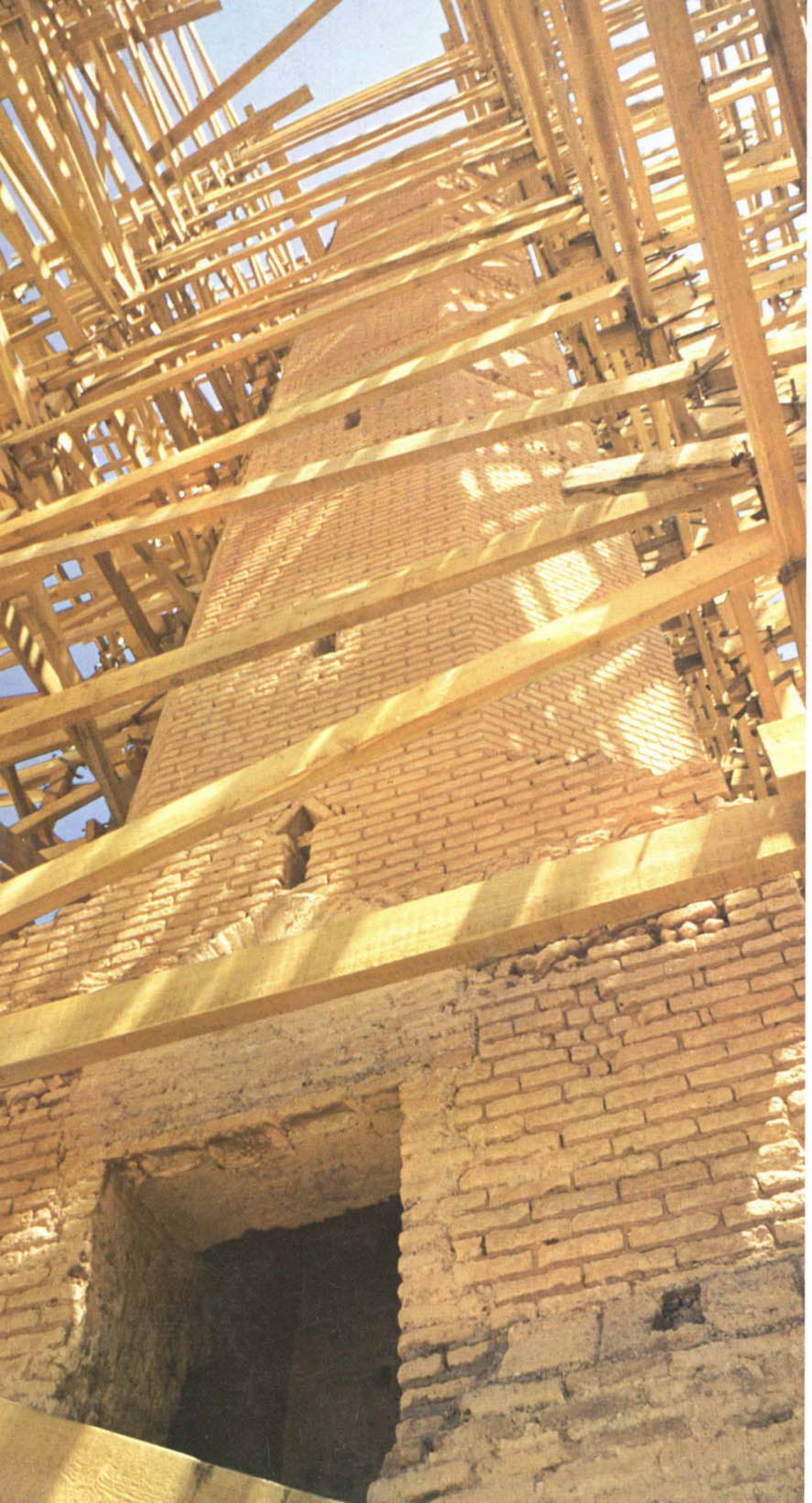


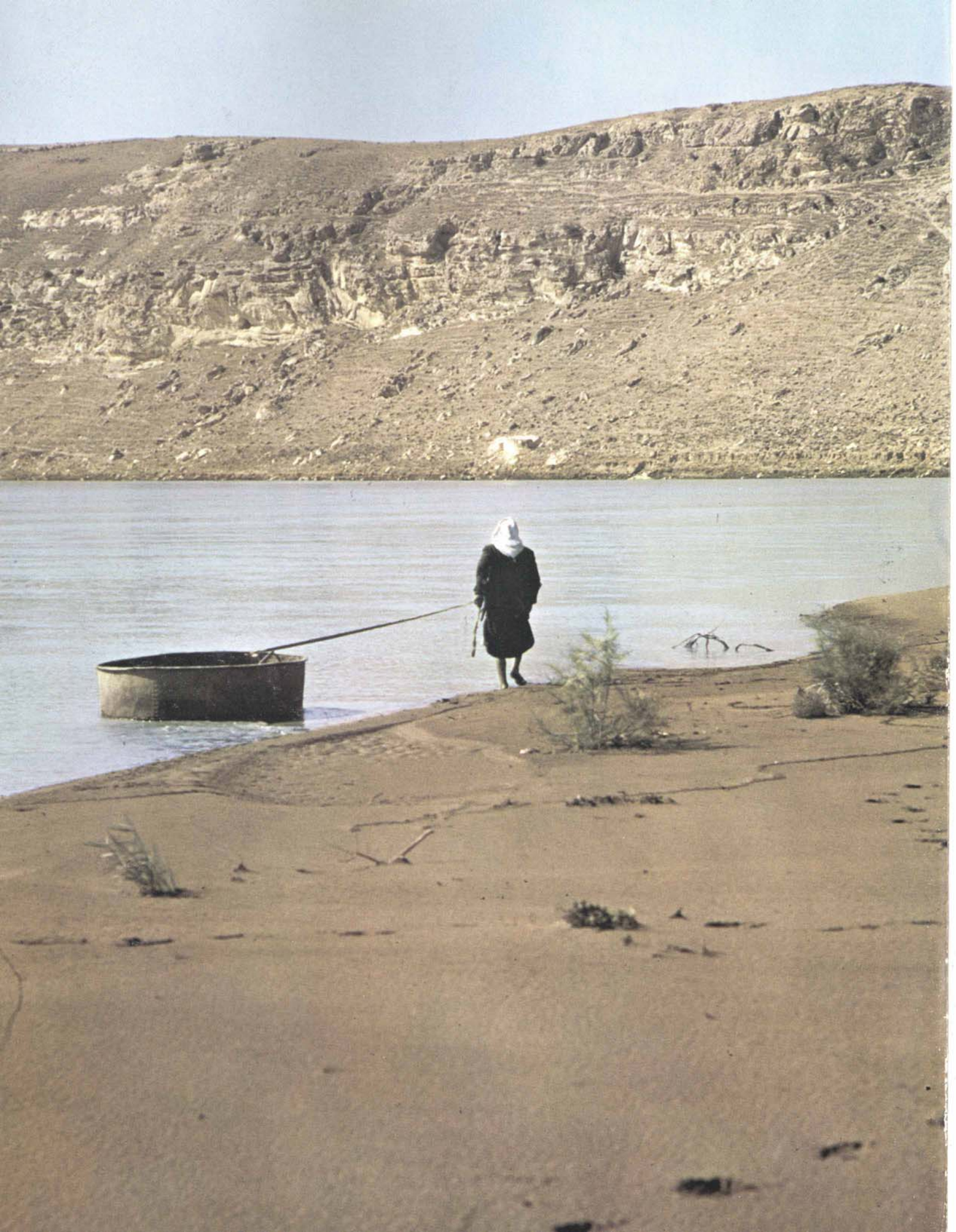
ARAMCO WORLD
magazine
1345 AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10019
ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED
RETURN POSTAGE GUARANTEED

ARAMCO WORLD magazine

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 1974

LAST BOATS TO TABQA

SPECIAL FEATURE: A SELECTIVE INDEX OF ARAMCO WORLD ARTICLES 1951-1973



ARAMCO WORLD magazine

VOL. 25 NO. 1 PUBLISHED BIMONTHLY JANUARY-FEBRUARY 1974

SPECIAL BLUE BINDERS DESIGNED TO HOLD 12 ISSUES OF ARAMCO WORLD MAGAZINE (REGULAR SIZE) ARE AVAILABLE FROM EASIBIND LTD., 4 UXBRIDGE STREET, LONDON W8 7SZ, ENGLAND, FOR $3 EACH. BINDERS FOR SPECIAL ISSUES (SIZE 10" X 14") ARE ALSO AVAILABLE FOR $3 EACH. MAKE ALL CHECKS PAYABLE TO EASIBIND, LTD.

Published by the Arabian American Oil Company, a Corporation, 1345 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10019; F. Jungers, Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer; R. W. Powers, President; J. J. Johnston, Secretary; E. G. Voss, Treasurer. Paul F. Hoye, Editor. Designed and printed in Beirut, Lebanon, by the Middle East Export Press, Inc. Distributed without charge to a limited number of readers with an interest in Aramco, the oil industry, or the history, culture, geography and economy of the Middle East. Correspondence concerning **Aramco World Magazine** should be addressed to The Editor, Box 4002, Beirut, Lebanon. Changes of address should be sent to T. O. Phillips, Arabian American Oil Company, 1345 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10019.

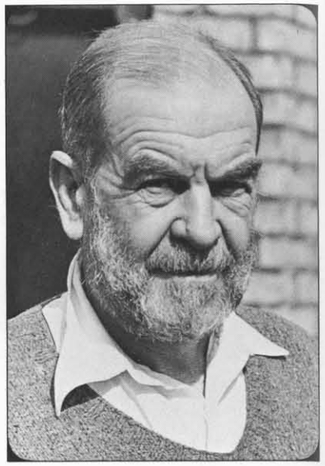
Cover: Down Syria's Euphrates River last spring went a party of five amateur explorers to see some of the ancient sites soon to be covered by the new Tabqa Dam. Rear cover: A historic minaret at Meskene is being dismantled to escape the rising waters. Story and photographs begin on page 8.

← On a five-day voyage down Syria's Euphrates, a small group of adventurers met few river craft other than unusual round tubs such as this one. Their story on page 8.

H. St. John Philby's Great Arabian Journeys of Exploration
Part two, 1936-37:

INTO THE HIGHLANDS

WRITTEN BY ELIZABETH MONROE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY H. ST. JOHN PHILBY



Harry St. John Philby spent 45 years studying, exploring, mapping and writing about the Arab world. He is probably the most famous of the hardy band of that era's Arabian explorers. During that time he also became a Muslim and a trusted adviser to King Abd al-'Aziz, founder of Saudi Arabia. Elizabeth Monroe, author of Philby of Arabia, *from which this chapter is taken, is a Fellow Emeritus of St. Antony's College, Oxford, a former correspondent of* The Economist *and author of several books on the Middle East.*

A map tracing the journeys described below was included with the first section of the chapter, which appeared in November-December 1973.

Philby had recovered his taste for exploration. On his way back through Riyadh with Dora, he learned with delight that the King, 'my King,' wanted a service of him that would carry him back into the blue.

In 1934, Ibn Sa'ud had won a quick victory over his southern neighbor the Imam of Yemen, thereby consolidating a disputed frontier. He explained that boundary marks had been set up, but that he needed them mapped. Philby was delighted to accept the job. He had never seen 'Asir province or the Najran valley, a round trip to both of which would be at royal expense and with royal introductions to help him on his way.

