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ARCHAEOLOGICAL NOTES ON THE EXCAVATION OF A PITHOUSE NEAR PRESIDIO, TEXAS

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THE VALLEYS of the Rio Grande and Rio Conchos within an eighteen mile radius of their junction near Ojinaga, Chihuahua, form an archaeological area of considerable importance.¹ Here are found the remains of eight or more large Indian villages, and innumerable smaller sites. For the most part the sites represent a cultural development embodying a considerable prehistoric, and a well documented early historic period, with cultural and ethnic extensions into modern times. The first European to visit and describe the people and culture of the area was Cabeza de Vaca in 1535.² Further descriptions were given by several successive Spanish explorers³ and Spanish missions were founded there as early as 1684.⁴ Spanish occupation of the region was apparently of no real significance, however, until after 1750.⁵ When the first American settlements were made in the Presidio neighborhood in

1. This is only the nuclear area. The area in which similar archaeological remains occur is much larger.

2. Fanny Bandelier, *The Journey of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca*, 1905, pp. 149-155.

3. Rodriguez Expedition, 1582; Espejo Expedition, 1582-1583; Mendoza Expedition, 1683-1684; Trasviña Expedition, 1715; others.

4. H. E. Bolton, *Spanish Exploration in the Southwest*, 1916, p. 315.

5. C. F. Coan, *A Shorter History of New Mexico*, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1928. Pt. 1, p. 99.

the late 1840's and the early 1850's⁶ all outward evidences of the original Indian culture had seemingly been absorbed into the Mexican melting pot. Recent investigations, however, reveal a wealth of legend and folklore regarding the absorbed culture. In at least two instances Mexican villages have been located which are situated on the same sites and bear the same names as Indian villages described by Trasviña in 1715.⁷ Ruins of the Indian pueblos lie beneath the present Mexican villages.

The archaeological sites were first noted and described by E. B. Sayles in 1935⁸ and again in 1936⁹ in his reports on the surveys of Texas and Chihuahua carried on by the Gila Pueblo, of Globe, Arizona. Mr. Sayles defined the general nature of the culture rather clearly, including it under his "Jumano"⁸ and "Conchos"⁹ Phases. No clear distinction, however, was made between the two phases either as to content or chronological relationship.

Beginning in the spring of 1936 on my own initiative and continuing since June, 1937, in the employ of the Sul Ross State Teachers College of Alpine, Texas, and as a fellow of the School of American Research, I have pursued a program of archaeological, historical and ethnological research in the Presidio area.¹⁰ At the present time a

6. Clifford B. Casey, *The Trans-Pecos in Texas History*, West Texas Historical and Scientific Society, Publication No. 5, Alpine, Texas, 1933. Pp. 11-12.

7. Reginald C. Reindorp (Translator), "The Founding of Missions at La Junta de los Rios," Supplementary studies of the Texas Catholic Historical Society, Austin, 1938.

8. E. B. Sayles, "An Archaeological Survey of Texas," *Medallion Papers*, No. XVII, Globe, Arizona, 1935. Pp. 79-80; 84; 86; Table 7; Map E.

9. E. B. Sayles, "An Archaeological Survey of Chihuahua, Mexico," *Medallion Papers*, No. XXII, Globe, Arizona, 1936b. P. 84 (table 1) and p. 107 (map).

10. Mr. E. B. Sayles of the Gila Pueblo of Globe, Arizona, has aided considerably in the work by placing his own knowledge of the culture at my disposal. Both Mr. Sayles and Mr. H. S. Gladwin have also contributed financially to the project. Their aid is gratefully acknowledged.

fairly clear idea of the succession of culture in the area has been formed, but the details of the archaeological picture are and will remain quite dim until further intensive and extensive investigations produce more data. At the present it is thought wise to bring to the attention of archaeologists certain *interim* developments in the program.

