

A TRIP TO ANGEL FALLS, VENEZUELA

June 28 to July 6, 2012

A Personal Narrative

by John Holl

July 24, 2012

Introduction

1. Angel Falls in Venezuela is the highest waterfall in the world, at 3,212 feet.¹
2. Angel Falls was discovered² in 1933, only 2 years before I was born, long after the great period of exploration of South America by the Spanish and Portuguese.
3. It was discovered by Jimmie Angel, a U.S. pilot, not by a Spanish, Portuguese, or South American explorer.

I learned this information when I was about 10 years of age, reading my family's World Atlas and Gazetteer in our home in North Canton, Ohio. To me this was such a wondrous and compelling set of facts that I tucked it away in my mind for many years. While I was in my 40's I did some research about Jimmie Angel and his discovery of Angel Falls, met and interviewed Jimmie Angel's widow Marie in California, and wrote an article "Angel on Silver Wings", which was published by The Organization of American States in its magazine *Americas*, in August 1980.

Still interested in the subject in 2010, I checked out Jimmie Angel on Google, and learned that a Jimmie Angel Historical Project had been organized in 1996 in Eureka, California, by his niece, Karen Angel. Karen brought to my attention by email an upcoming eco-tour of Angel Falls scheduled for September 2-9, 2010, at a base cost of \$1,999. I signed up for the tour, but it had to be cancelled in August because of illnesses involving the 2 leaders of the tour, Karen Angel and Paul Stanley of Stanley Eco-tours.

However, I maintained email contact with Karen, and in July 2011, she and Paul announced that the eco-tour had been re-scheduled for June 28 to July 5, 2012. I signed up for the tour in March 2012 at the base cost, still \$1,999, plus an extra amount for single accommodations where possible. Using some of my frequent flyer miles with American Airlines to cover my air transportation made the trip even more affordable.

This paper is an account of my day-to-day experience on the tour, based on memory, notes I took during the tour, and digital photos I made. Dates and times of the photos proved very useful in supplementing my memory and notes. I have prepared the account to reinforce my own memory, and to preserve the experience for my children, posterity, and anyone else who wants to share my experience.

The Tour and Our Leaders

¹ The second highest, at 3,110 feet, is Tugela Falls in the Drakensberg Mountains of South Africa, which drops in 5 steps. No other waterfall in the world reaches even 2,700 feet.

² That is, brought to the attention of the world outside Venezuela.

The tour was entitled *A Tribute to Jimmie Angel - The Overland Route by Ruth Robertson to Angel Falls*. Jimmie Angel was not only the discoverer of the Falls, but in 1937 also led the first expedition, a small party, by airplane to the top of the table mountain or *tepui* from which Angel Falls issues forth. The airplane was disabled upon landing, so the party in an epic journey had to traverse the serrated and overgrown surface at the top for 10 days just to reach the edge of the *tepui*, and another 4 days down to reach their base camp. He continued to explore the area in support of the Venezuelan Government's Gran Sabana Expedition of 1939 and the work of the Venezuelan-Brazilian Border Commission in subsequent months.

Ruth Robertson was an American photojournalist based in Caracas, who led the first overland trip to the base of Angel Falls, and with 2 engineers measured the true height of the Falls, at 3,212 feet - the first drop measuring 2,648 feet and the second 564 feet. Her photographs and an account of the journey were published in *National Geographic* in November 1949.³

The tour was, in part a fund-raising benefit for the Jimmie Angel Historical Project, based in Eureka, California, and a tax-exempt organization incorporated in California. It was also an eco-tour through the land of the Pemón indigenous tribe of Venezuela, employing many of the tribe members in guiding, feeding, housing, transporting, and otherwise supporting the tour members, as well as providing extra tips and gifts to the tribe. Donations to the Pemón by tour members were tax-deductible through Angel Conservation, a tax-exempt organization incorporated in the State of New York.

Karen Angel is the daughter of Clyde Angel, Jimmie Angel's youngest brother. She is the President and co-founder of the Jimmie Angel Historical Project, and curator of the JAHP Archive. She has authored several papers about Jimmie Angel and his era of exploration, and collaborated in many other studies on that subject.

Paul Stanley is President of Angel Eco-Tours and Angel Conservation, an organization working to preserve the culture of the indigenous Pemón and the flora and fauna that support them. Paul was born in England and became successful there in the printing industry. Later he engaged in the tourism business in New York City for a number of years. He is now resident in Caracas, Venezuela, with his wife Carmen.

Our leaders provided us in advance with substantive advice about what to bring with us on the eco-tour, including suggestions for gifts for the Pemón school and community. We were advised by Paul (Karen had a different opinion) that mosquitoes were not often seen in the Angel Falls area, but most of us chose nevertheless to get yellow fever shots, malaria medicine, and insect repellent.

³ For a full account of the works of Jimmie Angel and Ruth Robertson, see Karen Angel's essay "Why the World's Tallest Waterfall is named Angel Falls", *Terra Incognita*, Vol. 44, No. 1, April 2012, pp. 16-42.

The Terrain

Angel Falls is located in the Guiana Highlands, which extend beyond Venezuela to Guyana and Brazil, and which are sites of other mighty waterfalls, including Kukenan Falls in Venezuela (2,000 ft.) and Kaieteur Falls in Guyana (740 ft.) A large part of the Guiana Highlands in Venezuela is located within Canaima National Park, which includes Angel Falls and, at 115,000 square miles, is the sixth largest national park in the world.

The two principal features of Canaima National Park are (1) a vast grassland known as *La Gran Sabana* which extends into Guyana, interspersed with heavily forested river valleys, and (2) tabletop mountains known as *tepuis*, which from a distance resemble the mesas of the U.S. Southwest, but are quite distinct in their geology and topography. La Gran Sabana has a mean elevation of about 3,000 ft., which tapers down to about 1,000 ft. in some river valleys. Tepuis, with steep walls, tower as high as 9,219 ft., at Mount Roraima near the Guyana and Brazilian borders. The tops of the tepuis have plant and animal life unique in the world. The tops are not really flat, but rather are riven by crevasses, slot canyons, sinkholes, and caves, some of which have their own unique plants and animals. Many of them have waterfalls issuing from their tops or sides.

