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**Why the World's Highest Waterfall is Named
Angel Falls
The Phelps Venezuela Expedition
Years of Exploration 1937-1938**

by Karen Angel

Why is the world's highest waterfall named Angel Falls? It could be because the name is descriptive of the wing of water that falls from the heavenly clouds hovering over Auyan-tepui, its mountain home. In fact, it is named for Jimmie Angel, an earthy North American aviator-explorer born in 1899 in the state of Missouri¹

Why the waterfall came to be named Angel Falls in honor of Jimmie Angel, I believe, is largely due to the vivid writings of E. Thomas Gilliard, a young scientist from the American Museum of Natural History who explored Auyan-tepui in 1937-1938 as a member of the Phelps Venezuela Expedition.²

According to legend, Jimmie Angel's first trip to Venezuela was in the 1920s with an American mining geologist from Colorado known as McCracken. The two met in a bar in Panama and agreed that McCracken would pay Angel \$5,000 to fly him to a secret location. At McCracken's direction, Angel landed his airplane on a mysterious tepui in the Gran Sabana region of Southeastern Venezuela. Together, they removed many pounds of gold from a river on top of the tepui. After McCracken died in the United States a few years later, Angel spent the balance of his life looking for the river of gold.

In his search, Angel became obsessed with Auyan-tepui; a 435 square mile heart shaped tepui not shown on the maps prior to his explorations of the region.³ He believed that it was the home of the lost

river of gold. During a solo flight on November 16, 1933, he discovered a vertical river, the world's highest waterfall.⁴

The Gran Sabana is a vast 200,000 square mile plateau some 3,300 feet above sea level. It is home to the tepuis and to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's 1912 novel *The Lost World*; a place he never visited but had learned about when he attended a lecture by British botanist Sir Everard im Thurn.⁵ Thurn had scaled Roraima, the highest tepui, in 1884.⁶

Referred to as "Islands in Time," tepuis are towering ancient Cambrian sandstone structures which are believed to be remnants from the vast continent of Gondwana which broke apart about 135 million years ago to form the continents of Africa, and South America. Each tepui rises from the Gran Sabana as an isolated island with its own unique botanical world.⁷

The American Museum of Natural History's first successful expedition to the Gran Sabana in the 1920s was led by George H. H. Tate who successfully explored Roraima. In 1928, Tate reached the remote Duida plateau for the first time, and as with Roraima, many unknown plants and animals were discovered.⁸

Perhaps plants, animals and geological features are never discovered. Instead, the knowledge of their existence gains recognition by a larger, more diverse audience. Surely Angel Falls was known to the indigenous Pemón of the Auyan-tepui region for thousands of years. Perhaps it had been reported in the journals of early explorers. One thing is certain about the discovery of Angel Falls; its existence became known to the world because of Jimmie Angel's explorations.⁹

In 1937, William H. Phelps, Sr., a wealthy American businessman and ornithologist¹⁰ living in Caracas, had been hearing for many months fantastic stories from the bush about Jimmie Angel's new "Lost World" of Auyan-tepui and a mile high waterfall he had discovered. He wrote to his fellow ornithologist and friend Frank Chapman, Curator of the Department of Ornithology at the American Museum of Natural History and offered his sponsorship of an expedition to Auyan-tepui and the participation of

himself and his son William "Billy" H. Phelps, Jr. who was also an ornithologist.¹¹

Located between Roraima and Duida, with hundreds of miles separating them, Chapman believed Auyan-tepui to be the missing link in the Museum's explorations.¹² He enthusiastically responded to Phelps and his invitation as, "the kind of a letter of which dreams both geographic and zoologic come true."¹³

Eager to move forward with preparations for the expedition, Chapman selected twenty-six-year-old ornithologist Tom Gilliard and called upon Tate, who had been the leader of the Roraima and Duida expeditions of a decade earlier and was now assistant curator of South American mammals, to accept the mantle of leadership for the expedition.¹⁴

Gilliard had arrived at the Museum as a twenty-year-old volunteer trainee in 1932 fresh from two years at Deep Springs College in the remote high desert east of southern California's Owens Valley.¹⁵ Then, as now, Deep Springs College was a working cattle ranch that attracted the nation's brightest students who were required to do the hard physical labor of ranch hands, engage in self-governance and maintain the highest academic standards.¹⁶ Gilliard's willingness to take on daily hours of hard physical tasks while maintaining high scientific standards served the expedition in unanticipated ways on Auyan-tepui.

