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Hollywood and the Scientist

Would one of your scientific staff like to accompany us on a yacht trip from San Diego to Acapulco? asked Errol Flynn in a letter to Scripps Institution of Oceanography in the summer of 1946.

Errol Flynn, the greatest swashbuckling movie actor of them all. He began with "Captain Blood," romped through "The Charge of the Light Brigade," immortalized "The Adventures of Robin Hood," went out west to "Dodge City," sailed heroically in "The Sea Hawk," and lived "The Adventures of Don Juan." His character outside of films was not unblemished. "I've had a hell of a lot of fun," he said, "and I've enjoyed every minute of it." Now he was offering his yacht Zaca for fun and science.

The offer was irresistible to Carl L. Hubbs, who yearned for a ship. Hubbs, one of the last disciples of America's dominant ichthyologist David Starr Jordan, had graduated from Stanford University in 1916 and had established his own reputation as an outstanding expert on fishes and their habits while at the University of Michigan from 1920 to 1944. Then he transferred to Scripps Institution of Oceanography as a professor of biology. The entire Pacific Ocean beckoned, but the only vessel of Scripps Institution, the schooner E. W. Scripps, was on loan to the United States Navy for wartime research. When Flynn's sudden invitation came, Hubbs quickly arranged for leave from the institution to go on a month's cruise.

Errol Flynn was delighted to hear that Hubbs could join him. "Be assured that every possible thing will be done to make our expedition a success. . . . I mentioned my gratification at being able to contribute anything which in the

least way might result in a step forward in the field of Marine Biology. . . .
I am more than willing to meet your expenses . . ."

If Hubbs had known that there would be mutiny, violence, and general mayhem, would he have stayed home? Probably not. But he might have left at home the borrowed dredges.

Errol Flynn's offer was genuine good will, in part because his father, Theodore Thomson Flynn, was a biologist at Belfast, Ireland, and the son was eager to provide him with an opportunity for collecting at sea. The senior Flynn was interested in the distribution of plankton in relation to commercial fishes such as tuna.

That was enough for Hubbs's participation. He soon learned that the major purpose of the expedition was to take film footage, including spectacular underwater shots, which Flynn hoped to sell to movie companies. Scripps Institution would certainly receive a copy of all film footage. The possibility of a tax write-off came up months later. Errol Flynn was not devious, probably naive. He had spent six months preparing for this expedition, he told Hubbs, and the crew had been "very carefully selected." At the last minute Flynn did agree to add one crew member specifically recommended by Hubbs: Robert P. Vincent, an ex-Navy ship's carpenter and diver, "strong as an ox." It was a fortunate choice.

"The Cruise of the Zaca" -- have you seen that film short?
Sun-drenched islands, Nora (Eddington) Flynn and Errol Flynn in blissful poses, trays of exotic fishes under study by Hubbs and the senior Flynn (those were real), intrepid Carl Hubbs soloing a helicopter in a well-staged rescue of the swashbuckling actor (that was not real). Typical Hollywood. No mention of mutiny, no sound track of the expedition's artist punctuating the air with what Hubbs said was the lewdest language he had ever heard.



Carl Hubbs, Laura Hubbs, Theodore Thomson Flynn. August 1946

As the invitation to accompany Flynn on Zaca came in late July, only three weeks before sailing, Hubbs had to scurry to borrow and assemble his collecting gear: dredges, seines, dipnets, lobster traps, gill nets, microscope, aquariums, sorting trays, jars, preservatives, and smaller paraphernalia. These were loaded aboard Zaca in San Diego on August 13, amid a flurry of reporters and a "feminine hubbub on the dock" as girls from nearby Navy offices came to beg autographs from their hero. The athletic actor was limping that day, having somehow sprained his ankle aboard ship on the way down from Long Beach. Errol signed autographs with a flourish while his attractive red-haired wife watched with amusement and his father remarked on "the depths to which humanity will fall." The reporters had already had a field day, by discovering from Nora that she was expecting a child and so would require a doctor on the voyage. Errol denied the report and said that there was certainly no room for a doctor.

Zaca was a graceful two-masted auxiliary schooner, 118 feet long, built in 1930 for San Francisco businessman C. Templeton Crocker. The ship had undertaken scientific voyages, some of them with William Beebe, as well as pleasure cruises under Crocker's ownership. The 1946 voyage was Errol Flynn's only use of Zaca for science. For that trip the sailing ship was manned by a crew of ten and also carried an artist, three above- and below-water photographers, Flynn's manager, Errol and Nora, Flynn's father, and Hubbs.