Before he set out he conceived an idea that caused him to pay for his own transport and use his own car. He read in the Royal Geographical Society's *Journal* Freya Stark's account of her journey to the Hadhramaut in 1935. She had tried to follow the incense route farther west, but, through illness, had failed to get to Shabwa—the first toll-point outside the wadi. Shabwa was for Philby 'the romantic land of Sheba.' Sir Percy Cox, taking the chair at Miss Stark's lecture, had remarked that the stretch of the incense route from the Hadhramaut to Najran was 'about the only piece of the Arabian Peninsula that is entirely unexplored.' This was enough for Philby. If the omens at Najran looked propitious, he must make a dash for Shabwa and supply the missing link.

Without a word of this to anyone, he set out in May 1936 on the longest of his Arabian journeys, whether judged by time, distance or the tens of thousands of feet he climbed. In order to map new ground from start to finish, he took a chauffeur and made for the 'Asir by a route inland of that which he had traveled on his way back from the Rub' al-Khali. He started through the dreary, uninspiring lava fields south of Turaba, and climbed to Bisha through wadis where no car had been before, and where the going was execrable. The compensation was a wealth of new geological specimens, and of birds in the bushes that snagged the car. They were full of shrikes, larks, chats, wagtails, flycatchers, hoopoes and ravens; he found a new brand of owl (*Otus scops Pamelae*) for dispatch to the British Museum, renewed acquaintance with 'my own woodpecker' (*Desertipicus Dorae*) and saw sunbirds for the first time. (Most of his birds, like most of his books, were dedicated to women he admired.)

Bisha is the last outpost of Najd. Thereafter 'Asir Province begins, and is another world by comparison with the rest of Arabia—*felix* instead of *deserta*. At Khamis Mushait, there are fields of grain and no more palms; women go unveiled and square towers with whitewashed tops are a foretaste of Yemeni architecture. Owing to its inaccessibility, 'Asir was largely untouched by Wahhabism and so indulged in frivolities such as gay ink patterns on the inside walls of its houses. Its people are jaunty, and Philby was pleased to see their children playing a game 'not unlike cricket without runs,' using a slate wicket and a stone ball. Though its capital, Abha, was in 1936 still only a set of villages, it had become one of Ibn Sa'ud's pivot-points and was run by an amir from Najd; it had a Saudi garrison, and possessed the only doctor—an Indian—between Najran and the Red Sea. Its native inhabitants were mountain men, ready to climb with Philby or show him rain-fed fields, and juniper forests under which grew thyme, mint and lavender. The doctor, to his excitement, took him to see some rock drawings and inscriptions, and told him that there were plenty more on the softer pink rocks north of Najran. He counted his stay in this agreeable society 'my first real taste of the Happy Arabia of the ancients.'

It was June. Time was no object. He saw little reason to take the ordinary motor track to Najran. He picked up a guide who knew the whole district because he had helped to survey the line for a road, and set out on a detour north. He wanted to map the maze of sands and ridges at the upper end of the Wadi Tathlith, and to find those inscribed rocks. He made for Najran in a great curve that passed through several of the sandstone outcrops that the Indian doctor had described. Sure enough, here were quantities of inscriptions and 'veritable picture galleries of ancient man.' He could see that they were pre-Islamic, but could not read the script and so was unaware that he had stumbled on a discovery of importance to historians of Arabia. Full of excitement, he set about copying all he could with his stubby pencil, but for lack of experience did so faultily. He mistook cracks in the rock for letters, and, copying from left to right inscriptions that had been written from right to left, made mistakes of sequence. When he showed his copies to experts—A. F. L. Beeston at Oxford, and, later, Monseigneur Gonzague Ryckmans at Louvain—they saw at once that he had found in South Arabia a script till then believed to occur only in the north, but his crude copies set them to guessing games.

In such a wilderness of outcrops, finding the inscribed rocks, or even the right side of a rock or ridge, is largely a matter of luck. Philby's bag on this first of his searches was large because his main guide picked up at Abha was keen and knew much of the ground from making road surveys. The rest of his team was often less satisfactory and caused the outbursts of rage for which he has a name to this day. Shortcomings that struck his escort as trifles caused him to strike one man, dismiss another and inflict such 'moral bruises' on a third that the man gave up and walked home. Plenty of desert travelers lose their temper with their men and feel like slapping them, but few adopt Philby's retaliatory technique of refusing food for days in order to mark displeasure and cause consternation. But guides have tempers too; men still tell how they withheld information about sites for which Philby was hunting, so compensating themselves for the insults that they had had to bear. They also remember the sudden generosity with which Philby rewarded a guide whom he had found informative by the high standards that his mapping demanded.

After the barren wilds of Philby's route south from the upper end of Tathlith, the Wadi Najran looked a paradise—green, peopled, prosperous. He was back on a motor track manned by soldiers and police, and was expected. Fortunately for his private plans, the Amir of Najran, Ibrahim al Nashmi, was an educated man—a former merchant from Qasim who had distinguished himself in Ibn Sa'ud's wars. He was interested in everything in the wadi—its farming, its defenses and, to Philby's surprise, its antiquities. He accompanied Philby round its settlements; he encouraged a visit to its small Jewish community—a relic of the sixth century of our era, when South Arabia was ruled by a Judaising king; he went with him to investigate its chief piece of evidence of ancient greatness, the ruined city of Ukhdud.

In the course of these excursions, Philby broached his Shabwa project. He did so diffidently, as the military post at Najran was in daily wireless communication with the King and he feared that Ibn Sa'ud would forbid it. Maybe the Amir said nothing; at all events, he furthered Philby's end. He lent baggage camels and promised a small escort of Saudi troops. The only bar to starting at once was that Najran had run out of gasoline. During the detour via Tathlith, Philby's three vehicles—his car, a pickup and a lorry—had between them averaged only 7½ miles per gallon on their way across country. He meant to take the first two on to Shabwa, where the going might be rougher still. There was nothing for it but to await enough fuel to get them there and back. He had to wait a month for oil lorries to turn up from Mecca.

King Ibn Sa'ud, photographed in Basra, 1916, by Gertrude Bell.

The party that the Amir waved off from Najran at the end of July consisted of Philby's own chauffeur and servants, a dozen Najrani camel men and eight Saudi soldiers from Najd. Philby was uneasy because it had no guide or *rafiq* from farther south, but the Amir said that he had fixed up a chain of men to meet it at each well, and to Philby's surprise, all the promised guides turned up. Also to his surprise, the way was marked. It did not, as he had expected, cut across the corner of the Rub' al-Khali, but left this to its east and went along the foothills of Yemen. It had been a route for generations; near each well was a symbol carved on some rock—a sign like a bucket, with dots denoting the number of paces to the water. When they turned their backs to the mountains and struck east on a long run across the desert, cairns appeared, marking a onetime pilgrim route. Thus guided, the party reached hills and the seemingly inexhaustible wells of al-Abr, where thousands of goats were being watered, and herdsmen offered them a good meat meal. While his men slept this off, Philby climbed the hill above the well, and from it saw a sight that quickened his ambition. An array of cliffs and headlands stretched southeast from where he stood; he could see that in the distance they formed the north bank of the Wadi Hadhramaut.

But Shabwa was his first goal, and the view south towards it was more daunting. Below him lay the great sandbelt called the Ramlat Sabatain. Not only was it uninviting; it was a no-man's-land, counted by the Yemenis as Yemen and by the British at Aden as the fringe of the protectorates that they were trying to pacify. His arrival with some Saudi soldiers was bound to give the impression that it was also being claimed by Ibn Sa'ud.

Tales of journeys that are known to have ended safely read so smoothly that their hazards are difficult to assess. On this plunge into the unknown, even Philby felt a qualm:

> The physical exertion of desert travel is as nothing compared with the nervous strain—especially in the desert borderlands where tribal loyalties can never be taken for granted. In fact, we met with nothing but friendliness—a striking tribute to the desert's fear of the desert King—but each day's success had to be paid for by the anxieties of the night before.

Striking across the Ramlat Sabatain, the party spent in its sand wilderness one of the most uncomfortable nights that he could remember. The wind howled; dust devils danced around them; flying sand made eating impossible; the cars were half buried by morning. They got them out by brute force, and his own car, forging ahead, reached Shabwa by afternoon. The place looked so melancholy as to be hardly worth the trouble.

Among fallen walls and the crumbled remains of temples and dikes stood a line of villagers, squalid, silent and bristling with

Left: A Saudi Arab party in the Najd in 1918. Above: A view up the Wadi Haradha, 1917. Right: Crowds in Mecca during the 'Id al-Fitr celebration in 1931, and new Fords in Wadi al-Ula the same year.

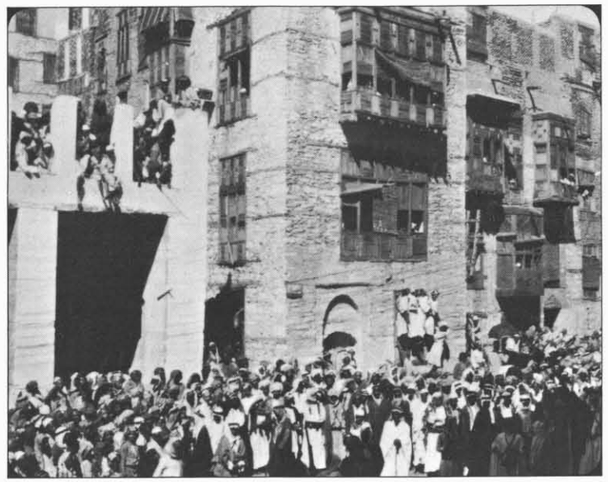
rifles. There were only seven men in the Philby car and 'I confess that I felt distinctly nervous.' The line of men stood motionless until Philby, unarmed, went forward to greet them. Then a leader, without a word, pressed him back towards his companions. Still in silence, the whole line wheeled and passed before them, greeting them palm to palm and 'kissing the intervening air with an audible intake of breath.' To their astonishment, they had passed muster.

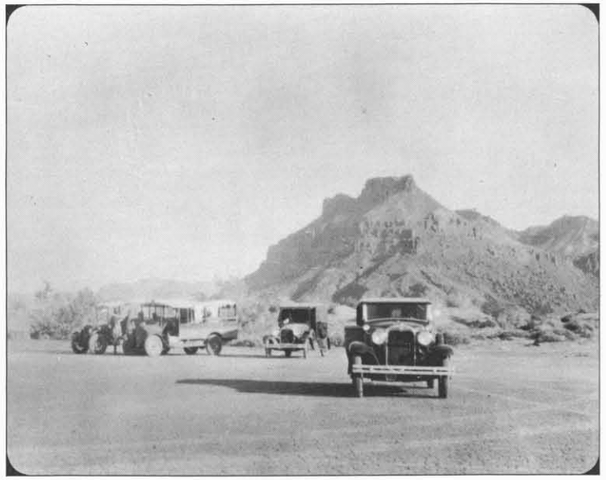
Shabwa's inhabitants lived, they told him, in a state of feud with all their neighbors. No one had visited them or invited their allegiance. With one eye on the Saudi soldiers, they went on to ask questions that were only to be expected. How secure was the peace farther north? Did Philby think that Ibn Sa'ud would come and bring them protection? (After a dose of occupation by Yemeni troops, they said much the same about British protection to a British officer, Colonel R. A. B. Hamilton, when he arrived with a tribal force to clear the Yemenis out in 1938.) Philby confirmed that the King was great, but otherwise promised nothing; saying that he was a private traveler, he puzzled them by his pastimes. For three days in early August he inspected their ruins and bought bits of their rubble. He visited their only asset—some salt mines that Arab historians mention as being worked in medieval times. Then, leaving behind his camel men, who would go no farther, and two of his Saudi soldiers to guard a dump of his belongings, he made a dash along the south side of the Ramlat Sabatain, bent on seeing the Wadi Hadhramaut while in its neighborhood.