The cultural sequence in the defined area appears at the present time to be divisible into three chronological stages having "phase" significance in the Gladwin terminology, or "focus" significance in the McKern system. The general similarity of the foci in many basic items, together with the differentiation of the entire sequence from others at present recorded, suggests the advisability of giving "aspect" (McKern) or "branch" (Gladwin) status to the general cultural lineage as expressed in the area as bounded above. The "phase" (McKern) or "stem" (Gladwin) affiliations of this aspect cannot be definitely determined with the data available, though general indications are that it lies eastward and northward. It is proposed that the general development be termed the Bravo Valley aspect, with foci in chronological order, early to late, called the La Junta focus, the Concepcion focus, and the Conchos focus. The earliest yet demonstrated or La Junta focus, is not well known, but is characterized in a positive sense by the inclusion of El Paso and Chihuahua polychrome wares as trade ceramics in the refuse deposits of the period, and negatively by the absence from the refuse of many artifact types characteristic of the succeeding foci. The obviously close relationships of this focus to the El Paso Phase of Sayles are not thoroughly understood at the moment. The Concepcion focus is clearly described by the early historical accounts of Cabeza de Vaca,¹¹ Gallegos,¹² Espejo,¹³

11. Fanny Bandeller, 1905, *op. cit.*

12. Hernan Gallegos, *Relation of the Expedition and Events Accomplished by Francisco Sanchez Chamuscado . . .* translation by G. P. Hammond and Agapito Rey, in the "Gallegos Relation of the Rodriguez Expedition into Mexico," Historical Society of New

and Luxán,¹⁴ and is very nearly identical with the Jumano Phase of Sayles,¹⁵ though lacking Spanish ceramics and other items of historical import. The term "Jumano Phase" is not retained, owing to grave doubts as to the validity of the implied ethnic association.¹⁶ The Conchos focus as defined by Sayles¹⁷ is retained intact with some additions suggested by subsequent archaeological and historical research. There is a possibility that a fourth and introductory focus, the Livermore focus,¹⁸ will eventually be added prior to the La Junta focus. It is realized that the present classification is highly tentative and that it will be open to revision and modification with the appearance of additional data. It offers at the moment, however, a satisfactory working framework for comparative treatment and is hence thought justified as a temporary tool.

Within the present townsite of Presidio, Texas, on the bank of an old channel of the Rio Grande lies a large archaeological site of the Bravo Valley aspect. For a distance of several hundred yards along the dissected gravel terrace forming the bank of the old river channel are scattered potsherds, hearthstones, and miscellaneous artifacts. Towards the southeast end of the site are large mounds, possibly kitchen-midden deposits connected with sites of

14. Diego Perez de Luxán, *Expedition into New Mexico Made by Antonio de Espejo, 1582-1583*, translation by G. P. Hammond and Agapito Rey, Quivira Society, Los Angeles, 1928. Pp. 57-63; 125-126.

15. Sayles, 1935. *op. cit.*

16. J. C. Kelley, *Jumano Relationships at La Junta de Los Rios*, unpublished manuscript, 1937.

17. Sayles, 1936b, *op. cit.*

18. This is known at present only from a stone industry, sandwiched stratigraphically between the Cave Dweller Horizons and the La Junta focus. The lithic technique represented is an abrupt change from that of the Cave Dweller horizon and introduces for the first time that which later dominates throughout the Bravo Valley aspect.

Mexico, Publications in History, Vol. IV, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1927, Pp. 14-21.

13. Bolton, *op. cit.*, pp. 160-180.

the large communal houses described in the early Spanish accounts.¹⁹ Excavation in the side of the kitchen-midden mound showed no apparent mechanical stratification of the refuse, probably indicating rather continuous and uniform occupation. Stratigraphic tests made in the same midden indicates that the site was occupied during both the La Junta and Concepcion foci and abandoned sometime during the Conchos focus, only to be reoccupied recently by modern Mexican and American families who now have homes there. Occupation of the site during the Conchos focus is indicated in the areas investigated by very shallow refuse deposits containing Conchos Red-on-brown pottery²⁰ and Spanish ceramics, all of which are diagnostic of that focus. The geographic location of the site together with its large size would seem to indicate that it is the village named "La Senora de Guadalupe 'of the Nations' Palacmes and Sibulas" cited by Trasviña as existing in 1715,²¹ and also possibly that village christened the pueblo of "Santiago" in 1582 by Luxán.²²

