

A Weaver Traveling in Chile

by HELEN LOUISE ALLEN

Most people know that Chile is in South America. Some know that it is almost—3,000-mile-long, 100 mile-wide saber curved country that lies on the western coast at the bottom next to Argentine. There may come to mind the spectacular flight over the Andes or the equally famous gambling casino at Valparaiso. The business man may think of Chile in terms of the copper mines high in the mountains or of the nitrate deposits in the arid rainless plains. All these things lie in the north. Few know about the rich agricultural lands, of the lake regions and their fine summer resorts. Few know of the fruits; pears so large that one slice is as large as one of our pears, of ordinary grapes that are as large as hot house ones, of peaches four and five inches in diameter and dripping with juice; and of coal mines running three miles out under the ocean, or of the Indians of Chile. All these things lie in the south. Tying these two regions together are the two large cities of Santiago and Valparaiso: Valparaiso, the coastal shipping center and Santiago, the old Spanish and ultra-modern capital lying further inland.

In one travel folder of Chile I saw mention of the Indians and where there are Indians there is usually weaving. Most of the people that I asked about the Chilean Indians said they did fine silver work but no weaving. This means one of two things, I have found by experience; they do not do any weaving or they do weaving of such unusual types that the average American business man, tourist or missionary does not recognize it as weaving and thus it is quite pure in type and "untouristy".

Notwithstanding that statement when I reached Chile I found where the Indians were located. There are estimated to be about 50,000 to 150,000 of the Araucanian Indians located south of the BioBio river with their trading center at Temuco. When I told an American copper miner at the hotel that I was leaving in the morning for Temuco to see the Indians he cheerfully told me, "Well, I hope you see some Indians. My wife was down there for two weeks and didn't see an Indian." How I wish I had taken his address. I would have written him, "Does your wife know an Indian when she sees one?" She must have been looking for feather headdresses and Navajo blankets, just as I looked in vain for the colored porter on the Chilean sleeping car.

Temuco is a comparatively new city celebrating its 50th anniversary only a few years ago. It lies in a rich agricultural district of rolling hills and broad rivers, a fifteen hour train ride south of Santiago. The country has been so recently timbered off that some of the fields had the stumps in them. It looked much like northern Illinois except that "on a clear day" one can see the snow capped mountains of the high Andes off on the horizon.

After watching the Indians come into the city with their high two wheeled oxen carts and after following them around the market while they did their shopping, I could understand somewhat why the miner's wife did not see any Indians and why the people told me they did no weaving. The women dress entirely in black. Over a cotton blouse is worn a heavy black woolen blanket fastened around the waist for a skirt, with one corner pulled up from the back and fastened to the skirt in front with a large silver dagger-like pin. At least in original costume it was but now all too often a safety pin does the job. Over this is worn another

large thick woolen blanket for a shawl. It is held together at the neckline in front with a large silver ornament like a breast-plate. At the top is a silver plate about three by five inches. From this hangs either three or five inch-wide flat silver chains about seven inches long. Hung from these is a smaller plate from which hangs silver bugles like a fringe. Fastened to the blouse on the right side is another flat silver chain with a Maltese cross on it and from each arm hang small and large circles or small Maltese crosses. I was told that each large circle or cross marks a child. A small circle for a daughter and a large circle or a cross for a son. A gingham or percale apron is always worn. The skirt is held up by a woven belt which the apron band covers up. On her head the woman wears a two-inch leather band studded solidly with silver with silver circles or crosses hanging in a thick fringe from it. The band is fastened in front with a wide ribbon tied in a bow and the top of the head is filled in with gay ribbons and velvets. These are the only bits of colour that show on the costume. The hair hangs down the back in braids that are closely wound with silver studded leather bands. The whole effect is sombre but with a carefully planned center of interest.

The design and the colour scheme of the women's belts are always the same. Ill. 1. They are white and a dull red, sometimes a yellowish red, sometimes a purplish red, with a few yellow or blue threads in the selvage. The weave is the typical warp type found in South America. The weft does not show. There are no long over shots. It is the reverse on one side from the other and seems more like a warp Summer and Winter weave. Both background and pattern are picked up for each shed and at every third weft the design changes. One of my women's belts is of the old vegetable dyed fine wool but the other is coarse and dyed with aniline dyes so that the colours are much more brilliant. This one shows a change in design at the two ends. The weave found in these belts and used on some of the ponchos is also found to be the typical weave of Peru and Bolivia. According to tradition the Auracnians were taught their weaving by the Incas of the north who came down to conquer them but didn't. This weave is not found in Central or North America.