Once there, his jaunt became a holiday. Predecessors, among them van der Meulen, his companion von Wissman, and more lately Freya Stark, had photographed and mapped the wadi and described it in books for the common reader. He need only sight-see. In 1936, though claimed by the British as a protectorate, it was not yet pacified by the officials who arrived soon after Philby's escapade, and its society was an odd mixture of ancient and modern. Some parts were riddled with blood feuds, and rifle fire resounded between house and house; elsewhere great towns flourished—their houses small skyscrapers, the richest of which had been built by local merchants who had made fortunes in Java. Down side alleys lived their cousins, as often as not still in loincloths. Once Philby had paid a few formal calls, he was passed from family to family, and enjoyed luxuries such as libraries, beds with mattresses, iced water and delicious Javanese *rijstafel*. He counted himself welcome everywhere, and was made so for the variety and entertainment of his talk. He himself thought that his chief asset was the evidence he provided that the Pilgrimage could be safely made by car. When questioned, he always denied that he was Ibn Sa'ud's emissary, but his praise of all that was happening in Saudi Arabia suggested the opposite, and his escort of six armed Saudi troopers was thought to prove it. Stories of his visit that his hosts later retailed to British officials show that they took him for a spy. He puzzled them on many counts: 'Who was this Christian who prayed like a Muslim?' they asked.

He enjoyed himself in their company but for two disappointing discoveries. One was that he had been forestalled at Shabwa. One host showed him a book by a German photographer, Hans Helfritz, who had got there a year before him; he consoled himself with the thought that Helfritz and his camera had been chased out after only half a day. The other discovery was that he had a rival. In Shibam he met a fellow-explorer called Norman Pearn, who was bound for Shabwa and other ruins on the incense route of the ancients, armed with all sorts of permits and introductions from Aden. For weeks Philby was plagued with anxiety lest Pearn would forestall him in the British press. In fact, Pearn never got to Shabwa. Speaking no Arabic, and abandoned by his guides in mid-desert, he nearly died of thirst on his lone walk back into the Wadi Hadhramaut.

Philby meant to turn back from the easternmost of the great towns, Tarim, regain Shabwa before the end of August, and thence to make straight for Najran to tackle the frontier mapping job for the King. He had undertaken to his men to be back at Mecca in time for the Pilgrimage, so had to finish it before February. Through ill-luck his immediate plan miscarried. When the two cars turned about and set off westwards, the pickup, overloaded with men and Hadhramauti wares, first fell behind and then broke its back axle. Philby, summoned back, hunted the wadi for a replacement, but without success. What was





he to do? A single car could not tackle the desert route back. Either he must plod to Najran by camel, or else get to the nearest telegraph office, which was at Mukalla on the coast, and cable to Aden for a new axle. He made up his mind at once, for he had thought of a consolation prize. If he motored to the coast, he would be the first European to cross Arabia from north to south by car. The main snag to this solution was that leaving Saudi Bedouins on their own in a strange town would be bound to make them restless, and quite likely a nuisance.

He dismissed this anxiety and, taking only his chauffeur and a servant, turned his car towards the sea. From Tarim, a track of sorts climbed the steep side of the wadi; beyond, the local family that had built it had bribed the tribes along its way to let traffic through. Unfortunately for Philby's record-breaking aim, it was not complete. He had to walk 10 miles through a rocky gorge full of tropical trees and pick up a hired car for the last few miles. But he had as good as performed another unique feat. He reached Mukalla on the last day of August in a complacent frame of mind. He cabled to Aden for the spares, and got an answer that jarred him. The spare part would be sent by the first available boat, cabled the acting Resident, Colonel M. C. Lake, but what was he doing in British territory without permission and with an escort of 'a party from a foreign government'? A week later Lake, obviously after consulting his bosses in India and telling London, cabled more peremptorily:

> I am instructed by His Majesty's Government to request you to withdraw your Saudi armed party from the Aden Protectorate.

The content of this telegram, which was sent clear [uncoded], was soon known all over Mukalla. Philby's temper rose. His welcome there had from the start been lukewarm, both because the Sultan was away and his underlings feared to take responsibility for a stranger, and because boat owners saw his propaganda for Pilgrimage by car as a threat to their seaborne traffic. Once the town knew that the British were not pleased, merchants refused to cash his drafts for money. Since he was a prisoner till the axle came, he answered Lake's telegrams gratefully and politely; he even mentioned that he hoped to go back through areas south of Shabwa. But he waited in mounting dudgeon. He was always short-tempered when bored, and at Mukalla he had nothing to do but scribble articles to send to Dora to be placed 'before Pearn spoils our market.'

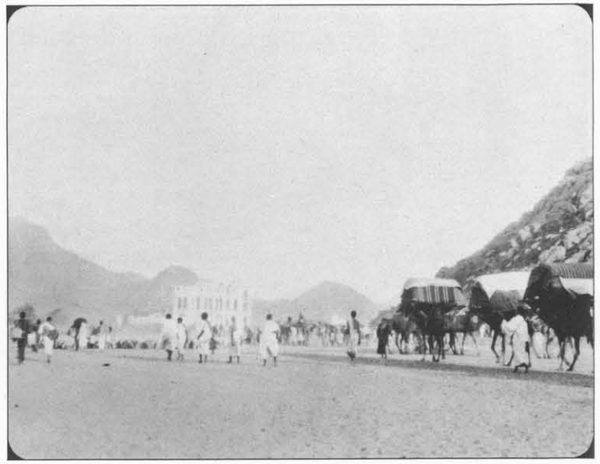
At last the spares arrived, accompanied by a warning that he must leave forthwith and on no account venture into more British-protected areas. He set off north at once, but when thanking Lake for his help could not resist venting pent-up annoyance by adding a quip:

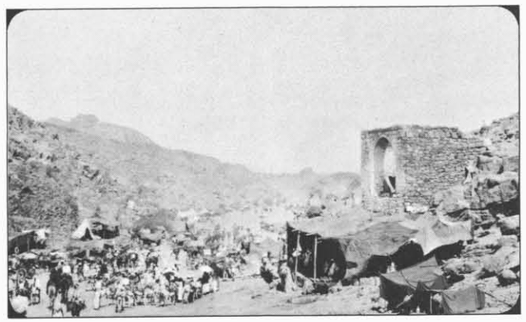
> Leaving today for advanced G.H.Q. to superintend evacuation of occupied territory.

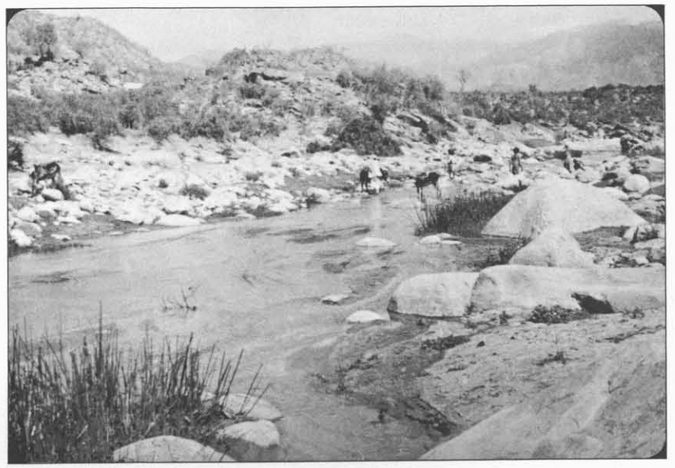
Naturally, Lake was infuriated. Not only had his authority been flouted; it was being mocked by a man who had been an Indian Civil Servant and knew the rules. The gibe also came ill from a man who was a byword for furthering Ibn Sa'ud's cause and attacking the British Empire. Telegrams flew between Aden, India, London and Saudi Arabia. The Saudis were able to say that Philby was paying for his own trip, and to disclaim responsibility; nevertheless, Ibn Sa'ud was annoyed about the incident, which embarrassed him in the course of other negotiations with Britain.

Philby, out of reach and oblivious of the fuss, had the axle fitted and left the Wadi Hadhramaut at once. Though he was by now in a hurry, he was so annoyed with Lake that, when he got back to Shabwa and found that desert gossip had spread news of his visit and that shaikhs farther south had invited him to call, he determined to do so. He was bent on showing Lake that he could travel with impunity in territory that the British might claim, but did not control, so set off into forbidden territory.

In his dudgeon, he here spoke much more freely of Ibn Sa'ud's virtues than before; he also took it upon himself to promise his hosts exemption from dues at the next year's Pilgrimage. This deliberate trespass southwards was the worst of his offenses. But he always counted it a triumph because in its course he made one of the major epigraphical discoveries of his career. Within 10 miles of Shabwa, he was shown the Uqla rocks, which are covered with formal inscriptions celebrating a royal ceremony at ancient Shabwa, till then unknown. He was well pleased with himself







Left: Cars negotiating Saura Pass at the head of Wadi Dhiyaigi, and a caravan of camels with pilgrim litters, both in 1931. Above: A view of the pilgrimage, near Mecca, 1931. Right: Looking up Wadi Dahwan toward Birkhan Ridge during the frontier mapping in 1936-'37.

when he rejoined his party and set off for Najran.

A return trip dotted with familiar landmarks is never as exciting as the journey out. Philby, to vary the trip and add to his map, took a line most of which lay to the south and west of his outward course, and, so doing, traveled closer to the Yemen mountains. When he turned north along their flank, he passed between ridges crowned with ruins—pillbox forts, graveyards, paving stones along crests that he took to be sacred ways. These he guessed must belong to the great Sabaean civilisation that had its capital at Marib in Yemen. If only he could inspect Marib, his cup would be full. His chances of examining it closely were nil; the Imam of Yemen forbade all visitors; in any case the pickup had by now finally collapsed, and his car and the camels were both in poor condition. Yet a devil drove him to try to see it. Telling his men to take a rest while he hunted gazelle, he left them at a well called Masuda, and taking only two men whom he thought that he could trust to hold their tongues, he struck into Yemen in his shaky car. They were in luck; they met no one and the car held together. They reached a ridge from which they could look down on Marib's ruins and its once-fertile plain, and Philby sat there for two hours, wishing that he dared to inspect it at closer quarters. For once, prudence set in; to the relief of his men, he contented himself with the peep, and scurried back to Masuda and on to Najran.

The desert is a sounding box. Someone talked; the Imam of Yemen found out, and once more angry telegrams flew from Foreign Office to Foreign Office, this time from Yemen also. Philby would have much to answer for to Ibn Sa'ud by the time he got back. In the King's eyes, he made some amends for his misdemeanors by the excellence of his frontier maps. The British and the Imam had no such compensation, and both put black marks against his name.