About one hundred feet west of the west end of the main midden-mound, Mr. V. J. Shiner, amateur archaeologist of Presidio, Texas, dug a pit some five feet in diameter to a considerable depth in the gravel terrace near the edge of the old river channel. Finding nothing of interest he abandoned his digging, leaving the pit unfilled. Examining this pit in June, 1937, I noted only the natural gravel and clay of the terrace exposed in the cut on the south side, but on the north side there seemed to be material suspiciously resembling midden deposit. About two feet beneath the surface on the north side was a horizontal line of ash and charred reeds containing burnt and broken fragments of clay. The burnt chunks of clay proved to be fire-hardened

19. Gallegos, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

20. E. B. Sayles, "Some Southwestern Pottery Types," Series V, *Medallion Papers*, No. XXI, Globe, Arizona; 1936a. P. 55.

21. Reindorp, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

22. Luxán, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63.

"mud-dauber"²³ nests, some of the cells still containing the cremated bodies of the insects. The surfaces of these nests were perfect casts of the original structure, a criss-cross of reeds and poles, to which they had been attached. With this obvious clue as an inspiration I began excavations which speedily revealed the house-pit of an aboriginal habitation. Since the house types of the Bravo Valley aspect have not been previously determined archaeologically, it seems important to record here the details of this structure.

The house pit as revealed by excavation was a roughly circular hole slightly less than twelve feet in diameter with a natural untreated earthen floor ranging from 27 inches to 30 inches below the present surface. The gravel terrace into which the pit had been dug lies from two inches to four inches below the present surface, covered by a layer of refuse. Since this refuse is continuous over the pit, the latter would seem to have been sunk into the original surface of the terrace and prior to the deposition of most, if not all, of the refuse at that particular point. Its original depth would, therefore, have been slightly over two feet. No traces of plaster or lining of any kind could be detected on the rough gravel sides of the pit. No evidence of the presence of a fire pit, storage pit, or any other floor feature was found.

On the floor of the pit lay large sections of burnt fallen roofing, still retaining much of the original form. In constructing the roof, poles ranging slightly less than an inch in diameter had been laid rather loosely together across the framework of the house, then covered by two layers of reeds running in opposite directions across the poles, and then by a layer of grass, corn husks, etc. There was some evidence that a light layer of sandy clay, and possibly occasional thin stone slabs, had covered the roof thus formed. Beneath the roofing and in places still attached to it was

23. Probably the genus *Pelopeus* and of the family *Sphecidae*.

a thick accumulation of the fire-hardened "mud-dauber" nests, the imprints on their surfaces amplifying and confirming the evidence of the roof construction obtained from previous study of the burnt sections.

The burning of the superstructure had reduced roof supports and framework posts to charred stumps barely projecting above the floor level. Since that time the portions of the posts beneath the surface which had escaped the fire have decayed leaving charred stumps above post-holes filled with soft woody earth. This made it possible to map accurately the position of the original superstructure posts.

Around the entire circumference of the pit at a distance of six to twenty inches from the pit sides was a ring of upright posts, averaging three inches plus in diameter. Ten of these posts were found, and one or two others probably existed in the section of the pit disturbed by Mr. Shiner's digging. Thus the outer ring consisted of eleven or twelve small poles irregularly spaced from each other and from the wall. These poles, as indicated by both the stumps and the postholes, were not set absolutely vertical, but leaned inward somewhat. No indication of the original height of the poles was found. The depth of holes into which posts had been set varied from seven to ten inches. Inside of the circle of small posts was a second series of four posts forming a rough quadrilateral, with corners oriented approximately northeast, northwest, southeast, and southwest. They varied from four to six inches in diameter and were set vertically into the ground to depths of twenty to thirty inches. Again, no determination of the original height was possible. About two feet from the southwest post toward the northeast but slightly out of line with the northeast post was a shallow post hole containing a badly broken, charred stump. This post hole was only a few inches in depth though of the same diameter as the four major support-post holes. The function of this

feature cannot be definitely determined, but it does not seem improbable that it represents the base of a pole ladder, as no trace of a side entrance could be found.

On the floor of the house were burnt mesquite beans, an occasional charred corn-cob, a few corn husks and stalks, and miscellaneous fragments of burned and broken animal bones. A few fragments of fresh water mussel shell were found also. Mixed with the roof debris was an ear of corn, burned while still on the stalk, with the shucks still in place.