Months of preparation followed Phelps' invitation before the expedition was ready to depart from New York with Gilliard and Tate assembling "the million and one things" that would be needed "from costume jewelry to dentist's forceps."¹⁷ During this period, Gilliard made frequent entries in his Field Diary. He recorded in his good-natured manner that Chapman has "been impressing upon me the dangers ... horrors of green hell have graced my ears, - insect insanity, diseases, and snake bite..."¹⁸

On October 14, 1937, the same day that Gilliard departed from New York City by steamship to make advance preparations for the expedition's

arrival in Venezuela, Phelps wrote to Chapman that Jimmie Angel, who had been employed to work as a pilot guide for the expedition, had landed his airplane on the top of Auyan-tepui in search of gold. With Angel were his wife Marie, expert Venezuelan outdoorsman Gustavo Heny and Miguel Angel Delgado. With no radio communications from them for over four days, Phelps expressed great concern because "If Angel has cracked in taking off it is bad for us because we need his plane during our stay at the mountain."¹⁹

Led by Heny, the landing party, which had been given up for lost or dead, made its way back to camp from the top of Auyan-tepui after ten days of scrambling over crevasses, climbing rock walls, fording rivers, and hacking their way through jungle.²⁰

With their safe return, Phelps wrote to Chapman, "The loss of the Angel plane, although fatal to his hopes of gold I think has been a windfall for our expedition ...the expedition will have an elegant clubhouse on top right in the middle of the mountain: lounge chairs, warm room and a radio...for I presume that Angel's plane will never leave its resting place on top."²¹

Without an airplane to fly in support of the expedition, Jimmie and Marie Angel left Auyan-tepui for the United States prior to the arrival of the Phelps Venezuela Expedition.²²

On December 1, 1937²³ when the expedition composed of ornithologists Gilliard, Phelps Sr. and Jr., William F. Coultas and mammalogists James A. Dillon and Tate had finally assembled in Ciudad Bolivar on the Orinoco River, the four flights required to transport the expedition to the foot of Auyan-tepui were accomplished smoothly.²⁴ Unfortunately, difficulties were encountered as soon as they reached Auyan-tepui. Tate and Gilliard believed that their guide Captain Felix Cardona was responsible for many of the expedition's unanticipated problems.²⁵

A native of Barcelona, Spain and former officer in the Spanish Merchant Marine, Cardona had explored the Auyan-tepui area on foot,

primarily in search of plants. On Phelps' recommendation, Cardona had been hired as guide, camp manager, and radioman.²⁶ According to Gilliard's diary, Cardona dismally failed in his duties to manage the camp helpers because of his "conquistador" attitude, and had difficulty maintaining radio communications. All but one of the helpers and porters fled under Cardona's management or perhaps indirectly due to his lack of explanation about the endless demands of camp work and the extreme difficulty of supply portage on unexplored dangerous mountain routes. On one of the rare occasions when the radio was working, Cardona received word that his son had died. He abandoned the expedition on December 18 to return to Caracas.²⁷

The expedition struggled on for almost three months in various camps on the slopes and plateau of Auyan-tepui without support. All the members did triple duty as field scientists, porters, and camp helpers with much of the extra work willingly taken up by Gilliard who, loyal to his Deep Springs College tradition, considered it his duty.²⁸

In a long January 8, 1938 letter to his mentor Chapman from a camp high on Auyan-tepui, Gilliard began with a positive report about their successful bird collecting²⁹, but quickly descended into news of the expedition's desperate condition. "I want to tell you a bit more about the camp situation, as it precariously stands today ... we are all very well except perhaps Mr. Phelps Sr. who some time ago cut his knee with a machete and Bill Phelps (Jr.) who took two nasty falls while up here" Gilliard went on to say that "all of the Indians had quit and spread to the four winds except one and he is expected to leave at any time ...Captain Cardona ... has long since left and his radio is functioning but weakly ... (and) is expected to peter out any day and as none of know 'beans' about such machines, to stay that way." He continued that in addition to his collecting duties, he was "chief cook and bottle washer" for the camp, food was running low, and finally Gilliard wrote, "the situation is so bad that we possibly will have to collect as long as we can and then cache all of our equipment and carry out the specimens only."³⁰

In March 1938, having never obtained the dreamed about comforts of Angel's abandoned airplane on the mountain's plateau, Gilliard wrote in his diary, "... after three months and sixteen days on Auyan-tepui ... we are today turning back. ... It has been a real test and all of us have stood it well – all are the best of friends and truthfully, all, I believe, are glad to be on our way off this raft of rocks known now to be an awfully dangerous and desolate uncharted 8,100-foot (2,471 meters) mountain in the Guiana Highlands."³¹