The journeys along Saudi Arabia's southern frontier that Philby made in the King's name between October 1936 and February 1937 were as arduous as any he undertook. His letters describing their trials match the perils listed by St. Paul to the Corinthians. His car was useless in such country, and he had to take to muleback and to his legs. Winter had set in. Climbing up and down between 5,000 and 8,000 ft., he was bruised by rocks and tortured by chilblains. He got boils and bouts of fever. Lower down, this turned to malaria; he was lamed when he impaled his foot on a hidden stake in a streambed, and caked in salt when he had to wade from marker to marker in the coastal salt-marshes. Yet he persevered. He could not rest, or he would break his promise about the Pilgrimage. He was 50, and driving himself at this pace told on his physique.

By one means or another he contrived to visit every boundary post except for two long gaps in the highest mountains: in one, the knife edges were too sharp to tackle; in the other, tribesmen took his party for government officials out to collect fines and vanished, leaving him in hostile country without hope of picking up a guide. Each of these gaps he conscientiously filled as best he could by rejoining the boundary and traveling back along it till he could see the lie of the land between him and his last checkpoint. He knew that he needed to justify himself to the King.

In parts, the route had charm, or at least was novel. As he trekked down to the coastal plain at Jaizan, which he made his headquarters for his three final assaults on the foothill frontier, he came across scenes and human types never met with in the rest of his Arabian experience:

> The garden of Eden must be very like this valley [he wrote to Dora from the Wadi Baish] and the human beings one meets from time to time might have stepped straight out of Genesis, naked except for a loin-cloth and sometimes a rifle, and with very fuzzy greased hair. All prefer walking to riding... and drink from the brook whenever they are thirsty. When tending goats on the hillside they sit so still... that one doesn't notice them unless they move or speak.

He heard shepherds piping their thin tunes and was reminded of Greece; some of the birds that he saw were so new to him that he bestirred himself to catch them. Down in the plain, he met men more like Africans than Arabians—living in beehive huts, tilling in pointed straw hats, and walking with a stick across their shoulders and their wrists hooked over either end of it, as do the Danakils across the Red Sea to keep arms away from body for the sake of coolness. He tried chewing their *qat*, the drug that Ethiopians also chew for comfort, but got no pleasure out of it.

Jaizan is a sad place. It lies seaward of a salt-marsh and is ugly, mosquito-ridden and humid. He sped in and out of it with no zest for anything but getting his arduous assignment finished. Though seldom lonely when traveling, his eight months spent almost entirely without educated company seemed for once to make him so. When two cases of home mail and newspapers caught up with him on an exacting stretch of foothill frontier, he noted that:

> For that afternoon and night I was not in Arabia. The joy of such an occurrence cannot be imagined by anyone who has not experienced it.

To add to his sense of isolation, his wireless batteries were giving out. Before they did so altogether, he picked up the abdication speech of Edward VIII; but he missed his radio less for the world's news than for loss of the accurate time signals that it picked up from Jerusalem or Europe. Without these he could not take star observations or fix his positions; he therefore judged it useless to return via Abha and through the highlands. He must go back by the flat, humid and dreary coast.

From Jaizan to Jiddah is more than 400 miles. There is no road north from Jaizan. He decided to use a donkey, his men and baggage accompanying him on camels. They must cover 30 to 35 miles a day if they were to arrive on time, and Philby's fatigue was the greater because this humdrum end to his toils was an anticlimax. Sometimes he was feverish; sometimes his spine felt as if it would not hold him upright. Each monotonous day, the camel caravan started first, but he rode faster:

> As I have no light until it arrives, I generally lie down to rest and sometimes even to sleep . . . dozing, as by the time I get in I am pretty tired with the back-breaking strain of sitting on a trotting donkey . . .

By sheer willpower he got the party home by the promised date, but he personally was never more thankful than to see the King's Rolls Royce parked in a grove at Lith, waiting to whisk him to Mecca.

One of the ironies of Philby's longest journey was its end product in the no-man's-lands that he had proved were what they ought to be—independent and free. He had filled in their blanks on the physical map of Arabia, but had revealed them to be blanks on the political map also. As a direct result of his travel with impunity, neighbors woke up and stepped in. The Imam of Yemen invited their tribes to come under his rule, and, when the Shaikh of Shabwa answered that he had enough visitors, sent men to occupy the place. Similarly the British in 1937, after turning Aden into a crown colony, began to establish order in its hinterland. They sent administrators and levies and airplanes to north and east—Ingrams to the Hadhramaut, Hamilton to eject the Yemenis from Shabwa, squadron leaders to map from the air and pounce on tribesmen out of the blue.

The Saudis saw the connection between cause and effect. Their Deputy Foreign Minister Fuad Hamza mentioned to the British Minister in Jiddah that critics were sometimes of material assistance to the government they criticized; witness the increase of British control in the Aden protectorates following Philby's visit. The British saw it too: 'I think that he [Philby] and his like are good for us,' minuted an official, 'in that they compel us to try to forge armor that will not have any chinks.' But Philby, who never saw any point that he did not wish to see, prepared to lecture his countrymen on unfairness to free Arabs, without pause for thought on the part he had played in triggering Britain's forward policy.

In any case, there was no time for reflection on return to home and office after eight months away. With the Pilgrimage to perform, the King to pacify, quarrels between his office clerks to settle, telegrams from Dora to deal with (one reporting 'funds exhausted'), commissions from the *New York Times* to accept, and invitations to lecture in England to answer, he did not draw breath. Within days he was rested and cock-a-hoop, brimming with his epigraphical discoveries and sharpening his pen for a brand new onslaught on the British Government for secretly cheating remote Arabs of their birthright.

LAST BOATS TO TABQA

To see the historic Euphrates before the Tabqa Dam blocked it forever, five river runners took the...

WRITTEN BY CARLA HUNT
PHOTOGRAPHED BY NIK WHEELER

It was our fifth day on the Euphrates River. The current, sluggish but dependable, coursed through a network of channels which looped around low spits of mud and islands of baked clay and rock. Because there had been little rainfall the past winter, the river was flat and placid and half-hidden bars of silt created endless detours, not anticipated when our maps, charted at high tide, were prepared. But as each detour eventually threaded back into the main stream, we were always somewhere identifiable, if often downstream, from some historical site we had planned to visit.

That day, our photographer, Nik Wheeler, did not have to hop in the boat with his usual question: "And what is our destination today?" Although our location was often more a matter of consensus than verifiable fact, the night before we had seen a horizontal bar of light to the south which meant, we hoped, that the Tabqa Dam was not too far ahead. Soon that spectacular dam will mean power and irrigation for vast areas of Syria, but on that May morning it meant our first bath in five days. Or so we thought.

We had learned that hurrying down the Euphrates was useless. Even the not exactly reckless pace of our three-and-a-half and nine-horsepower motors could run us into unseen mud banks, so we drifted along in our usual fashion: five travelers in two rubber boats lashed together, perched atop camping equipment, scanning the banks of this historic stream and nibbling the sandwiches that Jackie Drucker, a mother of three, a tennis champion and boating enthusiast, had just passed around with her daily blessing: "An army marches on a full stomach." Kamal Farajallah, a Lebanese

sportsman and our combined interpreter and handyman, was assessing the odds against our two little motors remaining operative for the trip's duration; Fred Drucker, an American lawyer living in Beirut, a veteran of Colorado's white water, and our captain by default, was detaching an untouched lure from his line; Nik, an ex-UPI photographer, was juggling cameras and sandwiches. As for me, wife of an NBC correspondent and aspiring free-lance writer, I was jotting down notes on the scenery. Then, suddenly, there was the dam stretched hugely across our downstream path. We paused to look at it.

The Tabqa Dam, since completed, is the largest earth dam in the world. Close to 1½ billion cubic feet of sand and gravel went into its construction; it stretches 2.7 miles across the north Euphrates River Valley; it stands 196 feet high; its thickness at the base measures a whopping 1,680 feet. Behind the dam there will be an artificial lake 49 miles long, with a surface area of 243 square miles. Fed into giant turbines, this immense volume of water will eventually supply Syria with 1,100 megawatts of electricity—close to 14% of the capacity of New York City. And piped into the country's agricultural areas it will irrigate 1,580,246 acres of land.

To build the dam 12,000 Syrians and 700 Russians worked in shifts 24 hours a day and with their families comprised a dam-site community of 40,000 people. Their work, completed last summer, means that man, for the first time since antiquity, can impose significant controls on the mighty Euphrates. It also means that Syria, with power to spare, will eventually be able to proceed with a long list of needed economic and social development projects.

None of us had known any of that when, in Beirut, six months before, we first hatched the idea of trying to canoe down the river from the Turkish frontier to the Iraqi frontier before the dam was finished and some of the most historical areas in the world disappeared forever under its waters. Nor had any of us actually seen the Euphrates. We had no idea how long it would take, how swift or how deep the water, or, indeed, if boat travel was even possible.

Preliminary research provided a few undisputed facts: the Euphrates is 1,400 miles long; its headwaters begin near Lake Van, in northeastern Turkey (*Aramco World*, March-April, 1973); it flows southward through Syria and joins the Tigris in lower Iraq. We learned too that the Turkish sector of approximately 430 miles seemed unnavigable by any sort of boat but that the remaining 960 miles appeared to be passable.

We had to piece together what the river might be like. Written information was scanty and contradictory, but we read it anyway: historical reports of Roman garrisons manning their lonely river outposts, diaries from British civil servants en route to India by camel caravans to Baghdad, obscure college theses on Bedouin migrations and the 1925 edition of Cook's *Travel Guide to the Middle East*. We also had some mid-term reports helpfully produced by an ancient history class at the American Community School in Beirut and the memoirs of Englishman Ralph Fitch. Fitch made a 16-day voyage on the river in 1583 carrying letters from Queen Elizabeth to the Grand Mogul and Emperor of China. We also had a dismaying report from Colonel Francis Rawdon Chesney who was sent out by England in 1831 to explore the possibilities of establishing a commercial steamship route on the Euphrates. He lost 21 men and a 103-foot steamboat when a freak tornado came swirling across the desert (*Aramco World*, March-April, 1969). While his report did not encourage England, it did us; we decided that if the river could float steamboats it could take the small boats we were considering.

Having finished the reading, our gallant menfolk concluded that somebody had to go to see the great river in person—somebody like Jackie and me. So we went to a river town called Meskene hoping we might rent boats, since we had brilliantly surmised that hauling boats 140 miles from Lebanon might pose a few difficulties. But a marina Meskene was not. So it was on to a place called Jerablus where, eventually, we would embark. Again no boats. Jackie then went to the seaport of Latakia to check the possibility of taking fishing boats overland. Still no. They were too heavy to haul without a truck. So it had to be what Ole Cap'n Fred, the only experienced river runner among us, had been advocating right along: inflatable rubber boats. A few weeks later we located two such craft and carefully moored them in the Druckers' sixth-floor living room in Beirut. One was 10 feet long, the other 13 feet, and we should have them paid for by 1980 easily.

Next we had to rent some motors, borrow tents, sleeping bags and a Primus stove, buy food (various gourmet basics such as rice, Spam and peanut butter) and such essentials as a magnetic chess set, a harmonica and a Scrabble set. Then all we had to do was get permission.

To get permission we began to commute to Damascus—50 miles away. We went so often that we got on first-name terms with the frontier guards. We began with the Tabqa Dam officials, who had always been most helpful to writers and reporters interested in seeing the dam project. The gentleman who received us was politely certain that we were mad, but agreed that what we planned was a fine idea. *Ahlan*! (Welcome!) We never saw him again. Then we proceeded to the Ministry of Tourism, where another cordial man agreed that a boat trip on the Euphrates was excellent travel promotion. *Ahlan*! But we never saw him again either. Over at the Ministry of Information, the skepticism was stronger. However—*Ahlan*! Maybe! Last, to the museum director who gave us an excellent briefing on Islamic culture along the river valley.

