



AMERICAN ART

PUBLIC HEALTH

Nation's Health Good, Congress is Told

THE HEALTH of the people has continued generally good, in spite of economic depression and unemployment, Surgeon General Hugh S. Cumming declared in his annual report to Congress. He warned against making any predictions as to future effects of the depression on the nation's health.

A new low record for the tuberculosis death-rate was set and a low diphtheria death-rate was also recorded for 1931.

Scientific achievements of the research staff of the U. S. Public Health Service included discovery that cultures of plague germs could cause disease after being stored for nine years and that the causative virus of endemic typhus fever remained alive in rat fleas for 52 days. It is thought that fleas once infected remain infected throughout life, an important point since it is this insect that transmits the disease to man.

About one-fifth of all planes from tropical countries were found to bring mosquitoes with them. While there is danger of introducing yellow fever by airplane, the greater danger is the introduction of new species of insects.

Science News Letter, December 24, 1932

ARCHAEOLOGY

Most Important Mayan Pottery Jar Found in Burial Vault

THE MOST IMPORTANT piece of pottery ever found in the land of the Mayas, in Yucatan. This is the verdict of science on a tall cylindrical jar found in a burial vault inside a pyramid in the oldest known city of the Mayan Indians, Uaxactun.

On the jar is painted a scene of some great event in the ancient history of America. There is a man of importance, seated cross-legged on a dais; a figure back of him with an offering, a third back of that with a ceremonial staff. And before the throne stand two stifferly formal Indians in high plumed headdresses and robes of figured material. Ambassadors before a powerful Mayan chief-tain? Perhaps.

What gives the scene its greatest scientific importance is the fact that the artist accompanied his picture with a date. Two vertical bands of little square pictures form the date in the curious hieroglyphs which the Mayas used as their writing system. Dr. Sylvanus Morley, of the Carnegie Institution's staff, reads this date as the equivalent in our calendar system of either 120 B.C. or 140 A.D. Scientists are not altogether agreed on the method of translating the Mayan signs, hence two possible readings, one of them two centuries later than the other.

First Complete Date

This very early date painted on a pottery jar is the first complete Mayan date ever found on any medium other than stone or stucco.

Considering that modern science cannot read all of the Mayan writing, it is remarkable that modern science can detect mistakes made by ancient Mayan writers. Yet Dr. Morley, a recognized authority on the Mayan hieroglyphs, found on examining the dated jar that there was something wrong with the symbols. It was as if the artist had carelessly written Sunday, December the first, 1932, whereas the first fell on Thursday. Several small corrections in placement of dots and bars are sufficient to make the date one that fits into the Mayan calendar of about 2,000 years ago.

The painted pottery in the burial

vaults of Uaxactun is also important artistically. It shows how very early in their history these aboriginal Americans were capable of fine ceramic art, even judged by modern standards.

The vault containing the most important piece, the tall jar, was the resting place of a man. The skeleton lay at full length, with the hands folded toward the right shoulder. The beautiful jar held strange contents—the bones of over a hundred shrews. Lying about were other objects of real or symbolic value, including a jade bead, sea shells, a stingray tail, a turtle bone, a deer antler, and a carved bone necklace.

Science News Letter, December 24, 1932

GENERAL SCIENCE

Scientists Gather For Great Midwinter Meeting

ONE AND ONE-HALF million words of scientific discussion, enough to fill a bookshelf of respectable-sized volumes, will be precipitated in Atlantic City when the American Association for the Advancement of Science, together with something over forty of its affiliated societies, hold their midwinter meetings during the week after Christmas. Notices of presentation for approximately 1400 papers, which will average between 1000 and 1200 words apiece in length, have been received at the Washington headquarters of the Association.

This great flood of scientific information will be poured out before audiences totalling about 4000 persons, constituting only a little over a fifth of the total membership of the Association, which is now in the neighborhood of 19,000. The whole group will come together on several occasions in the vast Atlantic City auditorium, which is so huge that a full-sized football field can be laid out on its floor. But to facilitate discussion of most of the papers, the scientists will divide themselves into sectional and separate society meetings, comprising groups from a few dozen to several hundreds of persons.

Science News Letter, December 24, 1932