

Trekking Through Both The Americas

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the final in a two-part series dealing with the experiences of Danny Liska, a Nebraska man who traveled much of the little-explored world in search of adventure. He visited the Quad-Cities recently.

By JIM ARPY

When Danny Liska decided to give up ranching and go adventuring he considered this advice of a Chinese philosopher: "If you want to play the harp, play it. Don't talk or dream about playing the harp, do it."

Liska had always been fascinated by adventure stories, but his only foray into the unusual had been a motorcycle trip to Mexico and an unsuccessful attempt to climb the volcano Popocatepetl.

But in 1959 he was 30 years old and felt he was becoming more and more isolated from the intriguing world outside. Accordingly, he and his wife let the cattle dry up, put the land in the soil bank, and headed into the unknown.

A SEVEN-WEEK photographic trip through Alaska only whetted his desire to try what he had often considered impossible — a trip from Circle City, Alaska, the northernmost settlement in North America that could be reached by road to Ushuaia, Argentina, the most southern town in the tip of South America.

Before the trip was over, he would have awakened to find vampire bats sucking his blood, eaten monkey and lizard to stay alive, survived a jungle trial by savages, traveled with smugglers and served as a double for movie actor Yul Brynner.

On his motorcycle, he traveled Alaska's trackless tundra, whizzed past vast herds of wild game, fought choking dust and flying rocks.

WAS HE READY for such a strenuous undertaking as the Alaska to Argentina trip? In Mexico, he sought out his old adversary, Popocatepetl. If he could climb it, he felt he would have the strength and endurance for what lay ahead.

On a foggy morning, he strapped spikes on his boots and began the ascent. After what seemed like hours, he collapsed

in the snow, his lungs on fire. Then slowly he got to his feet and resumed the climb.

"As I walked up the mountain a step at a time. I realized that there is only one way to get to the top, whether it be a mountain or a goal in life. A man should make the next step his goal, not the whole mountain," Liska says.

When he stood on the top of the old volcano, he knew he would finish his terrible journey. Liska's wife, Arlene, joined him in Mexico and the two headed for Panama. Heavy rains and unfinished roads slowed their progress. In Costa Rica, it took them five weeks to go 120 miles. Then Mrs. Liska became ill and took a plane in Panama City to return to the States.

The road ended 37 miles outside of Panama City. Beyond were 450 miles of the most impenetrable jungle in the world. There were no roads or trails — only vines, jungle, snakes, wild Indians and blood-thirsty vampire bats.

AS LISKA stood surveying a sign that said: "End of the Road. Here begins the Darien Gap," a Panamanian walked up and said, "Mon, you're crazy to think about going into that jungle. No mon goes in there and comes back!"

But Liska knew that somewhere beyond the endless jungle was Turbo, Colombia and the magic line that would carry him, aboard his motorcycle, to the end of his personal rainbow — the very tip of South America.

The trip in Costa Rica had been through 14 days of torrential rains. There had been landslides and 38 bridgeless rivers to cross, the cycle having been shipped ahead to Medellin, Colombia.

"People said I was crazy and I didn't deny it. You have to be a little insane to try a trip like this," Liska says.

IN HIS RUCKSACK he carried food for two days, a hammock, camera, machete, hunting knife, penicillin in a syringe, extra socks, mosquito repellent, matches and garlic, which a witch doctor assured him would keep snakes at a distance.

On Dec. 5, 1960, he plunged into the jungle with a Spanish-speaking guide. They traveled in a piraqua, a craft hewn from a single tree trunk. Down rivers they went,



pausing at Indian villages to seek a guide to take Liska through the Chucunaque Valley. He finally obtained the services of a young Indian named Manuel for \$3 a day.

For days they hacked through vines and ferns until Liska thought they were hopelessly lost, but eventually they came out onto a well-trod trail. They moved into Vala Indian territory, a forbidden stretch of jungle where they were arrested for being without permission.

The guide, Manuel, was taken away and Liska was put through a trial of sorts. He was asked what position he held in his home town of Mobara, Neb.

"I shouted, 'I am president of the Mobarra Community Club!' A look of awe swept their faces and they set me free," Liska says.

AN OLD WITCH doctor volunteered to lead him through the jungle. In five lazy days of floating down the river, fishing and swimming, the two men became fast friends.

"Sometimes we'd throw stones at alligators. Often we'd stop to eat monkeys or lizards. We moved from one Indian village to another," Liska recounts.

At the banana port of El Real, Liska contacted a group of smugglers who agreed to take him into Colombia for \$7. The Darien area then was reeling from a terrible

flood. The men saw bodies of animals and an occasional Choco Indian hut floating by.

One day one of the smugglers became quite ill and was holding up the rest of the party. Liska heard a shot and discovered the smugglers had shot their companion to put him out of his misery. They threw his body into the river and divided his property.

Near the village of Boca de Coupe, Liska retired in a jungle hut, sleeping on the floor because he was too tired to set up his hammock.

He awoke as he became aware of a gentle fanning above his face and noted a musky odor. When he felt some creature crawling up his body he jumped up and found the room was full of vampire bats, one of which had been feeding on his big toe.

IN PERU, Liska's motorcycle broke down and he had to wait three months for parts. This gave him time to explore the Amazon River, the mountains and jungle areas, and to meet various Indian tribes.

In Southern Argentina, an area of few roads and fewer people, he often had to drag his motorcycle through heavy snow. One day the machine tipped over 50 times.

And then one morning he came over the crest of a hill and below him stretched the ocean and the end of his rainbow, but instead of being exhilarated, Liska felt let down. He still thirsted for challenges.

He next discovered that money his wife had sent him months before had been returned to the States. He caught a free ride on a boat and learned that the movie "Taras Bulba" was being filmed in northern Argentina. Liska joined a group of gauchos, en route to the site to serve as extras.

WHEN LISKA saw Yul Brynner, who was playing the lead role, he vowed to act as his double for dangerous work. He got his chance when the regular double refused to ride a horse at full gallop down a treacherous hill. Liska got the part and thereafter led 7,000 men into mock battle.

After he returned home, Liska and his wife returned to South America and traveled through Brazil, Uruguay and Para-

"In Central America we saw zombies, the so-called living dead. They were men without expression and moved as though in a trance.

"I talked to a college professor who said that when his brother died, he and his father and other brothers stood around the coffin. Then his father said, 'It is your duty as the eldest son,' and handed him a dagger which he plunged into his brother's heart. The people believe this is the only sure way to make sure a person who is apparently dead cannot be turned into a zombie by unscrupulous persons with supernatural powers.

"When I was in Africa I saw repeated evidence of some powerful form of telepathy. Wherever I went, even in the most remote parts, the people knew I was coming. It was as if they had seen me on tv. Yet there were no methods of communication and no way they could have known about me. No way, that is, except through sophisticated mental telepathy," Liska says.

He hopes some day to take a motorcycle trip through Russian Siberia, but thus far the Russians have turned down his requests.