Subsequently, of course, we had to submit a few details: letters, photographs, biographical résumés, equipment lists, camera specifications, transportation registrations—all requiring copies in English and Arabic. But finally the okay came through and we scheduled our launching for the next Saturday.

Then, at the last minute, disaster. On Thursday, 48 hours before departure, Damascus called to say that the dam officials had withdrawn their *ahlans*. A flood had made the river too dangerous and the director general thought officials would be too busy to receive us. Never mind, we said, we'll just paddle by and bother no one, okay? Impossible. Could we see someone from the Ministry of the Dam? That someone is in Beirut. Ah-hah, we'll find him. We found him. Okay? Not okay—unless Official X would take the responsibility. Off to Damascus went our trusty captain with a notarized document signed by all of us absolving anyone concerned of any responsibility. Okay? Well, no written permission but "in principle," okay.

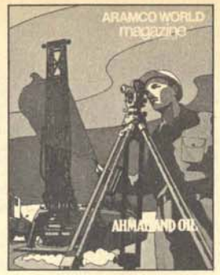
continued on page 29

AN ARAMCO WORLD INDEX

COMPILED BY EILEEN OLMSTED

In anticipation of *Aramco World's* 25th year of publication, we include in this issue a selective index chosen from articles which have appeared in the magazine since 1949, the date when the first issue appeared. As the magazine was originally an internal publication, few of the early issues contained information of interest to the scholars, writers, journalists and teachers who make up a large part of the magazine's present circulation. For that reason this index focuses primarily on material carried in the last 15 years.—*The Editors*

INDEX OF CONTENTS



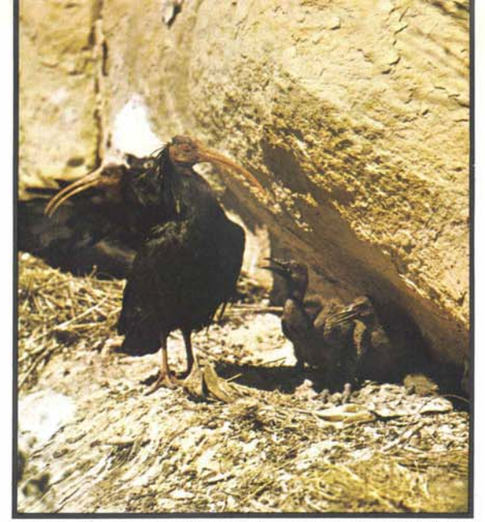
Eileen Olmsted studied library science at the University of California at Berkeley and was a part-time librarian at the American University of Beirut for four years.

He's rare, he's ugly, he's on the edge of extinction.

THE IBIS OF BIRECIK

WRITTEN BY ROBERT ARNDT

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ROBERT ARNDT AND UDO HIRSCH



An adult ibis with two chicks on the dangerously narrow nesting ledge.

The town of Birecik is a small cluster of cream and brown cubes bunched on the east bank of the Euphrates River in southeastern Turkey. Upstream from Birecik, the river tumbles along a steep and rocky gorge; below the town it flows gently through a wide floodplain toward Syria. Birecik, and the old fortress it grew up around, defended the mouth of the gorge in ancient times, and the town now marks the northern limit of a natural climactic anomaly that could make it a place of pilgrimage for naturalists. Animals and plants are found there that 'belong' much further south or in much warmer climates: a river turtle that is otherwise known only in the Ganges, a white-edged bat whose habitat is usually southern Egypt.

But climate is not Birecik's only anomaly. On a narrow ledge in the 60-foot limestone cliff that arrows diagonally through the town, nests one of the world's rarest birds, a species that, in this variant, now breeds only in this one spot in all the world: *Geronticus eremita*, the bald ibis. Like the town itself, many of whose houses are built into and onto the buttery beige stone of the cliff, the bald ibis too has its back against the wall, and it is only the heroic efforts of a team of three young conservationists, and the backing of the Swiss-based World Wildlife Fund, that give some gounds for hope that the world's last bald ibis colony will survive.

The object of so much concern and attention is a remarkably ugly bird with a proud past. Goose-sized, the bald ibis is shiny black, with a barely visible rusty patch on the wings. It has a long, red, down-curved bill, gawky legs and an embarrassing pink and gray bald head. On the back of the head and hanging down the neck is the crest of long narrow black feathers that earns the bird its alternative name of crested ibis.

This bird was part of the stone-age fauna of a wide mountainous area of southern Europe, fossil finds show, and was recorded —and recognized as a type of ibis—by a Roman official traveling in the Alps during the first century A.D. Known by the dialect name *waldrapp* (woods raven) in Bavaria, Austria and the Swiss Jura, the bald ibis was one of the first—and most energetically—protected birds in Europe, since by the 16th century its nestlings had come to be a delicacy that, in theory, was reserved for the tables of the rich and powerful. Terrible-tempered Archbishop Leonhard of Salzburg published the first decree protecting the bird in 1504, and the fact that his edict was repeated almost annually thereafter shows that common people shared his taste for the squabs.

Ultimately, too many people and too few squabs led to the bald ibis' total disappearance in its European range. Within the course of a single century, the bird was so well forgotten that naturalists of the 18th century believed it to have been as mythical as the cameleopard. They argued that earlier naturalists like Switzerland's Konrad von Gesner, who had published a drawing and description of the bald ibis in 1555, had been either hoaxers, or hoaxed themselves.

Thus when a wandering ornithologist discovered a huge colony of bald black-crested birds in Syria in 1854, they were treated as an entirely new species, and it was not until after 1906 that this bird was finally accepted as being the same species as Gesner's waldrapp and the Roman prefect's "local ibis species." In the meantime, the Birecik colony had been discovered in passing by an English ornithologist in 1879, and though he was unable to count the birds, there must have been at least as many as in 1953, when an accurate count showed 1,300 birds—perhaps 500 brooding pairs.

The bald ibis never reached such numbers again. By the time the Birecik colony had been discovered, the Syrian ones had been destroyed — perhaps intentionally — and Birecik's own ibis population was declining dangerously, thanks in part to the introduction of crop-protection pesticides into the area. In 1967, only 50 ibis pairs nested; in 1970, 36 pairs; and in 1972, only 26 pairs, and the total population of the colony had declined to some 60 birds. It was at this point that Turkey's well-known bird painter Salih Acar, his conservationist wife Belkis, and Udo Hirsch, a young German ethnologist and wildlife photographer, learned how close these rare birds were to extinction, and moved to protect them.

They moved on several fronts at once, alerting friends and scientific acquaintances in foreign countries, making a preliminary report to the World Wildlife Fund and to the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, compiler of the Red Data Books of endangered species, and—most important—establishing Udo in Birecik, in a house within sight of the ibis' brooding ledge, to undertake two parallel lines of research. Should the conservationists' efforts to save the bald ibis as a free-living species fail, Udo's observations would provide the only available behavioral data on the bird in the

Left: Nests are made of grass, twigs, plastic scraps and mud. Right: This pair nested on the new wooden extension of the stone ledge.

wild, data which—valuable enough in itself—might, if worst came to worst, permit the preservation of *Geronticus eremita* in a zoo until, someday, it could be re-established in the wild.

The other object of Udo's research was to determine what it was that was killing off the bald ibis, and what efforts might help to save it. His first conclusions assigned the blame to two probable causes: pesticides causing inefficient and non-adaptive nesting and mating behavior, and the configuration of the narrow nesting ledge itself.

"Generations ago," Udo pointed out, "the bald ibis built good deep nests—we know that because its eggs are very round, not oval, and roll easily. Today, the ibis nests in Birecik are nests only by courtesy—they're flat bunches of twigs, plastic-bag scraps and grass, and one good kick by a startled adult bird can easily throw an egg out of the nest and right off the ledge. The same is true of nestlings: as they squabble for food the smallest are often bullied out of the nest and fall 40 feet. They're either dead instantly or a cat finds them later. And Birecik's children throw rocks at the birds for fun, so a lot of eggs and chicks are lost in the uproar that causes in the colony." Udo clawed his red beard and flipped through a journal. "Last year, of all the eggs laid in the colony, 86 percent were smashed, or the chicks were killed before they were fully feathered. There's no species that can stand up to losses like that—20 to 30 percent would be a normal rate."

With the Acars, and with the WWF's financial help, Udo planned his intervention. Since the birds were too unadaptable to move them to a safer nesting site, the group decided to make the present site safe. In Birecik, they hired stonemasons and scaffold builders, and increased the depth of the ledge 50 to 150 percent over most of its 200-foot length, then added a wooden platform to widen a section where stone-cutting was impossible. The work was finished just as the ibis returned in March from their winter quarters. To greet them the town of Birecik revived an ancient custom and celebrated their return with an all-day festival.

Widening the ledge proved a success: the 26 pairs of ibis that nested were undisturbed by the alterations, and during the brooding season's first half, smashed eggs came to less than 20 percent of the number laid. With cooperation from a large pesticide producer who offered to make a substitute crop spray for the Birecik area that would be less harmful to the bald ibis, it seemed that the chances of the birds' survival had jumped from 50 to 1—the Acars' original estimate—to 50/50.

At the same time, Udo Hirsch's photographs and Salih Acar's magisterial public relations talents had made the bald ibis the subject of numberless Turkish newspaper and magazine articles and of a quarter-hour report on Turkish television. So well known had the bird become that television quizmasters made jokes about it, and long-distance telephone operators across the country recognized the name of Birecik.

Unfortunately, the Bireciklis themselves, whose help is most essential if their bald ibis colony is to survive, now pose the greatest threat to the birds. The rooftops of some of Birecik's cliffside houses now reach to within five feet of the birds' nesting ledge, and the human and bird worlds intersect only with some friction. "Flapping laundry scares the birds," cites Belkis Acar, "and the birds leave droppings on the laundry. Then, people sleep on the roofs in summer, and the birds' noise and mess makes that unpleasant. The higher housetops interfere with the ibis' flight patterns, too." As a result, Udo's and the Acars' exertions have not been able to convince the Bireciklis to protect the bird and tolerate it: three quarters of the 1973 egg and chick losses were due directly to human interference.

"This is how it goes," Salih Acar said a little wearily. "Nature conservation comes down to a question of *people*. We know how we can probably save the bird. World Wildlife gave us the money we need for the first steps, and they've promised help in finding the $200,000 more that will finish the job. We have the cooperation of the National Parks Department of Turkey—though not of some of the other arms of the government. But unless we get the help of Birecik's human population, the bald ibis will be extinct within three years."

Salih Acar is right, and there is no telling whether he and Belkis and Udo Hirsch can win the Bireciklis' help and cooperation in time to save this unique, ugly, stubborn bird from extinction. But the hope exists, and the effort is being made, and perhaps —only perhaps—the tale of the Birecik bald ibis will turn out to be one of conservation's rare success stories.

Robert Arndt, who free-lances from Istanbul, has followed the fate of the bald ibis for two years.

LAST BOATS TO TABQA continued from page 10

In principle. Hmm. Shouldn't it be in writing? Well let's see. Most Middle Eastern countries do require permits, don't they? But we have permission from everybody. In writing? No, but permission. True. Hmm. Okay, we'll go. An hour later we left.