On his way home, Gilliard wrote to Chapman from Port-of Spain, Trinidad, "In retrospect we were very fortunate in our exodus from Auyan-tepui. A combination of rare flying conditions and fast work enable Dr. Tate, Billy Phelps and Jim Dillon to reach Caracas, and Bill Coultas and myself to take our leave of Mr. Phelps and board the S.S. Trinidad within 24 hours of departing from Auyan-Tepui."³²

Upon returning to New York, Gilliard wrote his first popular magazine article titled "Unchallenged Champion – A new wonder and a new Lost World" which appeared in the December 1940 issue of *Natural History, The Magazine of the American Museum of Natural History*. In it Gilliard proclaimed, "The fact that a great Lost World really existed, falls or no falls, was sufficient to put the zoological world on its toes. Scientists in all branches who were acquainted with the strange flora and fauna of the two other Lost Worlds (Roraima and Duida) joined in acclaiming Mr. James Angel's discoveries."³³

His first major scientific paper, about the birds that were collected during the expedition³⁴ and his widely read article in the *Saturday Evening Post* titled "The Eighth Wonder of the World" were published in 1941. Gilliard concluded in the *Post* article, "I believe that Jimmie Angel has discovered the eighth wonder of the world. And this is not the age of faith, but I still dare to hope that he may someday find his creek of gold."³⁵

When reading Gilliard's lengthy popular magazine articles, I am struck by the fact that he wrote as many words about the adventures of

Jimmie Angel, a man he never met, as he did about the Phelps Venezuela Expedition.³⁶ Perhaps he did not realize that it would be his and his colleagues' purposeful scientific work that would validate the adventures of Jimmie Angel. Or perhaps Gilliard intuitively knew that his written words would provide the generous gift of acknowledgement that would cause Angel to be remembered in history.

Having stood on several occasions beneath the towering cascading wing of water that forms Angel Falls, Gilliard's lyrically descriptive prose capture its magic for me, "You've walked a mile, but did you ever see a mile of water stood on end, and slowly falling, falling through eternity? Not breaking into spray because there is so much of it, and seeming slow because it falls so far – unbroken by so much as one cascade. It makes you realize the scale on which the world is built, and it belongs just where it is, where time itself is slowed, foreshortened by its own immeasurable reach."³⁷

Epilogue

From his first position with the Museum in 1932 as a twenty year old volunteer trainee, Gilliard advanced through the ranks to become the curator of the Department of Ornithology. He died suddenly on January 26, 1965 at age 52 of a heart attack after attending a meeting at the Explorer's Club of New York. He was an internationally known ornithologist, explorer, and authority on the birds of New Guinea specializing in the behavior of some of the most beautiful and exotic birds of the world, including the birds of paradise and bowerbirds of the South Pacific and the cock-of-the-rock of South America.³⁸

When Gilliard and the other members of the Phelps Venezuela Expedition returned to New York City in the spring of 1938, Museum Director Roy Chapman Andrews was arranging for George Gaylord Simpson from the Department of Paleontology and his wife psychologist Anne Roe Simpson to join an expedition organized by the Venezuelan Ministry of Development to Auyan-tepui.³⁹ My next paper will explore the

years 1938-1939 and Jimmie Angel's relationships with Simpson and fellow expedition member Carlos Freeman, a Venezuelan mining engineer, who wrote an unpublished biography with tales of Angel's travels in China.⁴⁰.

Author's Note: My thanks to the American Museum of Natural History for allowing me to do research in the Archives and Manuscripts Collections in August 2002.

Special thanks to Mary LeCroy, Senior Research Associate in the Department of Ornithology, who upon meeting me by chance introduction and learning of my interest in E. Thomas Gilliard (1912-1965) invited me to investigate the Department of Ornithology Archives. It was there that many of the mysteries about Jimmie Angel's association with the American Museum of Natural History and ornithologist E. Thomas Gilliard's interest in him were resolved.

Mary LeCroy worked as E. Thomas Gilliard's assistant at the American Museum of Natural History from May 1959 until his death in January 1965.

¹ The Jimmie Angel Historical Project (JAHP) was organized in 1996 in the State of California as a 501(c)(3) not for profit corporation, EIN 68-0372407. Two of the six board members are citizens of Venezuela. The purposes of the JAHP include providing accurate information about Jimmie Angel (1899-1956) and his associates, restoring, and preserving his airplane "El Rio Caroni," and publishing articles about him and his era of exploration. The JAHP also maintains an archive that is shared with museum curators, journalists, film, and print writers.

