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Francisco Foot Hardman **Photographs by Dana Merrill**

Builders of Ruins or Death and Progress

“What did I come here for!
What is the reason for all of these international
dead who revive in the noise
of the locomotive with their little eyes of dim
light to peek in me through the windows
of the wagon? . . .”
Mário de Andrade, *O turista aprendiz*

Dana Merrill, the artful New York photographer, certainly knew it when he landed in Porto Velho in 1909, that it would be a true saga to capture in images he should fix, the scenario, characters and acts of an unique drama: the work of building the Madeira-Mamoré railroad, in the far western Brazilian Amazon.

In fact, photographic memory has seldom revealed so accurately the ruins produced by the civilizing process, which granted it an outstanding position among the scanty historical sources of the great shock that resulted from the arrival of modernity in the forest. Economic ruin, because when the railroad's 248 miles were set into operation in 1912, the enterprise was already absolutely obsolete and deficitary due to lowering rubber prices. Political ruin, because the entangled relationship between the American financial capitals and the national government in Rio de Janeiro accounted for several scandals in the still young Brazilian republic. Ecological ruin, because the fast change in the natural and human environment in the area crossed by rails caused all sorts of imbalance. And first and foremost, social and cultural ruin: in the 1907-1912 period, this huge project in the forest mobilized over 30 thousand workers of 50 different ethnic groups and caused famine, disease and death – approximately ten thousand died anonymously in the breaches of the railroad.

But Merrill and his lucid camera, his sensitive eye and perfect technique, became the primordial narrator of this contemporary epic drama which caused as many casualties as the tragedies of Canudos and Contestado in Brazil. Merrill focused on a deaf war that had never been declared, but equally inglorious in its results: a war between the technical civilization and the forces of nature; a phenomenon that has reached a matchless speed planetwide, after the Industrial Revolution; a war of a treacherous regime against the men who did and undid Madeira-Mamoré.

The interesting aspect is that Dana obtains impressive effects, not as a reporter of sensations, but much more, as a chronicler of ephemeral landscapes, an archaeologist, who does not devote to a remote past, but to a slippery present which signals between the light of a clearing and the forest dark, the future memory. The wonderful images of this chronicler-photographer – among a mosaic of 2000 he took between 1909-1910, only 10% remained – show, first and foremost, a work of meticulous realism, made by patient craft-

manship and a vocational gaze. Portrayed in these pictures are the somewhat desolated magnitude of landscape, the sober dignity of workers from all over the world, the sophisticated objects of a bourgeois life, the intense movement of Porto Velho in its birthplace, the high technical and social division of productive functions in grades, while the revenge of nature against progress here included avalanches, floods and the diabolical cycle of disease-hospital-cemetery. Let us not forget that malaria, among other tropical diseases, was the most lethal.

Besides showing a significant sample of Dana Merrill's photographic work, the present exhibit, organized by MIS, brought about a rare work where art and documentation gather in the finest style, faithful to the spirit that apparently commanded the instantaneous shots of this intriguing New Yorker: the desire to narrate, to report the true history of the construction of the Madeira-Mamoré line. Such a desire cannot, however, be fully achieved; the pictures fix fragments, the history can only be more real if it recognizes the discontinuous and precarious character of this iconographical language that attempts to gain access to the irreversibly lost past in the singularity of each detail cut in black and white.

However, is the fate of a chronicler-photographer not essentially different from that of a historian? If we cannot live again the past, then perhaps we can imagine it, imagine it with criteria though, that is, by means of images that truly highlight what has happened in the past. This is the greatest challenge for a documentary, regardless of whether it is made up of pictures or words. On admiring the truthful beauty of Dana Merrill's pictures, the contemporary observer will discover the reason for his remarkable narrative fluency: this photographer has an incredible ability to discover, recognize and capture in the quickest snapshot or in the most studied pose the most significant sign, the most interesting traces, the clearest signals of this mad adventure, which was doomed to fail long before its completion.

Dana Merrill's identity, saved from oblivion by his friend, Frank Kravigny (1940), one of the survivors and witness of the Madeira-Mamoré railroad saga, became the historical link and inspiring source of the brilliant narrative of Manoel Rodrigues Ferreira (1960) years later. These linking images rise among the buried facts and constructed memory as a source of light and truth.

Madeira-Mamoré, cross of rivers astray from civilization, memory flashes, tangled history, derailed trains. The railroad demanded its narrator, the phantom-photographer who insinuates himself in images, in the chronicle of an absurd road, history that came from negatives in glass plates.

People say that Dana Merrill and his magic machine – it was real and mechanical – used to travel, along the unfinished railroad bed with the company's courier. That way, he himself was also a courier, a Mercury of Chromes of this unfinished and brutal modernity. Merrill was therefore a fugacious courier of this large faustian construction – an epical and tireless recorder of its small exposed shades.







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