

ARE "WHITE INDIANS" ALBINOS OR A SEPARATE RACE?

So very little is known of the working of the laws of heredity among albinos that an opportunity to study a whole community of these strange human beings is exceedingly alluring to anthropologists. Dr. Clark Wissler, curator of anthropology of the American Museum of Natural History, says that the colonies of "White Indians", discovered along a tributary of the Chucunaque River in Panama by the Richard O. Marsh expedition, should prove to be a sort of laboratory.

Dr. Wissler inclines to the opinion that albinism will account for these human puzzles, who recently aroused keen interest in New York City. Other anthropologists, however, point out that albinism would not explain the fact that they are round-headed, large-headed and large-boned, unlike other Indians of the San Blas tribes. Indeed, this is the one inexplicable thing about the new arrivals. Their skeletal peculiarities have led to many ingenious attempts to supply them with a history.

All the anthropologists agree that they cannot be half-breeds. The crossing of dark with light races results in a smooth-toned skin, of whatever shade, and not in "this inhuman complexion", as Dr. Wissler calls it. To compare these white Indians with Swedes or other northern races is most unobservant, since the latter have ruddy and pronounced coloring, not a spectral pallor.

What, then, are the other possibilities? First, that they may be a separate and ancient race. Of this the anthropologists are skeptical. They recall, however, that in Central America as in Mexico the legend of a "white redeemer" who once dwelt among the people and would some day return, is common. Also it must be remembered that "white Indians" are the subject of old and authoritative mention. They have existed in the Zuni pueblo as far back as the records go. Columbus wrote of seeing white people in Darien. Von Humboldt related that they were to be found in Panama.

Circumstances might well have favored the development of an albino race. That is the second possibility, and the one best supported by known facts. The white Indians have always been ostracized by their San Blas neighbors, who fear racial contamination and drive them off into the jungle. The enforced segregation might easily have perpetuated albino traits. But then the skeletal differences remain to be accounted for. They also mar the third possibility, suggested by a scientist who has studied native African races - that these white Indians may be affected by a disease which prevents the nerves from supplying coloring matter (melanin) to the skin, hair and iris of the eyes.

"The ordinary traveler, encountering this strange people, is apt to dismiss their coloring as 'mixed blood'. Examination shows, however, that the white Indians belong to a distinct hereditary type," says Dr. Wissler. They do not show a mixture of white and Indian traits, as do other half-breeds, but a white skin unlike the white man's, and decidedly puzzling bones.

Should the albino hypothesis hold, the village of more than a hundred white Indians which some members of the Marsh expedition visited will probably attract eager anthropologists who have never before had enough human albinos to observe.

Some plants contain a substance which regulates their use of sugar in much the same way as insulin does in man and higher animals.
