

Transamazonia: The Last Frontier

THE noise is not yet loud enough to disturb the sloths munching on the leaves of the cecropia trees, or the river terns that wing lazily over the Amazon's mighty waters, or the secretive Indian tribes that live deep within the jungle. But along the tributaries of the world's largest river the sound is plainly discernible, like a low rumble of thunder in the distance. It is the dull, grinding roar of bulldozers cutting naked red strips through the vast Amazon rain forest.

Brazil's Transamazonian Highway, begun a year ago last week, has another three years and about 8,000 miles to go before it is finished. The \$500 million, 9,000-mile highway network will provide the first land link between Brazil's Atlantic seaboard ports of Belém and Recife and the Bolivian and Peruvian borders—and perhaps eventually the Pacific. Other roads will reach out to Surinam, French Guiana, Colombia and Venezuela to the north, and to Brazil's industrialized states in the south.

Work of the Century. Already, the first families of settlers are moving into the clearings left in the bulldozers' wake. Small backwater towns of the Amazon like Altamira and Marabá (see map) have turned overnight into construction boom towns where disputes are often settled with a gun. In gold-mining Itaituba, for instance, marijuana is literally worth its weight in gold; an ounce of one buys an ounce of the other.

Running 200 miles south of the Amazon River, and almost parallel to it, the Transamazonian Highway project is already being billed by President Emílio G. Médici's military regime as the work of the century. Not since the feverish 1950s, when former President Juscelino Kubitschek built the city of Brasília and



SETTLER'S HOUSE IN THE AMAZON
Needed: Farming families with a good credit rating and a capacity for work.

had the 1,350-mile Belém-Brasília highway carved out of the jungle, have Brazilians responded with such a display of national pride to the challenge of conquering their last natural frontier.

The challenge is born of the necessity of easing the poverty and political unrest of the Northeast, where nearly a quarter of the 30 million people live on the edge of starvation. The government's high hopes are that the highway will open up the natural wealth of the entire 2,700,000-sq.-mi. Amazon basin—an area almost the size of the continental U.S.—and provide vast new resettlement lands for 500,000 homesteaders over the next five years. Says Transport Minister Mário Andreazza: "We have to conquer Brazil completely, and this will do it. Transamazonia will be the dorsal spine of Brazil."

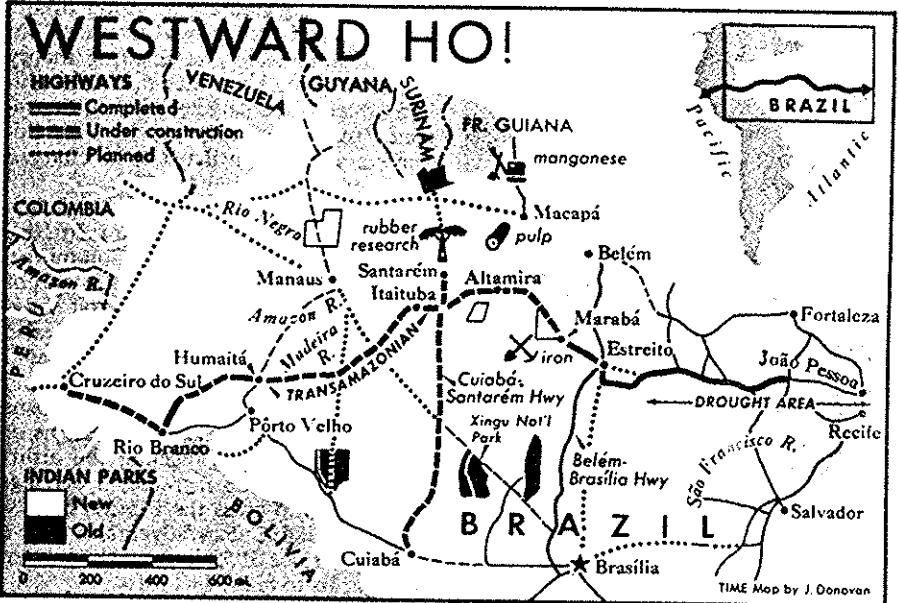
Escapist Psychology. The project is a politically popular one, at least in part because of recurrent rumors among Brazilian nationalists that the U.S. plans to take over the region for military pur-

poses, or as a home for blacks or a refuge in the event of nuclear attack. Not everyone is enthusiastic about the highway, though. For one thing, most of the money is coming from funds that had been allocated to build impressive new industrial plants in the Northeast. For another, some Brazilians fear that the highway will merely aid large U.S. companies like U.S. Steel and Union Carbide to exploit the area's mineral riches, which include the world's largest deposit of iron ore, estimated at 8 billion tons.

Brazilians have been wary of foreign exploitation ever since the British took Amazon rubber-tree seeds to Southeast Asia in 1875, which eventually ended a Brazilian rubber boom. The Amazon region has drawn little attention since, except when Henry Ford bought up 2.5 million acres in the 1920s for a rubber plantation named Fordlandia. The experiment failed, and part of Ford's plantation is now a rubber-research station.

One of Transamazonia's most outspoken critics is Economist Roberto Campos, who argues that Brazilians are "enslaved by an escapist psychology" and the emotionalism of territorial conquest. "Unfortunately," adds Campos, "the sight of famished couples with five or ten children does not appear to have drawn the President's attention to the problem of family planning"—which the Brazilian government firmly opposes. Counters Eliseu Resende, director-general of the national highway department: "Would Brazil ever have been discovered if the Portuguese government had carried out studies of the economic viability before financing Cabral's voyage? Do the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. economically justify their space flights?"