Three mullers, of the one-handed variety, and a large pendant, made by drilling a hole through one end of a mussel shell, were recovered from the floor of the house. Just south and west of the northeast main post was a pile of several loose stones on the floor. Mixed with the stones were two mullers similar to the others, and a small well-made grinding stone of the type usually classed as a paint mortar. Testing of the floor, which seemed to be disturbed at this point, revealed the presence of a burial just beneath the floor level of the house. The skull lay directly below the pile of stones, undoubtedly a burial cairn, and only four inches beneath the floor level. The skeleton, that of an old male, was tightly flexed, on its right side, skull to northeast, and face to the west. There was no mortuary furniture within the grave, which was merely an unlined pit cut into the gravel. Slumping of the enclosing gravel had so badly broken the bones that no measurements were possible on the skeletal remains.²⁴ Since the burial cairn extended above the floor level, it seems probable that the

24. This is the only burial known to have been excavated and recorded by a trained archaeologist in the entire Bravo Valley aspect. At another large site of the aspect several burials were dug into and destroyed by vandals. The reconstructed skull cap of one of these gave a cranial index of 67, plus or minus. Another skull plowed up, apparently from a Bravo Valley site, by a Mexican farmer is hypsiceranial and brachy-cranial (Cranial Index 82.) and does not at all resemble the first skull cap mentioned. Both finds are of doubtful provenance.

house was burned immediately or soon after the burial was made. The lack of sand, silt, refuse, etc., upon the floor and below the fallen roof debris certainly indicates that burning of the house followed soon after its abandonment.

Directly upon the roof debris, which covered the floor to a depth of several inches, was a layer of culturally sterile clay varying from two and one-half to five inches in thickness. Above this was an unstratified layer of refuse completely filling the pit, and topped by a surface of wind blown sand, loose hearthstones and ash. There was no perceptible surface depression marking the location of the pit. Included in the refuse at varying depths were two mullers (depth 21" to 23"), two notched "sinker-stones" (depth 8" and 18") of the type defined by Sayles as diagnostic of both his Jumano and Conchos Phases,²⁵ one small arrow point (depth 12"), one potsherd (depth ca. 12"), one crudely shaped handaxe (locus uncertain), and one flint core (locus uncertain). From the surface came still another muller, of the same type as those on the house floor and those in the refuse.

The structure and its original contents probably can be associated with the Concepcion focus. The one potsherd found in the house refuse is of a brown ware appearing in the Concepcion focus and lasting well into the Conchos focus, where, in modified form, it shows strong Spanish influence. The refuse surrounding the house ruin shows wares of the Conchos focus on its surface, although the depth to which they occur is not now known. The arrow point is of no diagnostic value since the sequence of projectile point types in the Bravo Valley aspect is unknown. Notched sinkers seem to belong to both the Concepcion and Conchos foci and possibly appear as far back as the La Junta focus; hence they are of no great chronological

25. Sayles, 1935, *op. cit.*, Plate XXI, and Sayles, 1936b, *op. cit.*, Table 1, p. 84.

value. The other artifacts are of no diagnostic value whatsoever. The absence of European artifacts from the house, and from the refuse dumped into it, is possibly of significance, since the refuse attributable to the Conchos focus is usually very rich in artifacts of this sort. Early Spanish descriptions of pithouses in the area indicated that such were present in the Concepcion focus.²⁶ The complex described probably belongs to the closing days of the Concepcion for Rio Bravo focus, therefore, or perhaps as late as part of the Conchos focus.

Features of the pithouse are strongly reminiscent of both Plains and Southwestern structures of similar nature. The pithouses of the Bravo Valley were described by Luxán in 1582 as "flat roofed houses half under and half above the ground,"²⁷ and again as "flat roofed houses in their fields where they reside during harvest time."²⁸ If this description refers to the same house type as that revealed by the excavations we are able to understand the arrangement of the posts in the archaeological structure. Such a supposition seems entirely legitimate on a tentative basis. Unless the entrance was destroyed by the first digging, the house had no side entrance but was entered through the roof. This fits in nicely with the flat roofs described by Luxán and with the general arrangement of the large supporting posts. The flat roof, roof entrance, and superstructure composed basically of four large center supports placed in a quadrilateral arrangement are traits highly suggestive of the Southwestern pithouse, particularly those of the early Anasazi Culture.²⁹ The unlined pit with the row of outer and smaller support posts, on the

