

Aztec-cannibal theory disclaimed

Texas A&M University anthropologists are casting some skeptical eyes toward a New York colleague's claim that the Aztecs of Mexico ate the flesh of sacrificial victims in order to get "needed protein."

"He would be very hard pressed to prove this archaeologically," A&M archaeologist Dr. Harry Shafer said of the claim made by Dr. Michael Harner, chairman of anthropology at the new School for Social Research.

Other A&M colleagues said Harner might have a "plausible" theory, but that he would have to come up with new evidence.

In a copyrighted, New York Times News Service story, Harner is quoted as saying the Aztecs were the most cannibalistic culture known and that sacrificial victims became regular food items. His theories will be published in the journal of the American Anthropological Association.

A&M researchers countered that no existing evidence supports Harner's theory. They also say that food levels were adequate enough that Aztecs were not forced into cannibalism and that humans serve as a relatively inefficient source of protein anyway.

Dr. Vaughn Bryant, leading authority on prehistoric diets, explains that if the Aztecs ate only beans and corn they would obtain all the protein they needed.

"Aztecs sacrificed many, many humans. But I think what we are seeing is a misinterpretation of ritualistic cannibalism in which a person eats a token piece of vanquished enemy as an insult or to gain that enemy's strength," Bryant declared.

Cultural anthropologist Dr. Norman Thomas, who has done long-term studies of the direct descendants of the Aztecs, says Harner's idea is a "perfectly legitimate one within the framework of modern anthropology."

However, Thomas believes Harner should restudy the existing resources of protein around the Aztecs before making such a risky statement.

Thomas says the ancient civilization ate fish, aquatic insect eggs and snails, all high sources of protein, in addition to vegetables and some locally produced meat.

Shafer said the Aztecs had access to some meat through small, domestic animals, through marketplace exchanges and through hunting.

Thomas notes that ritualistic cannibalism was highly developed in North, Central and South American societies, and underlying all that is the question of whether there might have been biological needs. He says Harner may have something if he's able to document it.

Physical anthropologist Dr. Ordean Oyen said Harner gives little credit to the Aztecs for efficiency.

Oyen believes the human would be an extremely inefficient source of protein, particularly if captives to be sacrificed were sustained on food that could have been eaten by Aztecs, as Harner suggests.

"If he reaches this conclusion from the evidence, what will future anthropologists think of a 20th Century Nazi concentration camp?" asks Oyen. "They'll think all Germans were cannibals."

Shafer questions Harner's citation of contemporary accounts written by conquering Spaniards.

"First written accounts of new peoples always reveal them as grotesque. You can't take them literally. As for the account written by Bernal Diaz (with Cortez), he was defending the Spanish conquest," Shafer said.

Dr. Glendon Weir, who just completed an intensive study of prehistoric food resources in Peru,

explains that food levels in the Valley of Mexico appeared to be adequate to support the Aztecs without their turning to cannibalism.

Weir calls Harner's theory "plausible," but asserts that no existing evidence supports the idea.

"Why would they go to cannibalism for food when cannibalism already had strong religious meaning? It might have even been taboo except for rituals," he argues.

Harner's claim, Weir recalls, is based on population estimates that are unsupported by known evidence. "If one of the population figures prove inaccurate, his whole theory could fall apart."

A&M laboratories have dietary evidence from North and Central Mexico, some of it 10,000 years old, and none of it suggests that meat or human flesh was necessary to sustain life, said Bryant.

Poet Peter Cooley to be guest at poetry, fiction ceremonies

Awards for Texas A&M University's third annual student poetry and fiction contest will be announced at 8 p.m. Thursday in Rudder Theatre.

Special guest for the ceremony is poet Peter Cooley of Tulane University, whose first book of poems, "Company of Strangers," has been published by the University of Missouri Press.

Dr. Paul Parrish said the selection of the top six entries in each category will be made from works submitted by more than 100 stu-

dents at A&M. Each student was eligible to submit several works.

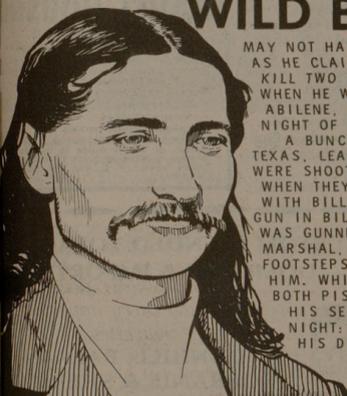
The top three in each category also receive a cash award, Parrish added.

Earlier Thursday, Cooley will be guest speaker at a 12:30 p.m. creative writing class in Harrington Education Center.

This is the second year for combined poetry-fiction competition. It was expanded last year from a poetry-only contest. The Memorial Student Center Arts Committee sponsors the awards selection.

THE YOUNG WEST Jim Earle

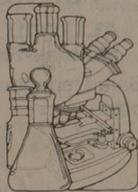
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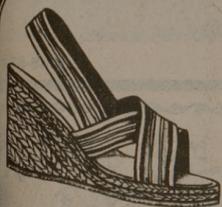
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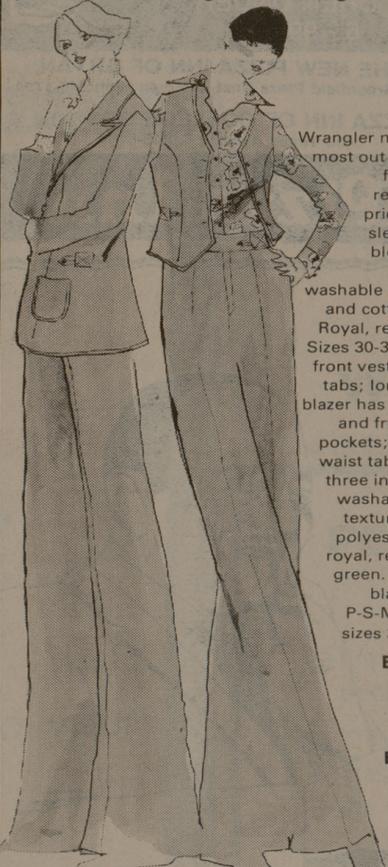
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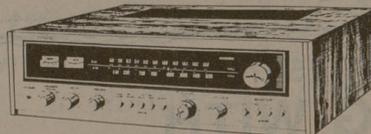
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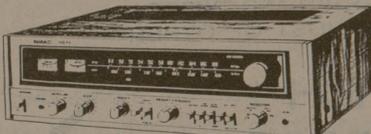
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