The tepuis, like the Guiana Highlands generally, are the remnants of a Precambrian geological formation of some of the oldest rock in the world, some 1.7 billion years old. They are composed mostly of sandstone and quartz conglomerates. There are more than 100 tepuis in Canaima National Park

La Gran Sabana is the result of eons of weathering of that Precambrian formation. The soil, composed mostly of sand and quartzites, lacks nutrients and cannot support a large population of grass-eating animals like the alluvial *llanos* of southwestern Venezuela. The savannah is broken up by occasional watercourses and mini-swamps which support palms and other plant life. The lush growth surrounding the tepuis occurs despite the lack of nutrients in the ground.

Auyántepeui (Devil's Mountain) is the source of Angel Falls, and is the largest of the tepuis in Venezuela, at about 350 square miles. It reaches an elevation of 8,317 ft. toward its southern end. Its rainfall is large enough to support not only Angel Falls, but several other falls, including Churún Falls, the source of the Churún River which divides portions of the Auyántepeui. Viewed from above, Auyántepeui somewhat resembles a baseball catcher's mitt, with the Churún River and Canyon dividing the thumb from the rest of the mitt.

The Narrative

Day One -Thursday, June 28, 2012. I set out from home at 2:30 a.m. via private airport transportation in the luxurious, nicely-accountered, quasi-limousine of Joel Prentice. It cost me \$75, but was worth it. My flight wasn't scheduled to leave until 6:30 a.m., but the idea was that it would take about an hour to get to Baltimore-Washington Airport, and 3 hours' time should be allowed for clearance for the international flight to Caracas. However the trip to BWI took only about 30 minutes in the early morning, and the American Airlines ticket office didn't open until 4:00. I waited until the ticket office opened, then checked my one large piece of luggage through to Caracas, and kept one carry-on bag.

However, the gate attendant directed me to Gate 41 in Concourse D, and I had to clear security and take the long walk to the end of Concourse D. After dozing there about 45 minutes, I noticed I was still the only person there. I checked with the nearest active gate and found out that *there are no American Airlines departures from Concourse D*. So I had to hustle back down Concourse D and past security to find out that the proper gate was in Concourse C. I passed through security once more, this time in Concourse C (fortunately much faster than in Concourse D), and arrived at my departure gate as the flight was in the latter stages of the boarding process. A rousing start for my trip to Venezuela.

The plane arrived on time at Miami International Airport and I had ample time to proceed to the departure gate of my American Airlines flight to Caracas. I had forgotten to bring a book to read so I stopped at a newstand to buy *Destiny of the Republic* by Candice Millard, about the campaign and assassination of President James Garfield in 1880. I also had time to see CNN provide the news about the complicated and controversial Supreme Court decision to uphold the Affordable Care Act, popularly known as Obamacare. It was the last piece of U.S. or international news I was to hear until July 5.

My flight arrived in Caracas Maiquetia Airport more-or-less on time at 4 p.m., and cleared passport control and customs in about 45 minutes. I was met by Veronica of Paul Stanley's Caracas staff, who drove me to my hotel in downtown Caracas. The Caracas Airport is built on the coastal plains of Maiquetia on the Caribbean, while Caracas lies in a valley on the southern, inland side of the coastal hills. Traffic was heavy, being rush hour on a Thursday, and it took 1½ hours to get to the Hotel Avila, where reservations had been made for me. I checked into the hotel at about 6:30 p.m. After freshening up a bit, I went downstairs to the hotel bar where I met Paul Stanley and some of my companions for the trip to Angel Falls. Later, at dinner, I met most of the rest of them, including Karen Angel, with whom I had been corresponding by email for more than 2 years (and talked to on the telephone just once), but had never met. We made up a group of 15, including Paul and Karen. Most of them were from the

West Coast, and the origin of the rest was scattered - suburban Washington, D.C.; suburban New Orleans; Brooklyn Heights, New York; and New Zealand. Most of the group appeared to be in the age range of 30's to early 50's, while a distinct minority (including me) were more in the 60's to 80's age range. The members of our group were:

Robert Allen	Metairie, Louisiana
Steven Allen	Eureka, California
Bruce Amundson	Shoreline, Washington
Karen Angel	Eureka, California
Steve Davidson	Bayside, California
Colleen Edwards	Auckland, New Zealand
Patrick Edwards	Auckland, New Zealand
Kitch Eitzen	Eureka, California
Larry Eitzen	Eureka, California
John Holl	Silver Spring, Maryland
Alan Mason	Eureka, California
Maia Nero	Brooklyn Heights, New York
Bill Peden	Mill Valley, California
Kevin Rowland	Seattle, Washington
Paul Stanley	Caracas, Venezuela

While we were all together, Paul exchanged our dollars for Venezuelan currency, the Bolivar fuerte, at 7.5 Bf to \$1.00, the market rate. Paul explained that conversion by banks and through credit card purchases would be at the official rate, something more like 4.3 Bf to \$1. I exchanged \$400 and received Bf 3,000, for tips and payments to crew, guides, and cooks; gifts; and purchases of souvenirs and incidentals. I stashed away my remaining dollars for possible future conversion, but the Bf 3,000 amount proved more than sufficient for my needs during the trip.

We retired for the night at about 9 p.m., so as to be ready for an early departure in the morning of Day 2. "Early departure" was an expression we were to hear frequently.

Day 2 - Friday, June 29. As directed, I received a wake-up call at 5:00 a.m. and was down in the lobby at 5:30 for our transportation to Maiquetia Airport, arriving about 6:15 a.m. Our day's itinerary was to fly from Caracas to Puerto Ordaz to Canaima Lagoon to Uruyén. There was some delay, it seemed like about an hour, before we could board our flight to Puerto Ordaz. Puerto Ordaz lies on the lower reaches of the Orinoco River, close to Ciudad Guayana. Once again there was a bit of a delay in boarding our next flight, which gave us time for a quick sandwich in the airport lounge. Finally, we boarded and flew to Canaima Lagoon on the Carrao River, a few miles to the north of Auyántepei, at about 9:30 a.m.

