

PALEONTOLOGY

200,000,000-Year-Old Track Tells Tale of Insect Tragedy

FOOTPRINTS in the sands of time that have since hardened into solid rock near the German city of Nierstein on the Rhine tell the tale of a little tragedy that happened something over two hundred million years ago. The small tracks of an insect can be traced across a slab of sandstone that was once desert sand. The tracks of a lizard converge upon them. Presently the two trails come together—and beyond that there are no more insect tracks.

This small tale of sudden death on the sands is only one of many written in natural hieroglyphics preserved in the Permian sandstones around Nierstein, that have been studied by Prof. Otto Schmidtgen, director of the Mainz Museum of Natural History, and his collaborators. They have been able to spell out a considerable amount of information about life as it was lived in that part of the world long before there was a Rhine.

The Nierstein formations date from that great depression period in earth's geologic history known as the Permian, when drought and apparently cold prevailed over much of the planet. During the same period the desert sands in southwestern America, where now the Grand Canyon of Arizona cuts its mile-deep gash, also recorded the footprints of scurrying animals, which are now part of the petrified record.

Prof. Schmidtgen and his associates have been able to build up some kind of a picture of the life of those remote times by repeating the events now, so far as they are able. They take insects, reptiles and amphibians, and let them walk and run over sands and muds of various degrees of hardness and wetness. They have found that the same animal may make several quite different-looking tracks, according to the kind of ground it is going over and the speed at which it travels.

Science News Letter, July 8, 1933

ETHNOLOGY

American Negroes Came From Small Part of Vast Africa

ONE SUPPOSEDLY unsolvable mystery—from what parts of Africa came the negroes of America—is being cleared up. How it is being done was reported by Dr. Melville Herskovits of Northwestern University, to the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

The regions of Africa where slave traders captured natives were not nearly so vast and vague as popular fancy has believed, Dr. Herskovits demonstrated.

That some slaves came from the deep interior of the Dark Continent or from East and South Africa is not to be denied, he said. But by far the major portion of the slaves were drawn from a region that comprises only a fraction of the vast bulk of Africa. This area was the West Coast from Loango to Gambia and the forested belt that stretches a hundred or so miles inland.

Several kinds of evidence are being focussed on the problem, Dr. Herskovits showed. One is the testimony of those who wrote at the time when slaving operations were at their height. In the great mass of literature from this period, African names and places were so poorly recorded that they have been considered of little historical value. But the information can be very useful when fitted together with information from other sources, the ethnologist has found.

The other sources are negroes in Africa and negroes in America. Old men who actually participated in the slave trade are living in Africa today. From several of these, Dr. Herskovits obtained details of the trade and the routes taken. The ethnologist is also studying Africanisms that have survived in negro life in America.

In South America and islands of the

Caribbean, he finds the customs and lore of African regions occurring over and over. Various names of gods, place names, ideas of religion can be identified as coming from the Gold Coast, Dahomey, Togoland, Nigeria, and other definite parts of the West Coast. In the United States most negro memories of Africa are identified as generalized West Coast Africanisms.

Describing some of these, the ethnologist said:

"Negroes in the United States are Christians. Yet their dead must 'cross the river Jordan' in a manner that is exactly parallel to that in which the West African dead must cross their rivers before they reach the spirit world. We find the African importance of wakes for the dead. And we observe an entire complex of ritual surrounding burial so akin to the West African funeral customs, even to 'burying shallow' until arrangements can be made for a proper funeral, the passing of small children over the coffin as they do in the Suriname bush, and the inclusion of food and money in the coffins."

Declaring that peculiarities of speech of southern negroes have been mistakenly accounted for, Dr. Herskovits said:

"Any grammar of a West African people explains the grammatical oddities which it has become customary to ascribe to the influence of Elizabethan English on the early slaves, or to the grammatical perversions of child-like folk taught the language of the masters in a manner that children are spoken to."

Science News Letter, July 8, 1933

ASTRONOMY

New York to Have Third Planetarium

WITH a Reconstruction Finance Corporation loan of \$650,000, the American Museum of Natural History will soon begin construction of a planetarium in New York City which will show the motions of stars and planets.

This will be America's third planetarium. The first has been in operation at Chicago for several years. The second will open this fall at the Franklin Institute Museum in Philadelphia. About a dozen planetaria are located in European cities. All have their intricate optical parts manufactured by the famous German firm of Zeiss.

Science News Letter, July 8, 1933