

# Field Museum News

Published Monthly by Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago

Vol. 12

DECEMBER, 1941

No. 12

## STORY OF EARLY COFFEE TRADE DEPICTED IN MUSEUM MURAL

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At a time when French ships in the Red Sea would be news, and when the sea-borne traffic to the Near East must resort to the long route by way of the Cape of Good Hope, one of the murals in Field Museum's Hall of Food Plants (Hall 25), viz., that of French Coffee Buyers in Arabia, appears to be of particular interest.

It recalls the centuries before the existence of the Suez Canal when the same sea-route, around the southern tip of the African continent, was the only one available for direct European commerce with the countries bordering the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf. Those who are at all historically minded will remember that even that route, now so important for the transportation of supplies to the British armies in the Near East and of American materials for Russia, has been known only since the time of the Portuguese navigators.

The painting depicts an historic incident in the early days of the water-borne commerce which followed upon the discovery of this route and not only made the West independent of the ancient caravan trade by bringing the products of all parts of the East directly to Atlantic seaports, but also, and fully as important, opened the way for an enormous increase in the world's supply of food and other products of vegetable origin by initiating a far-flung distribution of the useful plants of all continents.

Even at the present time, this process of transportation of economic plants from one part of the world to another is still going on. The Asiatic soybean, for example, grown in the Far East since times immemorial, is finding new and extensive areas of cultiva-

tion and (as described elsewhere in this issue) new uses in North America. Peruvian bark and the Brazilian rubber tree attained their present importance in the tropics of the Far East, whence after half a century of intensive cultivation they are now returned, improved and pedigreed, as stock for plantations in their original habitat.

The most spectacular, if not the most important, instance of the transposition of



FRENCH COFFEE BUYERS IN ARABIA

Mural by Julius Moessel, in the Hall of Food Plants, showing a historic incident of about the year 1706 when water-borne commerce was established between Europe and the countries on the Indian Ocean, Red Sea, and Persian Gulf.

a cultivated plant from one part of the world to another far removed, is furnished by the history of coffee, to which Mr. Moessel's mural refers. Originally a native of the highlands of Abyssinia, where it was of relatively slight importance, the small tree which produces coffee beans had been introduced in southwestern Arabia some few hundred years before it attracted general attention. Though the beverage made from its roasted seeds had become popular there and its use had spread by way of Mecca to all of the Mohammedan world, it was not until it was sought by European buyers that coffee became considered an important article of commerce.

In Arabia the areas suitable for coffee  
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## VISITORS SEE THE "INVISIBLE" IN MUSEUM EXHIBIT

By HENRY W. NICHOLS

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The Department of Geology has encountered and solved the problem of exhibiting specimens that, from their nature, are actually invisible. There are five rare gases present in minute quantities in the air. Like the principal components of the air,

oxygen and nitrogen, they are absolutely invisible, and a bottle filled with them would appear empty. Although it is impossible to show them in their normal state, these gases can be made to glow with brilliantly colored light when they are excited by an electric current.

Through the courtesy of the Air Reduction Company it has been possible to exhibit tubes of these gases. Although the tubes appear empty in their usual state, they glow brilliantly with the most beautiful colors when the visitor presses a button.

These rare gases—argon, neon, helium, krypton and xenon—are peculiar in that they cannot be made

to enter into any chemical combination. The most abundant, argon, is found in the air in the proportion of one part argon to 125 parts air, and the most rare, xenon, is present only in the proportion of one part to 1,700,000 parts air. Rare as they are, these gases have an important commercial value, for they produce the light of the numerous neon lights seen at night along many of our city streets.

## MUSEUM TO CLOSE CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR'S DAY

in order to permit as many employees as possible to spend the holidays with their families.





Nichols, Henry W. 1941. "Visitors See the "Invisible" in Museum Exhibit." *Field Museum news* 12(12), 1-1.

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