Since we had a couple of hours' wait for our ongoing flight to Uruyén, we had time to explore Canaima Lagoon, a beautiful place with several tourist resorts located nearby. Canaima Lagoon is picturesque in that it has seven falls feeding into it from the Carrao River, most of them on the opposite side from the airport, which made for some good camera shots. We also had time to make some souvenir purchases, mostly beadwork of indigenous tribes.

The flight onward to Uruyén was to be by much smaller planes. Our group was broken up into three groups to fit the smaller planes, and I was on the last flight. When they loaded our group and luggage, the tail of the plane plunked down, so one of our larger members, Steve Allen, sat in front with the pilot to even the load and lift the tail. Thus rearranged, the plane took off a little before noon. The plane never flew higher than about 4,000 feet, so we were able to clearly see the terrain, with Auyántepeui and other tepuis on the left and river valleys on the right. Uruyén is on the south flank of Auyántepeui, so we flew around it rather than over it. One of the earlier flights was able to fly over Angel Falls for a view, but it was too clouded in for our pilot to make the effort. We landed on the grass airstrip at Uruyén at 12:15 p.m.

Uruyén is on the Grand Savannah which stretches for miles to the south and east of the village. Its airstrip was used by both Jimmie Angel and Ruth Robertson during their expeditions in the 1930's and 40's. We gathered our luggage from the planes, which quickly departed, and were assigned to rooms in fair-sized round huts built by the Pemón. Although I had asked for single rooms throughout the trip, I was not able to be accommodated on this day, and thus I got to know my fellow roomer, Robert Allen, who was to become my buddy during the rest of the trip. Robert was 85 years of age, compared to my 77, and tall and fit, more so than I was. He was from the New Orleans area, a former career Marine, and an active outdoorsman. He told me of canoe trips he had taken in Arkansas and Texas. We were part of the smaller, non-West Coast contingent of our group, and soon came to be treated generally as "the elders" by the rest.

We soon met our Pemón guides, Arturo Berti and Clemente Lambos. Arturo was the younger, in his 20's or early 30's; Clemente, the older, was in his late 40's or early 50's. I'm guessing because no one announced their ages. I came to know Clemente quite well, as he guided me on most of the walking and boat trips that lay ahead.

Paul was not about to let us relax after the 3 flights to Uruyén. A trip was arranged to Yurwan Canyon to see several waterfalls. Since we were to go part way in a jeep, we were broken up into 2 groups, let us say Group A and Group B. I was in Group B and we left Uruyén about a half-hour after Group A. The jeep took us into the savannah about a mile, where rocky terrain made it impossible for the jeep to go any further. We set out from the drop-off point across the hot and sunny savannah. It was at first easy to follow Clemente, the terrain being only slightly uphill and the trail easy to follow. Before long, however, the trail became steeper and rocks more frequent. I was trying

to keep up with Clemente, but soon fell behind, although never in last place. After about an hour of climbing the ever-ascending trail, we came to a small river filled with rocks and stones, where we stripped down to shorts (a pair which Robert lent me). We came prepared to walk through water with water shoes. Even with water shoes and Clemente's help, I had difficulty crossing, learning that rocks under water are slimy, slippery, and treacherous, and that it was safer to walk on smaller stones. Worse, my legs were no longer cooperating very well with the rest of my body. They simply had become too tired. The rest of my body was fitter than my legs. Thus, I had Clemente and the group leave me at the river, while they continued their climb to the falls. Clemente agreed, telling me to stay on a small island in the river.

While they continued, I sat in the water, cooled myself, and recuperated a bit. It turned out to be rather pleasant there. There were few bugs, and no creatures that I could see the water; just me, the water, and an occasional breeze. I sat there 30-45 minutes, when a portion of Group A, including Robert, returned to the river. Like me, they had not gone all the way to the falls, just farther than I had. We all put on our long pants and I began my trip back. Although my legs were still tired, the trip downhill was easier, and we were very relieved to see the jeep waiting to pick us up where it left us off.

After the rest of the groups returned and we rested a bit, we learned that we were all invited to a wine and cheese celebration at the nearby of Vittorio Assandria, a good friend of Paul and a big fan of Jimmie Angel, in the next village over. "More walking", I muttered to myself. However, it was only about a quarter-mile, and the French wine was excellent and the cheese and breads only a little less so. After a little while, we thanked our host Vittorio and returned to the village for dinner provided by our Pémon hosts.

I should mention here that, at both Uruyén and our next destination, Kavak, the places we were staying were not where the Pemón actually lived. They built these little "villages" for guests, and came to them mainly when they had guests; otherwise they came only for security, maintenance, and upkeep, as needed. The money they receive from tour groups such as ours is very important to their community treasury and wellbeing.

After dinner, we retired for the night at about 8 or 9 p.m. We had very comfortable beds, with a sink and a flush toilet (but no light). We soon came to learn the practical utility, particularly in the middle of the night, of the headlamps we had been advised to bring with us.

Day Three - Saturday, June 30. Robert and I both woke up at about 6:00 a.m. I had slept well, but I had a foot cramp during the night, and had to get out of bed to walk it off, and managed to find my way to the toilet in the dark. We rearranged our luggage a little, walked out and about, and found a few others awake. We had breakfast about

8:00 a.m. -- meat, cheese, eggs, coffee, tea, and juice. After breakfast, Paul began a precedent for our other stays during the tour: he set out envelopes for suggested tips for the services provided us by the Pemón, such as the meals and housing at Uruyén. Today was the day to hike to the village of Kavak, our next destination. Paul announced that the hike would be arranged in two groups: Group A would take the long route, where they would visit another Pemón village before arriving at Kavak. Group B would take a shorter, more direct route. He hinted that Robert and I would want to be in Group B, plus anyone else who wanted a shorter, perhaps less interesting route. Group B was accompanied by Marianela Camacho, a young Venezuelan woman who was taking pictures of our group while we were with the Pemón in the Kamarata Valley. While we were hiking, the Pemón crew would load up our luggage and carry it by truck to Kavak.