We had hoped to get to Aleppo the first day and we would have if—if the car had not broken down twice, if all the papers did not have to be redone at the border, if we hadn't forgotten to get a Lebanese export license for our boats and if we had not had to post a $300 customs bond in cash.

Even so we were only eight hours late and only mildly upset to discover that the Baron Hotel was full and that only the incredible hospitality of Koko Mazloumian, proprietor of the Baron, kept us off the streets—by making up beds for us in every corner of his own home.

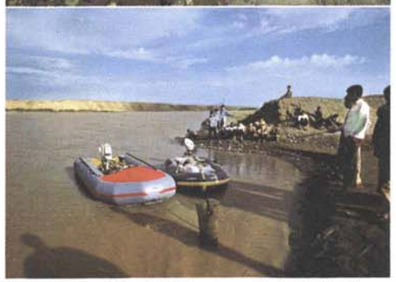
The next morning we set off again surrounded by some 50 or so bystanders—one a boy selling Chiclets who went home a hero after we purchased his entire supply for gifts to children we might meet along the river. We set off gaily, rather pleased that after six months of planning and problems we were only one day late and only two hours away from the river. Or so we thought.

Three miles before Jerablus, two military guards courteously escorted us to our first rural police station. *Ahlan*! The captain served coffee while Kamal told him in flowing Arabic of our wonderful forthcoming adventure. They all agreed that our trip would be interesting, but ah, please, the permits? Permits? Well, we don't actually have them in *writing*, of course. We have permission "in principle." Ah, "in principle." Well, unfortunately . . .

Only Koko Mazloumian didn't seem surprised when we checked into the hotel in Aleppo again late that afternoon and philosophically decided to celebrate Jackie's birthday while we waited for our permissions to be verified. We dined out on *haleb kebbab* and exchanged toasts with those eating in the small restaurant.

The next morning, after Koko and a certain Aleppo major (bless them) had looked into things, we set off again. Along the way we waved gaily at the check point and finally—finally—got to the Euphrates. There, on a low hillock near the river bank, we pumped up the boats, loaded five-gallon containers of drinking water and gasoline into them, piled tents, food and cameras on board, scrambled on ourselves and drifted quietly into the current.

. . . then began their slow odyssey down the Euphrates River.



The river runners inflated their boats near the Turkish frontier. . .

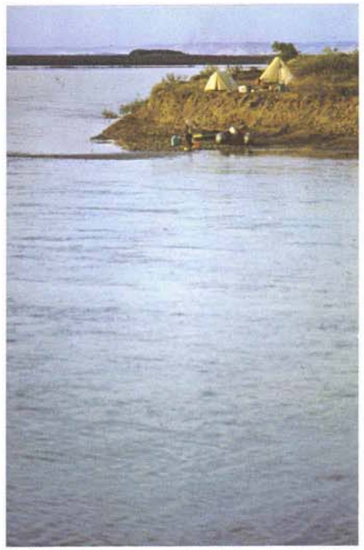
Coming ashore downstream at sunset, they landed in deep mud.

* * *

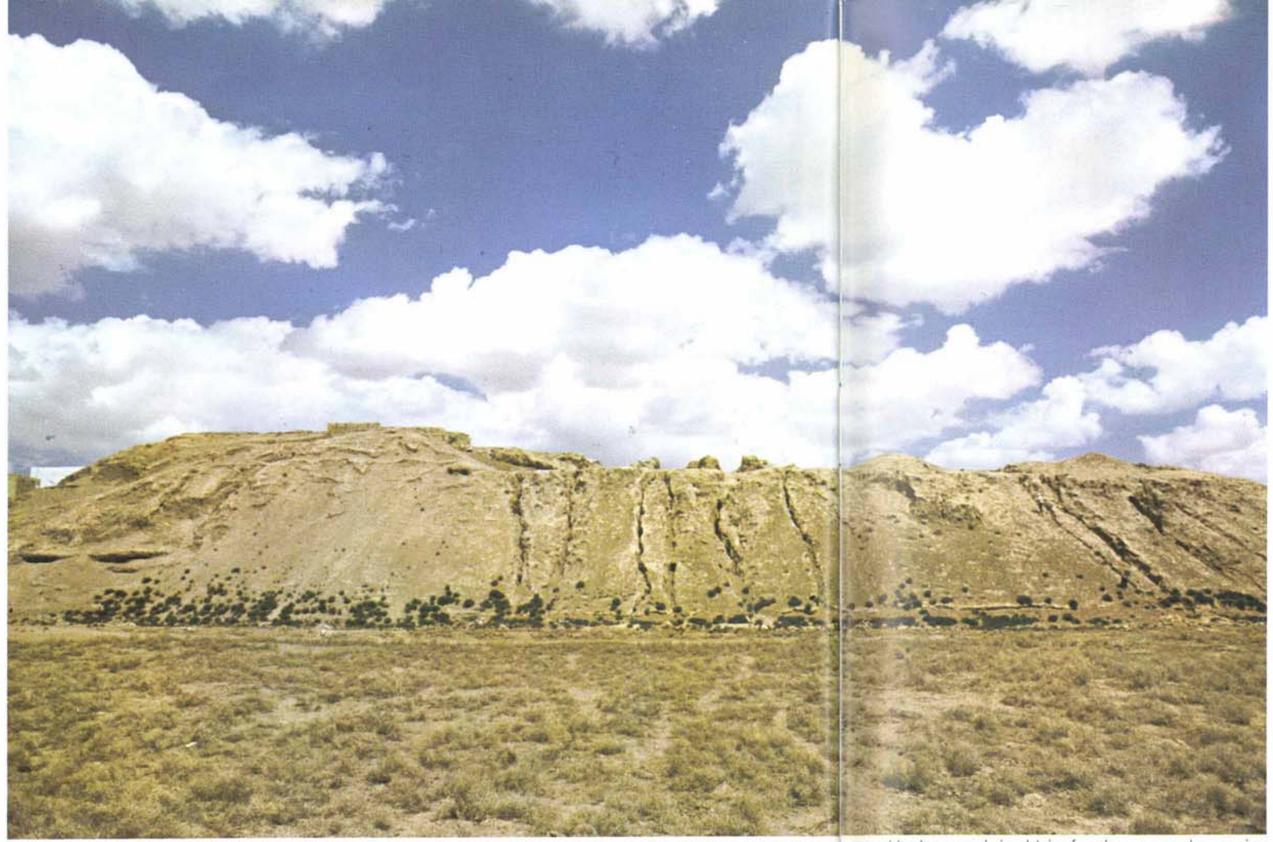
For a long time we traveled in silence, chipping mud off our legs, savoring the isolation, letting the tensions of the past days fade and basking in the calm majesty of the Euphrates, elegant in the muted purples and pinks of late afternoon. Except for a great variety of birds darting and calling, there seemed to be an overwhelming absence of life, of movement. The banks were tranquil, the current strong but invisible.

As the Jerablus bridge—and the Turkish frontier—disappeared behind us, the broad river began to divide into branches around islands usually covered by water in the spring. There was a constant choice of which way to go around the islands and great difficulty in differentiating between a jutting extension of river bank and an isolated island. At sunset we opted for what we thought was a sandy beach. Actually, there is no sand along or under the Euphrates. If the land is dry, it is either dust or clay. If it is wet, it is mud—as Nik discovered when he jumped ashore to photograph the first of a series of inept landings and sank to his knees. I went in even deeper and had to be laboriously and ignominiously hauled out.

Our first night set the pattern for the rest. We landed in mud, pulled the boats in as far as possible and began carrying the equipment to the highest part of the island. Jackie and I would set up the kitchen, the stove downwind, dinner to the right, breakfast to the left. Fred and Kamal would put up the tents and distribute sleeping bags and personal clothing within. Nik would disappear with his cameras while the light was good. Although he always gathered firewood on the way back, there's a lot to be said for being expedition photographer.



The first night the voyagers set up their camp on an island.



Tell Ahmar, about a mile from the present riverbed, is typical of the scores of tells in the Euphrates Valley. Tells are artificial mounds created by the accumulating debris of settlements over the centuries.

At Tell Ahmar landing, a cable-guided barge ferries herds across the river while author Hunt tows the rubber boats through shallows.

A freak squall (precursor of a twister spotted later) drenched the group soon after they bought—not caught—a 15-pound river fish.

On the first evening, dinner was served rather late. Plates were in one pack, salt in another. The corkscrew was missing and the honey jar had broken. Of the five new flashlights—a different color for each person—only two were operative. Jackie and I giggled over the daily menus planned long ago, then used them to kindle the fire. In the distance, we could see the faint lights of the Jerablus bridge and above, the stars—clear, close and almost personal.

Breaking camp the following morning was no more efficient than our arrival the night before; it took us three hours to get back on the river. Then, after about 20 minutes, Kamal, Nik and I in the flagship detected a hissing sound. Our wonderful new boat, described in the brochure as almost puncture-proof, seemed to have sprung a leak. We decided to land. When the smaller boat caught up, Fred disclosed that he too seemed to have a leak. But as we examined the boats, we realized that the hissing noise was all around us. The waters of the Euphrates, for whatever reason, have hissed through history.

Nik, meanwhile, had walked down-river in the first of several frustrating attempts to catch us gliding by in neat nautical formation, but as a result we nearly lost him. While the Euphrates never seemed to move fast, it was a real effort to move across the current and, even with motors, nearly impossible to go against it.

For the next hour we pored over our maps, trying to orient our position. Just as we concluded that we needed help we rounded a point and saw some people gathered around a pump which lifted water from the river to a small village on the upper slope. This was the first of the pump stations which appear every few miles or so along the river and with which Syrian farmers irrigate their fields.

When we pulled into the river bank, the women and children of the village turned out to greet us and Jackie and I began the first of many baby inspections while young boys raced off to find fresh bread and eggs somewhere amid the square baked-mud houses whose window slits stared down at the river like narrow eyes.

Our next stop was Tell Ahmar, a busy crossing for a river which could hardly be described as teeming with activity. As we approached the muddy landing area, a bus was heaving itself onto a barge to cross to the opposite bank. Because of the low water the landing was about a mile from the hamlet and we had to hike to it.

Tell Ahmar is a typical of the tells in the Euphrates Valley, the artificial, man-made mounds created at the rate of about five inches each one hundred years by the accumulating debris of settlements that are periodically abandoned—because of famine, pestilence, war—then collapse under rain or the annual floods and are reoccupied and rebuilt. There are hundreds of tells in the river valley and by slicing through the layers of these high, shapeless mounds, historians and archeologists have been able to reconstruct 5,000 years of continuous civilization. At Tell Ahmar the stone walls of an old fort crown the hill and as we scrambled up to see it rocks and pottery shards cascaded down the steep sides. At the top is the shell of an ancient palace and a cluster of huts.

The second morning the boats began to pass riverside villages.

By the time we returned from our first archeological hike, our pockets heavy with bits of pottery, the barge had delivered the bus and returned for a cargo of sheep. We sailed off, gulping water from our canteens and applying our first thick coating of suntan lotion.

Small villages began to appear along both banks, some high on cliffs and tells, some on the slopes nearer the river, tracks and roads threaded behind them like smoke from chimneys. We also began to see occasional shepherds outlined on high bluffs.