The planned itinerary, which incorporated some of Hubbs's suggestions, included the islands of Guadalupe, Cedros, Socorro, San Benitos, and Clipperton. A full two weeks were scheduled for detailed studies at Socorro and a similar time at Clipperton. The intent was to collect from the then-unexplored shallow-water fauna of offshore and oceanic islands. So much for plans.



Carl Hubbs and Errol Flynn, 1946

After an early start on August 14, the expedition stopped along the Mexican west coast at Guadalupe, the San Benitos, and at Cedros Island. From there Hubbs wrote to his wife enthusiastically about his observations and collections of flyingfishes (with notes that were to be incorporated immediately into a nearly finished manuscript), and on his discovery of a high incidence of endemism (i.e., species unique to that locality) among the shore fishes of Guadalupe Island -- "worth much of the trip . . . a real expedition is in order to work out the problem." The sea elephants (i.e., elephant seals) and a big rookery of sealions at San Benito were "quite a sight." (Hubbs went on to become a recognized authority on the habits of and conservation of marine mammals.) The crew of Zaca, Hubbs said, was "a weird and inexperienced mixture," and cooperation was "quite satisfactory, though not perfect all around."

The situation deteriorated rapidly. From Cedros Zaca sailed to Socorro and cruised about to select spots for dredging. "Then," wrote Hubbs, "while I was ashore shooting a few lizards [for museum specimens], the impossible kid (Wally Berry)* drove a harpoon far into his foot -- requiring an emergency operation, which happily seems to have gone into no complications. But after a dramatic conference it was decided to pull anchor and head for Acapulco (and its night life) that very night. So up came the anchor and off we sailed. With one hand short & most of the rest of the crew either too ignorant or too lazy to do a decent job, other party members had to take over. We ran watches of 2 each. I was on with Bob Vincent, but constant engine trouble put him in the engine room so I had the ship from 8 to 12 p.m. and

*Note to movie buffs: this was not actor Wallace Beery, who was certainly no kid in 1946.

4-8 a.m. on alternate days." Down the drain went the intended studies of Socorro and of Clipperton.

Zaca reached Acapulco late on the evening of August 31. The passage and first few days in port were eventful, wrote Hubbs: "Our experiences have been varied to say the least. Drunkenness, 2 men with broken ribs, wife beating followed by a frustrated suicide [there was no further explanation of this in his letters!], mutiny, virtual running out of water (with tanks of water closed off somehow), engine stoppage, a very close escape from shipwreck here at Acapulco, something wrong with almost everything mechanical about the ship were among the highlights."

Only the "mutiny" was headlined in California newspapers, and that when artist John Decker returned to Los Angeles. Decker bore the distinction, according to a newsman, "of having been one of the more successful of the hundreds of drinking companions of the late John Barrymore." Hubbs always tried to see the best in people, and of Decker said: "In many ways he displays fine character during his occasional sober moments, and certainly is a genius in painting. . . . Errol kept the icebox locked, largely to keep liquor away from his [Decker's] unquenchable thirst. Decker got the idea that Nora was doing this . . . [and] swore revenge on Nora." That was when the air turned blue, with language "quaint and distinctive enough to be funny, but still terrible."

Interviewed in Hollywood upon his precipitous return from Acapulco on September 9, Decker growled of Nora: "She turned into a female Capt. Bligh. And I'm no Fletcher Christian. Ships are for men to run. It's a man's world at sea. . . . She kept making sarcastic cracks that I don't take from women. Like, 'Don't throw cigarets on deck,' 'Pick up your cup and take it to the galley,' 'Don't eat in the salon; it's not the messhall.' . . . Dames are

okay on board a yacht. But they oughta stay in their place -- preferably below deck."

Was it in deference to Errol Flynn's first movie role that Decker said Captain Bligh? Hubbs commented that Nora was known aboard ship as Capitan Sangre, "more or less behind her back," and he deplored it as Nora was, in his opinion, "a sweet girl," who had done nothing to deserve the sobriquet. Hubbs said that he had become very friendly with Errol and Nora on the voyage, as well as with the senior Flynn, "a sweet old devil" who was unfortunately limited in his biological collecting by a lame leg.