Group A left at about 10:00 a.m., taking the jeep out to the savannah for their start, as we all did yesterday. Group B, with me and Robert and five others, and Arturo as our guide, set out at about 10:30 a.m., not in the jeep, but on foot, fording the small river behind our Uruyén campsite. I settled on what became my outfit for the rest of the eco-tour: wide-brimmed Tilley hat, long khaki pants, tee shirt, unbuttoned long-sleeved shirt, socks, and sneakers or water shoes, fanny pack, and water bottle hung on my belt. Nobody said anything about walking through water on our way to Kavak, but as it turned out my sneakers worked out just as well as my water shoes. We went through a short patch of jungle, with Arturo hacking the way ahead with his machete. Then, out into the hot savannah we went. Sometimes Arturo followed a trail, and sometimes he just set out through the grass. I knew we were headed for a village, and everytime I saw a treeline ahead I hoped it might be the village. However, the treeline usually marked a little stream or low swampy spot which we had to pick through and try to keep our feet out of the water. On one such crossing, I misjudged a clump of weeds and went into mud halfway up my calf. My pantlegs stayed muddy for the rest of the trip, and I retired my socks until I got home to the U.S.A. And so our trek went on over lots of savannah, interspersed with occasional wet treelines.

We did get to see some of the animal life of the savannah. Occasionally we would disturb a bunch of grasshoppers, who would go bounding away in great numbers. They were only about an inch long, black, and not as fat the grasshoppers I know in the U.S. However, they are known as a favorite food of the Pemón, who catch them in nets in great numbers. I later sampled a pinch of them prepared by grilling. They weren't gross, but they didn't have much taste, either. Maybe they become an acquired taste. They must provide lots of needed protein for the Pemón.

On one creek crossing, we saw some fish about 6-8 inches long, which looked something like catfish, but had scales on their undersides. Arturo adeptly despatched five or six of them with his machete, and took them with us. We didn't have fish on the menu that night, but I imagine someone enjoyed them.

The hike was mostly on fairly level ground, but after about 3 hours we began to ascend the foothills of a tepui. Soon Arturo pointed out in the distance the village which was our destination, Kavak. By that time, my legs were getting tired, although not so much as during yesterday's hike toward the waterfalls in Yurwan Canyon. Anyway, I had to press on: there was no place to stop and nobody coming by to join me. We eventually arrived at Kavak at about 2:00 p.m., 3½ hours after we left Uruyén. The guides were always wonderfully vague about distances, which they phrased in terms of time, but I think we hiked about 6 miles, farther than I remember walking in one stretch since I was in the Army 54 years ago.

After resting a bit, we wandered around Kavak a while, and about 30 or so minutes later, Group A arrived. They spoke of seeing in the Pémon village of Santa Marta the making of cassava meal from tubers, and tasting a powerful brew of the Pémon, *cachiri*, with an alcohol content of about 20%.

At about 3:00 p.m., Paul, as always wanting to give us something to do, announced a hike to a nearby waterfall in a narrow canyon. I think everyone went except Robert and me. We stayed in Kavak, checking out our rooms. We were roommates again. Our beds were about the same as at Uruyén, but with mosquito netting. The bathroom was about the same, except that we had a candle for lighting. Then we wandered about the village, looking particularly at a fairly large assembly hall under construction, where Robert dried out some of his clothes. We were fascinated by how the Pémon arranged the palm frond roofing. Some villagers brought out chairs for us to rest in. They said that particular roof should be good for about 20 years, although some roofs of cheaper, more easily available types of fronds, may be good for only about 8 years. The other campers returned about 4:30 p.m., talking about the falls, which were almost circular in shape, in what amounted to a slot canyon.

At about 5:15 p.m., Paul and Karen called for us to bring out the gifts for the school that we had bought for the Pemón in the U.S. I had bought notebooks, wooden pencils, and pencil sharpeners. Some of the others had brought a great deal more - soccer balls and pumps, inflating needles, art materials, and lots of other things, including yet more notebooks, pencils, and sharpeners. Our gifts filled up a good-sized table. The villagers began to gather and Paul made a short speech, translated into Pemón by our guides. He invited the village children to come to the table and check out and receive the gifts. Then their chief gave a short thank you speech, translated into English for us. As dusk began to gather near 6:00 p.m., a group of Pemón children of ages about 8 through 12, performed some folk dances for us, and one of their officials told us in English what the dances were about. The only one I remember dealt with the propriety of not offering too many drinks of their alcoholic brew to guests and of not partaking too many themselves, a lesson easily translatable into U.S. mores. Paul and Karen then gave short speeches thanking the performers on behalf of all of us and the Angel family.

By the time they finished it was dark, and most of us brought out our headlamps to be able to retreat to our rooms and get ready for dinner. We ate at about 7:00 p.m. Afterwards, we continued the practice of placing our tips for the services in the tip envelopes. After we did that, we were invited to a souvenir shop operated by one Hortensia, who had a very nice collection of beadwork, basketry, and wooden crafts. She had some nice blowguns with darts, but I decided not to get any for our grandkids for fear they would use them. Also, she had some nice rain sticks to simulate rain when it's difficult to sleep. Ultimately I settled on some beadwork and basketry. Then we retired to our rooms for the night at about 8:00 p.m. For the first time, I used my headlamp in bed to read the book I bought in Miami.

Day Four - Sunday, July 1. Robert and I awoke at the same time once again, at about 5:30 a.m. Once again I had cramps in the night that drew me out of bed. But this time they were in my calf and thigh, a charleyhorse. I woke up with really stiff legs. I looked forward to this day, though, because we were going onto the river and not do any walking to speak of. At breakfast, I talked to a member of our group, Bruce Amundson, who was an M.D. He showed me some exercises to do before walking, and gave me a small supply of ibuprofen. For breakfast we had meat, cheese, and fried eggs over corn cakes known as *arepas*, and coffee, tea, and several kinds of juice to drink.

