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MATTEO BORRINI: FORENSIC
ANTHROPOLOGIST BY DAY,
MAGICIAN BY NIGHT



Age-old questions

In the annals of supercentenarianism, the French Jeanne Calment continues to top the list of people with a verified age, reaching a ripe old 122 years and 164 days when she breathed her last in 1997 [FT103:7]. It may seem unlikely that another woman in the 20th century could have beaten that record by 17 years, if not more, while remaining under the radar of longevity researchers, but the story of María Jesús Pinto suggests exactly that.

Clyde Edgar Keeler (1900-1994) was a renowned Harvard-trained geneticist with an amateur interest in archæology, anthropology and comparative mythology. He developed a particular fascination for the Guna people of eastern Panama, whom he visited numerous times. In his book *Secrets of the Cuna Earthmother; A Comparative Study of Ancient Religions* (1960, pp.226-228) he reported on an excursion to the province of Chiriquí in the far-western part of that country, during which he met María at her home:

"I bent over to shake hands with Maria Jesus Pinto, the most aged lady I had ever met. She was seated in a low hammock made of sisal fibers which had been her refuge for rest during many years. This moment when I greeted her in Spanish was one of the high points in my life as a medical geneticist. The Bible says that the days of a man's life are 'three score years and ten', but there was an individual rounding out six score years and twenty, or seven score. A woman, according to our best checking, of one hundred and forty years of age come her next birthday... Presumably, she was born in 1820."

The claimed age beggars belief, but is difficult to brush aside, given Keeler's medical expertise. He went on to give a detailed description of her condition:

"There was still some power



"A woman of one hundred and forty years of age"

The wrinkles of her face were less deeply furrowed than I had imagined they would be. Her ears had grown large as is often the case with excessively old persons. There was a slight yellowish cast to her good head of whitened hair which she parted in the middle and wore in two braids, except above her forehead where some black hairs continued to survive. It is well known that Indians usually do not get white hair until after the age of one hundred, and I know one of eighty-six without a single white hair. Her teeth were gone. She could see to move about with her once sharp brown eyes, now faded to light gray. When necessary,

in her warm handshake, and I noted that age was still dealing more kindly with her than with most people in their seventies. To be sure, the veins of her thin lower arms were much distended, but I have seen worse. The skin of her lower arms was excessive and hung in folds. Her complexion was somewhat sallow and a bit lighter than one might expect for a mestizo because for years she has stayed indoors.

LEFT: Maria Jesus Pinto, photographed by Clyde Keeler. BELOW LEFT: Keeler's 1960 book *Secrets of the Cuna Earthmother*, in which his account of meeting Pinto appeared. FACING PAGE: Thomas Parr, said to have lived to the age of 152.

she could manage to get up out of her hammock alone. Her mind was good, her outlook cheerful and contented, and when I presented her with a bright new pipe she thanked me courteously in Spanish and exhibited a pleasant smile. She was much stooped and a bit unsteady in walking, but she did not use a cane."

So spirited was she that she would not have her picture taken unprepared: "When I asked if I might take her photograph she replied: 'Of course you may, but not this way! Just wait a minute.' She hobbled slowly into the next room and exchanged her old house dress for her Sunday best, demonstrating that she still possessed a bit of the 'eternal feminine'."

Keeler was happy to credit María's hardiness to her mixed genes: "To a medical geneticist the miracle of the longevity of Maria Jesus is not difficult to explain. She derived much of her unusual vigor from hybridity, just as do hybrid chickens or hybrid corn. She represents the first generation of a cross between French and Guaymi Indian, which is vigorous, but subsequent generations will live no longer than the average person. Besides, Maria Jesus had lived simply all her life and had observed moderation in all things, especially her diet."

Or had Keeler been gullible after all? He stated expressly that the primary reason for his visit had been that "Mrs. Pinto..., through her granddaughter..., was my principal source of information about the secrets of the Guaymi religion." That her extraordinary age was of secondary importance to him at best can also be gleaned

from the fact that he made no effort to prove it to his readers. Short of providing photocopies of her identity documents, it would have helped if at least he had furnished us with the date of birth of María's granddaughter, whom he knew personally, if not also that of the granddaughter's mother or father. Sure, Keeler gave a lively account of how María's parents had got involved with each other, but this is legend-like – devoid of definite names, times and places.

