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Rollin' on a River: The Inland Waterways of Latin America

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Title: Rollin on a River: Traversing the inland waterways of the Americas

Exhibited: November 18, 2008 to January 24, 2009, Herzstein Latin American Reading Room, Zimmerman Library

Curators: Tarah Johnson, Wendy Pedersen & Suzanne Schadl

“If you come down to the river
Bet you gonna find some people who live
You don't have to worry, 'cause you have no money
People on the river are happy to give

Rollin', rollin', rollin' on the river”

One might never expect to find reference to Credence Clearwater Revival or Tina Turner in a library exhibit of Latin American river travel. Then again, who can resist this popular United States recollection of generosity and progress along a great river? Certainly there is something about a river that defies national as well as cultural boundaries. Rivers run through all of these. More importantly, they carry different peoples through, into and away from one another. Rivers, by their very nature, stir and blend elements like no other transnational pathway.

This exhibit is a testament to such confluence. It highlights printed artifacts commonly found in libraries and archives as well as physical objects generally shunned in such places. The elements of culture featured here come from people who describe themselves as German, French, English, American, Hache, Kayabi, Karaja, Karinya and Kagwahiv. The crossings between these cultures in and around Latin American rivers demonstrate multiculturalism too often overlooked in Latin American studies. The artifacts here cross time, space, culture and academic disciplines, offering research and reading materials for just about anyone. The central organizing theme “River” ties it all together.

For centuries, indigenous groups have successfully cultivated, traveled and traded along Latin America's rivers. They have also met their share of outsiders because their water courses also serve as a primary means of transport for Europeans and North Americans traveling through the Americas. Among the published works highlighted in this exhibit are those of French botanist Paul Marcoy, English naturalist Henry Walter Bates and German adventurer Eberhard Graf zu Erbach.

Henry Walter Bates is most famous for his explorations of the Amazon region during the 1850's with Alfred R. Wallace. Their trip, financed by the sale of Amazonian insects and birds to museums and private collectors, revealed almost 8000 new species to European naturalists. Eberhard Graf zu Erbach traveled to Venezuela and along the Orinoco in the 1880s. His romantic account of lands and peoples in the region expressed European cultural superiority, while highlighting conditions and resources for the exploration of important economic markets. Germans established merchant colonies in Venezuela throughout the nineteenth century to export coffee, cacao, indigo, tobacco, cotton, sugar, and later – petroleum. Paul Marcoy offers numerous descriptions of native peoples and their cultural practices. His representations follow

suit with those of other Europeans writing about Americans during the same period by asserting his exploits as an adventurer.

Postcards and photographs drawn from the “Peter H. Goldsmith’s Album Pages” and “Rubber Plantation Photographs” in the Center for Southwest Research demonstrate how the imperialist competition which inspired Marcoy, Bates and Erbach to travel through Latin America helped pave the way for the extractive missions of the early Twentieth century. Resources such as quinine, rubber, coffee and bananas found United States investors and diplomats navigating the Amazon, Orinoco, Paraguay, Lumija and Tulija. Goldsmith worked in the early twentieth century with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and traveled throughout Latin America, in part assessing railroad construction – often along already established river paths. The Florida and Philadelphia Plantations used the Lumija and Tulija rivers in Mexico to transport tropical fruits and coffee back to the United States on steamboats.

In addition to reflecting the convergences of different peoples flowing into and out of each other’s experiences the objects in the window highlight native tendencies to extract and modify natural resources in order to facilitate their activities as well. It is clear that the river is important to all of these cultures and that they all find one another “living” on the river.