Feudal Stranglehold. As one practical benefit, the planners expect the highways to break the almost feudal stranglehold that a handful of powerful landholders known as "colonels" have long held over laborers along the Amazon. The workers have been forced to



Povos Indígenas no Brasil

Fonte Time Class.: 19
 Data September 13, 1971 Pg.: _____

turn over as much as 50% of their earnings to the colonels for the privilege of picking Brazil nuts, tapping rubber or working the land. The government has expropriated a 60-mile-wide strip of land on each side of the various highways, an area that now totals 888,000 sq. mi., equivalent in size to all of Saudi Arabia. Potential colonists for this land must be poor but have a good credit rating, farming experience, a capacity for work, and a family. They are given free transportation, 250 acres, a small wooden house and loans of up to \$2,250 to improve the land.

In practice, the plan has not always worked smoothly. "We waited hungry for four months to leave Rio Grande do Norte," says João Felix de Oliveira, 30, who came to the Amazon early this year with his wife and three children. "When we finally got here, the house had holes so big in the floor you could drop your hat through them. We were nearly bitten to death by the flies in the daytime and mosquitoes at night. I heard that three men were killed by Indians down the road," added Oliveira, voicing a recurrent fear among colonists. The highway project has also brought serious inflation in its wake.

Ants and Dysentery. The 11,000 men who have signed up to hack the highway out of the oppressively hot and humid "green hell" of the jungle have hardly found the going any easier. Most of them put in twelve-hour days, seven days a week, for \$30 a month take-home pay. Food is dropped by parachute or hunted in the jungle. There are daily battles with snakes, stinging ants, swarms of African honey bees and wild animals, not to mention 100° heat and the perils of malaria and dysentery. The worst enemy, say the men, is the rain. During April, when 25 inches fell, many machines faltered and collapsed in the muck and others rolled off embankments.

There have so far been few encounters with the 8,000 or so Indians directly affected by the highways now under construction. Before the bulldozers move in, the government sends out groups of advance men to "pacify" the tribes with gifts of machetes, trinkets and clothing. Soon the bargaining includes cigarettes and *cachaç* (a powerful sugarcane liquor). All too often, part of the bargain is also civilization's diseases—tuberculosis, measles, smallpox—to which the indigenous tribes have no resistance. All of the workers are under strict orders to give the Indians anything they want. One party handed over a transistor radio and later found it riddled with arrows. The Indians had apparently become startled when they turned it on, and tried to do away with the evil spirit inside. Another group of men had their heads shaved by Indian women, who used sharp leaves for the task.

Recently, 84 Brazilian social scientists and historians signed a protest scoring the government's intention to force the Amazon tribes out of the way of the

vast redevelopment program and onto reservations. Many of the tribes that the government plans to move into reservations, the scientists charged, are hostile to each other. This, plus further contact with civilization, says the International Red Cross, is likely to be the death knell for Brazil's entire Indian population within 20 to 30 years.

Ecological Effects. Already, experts note, the estimated 2,000,000 Indians who inhabited Brazil when the Portuguese arrived in 1500 have dwindled to a mere 50,000. At one point, the government rerouted one of the highways to pass right through Xingú National Park, where 15 tribes now live. After a storm of protest, the government finally altered the park's boundaries. Three smaller reservations are also planned. But the government's attitude is best expressed by General Oscar Bandeira de Mello, head of FUNAI, the national Indian foundation charged with looking after Indian interests. "We could spend the next five or eight years in this love affair with isolated Indians," says Bandeira de Mello, "and all we would achieve would be to set back the opening of roads like the Transamazonia."

Yet another unknown raised by the Transamazonia is its effect on the ecology of the region. Scientists have worried about the effect upon world climate when the entire rain forest is cut. According to present development plans, that will probably be an accomplished fact by the middle of the next century. Another drawback is that the topsoil of the Amazon region is thin, and the jungle, contrary to popular belief, does not reclaim cleared land that has been depleted. Unless modern techniques of crop rotation and fertilization are used—techniques few of the impoverished colonists know—nutrients could be washed away a few years after the land is cleared, turning it into a desolate wasteland where only scrub brush would grow. "We honestly don't know what is going to happen if the forest is cut down," admits the agrarian-reform program's Jorge Pankov. "But when your belly is so empty that you have to steal to fill it, you're less apt to worry about altering virgin environment."



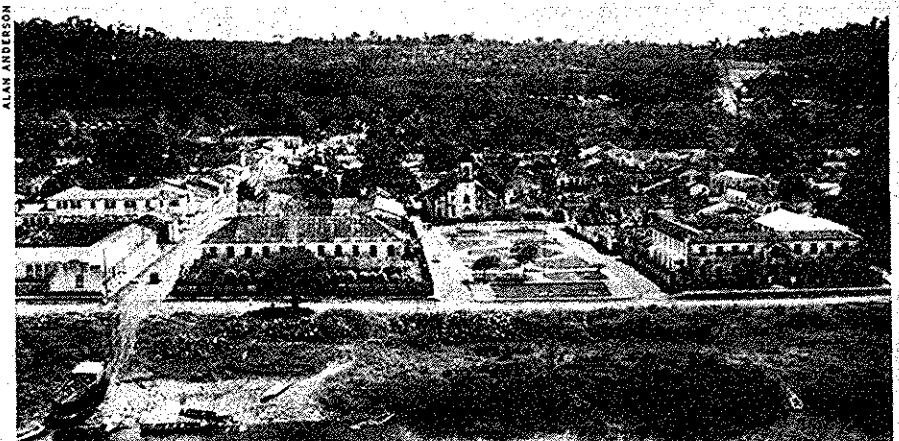
ALAN ANDERSON

HIGHWAY UNDER CONSTRUCTION



KAY HUFF

BOOM TOWN OF ALTAMIRA (BELOW) & COLONIST WITH PALMS FOR HOUSE (ABOVE)



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