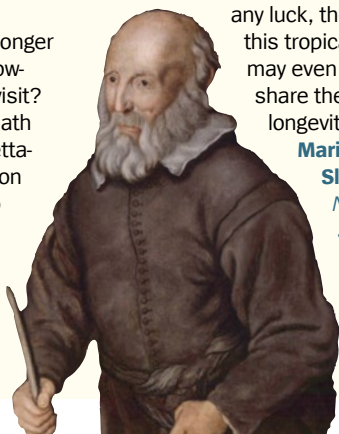
Keeler was vague even about the details of his own meeting with María, leaving his audience to infer from the context in the book that it took place on his seventh and then latest trip to Panama, when he also met the native chief or 'Montezuma' in the town of Remedios. Judging by the appearance of an article he wrote about that latter event in the June 1958 issue of the *Bulletin of the Georgia Academy of Science* (16, 2, pp. 53-63), it must have happened in the first half of 1958, but this causes a slight conflict with the purported age of 139 years and birth in 1820. It is also surprising that Keeler's experience with María was not itself covered in the pages of that journal, given that Keeler republished so many other chapters of his book in it. Did his text fail to meet the rigorous standards of peer review, or had Keeler been reticent to submit it in the first place? Nor does María look the part of someone that ancient, to a layman, in the photograph that Keeler supplied in his book. In that, she might be 80 or 90 for all one knows.

For how much longer did María live following the savant's visit? What is on her death certificate? Regrettably, this information is not available to us. What if she had hung on for another decade or

more? Except for the missing date of her passing, María's case is perhaps on a par with that of old Thomas Parr, whose white marble gravestone is still on display in Westminster Abbey. It boldly states that Parr lived through the reign of 10 kings and queens, expiring on 15 November 1635 at the age of 152 years. This and other details of his life given in John Taylor's contemporary pamphlet *The Old, Old, very Old Man or the Age and Long Life of Thomas Parr* (1635) inhabit a fortaean limbo: they have neither been conclusively falsified nor sufficiently substantiated. Despite the personal involvement of notables including King Charles I, it stretches credulity that Parr should not have married until his eightieth year of age, to point out just one snag. Stretching credulity proves nothing in itself, however; strange things do happen.

While chances of a breakthrough are vanishingly small with regard to Parr, it is eminently possible that more about María can still be learned from Keeler's privately published autobiography, *The Gene Hunter* (1984), or his extensive archive in the care of Georgia College (<https://lib-guides.gcsu.edu/keeler-collection>). Indeed, essential clues may well await someone willing to travel down to this remote corner of Panama, interview the community and search the local archives. From personal experience, be it on the Costa Rican side, I can vouch for the welcoming and helpful attitude towards foreigners among the Guaymí or, as they prefer to be called, the Ngäbe. With any luck, the denizens of this tropical paradise may even be willing to share the secret key to longevity.

Marinus van der Sluijs
Namyangju,
South Korea



ABOVE: Charles and Ryan Rajnus (plus Nessie-like humps) at Pixie Park.

Inner voices

A book on neurology by Guy Leschziner, *The Man Who Tasted Words*, mentions that brain scans indicate a part of the brain that reacts to external voices also lights up in response to people hearing supposed inner voices. What if in this case it indicates that those voices are really coming from an external source to the person hearing it, unlike the paranoid?

Tony Sandy
Alness, Highlands

Oregon Nessie?

On 25 September 2022, it was a very warm day in northwest Oregon, so Carla Rajnus – along with her son Charles (29) and grandson Ryan (five) – sought some cool recreation. An impromptu snapshot taken at Pixie Park (next to the Columbia River in Columbia City, Oregon) inadvertently shows a blurry object in the water next to the shoreline. Swimming is not recommended in the Columbia River due its depth, water temperature and swift current. In Scotland in AD 565, according to legend, St Columba first spotted Nessie in Loch Ness. In this snapshot, the floating object appears to be similar to other images of Nessie with a row of humps running along its back. Many photos of this kind have been written off as floating branches. (Oddly enough, in this same area along the Columbia River, countless sightings of Bigfoot have also been reported).

It is noteworthy that this

appearance of a Nessie-like object occurred at Pixie Park, as pixies are trickster characters similar to fairies, elves, nixies, sprites and kelpies. In Scottish folklore, a kelpie is a shape-shifting water spirit inhabiting lochs, usually described as having horse-like features. Some have claimed that Nessie is a type of kelpie. In folklore, water fairies protect waterways, wells and lakes. Some scholars assert that the term "pixie" (from the Latin *picti*) is related to the Picts, who once lived along the banks of Loch Ness, so named because they covered their bodies with enigmatic tattooed pictures [FT284:40-43].

So is it coincidence that a Nessie-like shape was spotted in the Columbia River, and St Columba's sighting was the first documented appearance of Nessie? On the other hand, the Oregon Nessie was photographed from Pixie Park – and pixies are water spirits linked to the Picts. It boggles the mind.

Jeffrey Vallance
By email

We can see you

You missed the comedic element of the green goblin gang on the New York subway [FT426:10]: they believed that wearing green bodysuits rendered them invisible to CCTV, due to greenscreen/chromakey technology from Hollywood FX. A little knowledge is more harmful than none at all.

Gianni Franco Crovace
By email