nine were mummified and the remainder were skeletons. After photographing them in their shrouds we investigated further. When the bodies and bones were straightened out they measured from seven feet, six inches to nearly nine feet tall! All except one—a dwarf 30 inches tall.

"I knew at once that we were the discoverers of no ordinary Indian burial ground, because every one of the mummies was a tawny blond with delicately formed hands and feet. A strange feeling crept over me: I realised I was in a cavern of kings who must have died thousands of years before the Christian era."

In the tomb were two pieces of furniture—two small four-legged stools chipped from solid pieces of wood. These added another puzzle; the wood has not been identified.

But the greatest mystery of the Hayes find and perhaps the key that one day will solve the riddle of the blond giants, was the saffron-coloured burial robes, plain except

coloured burial robes, plain except for a powder-blue pattern of latch hooks and pyramids. Hayes brought with him out of the barranca one of these robes. Exposure to air soon cracked it, however, and before he reached civilisation the ancient shroud was in fragments. Parts are now in sealed cases in museums in California and Arizona. Hayes kept several other portions and exhibits them during his lectures on the mysteries of Mexico.

CLOSE examination of the burial cloth reveals neatly hemstitched edges. Rows of pyramids seem to hold some sort of message for the scholar who can divine it. On the triangles are series of white dots, all intricately woven into groupings which recur throughout the pattern. Hayes is convinced that such a laborious job was never done without reason, but the white-dot code has yet to be cracked.

The number of white men who penetrated the Barranca de Cobre prior to the recent Sheffler expedition can be counted on the fingers of one hand. The first reports of this fabulous area came from a prospector who skirted the edges of it in the late 1880's. Lured by prospects of uncovering a rich copper deposit from which the place derives its name, he nearly died before he got back to civilisation. Little attention was paid to his tales of the vastness of the canyon with its weird flying snakes, although Indians and Mexicans have long referred to the barranca as "terra incognita"—secret land.

Hayes found only a trace of the flying snake—the shed skin—which he carefully packed back to the U.S. The Sheffler party verified that such a reptile exists. In a true sense of the word, the creature does not actually fly; it glides from tree to tree and even from

does not actually fly; it glides from tree to tree and even from the canyon rim to the floor more than a mile below.

In 1939, two California explorers, R. T. Moore and George Lindsey, ventured into the barranca, but soon gave up and returned without a single specimen.

Only other white man known to have had a close look at the canyon's marvels is Henry L. Vaughn, of South Gate, California. Some years ago he entered it through the somewhat more accessible northern end and photographed a waterfall that dwarfs anything of its kind in North America. The cataract, according to Vaughn, has a sheer leap of 1175 feet! He also saw Indians, garbed in bearskin, hunting with the most primitive bows and arrows.

The Sheffler expedition reported that the barranca itself presents a breath-taking beautiful sight, particularly in early morning when a fragrant haze lightly screens the 10,000-foot peaks. Unlike the Grand Canyon, the Barranca de Cobre is heavily wooded with elms, oaks and pines and hundreds of varieties of flowering shrubs. Literally hundreds of millions of giant wild orchids in every hue grow in the trees.

The barranca forms an L, running 40 miles in an east-west direction, and then making an abrupt 90-degree turn and continuing 60 miles in a north-south direction to its point of confluence with the Fuerte River in Sinaloa. The canyon, cut by the Urique River over a period of countless centuries, forms a great corridor to the Fuerte which, in turn, drains into the Gulf of California.

But it was the people who dwell in cliffs that interested the explorers particularly. They belong to the Tarahumare tribe and speak a language related to the ancient

Tarahumare tribe and speak a language related to the ancient Aztec. Hardy and intelligent, they live in widely scattered small groups and eke out a meagre existence from the rocky hillside, using only the most primitive tools. Goats are their only domesticated animal. Not all Tarahumare Indians live in caves, however. Sheffler was surprised to find a number of well-built, two-storied adobe houses occupied by the more progressive natives. These spoke a little Spanish, and made occasional visits to villages situated 50 back-breaking miles over the mountains.

All barranca natives were friendly and extended a warm welcome to the explorers

"It was probably the biggest event in their lives," one of the expedition members commented. "We talked with them through our chief guide, who acted as interpreter. They proffered their hospitality, which we politely accepted—though they had so little we were careful to reciprocate generously from our own supplies."

MOST of the cave-dwellers sleep inside their cliff homes but do most of their living outside in the "patio," which extends for miles. It is not unusual to see mere babies playing on the edge of precipices where a misstep would plunge them thousands of feet to the canyon floor, yet this causes no anxiety among the parents. Through their interpreter, the explorers learned that Tarahumares "never fall off cliffs."

One of the most noteworthy experiences occurred when the Sheffler photographers sought to take a picture of a young Indian maiden at the entrance to her cave home. Dressed in an ingenious calico-and-goatskin ensemble, the pretty lass showed shy interest when the cameras were set up. But, just as the visitors were about to snap the

the visitors were about to snap the first known picture of a genuine cliff-dwelling equivalent of a bobby-soxer, the girl turned and darted into her cave, uttering some native phrase as she went.

"We should have been more careful," chided Sheffler. "The cameras frightened the poor girl—she probably thinks they're some strange devices for casting the evil eye. Now we'll never get her to pose!"

But explorer Sheffler soon found out that he has much to learn about the workings of the feminine mind. For the Stone Age bobby-soxer re-appeared in the cave entrance a moment later with a small, shiny object clutched in her hand. As the explorers watched in amazement, she carefully painted her lips with a dime-store lipstick, then struck a sophisticated pose that matched the best efforts of any Hollywood cinema queen!