We were so intent on watching the water that it was startling to suddenly find a stone fortress towering over the river, a forlorn, deserted sentinel evoking images of adventure, endurance and conquest. It was Qalaat Najim, which I had never heard of, but since it fitted the description of Qalaat Jabar (which turned out to be a good 108 miles south) we pulled up on a stony island to eat and see if we could visit the castle. We decided we couldn't and it was just as well. During lunch the sky turned yellow and a north wind came up, whipping sand over our camp site. It got so bad we had to anchor everything down and wrap our heads in khafiya—an item no traveler should be without, easily adaptable to skirts, boat sails, umbrellas, bandages, tablecloths, pillows. Just as we uneasily concluded that we had a tornado making up, the gale passed over.

Back on the river, we saw a single cloud in the clear sky. It raced towards us, came to rest directly overhead and let us have it. The Euphrates area has an annual rainfall of three inches; two fell on us during that half hour. All available coverings were spread over maps, cameras and sleeping bags. Just behind the curtain of driving rain, the sun shone on the dry hills and continued to warm the castle, now too far behind for us to backtrack. The cloud moved on and we moved out, only to watch it shift into reverse and douse us again, leaving the water level in the boats almost equal to that outside. Not even the weather conformed to our pre-trip research. As we began to bail, the sun came out and we found that we were sparkling clean, that the newly washed air was fresh and exhilarating, and that the river bank was teeming with partridges and black terns.

(The next day we had an even worse scare. What in the distance appeared to be the spiraling smoke from a large factory, soon turned into an immense twister which veered from our path only at the last minute to wreak devastation in another quarter. Comparing notes later on, we found that all of us were sure we were facing the same kind of storm which wiped out nearly half the Chesney expedition just over a century before.)

Since the steep river banks provided no camping space, we opted that night for an island campsite, dug a pit and cooked a 15-pound fish that a fisherman had sold us just before the deluge. Yes, 15 pounds and it's not unusual. In the Euphrates one fish of 202 pounds has been caught and verified—which was 202 pounds more than anything Ole Cap'n Fred caught in five days of determined trolling.

On the third morning the river passed beneath high chalky cliffs.

In the afternoon the group reached Tell Mumbarqa, where German experts and Syrian workers were racing dam waters to uncover the past.

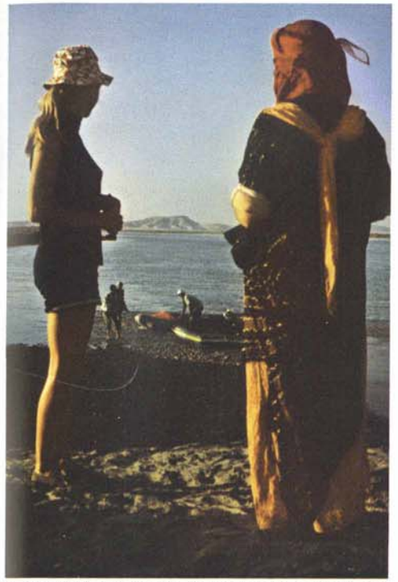
The next morning we managed to shave an hour off the time gap between fresh oranges with coffee and the morning launching. By then, the third day, we were quite at home on the murky, hissing Euphrates. We had learned that lashing our boats side by side was a faster way to travel and an easier way to serve lunch. We had learned the art of loading the boats for comfort, arranging packs and equipment into chaise longue seating, with individual canteens of tea and water an arm's length away. Nik had a special seat as far forward as possible for crew-in-action photos; editors love crew-in-action photos.

Ahead was a long day's journey into the archeological zone of the future Tabqa reservoir. But you don't hurry on the Euphrates. You lie back, sunbathe and check the hourly BBC news reports. (On that day the news was hardly soothing. Back in Beirut, where all our families were, serious fighting had broken out and the Syrian border had been closed.)

The chalky cliffs that morning were perfectly beautiful, one section spotted with swallows apparently gathering for a regional conference. The perfect place, we decided, for a crew-in-action sequence: four people paddling swiftly in stroke, combatting the forces of nature, retracing the paths of antiquity. To heighten the effect we thought it would be helpful to launch Nik and camera on an air mattress for a river's eye view. Unfortunately, the mattress went spinning off in the current and it took us half an hour to retrieve Nik. Then we put him ashore opposite the cliffs and waited until he'd walked far down the central island. Action? Camera? Well, almost. In the middle of the countdown we realized, almost too late, that the current was going to sweep us past the island before we could retrieve poor Nik. Abandoning the scene, we paddled mightily for shore and just caught the tip of the island in time to avoid having to leave Nik a castaway on an unnamed Euphrates sand spit.

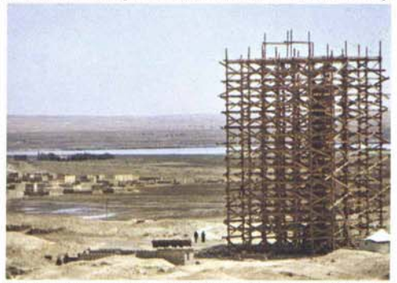
In the afternoon we came upon several gaping, rectangular excavations in the side of a huge tell. It was Mumbarqa, not the most northerly of the sites being excavated, but the first one we'd found. The excavation architect, one of a German team from the University of Saarbrucken, invited us to join the group for tea at quitting time, and, until then, to roam about the enormous tell.

The excavation team with the assistance of 60 local workers, had done an amazing amount of digging in a short time. They had already cleared the Islamic and Byzantine occupation layers and were going deeper, soundings having indicated that below the temples already uncovered may be another dating from around 2800 B.C. Dr. Orthmann, the director, showed us a beautiful Sumerian artifact—a clay fertility goddess—and over tea briefed us on the valley sites in general and Tell Mumbarqa in particular. It seemed that the biggest problem in working on the east bank was keeping the local ferry in working order to carry the supplies from Aleppo. It hadn't crossed in five days, so we left them the

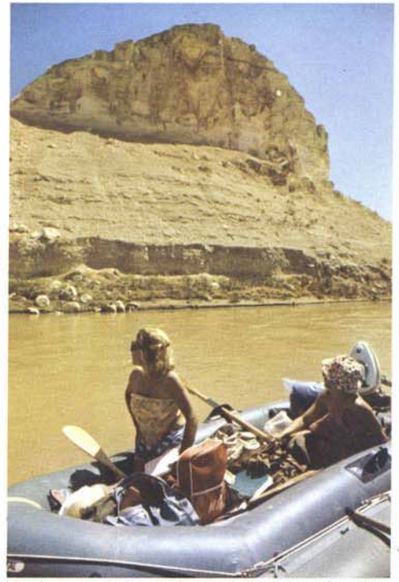


At their third-night campsite the travelers met a river family.

On the fourth morning the boats came ashore at Meskene landing.



Near Meskene a historic minaret is being moved to high ground.



Later in the day the boats drifted by monumental rock formations.

remaining two thirds of our huge fish.

One effect of the stop was to pinpoint our location. As we had way overestimated our progress, we used the motors the rest of the day, pushing to reach Meskene before nightfall. At dusk, Nik spied a lovely campsite looking toward the sun setting over the cliffs. The location was far enough ahead for us to begin working out of the current for a perfect landing. As we were tacking a man came off the island in his *karakul* and recommended a shelter at the far end of the island. We tried it, found that the shelter also housed our new host and his considerable family, and decided to try driving the boats back upriver to our original spot. Halfway there, the force of the river brought them to a standstill, the overworked motors smoking and an overturned can of oil gurgling into the boats. Since our host immediately assigned a work force of wives and children to help us unload the boat and clean up the oil, it was our turn for hospitality and our guests watched fascinated as Maxwell House freeze dried turned instantly into coffee and a white powder became milk. Jackie and I then ran shifts in receiving a seemingly endless parade of children shyly presented for our approval. The babies were indeed marvelous—all in colored satin caps tipped with gold ornaments.

Next morning, Nik again hiked downstream to photograph the two boats passing in review—this time opposite a picturesque island to the west. Again, his intention was frustrated when I surrendered to an irresistible compulsion to engage in a race with Kamal and Jackie in the other boat—and raced right past him before he was ready. Poor Nik began to feel that bad seamanship, unpredictable currents and distaff whims were in clandestine conspiracy against his efforts to secure this particular photograph.

By noon the next day, the river's high escarpments gave way to flat farmland and we arrived at the river crossing which serves Meskene, a town that once stood by the river but now, because the Euphrates has shifted course over the centuries, is several miles from the water. To get supplies we found a taxi and bounced along a rutted road to modern Meskene. The provisions available were limited but the trip was worthwhile because we discovered that a famous octagonal minaret was only a few miles to the south. The minaret, standing like Prometheus Bound above the river valley, is one of the historical monuments that Syria will move before the dam begins flooding the area. It was then imprisoned by a wooden grid of planks supporting platforms and ladders; the view from the top was spectacular. It was to be cut into seven sections and reassembled on higher ground.

On our return to the landing, we refilled the gasoline cans, and embarked again—this time to the music of Captain Fred's harmonica. As we passed beneath the citadel of Dibsi Farji, Kamal joined us in a chorus of "My Darling Clementine" while cleaning the sparkplugs with a paper nail file. Along the way we saw a large town across the plain and guessed that it was Abu Hareira, also famous for a minaret. Like the one at Meskene, it was scheduled for dismantling much the way Abu Simbel was dismantled. We asked several people where it was stored. One source said it had been taken to Meskene to stand shoulder to shoulder with its fellow minaret; another said it was packed for Jabar, a third advised that it would be a landmark at Tabqa. I hope they have found it by now.

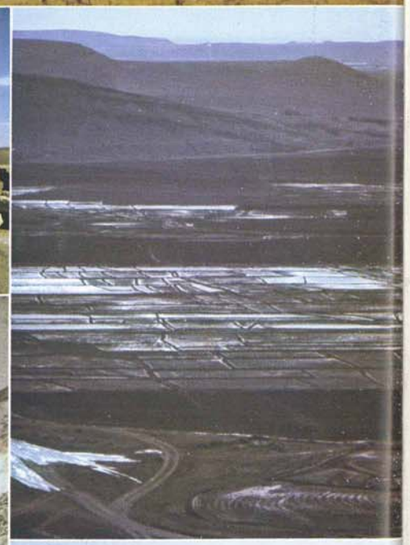
As the Jabar castle needed the earliest morning light for photography, and no boat of ours had yet hit the river before eight o'clock, we crossed to the east bank searching for a campsite close to the castle. Thinking he could pull us ashore, Fred jumped overboard and instantly sank to his belt line in mud. He hung on to the boat, and we to him. He finally maneuvered us onto a narrow, less gooey strip from which we formed a human chain, ferrying supplies from boat one to boat two, hand to hand up the embankment to the bluff—at which point Nik returned from a sunset reconnoiter with the last nine eggs in Jabar and the galling news that there was

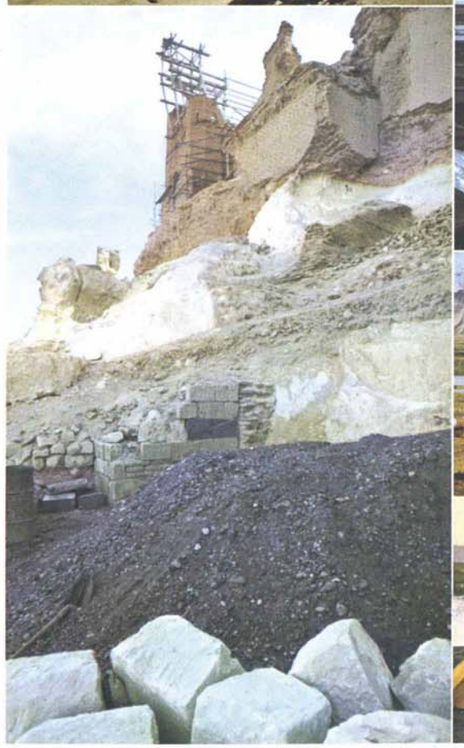
At Jabar, a tiny Turkish enclave marks an Ottoman sultan's tomb.

a nice firm landing just over the nearby levee.