As a boy, James Crawford Angel was called Crawford. As an adult, he wanted to be called "Jimmie." He was constantly correcting the spelling of his name from Jimmy to Jimmie. In this article, his name has been changed to "Jimmie Angel" when it appeared in documents as "Jimmy" or "Angell."

² Press Bulletin, "Dr. E. Thomas Gilliard, Noted Ornithologist and Explorer, Dies at 52," (New York, January 26, 1965), p.1. American Museum of Natural History, Department of Ornithology Archives.

³ The spelling "Auyan-tepui" is used in this article for the heart shaped table mountain located in Canaima National Park in the southeastern Gran Sabana region of Venezuela. Auyan means devil and tepui means house in the language

of the indigenous Pemón people, hence the Devil's House. Angel Falls, the world's highest waterfall at 3,312 feet (980 meters), flows from Auyan-tepui.

- 4 Marie Sanders Angel (circa 1904 -1987) declared November 14, 1933 the Date of discovery (Jimmie Angel's first sighting of the waterfall) in her unpublished book manuscript, *The Angel Falls*. [**2021 Note:** A careful review of the logbook page recording the discovery of the waterfall, indicates the day of discovery was November 16, 1933].

In the early 1960's, Marie Angel loaned the Jimmie Angel pilot log that recorded the 1933 flight to a man named Marvin Grigsby. Grigsby failed to return the pilot logbook, photographs and other documents loaned to him by Marie Angel.

John A. de Coup-Crank, (Interview, May 28,1997) Paradise, California. A retired detective with the Los Angeles Police Department, de Coup-Crank verified that Grigsby had possession of the missing materials during a police investigation in 1962.

- 5 Uwe George, "Venezuela's Islands in Time," *National Geographic Magazine*, Vol. 175, No. 5 (May 1989), p.534-538.

- 6 Rosamund Dalziell, "The Curious Case of Sir Everard im Thurn and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: Exploration & the Imperial Adventure Novel, *The Lost World*," *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (2002), p. 131.

- 7 George, p. 539.

- 8 E. Thomas Gilliard, "Unchallenged Champion," *Natural History, The Magazine of the American Museum of Natural History*, Vol. XLVI, No. 5 (December 1940), p.261.

- 9 Gilliard, p. 261

- 10 Gilliard, p. 260.

- 11 Phelps to Frank M. Chapman, Curator, Department of Ornithology, American Museum of Natural History (Letter, June 9, 1937). Department of Ornithology Archives.

- 12 Gilliard (Field Diary, August 6, 1937). Department of Ornithology Archives.

- 13 Chapman. to Phelps (Letter, June 16, 1937). Department of Ornithology Archives.

- 14 Chapman to Phelps (Letter, July 15, 1937). Department of Ornithology Archives.

- 15 Press Bulletin, "Dr. E. Thomas Gilliard, Noted Ornithologist and Explorer, Dies at 52," p.1.

- 16 Deep Springs College: <http://www.deep-springs-college.edu>. Retrieved July 8, 2005. Founded in 1817, Deep Springs college is a two-year all male college with twenty-six students on full scholarships. The student faculty ratio is 5:1. "The

purpose of Deep Springs College is to prepare its students for a life of service." The institution's three pillars are academics, labor, and self-governance.

17 Gilliard, "The Eighth Wonder of the World," *Saturday Evening Post*, (July 26, 1941), p. 69.

18 Gilliard (Field Diary, August 24, 1937). Department of Ornithology Archives.

19 Phelps to Chapman (Letter, October 14, 1937). Department of Ornithology Archives.

20 Phelps to Chapman (Cable, October 20, 1937). Department of Ornithology Archives.

21 Phelps to Chapman (Letter, October 22, 1937). Department of Ornithology Archives.

Karen Angel, *The River of Gold, The Life of Jimmie Angel, Explorer-Aviator, Discover of Angel Falls* (Unpublished Book Manuscript). (Arcata, California 2005), .p. 52. "Jimmie Angel's airplane "El Rio Caroni" was declared a national monument by the government of Venezuela in 1964 (Venezuelan Official Gazette #27533, 3 September 1964). Its silvery form remained on Auyantepui for over 30 years until it was removed by the Venezuelan Air Force in 1970 and taken to the Aviation Museum in Maracay for restoration. A partially restored airplane, which includes components of the original El Rio Caroni, was later moved to the airport at Ciudad Bolivar where it remains on the green in front of the passenger terminal.

