

# Island That Time Forgot

PHOTOGRAPHS FOR COLLIER'S BY WILLIAM NEIL SMITH II



Typical Seri dwelling place consists of pole framework with roof of woven brush. Such structures offer little protection from the elements

The tribesmen still use ancient weapons. Kilt is traditional garb, worn by all the Seri men



SCANT 400 miles south of the bustling metropolis of San Diego is a restless community of some 200 persons—213, at last count—who bear the unusual distinction of being one of the most primitive peoples in all of North America.

Their homeland, nestled deep within the Gulf of California, is a Mexican island called Tiburón, plus a few square miles of the adjacent mainland. It is a parched, sparsely populated region, and its wild life consists almost wholly of a few deer which graze on the island's thin pastures.

Crowded into this arid land by encroaching civilization, the Seri Indians live today much as their more numerous ancestors did centuries ago. When they want fire, they rub sticks together. When they

need bowls or baskets, they make them. Their diet consists largely of fish and turtle—and sometimes venison. Their weapon: the bow and arrow.

Because of their dependence on fish, the Seris are nomadic, moving to a new camping spot whenever their main dietary staple changes its feeding grounds. They have four principal camps, but only one is occupied often enough to rate permanent houses—rickety pole structures daubed with adobe. Elsewhere, they merely have huts of woven brush.

Despite their Spartan existence, the Seris are a happy—if often undernourished—people, with a culture all their own. There are a few rules which they observe carefully. One of these imposes on them a code of modesty which is strict by any stand-

A tribeswoman weaving a basket. Seri wives are devoted and hard-working. Divorce is rare



Making fire in time-honored manner. Though primitive, Indians are bright, eager to learn







**A Seri belle shows off make-up. Face paint is considered attractive, and both sexes wear it**



**Seri youngster playing homemade pipe. Note long hair, worn by most men and boys in tribe**

ard. Both men and women wear clothes that cover them from their necks to their bare feet; even when they swim, they remain fully clad.

The tribe has no government, possibly because it has few problems which a government might settle. It has virtually no religion, except for some rites used in case of sickness and a few beliefs about the afterworld. The Seris hold, for example, that when they die they will go to a heaven closely resembling their own island—but, of course, well-stocked with food. Their dogs, whom they consider members of the tribe, will accompany them there.

To the Seris, white men are descendants of a tribe of pale Indians (one of the five tribes which, according to Seri mythology, made up the entire popula-

tion of the earth). These white folk, so the story goes, once lived near the Seris in friendship, and the present islanders customarily accord a warm welcome to white visitors. The pictures on these pages were taken by such a visitor, anthropologist William Neil Smith II.

Despite their friendly feeling for white men, the tribesfolk have rarely entered a white settlement since the time some years ago when a number of them died of measles following such a visit.

Last fall, however, Smith persuaded four Seri men to join him in a trip to Los Angeles. Their encounter with civilization was a huge success—until they went to a beach and saw what present-day bathing suits look like. Pretty uncivilized. THE END



**Tribal medicine men are not taken seriously. The crosses are Indian symbols, not Christian**

**Indians spend part of time on coast of Sonora, a Mexican state. Here group prepares to sail for nearby Tiburón Island in Gulf of California**





# *A Picture for the*