After breakfast, we got ready for the trek to the river. I had by now developed the regimen of wearing a fanny pack stocked with my camera, bug repellent, sunblock, and headlamp, and a 32-oz. bottle of water on my belt. We climbed onto two trucks, a pickup and a stake truck, and our luggage was put in with us. At about 9 a.m. we set off on trip of about 5 miles across the savannah over a sometimes rough and rutted road. Next to me was a full bag, maybe a bushel, of something that kept clicking, which turned out to be grasshoppers.

Our destination was the riverport of Kamarata. When we got to the outskirts, we stopped to visit four of Karen Angel's Pemón cousins from the Ugarte family, two of whom she had first met in 2002. The backstory is that Jimmie and Marie Angel adopted a young Pemón boy named José Manuel (Angel) Ugarte who was about 9 years old. Jimmie taught José Manuel airplane mechanics and he travelled with Jimmie and Marie to Ciudad Bolivar and to various locations on La Gran Sabana. Karen's cousins were his children and grandchildren. The cousins had put out a small but tasty spread for us at cousin Santos Ugarte's lodge while they visited with Karen. The bag of grasshoppers was dropped off here. Kamarata is the largest Pemón village in the region. We had hoped to visit the school at Kamarata, but only saw it in passing because it was Sunday and not open. We also passed the Kamarata Capuchin mission, but didn't stop. The mission priest has served the community for 37 years, has accomplished a lot, and is well respected. Unfortunately, we didn't meet him.

We arrived at the Kamarata riverport at about 10:30 a.m., and saw two large canoes, or *curiaras*, waiting for us. The boat crews loaded trip supplies, then our luggage, then us. Robert and I and 3 others of our group were loaded onto the smaller of the 2 boats (about 35 feet, I would estimate). I got a chance to try out my boat seat, which I had bought from a silver-tongued pitchman at the Springfest in Ocean City, Maryland. I bought it because it had a back with some lumbar support for me. The crew consisted of a navigator in front and outboard motor operator/tillerman in the back plus 2 auxiliary crew, including our camp cook, Eulalia Sandoval. The other 10 of our group got into the larger boat, about 40 feet long. Our destination for the day was Arenal campsite, which we would approach via the Akanán and Carrao Rivers. If you can envision Auyántepeui as your right hand, palm up, we would travel from your wrist along the outside of your thumb to its tip, a trip of about 6 hours. The next day's trip to Angel Falls would be much shorter, from the tip of your thumb to the inside of your first knuckle.

So we got started downstream on the Akanán River at about 11:00 a.m. I had envisioned taking more pictures from the boat along the shoreline; however the wake kicked up too much water to aim the camera very well. Still, I enjoyed watching the shoreline go by, and not walking. The Akanán was a fairly wide river, but it did have a series of rapids. Most of these the crew navigated through or over the rocks. But on two occasions, we had to evacuate the boat and walk maybe 100 yards downstream, while the crew got the boat (with our luggage but without our extra weight) through the rapids. On the first set of rapids, they found a way to just shoot through the rapids, but on the second they had to carefully ease the boat through a portion of the rapids with ropes until they reached a point where the operator could lower the outboard motor, start it, and power the boat to a passage through the lower portion of the rapids.

After about 2 hours on the Akanán, we reached the Carrao River, a much wider and deeper river on which we saw no substantial rapids. However, after about an hour downstream on the Carrao, it began to rain and soon became a heavy downpour. Fortunately, we had been advised to bring rain gear, and I broke out my poncho which I purchased at REI but had never looked at, let alone spread out. I struggled to figure it out and put it on, with some help from Robert. It had a hood, on top of which I put my venerable Tilley hat. I tucked my arms inside, and the poncho was big enough to cover all of my boat seat. I didn't swelter because the forward movement of the boat propelled air up under the poncho. Then we all hunkered down to endure the rain. So much for sightseeing along the river bank. Fortunately, there were no rapids where we had to evacuate the boat.

The rain lasted until we almost reached our destination. We arrived at the Arenal campsite at about 4:00 p.m., a trip of about 5 hours. It was faster than our estimated time because recent rains had swollen the river and it was running faster. It turned out that my poncho had served me well; the only thing that got wet was my feet. I was the envy of many of the group, who had gotten drenched in rain jackets or similar less protective coverage, and the boat seat served my back well during the 5-hour trip.

Arenal campsite was an open-air site, with a corrugated metal roof and concrete floor, and the crew was soon engaged in installing hammocks with mosquito nets for us. So we all would be sleeping in hammocks under the same roof, and Robert and I would be roommates with the whole group. The toilets were uphill about 15 yards beyond the roof. They had what looked like flush toilets, but with no flushing mechanism. They had to be flushed by a convenient bucket of water, which one filled from an adjacent rain barrel.

I began to realize how much gear had been shipped in the canoes: the hammocks, blankets, and nets; a generator; all of the food and eating utensils; a tank of propane and burner; and all of the cooking gear, not to mention motor fuel. For meals, the campsite furnished only a place to prepare food. And when we left, all of our trash left with us.

Many of our group hung up wet clothing, hoping it would be a little less wet by morning. I had learned the utility of bringing along a lot of 1-gallon Ziploc bags. I was able to pack away wet things in my suitcase without getting everything else wet. It was dark by the time we had our evening meal. If I remember right, we had steak, which was good but tough. Although the campsite had a few meager lights powered by the generator, most of us finished supper using our headlamps. Most of us were in bed in the hammocks by 8:00 p.m., though a few stayed up longer, sharing a bottle of rum. I didn't have much difficulty getting into the hammock and arranging the mosquito net. However, the blanket furnished us was *huge*, and I had to maneuver a lot to properly cover myself.