22 Angel. p.53. Shortly after making their way off Auyan-tepui, Jimmie and Marie Angel left Venezuela and travelled by ship to the United States to see family and business associates. While in the U.S., they purchased a Hamilton H-47 airplane registration number NC-854E and returned to Venezuela in February 1939.

Chapman to Phelps (Letter, November 20, 1937). Department of Ornithology Archives. On November 20, 1937, Jimmie Angel appeared in Chapman's New York office with a perplexing request for a loan of money from the Museum. Chapman immediately reported Angel's visit by letter to Phelps, "...I thought that my connection with the expedition would be for the moment quiescent but Jimmy Angel came in this morning in a very disturbed mental condition. It appears that he lost his father and a brother, an aviator in China, and that Mrs. Angel has lost her mother. Just how that should affect his financial condition, I do not know, but he wanted a loan of \$200 which I gave him in the belief that it would hasten his departure from America and make him possible for the uses of the expedition at an early date."

When I discovered Chapman's letter to Phelps in the Department of Ornithology's Archive during my research, I was impressed and amused by the fantastic story that my Uncle Jimmie Angel had told Chapman. In 1937, Angel's father, my grandfather Glenn Davis Angel, was alive and well in Southern California, each of his four brothers were thriving, and as far as I know, his mother-in-law was not deceased. The story did not surprise me because Jimmie Angel was given to embellishing the events of his life to achieve his goals.

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- Jimmie Angel to Chapman (Promissory Note, November 20, 1937)). Department of Ornithology Archive. "Received from Mr. Chapman as a loan the sum of two hundred dollars (\$200) James C. Angel." The note was in Angel's handwriting on Museum letterhead. I am almost certain that the loan remains an unpaid account at the Museum.
- 23 Gilliard, "Unchallenged Champion," p. 264.
- 24 Gilliard, "The Eighth Wonder of the World," p. 71.
- 25 Gilliard (Field Diary, December 25, 1937). Department of Ornithology Archives.
- George H. H. Tate, Leader Phelps Venezuela Expedition to Harold E. Anthony, Chairman and Curator, Department of Mammals, American Museum Natural History (Letter, Auyan-tepui, 1,850-meter camp, January 6, 1938). Central Archives; 1218.
- 26 Phelps to Chapman (Letter, July 24, 1937). Department of Ornithology Archives.
- 27 Gilliard.
- 28 Tate.
- Gilliard.
- 29 Accession Record, April 1 & April 22, 1938. Department of Ornithology Archives. The official accession record for the Phelps Venezuela Expedition on Auyan-tepui lists that 2039 bird skins, 1 nest, 507 mammals, 243 fish, 150 insects and spiders, 22 shells and assorted other materials were received by the American Museum of Natural History.
- 30 Gilliard to Chapman (Letter, January 8, 1938). Department of Ornithology Archives.
- 31 Gilliard (Field Diary, Auyan-tepui, 1850-meter camp, date not recorded, circa mid March 1938). Department of Ornithology Archives.
- 32 Gilliard to Chapman (Letter, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, British West Indies, March 21, 1938). Department of Ornithology Archives.
- 33 Gilliard, "Unchallenged Champion," p.271.
- 34 Gilliard, "The Birds of Mt. Auyan-tepui, Venezuela." *Bulletin, American Museum of Natural History*, LXXVII - IX (1941).
- 35 Gilliard, "The Eighth Wonder of the World," p. 272
- 36 Mary LeCroy, Senior Research Associate, Department of Ornithology, American Museum of Natural History (Personal Communication, June 29, 2005), states that, "Tom Gilliard had a lifelong interest in the stories of people who lived a life of adventure in out-of-the-way places. He was particularly intrigued and captivated by the stories about Jimmie Angel, coming as they did on the heels of the discovery of Angel's plane at the top of the falls, on one of his own early trips to an out-of-the-way place."

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- 37 Gilliard, "The Eighth Wonder of the World," p. 272
- 38 Press Bulletin, "*Dr. E. Thomas Gilliard, Noted Ornithologist and Explorer, Dies at 52,*" p.1.
- 39 Roy Chapman Andrews, Director of the American Museum of Natural History, to Diogenes Escalante, Venezuelan Legation, Washington, D.C. (Letter, July 20, 1938). Central Archives; 1212.
- 40 Carlos A. Freeman, *The Life of James Crawford (Jimmie) Angel* (Unpublished Book Manuscript) (Caracas, Venezuela, circa 1940s) pp. 12-17.