Of crew problems there were plenty, said Hubbs. "The big mistake was made in picking up a miscellaneous bunch of men and boys, mostly with little sea experience and paid so little or not at all that they felt little responsibility and were almost uncontrollable. They were also poorly handled -- given undue privilege and bad examples." Vincent turned out to be the only experienced sailor of the lot. Four of the crew left the ship promptly at Acapulco, and before long so did the captain of Zaca. "The final straw," wrote Hubbs, "was the rumor that some contraband gold was being brought on board, in addition to a large store of contraband cigarettes. . . . Just now a Basque captain is looking over the boat. I venture to guess that crew troubles aren't over." Nora also was leaving from Acapulco; she hadn't been feeling very well.

Hubbs was no quitter. He had intended from the beginning to return home from Acapulco via Mexico City while the yacht would continue on a pleasure cruise through the Panama Canal to the Caribbean and maybe to Europe. In the hope of increasing his collections of fishes near Acapulco, Hubbs stayed aboard Zaca, amidst the boisterous roisterings, such as a Sunday entertainment of Mexican beauty-contest "princesses" and a Technicolor

movie-showing aboard ship after a dinner of roast young pig and all the trimmings. "With no cooperation of consequence and with social activities that couldn't be avoided, the days have been full from early to late."

Carl Hubbs was a very determined collector of fishes, however, and during his first week in Acapulco he had "gotten in some fine bay seining and one grand poisoning job on a very poor reef -- but using enough poison to move over adjacent submerged rocks and a sand beach. Nine species of blennies will be particularly useful."

After another week of what he called his "tropical negligence," Hubbs reported that he had taken about 100 species of fishes in the Acapulco area. "There is only a 1-foot tide and no flat reefs, but I give a heavy shot [of poison] to shoals and crevice areas and get most of the fish by face-plate diving. . . . I've had a grand trip, am brown as a Mexican and am in as fine physical shape as I've been in for years." His major complaint, besides murmuring against the social whirl, was that he was unable to do any dredging at all, apparently for lack of helpers.

Hubbs finally gave up, after arranging to have his equipment and specimens returned to San Diego on a freighter. He apparently had to handle the packing unaided, for he strained his back doing it. After visiting scientists briefly in Mexico City, he flew home on September 21. There he cautiously fielded inquiries about the "mutiny" and spoke with characteristic enthusiasm about his successful collecting. To his son, a student at Stanford, he wrote at length about the new species of fishes, the variations of described species, the uniqueness of the fauna at Guadalupe Island (which in later years Hubbs visited again and again), and the significance of the collections at Acapulco, because so little work had been done previously between Mazatlan, Mexico, and Panama.

"In the 6 weeks out I made 54 collections -- some mere dribbles. A summary of the field identifications indicates species as follows: Guadalupe Id., 24 (19 collected); San Benito Ids., 20; Cedros Id., 15; Socorro Id., 32; between Socorro and Acapulco, 1 [a flyingfish]; Acapulco, 160; Laguna Alvarado, Vera Cruz (gift of Mexican Dept. of Fisheries), 1; Arroyo Puyequi, Baja Calif. (gift), 4. Total, eliminating duplicates, 230." Of new species of tidepool blennies, Hubbs had selected two brightly colored ones from Guadalupe Island to be named Gibbonsia erroli and G. norae.

Errol Flynn, meanwhile, after a long stay amidst the night life of Acapulco, sailed off into the sunset, sans most of the original crew and sans his wife. Nora Flynn returned to Los Angeles from Acapulco in late October, and told newsmen that Errol was sailing for Tahiti. If so, he became lost, for he next wrote to Hubbs on his return in early March from Zaca in Jamaica. At Cocos Island (shall we assume the one west of Panama?) he had "shot some color film down there of porpoises spawning right along the side of the boat." Errol was home just before the birth of his and Nora's second daughter.

After the 1946 trip Hubbs received occasional breezy letters from the flamboyant Errol Flynn, with promises and half-promises. The two shared another expedition, in the spring of 1948, a hair-raising one by helicopter and airplane provided by Flynn, to observe the gray whales in the lagoons of Baja California. Footage from that, including the artificial scene of Hubbs flying a helicopter, was incorporated into "The Cruise of the Zaca," released as a movie short in 1952 by Warner Brothers (to whom Flynn had sold it). Through the original promise from Errol Flynn, Scripps Institution of Oceanography received a copy of the film, which, by agreement, it shows solely for educational purposes.

In later years Carl Hubbs enjoyed re-viewing that film and always

chuckled heartily, no doubt recalling various unfilmed scenes of his most unusual scientific expedition.



Errol Flynn "arriving" at Scripps by helicopter. 1948



Carl Hubbs, SIO Director Harald Sverdrup, and Errol Flynn, 1948



Carl Hubbs and Errol Flynn, on Scammons Lagoon gray whale trip, 1948