Day 5 - Monday, July 2. I woke up at the crack of dawn. I had no cramps in the middle of the night, but I did have to make the trip uphill to the toilet in the dark with my headlamp. A few of the staff were stirring, but I was the first one up in the eco-tour group. However, Robert was soon awake, too. At about 7:00 a.m. we had our usual breakfast of meat, cheese, eggs, coffee, tea, and juice. Paul wanted to get an early start on the river, but we didn't get going until 8:00 a.m., later than he hoped.

July 2 was a significant day because on that day in 1960, the ashes of Jimmie Angel were scattered from an airplane over Angel Falls by his wife Marie and their children James and Rolan.

We set out downstream on the Rio Carrao once again. After about 30 minutes, we reached the Rio Churún and turned into it going upstream toward our Ratoncito Island destination. Gradually, the Churún narrowed as we headed into the Devil's Canyon between the thumb and palm of Auyántepeui. We powered over or around a number of rapids, since the river was high with recent rains. Sometimes, our crew took us near the bank of the river, so as to escape rocks, and we were forced to duck under low-hanging vegetation. We arrived at our campsite on Ratoncito Island at about 11:30 a.m., a 3½ hour trip. Like Arenal, the Ratoncito Island campsite was open-air,

but with a corrugated metal roof and sandy (not concrete) floor. It had a toilet under the same roof, although it had to be flushed using a pail of water, refreshed by a rain barrel nearby but beyond the roof, a problem if it was pouring rain during the night. Most fortunately for us, our new campsite was directly across the river from Angel Falls, affording an excellent view of the Falls, and from which we took many pictures when the Falls were not socked in by clouds.

As the crew began unpacking, Paul informed us that we would be sharing the campsite with another group, so we would have to concentrate our hammocks in one-half of the

sheltered space. As it turned out, the other group didn't use the site, so we were able to spread out. After lunch, Paul made another command decision. Original plans were for all of us to take the trip by foot up to the Falls, but he considered that, being somewhat late to begin the trip and a possible return in the dark, and with the threat of rain, it would be better to do the trip this day with the faster and more eager of our group, and have the rest of us (meaning Robert and me and a few others) do the trip in more leisurely fashion the next morning. He emphasized that, although the trip was only about 1½ miles, it was made difficult by numerous roots and, toward the last third, by a near-45° grade of ascent. Undiscouraged, the first contingent, with Arturo as their guide, took off across the river in one of our boats to begin the trek to the Falls.

While the first group was gone, Clemente led us along the bank of the river downstream past 5 or 6 other campsites used by other groups. Some of them were more luxurious than ours, and some less. There were more campsites upstream which we did not explore. However, no other site afforded such an excellent view of the Falls as ours, so some other groups visited our site for the view after some negotiation with Paul. As I was to learn, there were shorter tours of the Falls offered by other tour operators, which started with the airstrip at Camaina Lagoon and proceeded directly upriver on the Carrao and Churùn Rivers. We were to run into a number of such groups the next day on our foot trip to the Falls.

For our subgroup, the rest of the afternoon was a time to rest and relax. I spent some time hanging up wet clothes, including my damp and muddy khakis from Day 3, then began for the first time to make notes of our trip for later transcribing. Unfortunately, my memory had failed me on a few incidentals, such as what we had to eat during the many meals prepared for us by the Pemón and by the crew that came with us in the boat. Later I tried to activate my short-wave radio, but received not even a hint of a signal. Then I read my book a little and visited with others. The first group returned about 5:00 p.m., near dusk. Fortunately for them, it had not rained, and they were spirited in their description of the trip and the view from Laime's Point. Their only regrets were (1) there were too many other groups at the Point, and (2) they were unable to access the pool below the first drop in the Falls, as they had hoped, because the volume of water made it unsafe. We also learned that, in commemoration of the anniversary of the scattering of Jimmie Angel's ashes, Karen had brought with her the

ashes of her father, Clyde Angel (Jimmie's youngest brother), who died in 1997, and scattered them from Laime's Point.

All afternoon long, while we were relaxing, our crew was busy grilling chicken on a spit. So we had excellent grilled chicken for dinner, along with mashed potatoes and grilled vegetables. With a fine meal and a celebratory mood in the first group, we spent the evening chatting and sharing a little rum and some cubalibres. Not expecting to be turned out too early in the morning, I didn't climb into my hammock until about 10:00 p.m. After my tussle with the blanket and a little reading with my headlamp, I soon fell asleep.

Day 6 - Tuesday, July 3. Awoke at about 4 a.m. to use the bathroom. By the time I climbed back into the hammock, I was thoroughly chilled by the cool, moist air. I had trouble falling back asleep because I couldn't get warm. So I got up about 5:00 a.m.. I wasn't the first person up. It had rained at night and the grounds about the campsite were wet. We had breakfast at about 7:00 p.m. By 9:30 a.m., our second group, I and the slowpokes, was ready to cross the river in one of our curiaras. Many of the first group decided to join us and take the trail to Laime's Point again. The point was named after Alejandro Laime, a Venezuelan of Latvian descent who lived with the Pemón and explored the area and even lived on top of Auyántepeui for three or four years. Laime was also Ruth Robertson's guide in 1949. As Paul had advised us, the trail was difficult. A third was on level ground, the second third sloping upward, and the last third at about a 45° angle. The entire trail was overgrown with roots, it was explained, because the trees could not put down taproots in the stony ground. The roots spread out, not only for support, but also to gain nutrients from the abundant leaf litter. In addition, there were numerous rocks and stones. Clemente had been assigned by Paul as my personal guide, and I held his hand much of the way up. By the time I reached Laime's Point I was pretty well exhausted. Of course, the members of the first group left us well behind, and other groups overtook and passed us, many of them teenagers and even preteens. That made me keenly feel my age, but did not discourage me. I reached Laime's Point, at about 11:00 a.m., unsurprisingly, the last of our group to arrive.

Laime's Point consisted of a number of outcroppings of uptilted rock, fairly close to the lower portion of Angel Falls. From there, I could really feel the power of the water from the blast of air and mist that hit me. The area of the outlook was not very big, and soon was crowded with visitors other than our group. I didn't feel too steady on my tired legs so I stayed well away from the edge of the rocks. I managed to take about 10 pictures of the lower falls and members of our group.