26. Luxán, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

29. F. H. H. Roberts, *Shabik'eschee Village*. B. A. E. Bulletin 92, Washington, 1929.

F. H. H. Roberts, *The Ruins at Kiatuthlanna*, Eastern Arizona, B. A. E. Bulletin 100, Washington, 1931.

contrary, strongly recalls the Plains earth lodge.³⁰ The number of posts in the outer circle is not inconsistent with the number generally employed in Pawnee earthlodge construction, but the inward slant of the outer poles is directly contrary to the outward slant of the homologous poles in the Pawnee structure.³¹ The size is more in keeping with that of the Southwestern structures than of the Plains.³² Resemblances are also apparent with the pithouses of the Georgetown Phase of the Mogollon Culture of southern New Mexico.³³ The absence of such floor features as fire pit, sipapu, storage pits, and of a ventilator shaft, differentiates the pithouse typologically from both Plains and Southwestern structures. The possibility must not be overlooked that it represents a storage house rather than a living apartment.³⁴

Flexed inhumation is common to both Plains and Southwest, but burial within the village is suggestive of the Southwest.³⁵ Burial beneath housefloors, however, probably did not become a common Southwestern custom until long after the pithouse period in the north of the area.³⁶

It has been noted that there seems to be represented a rather intricate mingling of Plains and Southwestern

30. W. R. Wedel, *An Introduction to Pawnee Archaeology*, B. A. E. Bulletin 112, Washington, 1935.

W. D. Strong, *An Introduction to Nebraska Archaeology*, Smith. Misc. Col., Vol. 93, No. 10, Washington, 1935.

31. Wedel, 1936, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

32. Compare Wedel 1936 and Strong 1935 with Roberts 1929-1931.

33. E. W. Haury, "The Mogollon Culture of Southwestern New Mexico," *Medallion Papers*, No. XX, Globe, Arizona, 1936, p. 83, Fig. 26.

34. The following quotation from Gallegos, *op. cit.*, p. 18, may possibly be of some significance in this regard: "Close to them [the houses] they have their granaries built of willow after the fashion of the Mexicans, where they keep their provision and their harvest of mesquite and things."

35. Compare the accounts of Wedel, 1936, and Strong, 1934, with those of Roberts, 1929 and 1931.

36. Roberts, 1931, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

traits in architecture. In the ceramic and lithic industries there can be detected a similar curious blending of the characteristics of the two great culture areas that border upon the Presidio locality.³⁷ Neither the extent of admixture nor the original sources or paths of influences can yet be determined. The historical data indicates that in ethnic and trade relationships likewise we have such a mixture of the traits of the two areas.³⁸

To summarize, the excavation of the pithouse described above has demonstrated the presence at the site of the following list of traits:

Pithouse, characterized by:

1. Unlined circular pit (ca. 12 ft. in diameter, 2 ft. plus in depth)
2. Use of four posts in quadrilateral arrangement as basis for the superstructure.
3. Use of eleven or twelve small secondary support poles irregularly spaced around the peripheries but within the pit and slanted inward.
4. Flat roof (?)
5. Roof entrance (?)

37. The following wares belonging to the Southwestern ceramic complex have been noted in sherd form in the refuse heaps of the Bravo Valley aspect (La Junta focus):

El Paso Polychrome
 Villa Ahumada Polychrome
 Babicora Polychrome
 Playas Red
 Chupadero Black-on-white
 Rio Grande Glaze Ware (probably Cieneguilla Glaze-on-yellow)
 An unnamed ribbed brown ware, associated with El Paso and Chihuahua wares

Another ware, laboratory name Chinati Plain Ware, belonging principally to the Concepcion focus, apparently shows influence from the north and east. It has a cylindrical form, pointed bottom, expanding mouth with no abrupt break between shoulder and neck, and is occasionally neck-filleted. It is gray to brown in color and occasionally shows a striated surface.

38. Kelley, Ms., *op. cit.*

6. Simple roof of alternating layers composed of reeds, grass, corn husks, etc.; possibly covered with earth.
7. Side walls of perishable material: probably pole or wattle construction. (?)
8. Walls and floor unplastered or otherwise treated.
9. Floor features apparently lacking (hearth, bins, etc.)

