

Amazon Tribe Still Responding to Gospel Years After Missionary Deaths

The story told in *Through Gates of Splendor* didn't end in 1956

Steve Saint was just 5 years old and living in the small Ecuador town of Shell-Mera with his mother and two siblings when news reached them that their dad, missionary pilot Nate Saint, had been killed by the indigenous tribe they were trying to reach with the gospel. It was 1956 and Nate, Jim Elliot, Roger Youderian, Ed McCully and Peter Fleming—after being the first to make friendly contact with the Huaorani—were speared to death, their bodies tossed in the Curaray River.

The story has since become a classic in Christendom, gripping audiences today the way it did readers of *Life* magazine and *Reader's Digest* some 40 years ago. Books have been written about it, including *Through Gates of Splendor* by one of the widows, Elisabeth Elliot, who later became a well-known author and speaker.

Since that time testimonies of healing, reconciliation and an unusual bond between the missionaries' families and the Huaorani have continued. Today the tribe lives relatively peacefully. Huaorani believers work to spread the gospel to their entire tribe while trying to preserve a culture that is becoming extinct.

Steve Saint followed his father's footsteps into the mission

field. He often serves as a jungle pilot, flying in Ecuador's dense Amazon rain forest.

Earlier this year Saint brought his tribal "Grandpa Mincaye" and dear friend, Temente, from their village of Nemompade to the United States to share their unusual story. Saint says audiences are mesmerized when he reads from his dad's journal and describes footage shot on Nate's 16 mm movie camera of the missionaries' first encounter with three Huaorani—a happy day with lots of smiling faces.

"The Huaorani returned two days later," Saint said, "but they didn't return as my dad had suggested in his journal, 'for the afternoon service.' They returned as a raiding party and speared all five men.

"It looked like the story was over," Saint said. "The Huaorani, fearing that other foreigners would now come and kill them, burned their homes and fled deeper into the jungle. But the story isn't over until God is finished telling it. And everyone knows God tells great stories."

Years later Saint heard another dramatic twist to the story from some of the tribe, how after the killing, Mincaye and others in the raiding party looked across the river and saw what appeared to be a large number of cowodi [foreigners] above the trees, dressed in white clothes and singing. Other Huaorani, at other vantage points on the mountain trail, just saw flashes of light. But everybody heard the choruses of singing—it continued long into the night. They haven't forgotten it.

Eventually the Huaorani asked Rachel Saint, Nate's sister, to

come

live with them and teach them “to walk God’s trail.” Since then, hundreds of Huaorani have become “God followers,” including Mincaye, who later realized what the singing was all about. He once told Steve that he knows “God sent those who were His to sing because His followers had died.”

When his Aunt Rachel died at 82 in 1994, Steve Saint returned to the Amazon to help the tribe bury their beloved “sister.” They then “told” Saint and his family to come live with them, not as missionaries but as “one of them.” Saint’s four children grew to love the Huaorani, just as he had.

Since 1995, Saint has worked alongside the Huaorani in their endeavor to share the gospel with the next generation while also trying to preserve their culture.

Huaorani Christians have built their own small clinic, pharmacy and store, attracting other Huaorani to visit their village. “It’s a long road,” Saint said. “I’m convinced from Scripture that the goal of the Great Commission is to establish native churches that are self-propagating, self-governing and self-supporting.”

Recently, Saint and the Huaorani founded I-TEC (Indigenous People’s Technology and Education Center), based in Dunnellon, Fla. Huaorani and other tribes are able to visit the center for training in aviation, the operation of medical and dental equipment and in other technology suitable to their needs.

Today, Saint hopes to save the same tribe that killed his father from losing their faith and their culture. Of the 1,800 Huaorani in Ecuador today, about 300 are believers. □