After about 45 minutes of resting, picture-taking, and absorbing the power of the Falls, Clemente said we should start back because rain was forecast. Of course, going back down the trail was almost as rigorous as coming up. My leg muscles now had to let me

down instead of pushing me up, and the roots and stones were as bad as ever. About a third of the way down, Clemente fashioned a walking stick for me, which turned out to be a wonderful help. I should have had one on the way up, and probably for all the walking I did on the savannah. As a result, I didn't need to hold Clemente's hand as much. I fell a few times going down, as I did going up, but didn't even scratch myself. Unfortunately, about two-thirds of the way down, the rains came. I put on my trusty poncho, but got thoroughly wet anyway. Unlike in the boat on the day before, I had to poke my arms out of the poncho to steady myself and use the walking stick, and the water just ran or wicked itself into my clothing underneath. The rain made everything a little more slippery. We made it down to the river by about 12:00 noon. The rest of the group was waiting for me under a shelter, and the boat had arrived to take us back across the river to our campsite.

Once back in the campsite, I looked for whatever dry clothes I still had in my suitcase. I found a dry tee shirt, long-sleeved shirt, and socks, and wearing wet khakis and shoes didn't seem to matter so much. I hung up my wet clothes in the hope they might dry out a little overnight. We were served lunch about 2:00 p.m., cold tuna and noodles, which hit the spot with me. We all talked awhile, then I caught up on my notes. We had dinner at about 7:00 p.m., steak if I remember right, tasty and a little less tough than at Arenal, and I ate it all. My camera batteries had run down, so I partially recharged them from our generator. We all chatted awhile after dinner, and shared a little rum and cubalibres. Paul put envelopes out for tipping our cooking crew, the boat crew, and our guides. We would be saying goodbye to them the next day, on Day 7, in perhaps somewhat of a rush, and it seemed advisable to give them their tips this night. I tipped Clemente generously, for all the help he had given me from Day 2 on. I turned in at about 9:00 p.m. I read in my hammock a little while, then fell asleep.

Day 7 - Wednesday, July 4. It rained all night and was still raining lightly when I got up at 5:00 for an early departure on the river. I slept OK and the good news was that I didn't have leg cramps after yesterday's strenuous trek to the lower Falls. The bad news was that I had a pain on the inside of my right leg at knee level, like a pulled muscle. Breakfast was served at 7:00 a.m.- meat, cheese, eggs, and cornflakes. At breakfast, someone reminded us that today was our U.S. Independence Day, but none of us lit a firecracker. While we were eating, the crew was already taking down the hammocks and mosquito nets and packing them. The cooks packed up after breakfast while we were getting our luggage arranged for loading. The rain had stopped by about 7:00 a.m., so the our luggage didn't have to be loaded in the rain. We began our river departure about 8:00 a.m.. The river was high because of all the rain, so we sailed downstream on the Churún River without having to maneuver much around rapids.

We reached the Carrao River at about 8:45 a.m., and followed the Carrao without event until we approached the rapids near Mayupa. We didn't see any of these rapids, but were told that they were quite large. Instead, we were unloaded at about 9:30 a.m. to

walk overland about a mile to the pickup point. My leg was really hurting by now, and even with the walking stick I trailed behind the others, including Robert. However, Colleen Edwards kindly stayed behind with me until we reached the Mayupa souvenir stand where the others were waiting. I bought a few last-minute souvenir items. The Mayupa airstrip was where Ruth Robertson finished her 1949 expedition to measure the height of Angel Falls. After a short rest, we went downhill to the adjacent pickup point and re-boarded our boats for the last time. We were on the Carrao only about a half-hour when we pulled over to land once again.

At this point, we said goodbye to our boat crew, who would pass through more rapids and transport our luggage directly to the airport at Canaima Lagoon. We walked overland once again, this time to Sapó Falls, one of the seven falls emptying into Canaima Lagoon. There we had the opportunity to walk behind Sapó Falls. I

declined the opportunity because (1) I needed to rest my leg and (2) I didn't want to get wet again. Everyone who went behind the falls stripped down to bathing suits for the event. We left Sapó Falls at about 10:45 a.m. and walked to one of the resorts at Canaima Lagoon, where our cooks were preparing a fine last lunch for us. After lunch we bid our cooking crew goodbye. I didn't realize we were on an island until we boarded one final curiara, staffed by another boat crew, for a short trip to the mainland.

We arrived at a spot not far from the same resort we had visited at Canaima Lagoon on Day 2 on our way to Uruyén. We trudged through that resort and went directly to the Canaima airport, where we found our luggage faithfully delivered by the now-departed boat crew. Here, we all said goodbye to our guides, Arturo and Clemente. I gave Clemente my personal thanks and a small gift, a small Spanish-English dictionary. We soon boarded our flight to Ciudad Bolívar, at 2:00 or 2:30 p.m.

When we landed at Ciudad Bolívar, we stopped briefly to see Jimmie Angel's airplane, *El Río Caroní*, that he had to abandon on top of Auyántepeui in 1937. It had been airlifted off Auyántepeui in the 1970 by the Venezuelan Air Force. The Venezuelan Government has restored the aircraft, but it is missing some of its original parts such as the wings. It is displayed directly in front of the Ciudad Bolívar airport.

We were picked up at the airport by Paul's staff and transported to a lovely small hilltop hotel, *La Cumbre*. One reason I call it "lovely" is because it was air-conditioned. After we checked in, I took all of my wet stuff out of the suitcase - shoes, socks, long-sleeved shirt, tee shirts, etc., and spread them out for overnight drying. Once again, I was glad to have liberally used Ziploc bags for all my wet stuff to keep the rest of the contents of my suitcase dry. I also showered, shaved, and brushed my teeth for the first time since Day 3 in Kavak. Afterward, we all met in the hotel bar and exchanged some of our remaining fuertes with one another. I had plenty left so I lent some to Karen for later repayment in the U.S., and traded some for dollars to supplement the amount I had stashed away on Day 1. While we were in the bar, Patrick Edwards, consulting his

Smartphone, told me that a powerful rainstorm had hit my home county in Maryland, Montgomery County, knocking out power over a large area. This was my first news of the outside world since Day 1 in the Miami airport. We had one last dinner at the hotel with all of us together, before we headed for our rooms to sleep once again in a bed (not that sleeping in a hammock was all that bad, but still . . .)