Artifacts of stone and shell:

1. Muller: a. One handed, shaped, rectangular grinding stone. Size: average 4" by 5". Two slightly convex parallel grinding faces. Material varied.
 b. Unshaped river stone. One convex grinding face. Smaller than a.
2. "Paint Mortar" (?) Unshaped boulder with oval milling depression, smoothly concave. Boulder size: 9" by 6" by 5" thick. Milling depression size: 6" by 4½" by 1½" deep.
3. Ornament of large, unshaped freshwater mussel shell pierced for suspension near hinge.

Evidences of foods used:

1. Broken bones of large animals (deer, etc.?)
2. Tortoise shell
3. Freshwater mussel shell
4. 12 row corn
5. Mesquite beans

Mortuary Custom:

1. Flexed inhumation in shallow grave beneath house floor, covered with cairn of loose stone. On right side; skull to northeast, face to west.
2. Mortuary offerings: paint mortar (?) and mullers.
3. Burning of house after burial of an individual beneath floor.

In conclusion it can be stated that the archaeological complex described above not only adds several items to the trait list of the Concepcion (?) focus, but also points to the value of the site (Shafter 7:1) as a component of the several foci represented, and to the archaeological area

in general as a valuable source of information regarding Plains and Southwestern contacts.³⁹

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BRANCH MUSEUM NOTES

MISS BERTHA DUTTON, Curator of Ethnology of the Museum of New Mexico, late in October delivered illustrated lectures to the Branch Museum Societies in Lincoln, Carlsbad, and Portales. She lectured on "How Silent Rocks Speak to the Archaeologist—An Expedition to Tajumulco, Guatemala."

The rotating exhibit of New Mexico Santos which had been on display in Carlsbad was replaced by one illustrating baskets and their modes of manufacture throughout the southwestern portion of the United States. An art exhibit of fourteen lithographs by Birger Sandzen was also loaned to the Carlsbad Society of Art, History, and Archaeology.

In addition to the art exhibits on the circuits three rotating exhibits are now on display. Two sets of New Mexican Santos are on exhibit. The first is in Farmington and the second in Portales. In the near future rotating exhibits of Southwestern Weaving and Aboriginal weapons will be shown on the circuits.

—A. G. E.

39. Since the writing of this article, extensive excavations have been undertaken at the site herein described, including the uncovering of several other house ruins similar in type to that described. In general the new data bears out the material herein presented. No other indications of the burning of houses after burial of an individual beneath the floor have been found, however.

INDIAN ARTS GIVEN FINE DISPLAY

THE INDIAN COURT . . . of the Federal Building at the Golden Gate Exposition is said to house the most comprehensive Indian exhibit ever installed. It comprises ten galleries of Indian arts, a market of Indian handicrafts, and ample working space for Indian artists and artisans. The eight main galleries are devoted to eight great areas of Indian culture. These areas are described in a bulletin as those of the Eskimo Hunters of the Arctic, the Fishermen of the Northwest Coast, the Seedgatherers of the Far West, the Buffalo Hunters of the Plains, the Woodsmen of the Eastern Forests, the Cornplanters of the Pueblos, the Navajo Shepherds, and the Desert Dwellers of the Southwest.

The program of activities at the exhibit has included daily talk tours by national authorities, demonstrations by outstanding Indian craftsmen of weaving, silversmithing, wood-carving, sand-painting, and other arts. In the market space the Indian producers are given an opportunity to display for sale their finest crafts. The exhibit was organized by the Office of Indian Affairs through the Indian Arts and Crafts Board. A series of light colored posters, each representing an area depicted at the Fair, through adaptation of Indian designs, have been executed by the Federal Art Project and distributed to Museums by the Indian Arts and Crafts Board.

FELLOWS TO LATIN AMERICA

EIGHTY-SEVEN fellowships to Argentine, Chile, Cuba, Mexico and Puerto Rico, virtually ambassadorships of young men to Latin America, have been granted by the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. To these have just been added four fellowships to Brazil, Peru, and Uruguay. Men and women, married and unmarried, of every race, color, and creed are eligible on equal terms.