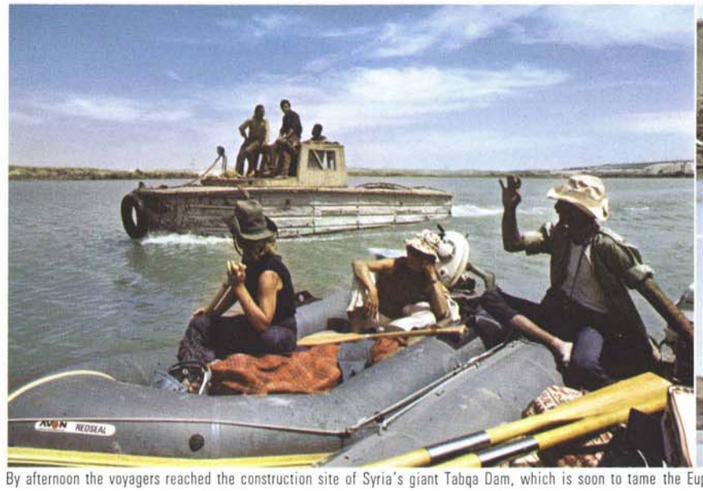
Maximum effort had us all finished with breakfast by six the next morning. Nik and I started off across the dry, crumbly fields to the Jabar road, following a pipeline made up of gaily painted oil drums soldered together. About two miles before the fortress, we came to a white stucco wall which encloses the last few hundred square yards of the Ottoman Empire: the tomb of Suleiman Khan, a former sultan who drowned in the Euphrates at this point. To visit it, we were astounded to hear, you were supposed to have a Turkish visa to get in and a new Syrian visa to get out. As there wasn't anyone around to verify this interesting item, we peeked through the barbed wire to see two low white buildings, a volleyball court and a red and white Turkish flag flying over all. We were later told that the military guard is supplied and rotated by a helicopter which lands every month in the compound and that the Turkish Government is not pleased at the idea of the Euphrates rolling over the sultan again, nor is anyone enthusiastic about transferring the tomb and its distinguished occupant elsewhere.

We walked another quarter hour up the steep track to the top of the cliff where the entrance to the citadel cuts a tunnel through the rock. About 100 workers were assembled for roll call as we puffed up the steep ascent. We continued up the main keep to the first





Early the fifth morning the river runners climbed the towering Jabar citadel for a view of tomb, irrigated fields and their campsite.



By afternoon the voyagers reached the construction site of Syria's giant Tabqa Dam, which is soon to tame the Euphrates and flood much of the area they had traversed.

of nine towers which remain standing, walked along the massive brick Byzantine walls, crisscrossed the rail tracks which carry small cars to dump the archeological debris beyond the enclosure. From the minaret perched on the summit of the citadel we could see the new dam to the south and Fred to the north, stopped at the Turkish enclave. I thought maybe a "yoohoo" would carry down the valley to indicate our whereabouts. It did: the workers thought this was the most amusing noise they'd ever heard and a full chorus of yoohoos filled the air. It also attracted the attention of Salim Karimly, excavation director, who guided us through a temple being cleared, then down a rope ladder into one of the castle's cisterns which is now the resting place for a Roman sarcophagus from another tell.

Jabar is not only a spectacular ruin but one of the three Arab monuments being preserved and restored by the Syrian Antiquities Department. This one will be unique, for its towering position will keep it well above the water backing up behind the dam. The citadel will crown a natural island on which the government plans to build tourist accommodations.

And then at last we came to the Tabqa Dam, Aswan of the Euphrates, and what, as it turned out, would be our last day on the river.

At first all went well. One or two of the Tabqa boats motored out to look at us. The workers on the sluicer, which looked like a Mississippi Riverboat, began to gather at the rail as we pulled into a small cove. As we were tying up, a lovely aqua-blue camper bus carrying the vanguard of the Tabqa public relations team came to greet us—*Ahlan*! We were to be driven to headquarters to meet the director. Leaving Kamal with the boats, off we went, weaving up the side of the vast man-made escarpment. At the top was a good-sized town (recently renamed Al-Thawra, "revolution"). Wide paved streets with signs in Arabic and Russian took us past government buildings, schools, stores and residential areas where, 10 years before, goats and camels grazed in quiet isolation. It was an impressive project.

After being interviewed by the public relations staff we were delivered to administration headquarters where the Deputy Director of the Dam congratulated us on our success in reaching Tabqa and authorized rooms, meals and a guide for the duration of our visit. *Ahlan*. After a fledgling public relations representative and the project photographer joined us, we were dropped at the main dining room for an excellent meal. It was, as Jackie said later, "the last supper," because by dessert we were again in trouble.

It started with the now familiar suggestion that our "in principle" permission was unfortunately not enough. These were troubled times. Perhaps you would secure papers from the provincial chief? Certainly, but where? In Raqqa, about 30 miles south.

Fred tried to call one or more of our original ministerial sponsors in Damascus and when he couldn't reach anyone we were asked to wait. While we waited, and debated possible courses of action, Jackie sterilized a needle to remove a thorn from her finger, I filed my nails, Nik lamented the absence of our Scrabble board, and we all worried about Kamal. No one had seen him since lunch. Time went by. Finally, about nine that evening, Kamal appeared, whereupon we were all escorted to two jeeps packed to the roof with our equipment. As we drove off, wondering, if perhaps we might be under some form of detention, Jackie began to cheer us up with speculations on the quality and quantity of food in jail.

About midnight we got to Deir ez-Zor, a lovely old Arab river town far downstream. We stopped before a rococo wrought-iron gate which opened onto elegantly landscaped gardens. Ah, we thought, a hotel! But it was the district military headquarters (an attractive military headquarters, but still a military headquarters). The district commander welcomed us cordially and offered juice. Another man came and began to question us. Did we enjoy traveling in Syria? What were the most interesting sites

we had seen? Whom did we meet along the river? Then he wanted to know what we all did in real life, and was delighted to find that Fred was a lawyer—a colleague! He, it seemed, was president of the Deir ez-Zor Bar Association. And also, we sourly decided, the local D.A.

After a cordial hour, however, we began to relax. Somebody had obviously talked to somebody. Sure enough we were soon sent off to a hotel where an enormous meal was miraculously delivered to our floor. As we ate it we reviewed what had happened and decided that without that damned permit further boating was unlikely. But could we, perhaps, finish the story by following the highway overland along the river to the Iraqi border? Why not? said the Major the next morning, and put a driver and Land Rover at our disposal for the day with an Arabic version of "Leave the driving to us."

Our nocturnal safari had taken us to a more tropical part of Syria. The steep cliffs of the upper river had given way to a wide, flat flood plain. The water barely slid over the shallow mud shoals as it slowly wound around the maze of tamarisk-covered islands. Cultivated land widened into fields of cotton and occasional citrus groves. The river people were consolidated into groups of farmhouses in the shade of palm trees.

About 12 miles out of Deir, across the river, we could see the oasis of Buseire, the junction where the Khabur River joins the Euphrates and once a major stop-over on the caravan route to and from Palmyra.

Mere minutes south of Deir a castle appeared on an isolated jebel jutting from a flat plain that sweeps to the river. The castle was identified by our soldier-scholar-driver as Qalaat Ali and the plain that of Siffin, the site of one of the most famous and portentous battles in Islamic history. Here, on July 26, A.D. 657, the warriors of Mu'awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan, on the point of defeat by the forces of the Caliph Ali, raised copies of the Koran on their lances and halted the hostilities. The truce or arbitration which followed led to the Umayyad caliphate which endured, with its capital at Damascus, until A.D. 750 The peaceful fields of Siffin today belie the significance of that battle which forever divided the Muslims into competing sects of Sunni and Shi'ah.

We eventually turned off the paved highway and followed a desert track to the ramparts of ancient Dura-Europus. To the left were the remains of a once triumphal arch, and to the right, two mounds of former funeral towers. From the 3rd century B.C. to the middle of the 3rd century A.D., trade caravans and military detachments entered through the main Palmyra Gate, the only one opening to the desert. Access gates from the river side have been washed away by the Euphrates.

Dura is initially impressive because of its isolation in a great space. Once inside the massive walls, you are overwhelmed by a vast site whose total area forms a desert of its own of over 150 acres. Poking up from the desert floor are brick and stone shells of buildings whose walls were once covered with vivid wall paintings. Within the enclosure were the remains of a temple of the Palmyrene gods, a Persian shrine, the House of Christians, a synagogue, the Temple of the Roman Archers, the temples of Artemis-Nanaia and Atargates. Dura was certainly an ecumenical town.

The group later visited Raqqa (above) and Mari (right) by land.

Next was Mari, a great artistic and commercial city of the Sumerian Empire nearly 5,000 years ago, and the center of a civilization allied with Babylonia 1,000 years later. You don't have to look up at monuments in Mari; you look down into a labyrinth of trenches, some long and straight, indicating streets which connected any number of temples built and re-built, one above the other.

Six miles south of Mari we came to Abu Kamal near the Iraqi border, and the place where our river voyage was to have ended. Well, it was certainly faster and more comfortable to zoom into town on wheels, particularly on those of a military vehicle which cleared the traffic in record time. Our driver, now guide and friend, beeped us through the market, and past rows of wonderfully painted trucks, lined up to cross the ancient caravan route to Baghdad.

On the way back we serenaded the countryside with a wide variety of musical selections, delivered in a somewhat shaky four-part harmony.

The next morning we stopped to pay our grateful respects to the Major and to present him with two tokens to remember us by: one of our choice Italian salamis and an essential ingredient for mint juleps. Then back upstream, to Halebiyeh, a fine fortress from the Byzantine period, thence to Raqqa to which the Abbasid Caliph, Harun al-Rashid, journeyed all the way from Baghdad every summer.

We drove past the Baghdad Gate, the last well-preserved architectural remnant of the ancient city's ornate entrances, to the mud-walled enclosure of the old town. Inside, a handsome wall with many arches is all that still stands from the palace, and a brick minaret towers in the center. Next to the minaret was a small whitewashed hut with a green door, guarded by a very elderly gentleman. We didn't try to go in, but a passerby from Raqqa explained that a special sect guards this shrine, consisting of a square entrance room and another round room decorated in Koranic graphics. There the holy tomb rests covered in green satin. He did not know whose tomb it was.

And so it ended.

In Aleppo we rejoined Kamal, who had collected our gear in Deir ez-Zor, and went on to Hama, Homs and Damascus. Recognizing our anxiety to rejoin our families in Beirut, the authorities graciously gave us permission to leave immediately, despite tensions in Beirut and closed frontiers. So, leaving our boats, tents and packs there, we dashed for the border, our adventure over.

It is now months later. The Syrian border has reopened. Our boats and equipment have been retrieved. Our expedition has scattered. At Tabqa the dam has sealed off the Euphrates and the lake is forming, its waters covering forever the sights and sounds of a trip that I am sure was the last of its kind on that most ancient of rivers.

Carla Hunt, wife of an N.B.C. correspondent, spent several years in the Middle East during which time she worked with the Middle East Sketch, *an English-language news magazine.*