Day 8 - Thursday, July 5. I was up at 7:00 a.m. and repacked all of my now-dry clothes in my suitcase, and went for our last breakfast together. Our group now began breaking up, and I was sad with the departure of these people that had shared my adventure of 7 days. Three for them (Steve Allen, Steve Davidson, and Kevin Rowland) took an early flight to Caracas, then on for additional adventures in Panama, my stomping ground more than 40 years ago. Two others (Larry and Kitch Eitzen) left from the hotel for a few days in the Orinoco delta. The rest of us went on a tour of Ciudad Bolivar, in which I was unable to fully partake because of my sore leg. We

went in a couple of vans provided by Paul's company, and I stayed in the car while the rest saw Simon Bolivar's home. I remember we visited a park in the old part of Ciudad Bolivar where the traffic was heavy because of festivities for Venezuelan Independence Day activities, which the others observed for a while. Then we visited the Ciudad Bolivar waterfront on the Orinoco, gazing upon its graceful bridge over the River.

At about 10:00 a.m. we left Ciudad Bolivar in the two vans for Puerto Ordaz, a journey of about 65 miles, to catch our flight to Caracas. We had time for a sandwich at the airport and left for Caracas at about 2:30 p.m. We arrived at Maiquetia Airport at about 3:30 p.m. Some of Paul's people picked up six of us and took us through rush-hour traffic to the Hotel Avila, where we had stayed on Day 1. Four (Paul, Karen, Alan Mason, and Maia Nero) went to Paul's house to stay the night. After checking in, I caught up on my notes. Also, I tried boosting the charge in my cell phone, which I had brought with me for the sole purpose of being able to call my son Kenny and my wife Jackie when I arrived in the U.S. at JFK airport. Curiously to me, the charger read "Battery Full" after about 8 days travelling around in my suitcase. Then I had dinner with the remaining members of the group: Robert Allen, Patrick and Colleen Edwards, Bruce Amundson, and Bill Peden. I had just a hearts of palm and avocado salad. Went to bed at about 8:30 p.m. for an early-morning wake-up call.

Day 9 - Friday, July 6. I woke up at 5:00 a.m. for a 6:15 pickup for the airport. I didn't have breakfast because my stomach was upset; the hearts of palm-avocado salad apparently didn't agree with me. By the time I got up, Robert, Bruce Amundson, and Bill Peden had left for their flight to Atlanta, which Karen, Alan, and Maia were also taking. So just the Edwards and I were left to be picked up by Sandra from Paul's office for our flight to New York's JFK Airport. We arrived at the airport at about 7:30 a.m. It took an unusually long time for my suitcase to be checked in. The Edwards, travelling in business class, had a much shorter time for the processing of their checked luggage, but they kindly waited with Sandra for me before moving on to the next step,

security, where Sandra had to leave us. After getting through security and immigration, the three of us had time for breakfast at an airport cafe. I had just iced tea and a torte. Our plane left at about 10:30 a.m. I had an uneventful 5-hour flight to JFK, during which I dozed and read my book *Destiny of the Republic*. I said goodbye to the Edwards at JFK as I headed for the U.S. citizens-only line of Passport Control. They were staying in New York a day or two before continuing on with a trip to the U.S. Midwest. The passage through U.S. Customs was smooth, and I re-checked my suitcase through to Baltimore-Washington Airport.

I tried calling Kenny and got through to him on his way home from Pennsylvania for less than a minute, when transmission stopped and my cell phone read "Battery Empty", in spite of what it said the previous night in Caracas. I had time to plug in the charger in the departure lounge for about half-hour before the BWI flight. Just before I boarded, I was able to call Kenny (who was by that time nearly home in Maryland) to make sure he would be at the BWI Airport to pick me up at 7:45 p.m. After I boarded I

called Jackie but was able to talk to her for only a minute or two before a steward made me turn off the cell phone. The hour-long flight to BWI was uneventful, although it took a while for the luggage to arrive at the carousel. I picked it up, went outside, and Kenny was on time. I talked to him all the way home to Jackie. At home, they both told me about their adventures during and after the storm that hit the Washington suburbs a week before.

Conclusion

After having Angel Falls and Jimmie Angel in my thoughts for more than sixty years, it was doubly gratifying to (1) see Angel Falls and feel its power and beauty up close, and (2) meet and leisurely chat with Karen Angel personally throughout the tour and hear about her life as well as Jimmie Angel's.

The pleasure was not lessened by any of the rigors of the eco-tour and in approaching Angel Falls. First, our leaders had amply prepared us for the trip and explained each day what to expect. Second, our Pemón guides were excellent, in our hikes and climbing, and aboard our curiaras. Third, I had prepared myself pretty well beforehand, with shots, physical conditioning, and obtaining the proper gear. Although I must have fallen 10 to 15 times, I never even scratched myself. I never received any insect bites, and never developed any travellers' diarrhea. In fact, our group generally survived the trip well, with just a few bites from *pourri-pourri* (what we in the northern latitudes would call "no-see-ums"), and only a few cases of travellers' diarrhea. I did suffer what was later diagnosed as a strained ligament in my right knee. If I were to do the trip over again, I would do more exercises that involved lifting my knees and pushing off (like stair-climbing) and lose 10 or 15 pounds beforehand.

The idea of an eco-tour suited me well. It was a pleasure to meet the Pemón (and particularly Clemente, who helped me so much) who guided, fed, transported, and housed us, and know that we were providing them with benefits that were consistent with their culture. Finally, it was a pleasure to meet my fellow tour members (especially my buddy Robert Allen), hear about their lives, and share the trip's pleasures and rigors with them.