The men wear an uncolourful but strikingly bold costume. Over short ill fitting trousers and a cotton shirt, they wear a large-patterned poncho in dark blue and white. The design is of stepped herringbone or diamond shaped figures sometimes in all-over pattern, at other times with the pattern only over the shoulders in stripes. Each motif of the design is about a foot long. Ill. 2. Seeing these animated bedspreads walking along the street with their oxen, I supposed that the ponchos were done in tapestry-like technique of the Navajo blankets but on closer inspection that proved to be of a tied and dyed warp technique, an enlarged Mexican reboso in wool. The wool is very smooth and very tightly twisted and the warp so close together that they are practically water proof. The ponchos are woven full width on the loom with the head hole woven in and reinforced on the loom. The men give the appearance of large blue and white patch work quilts going down the streets and the women look like complete silver stores and the miner's wife didn't see an Indian in two weeks.

The men's belts are the only humorous bits of weaving

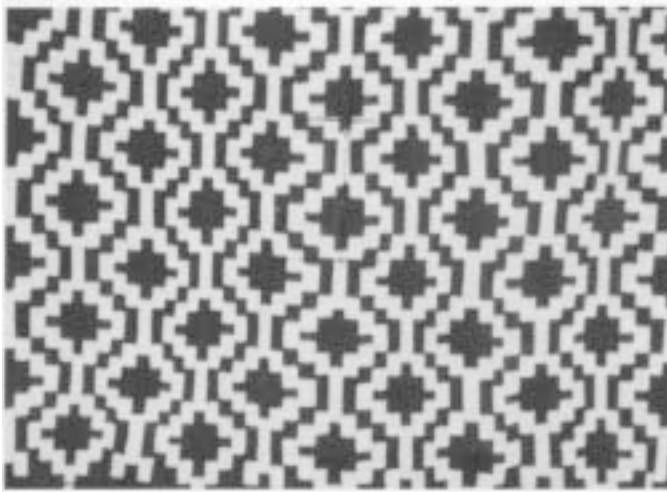


ILLUSTRATION No. 2a—*Man's Poncho in "tied and dyed" warp technique.*

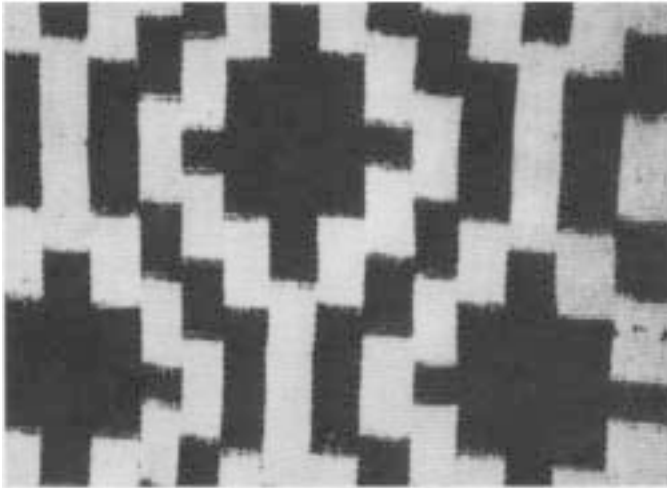


ILLUSTRATION No. 2b—*Detail of 2a.*

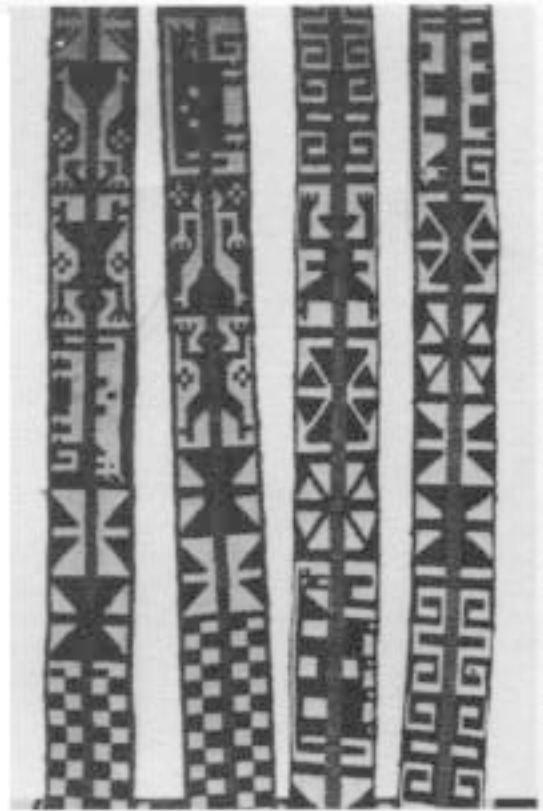


ILLUSTRATION No. 3—*Men's Belts in Double Weave.*

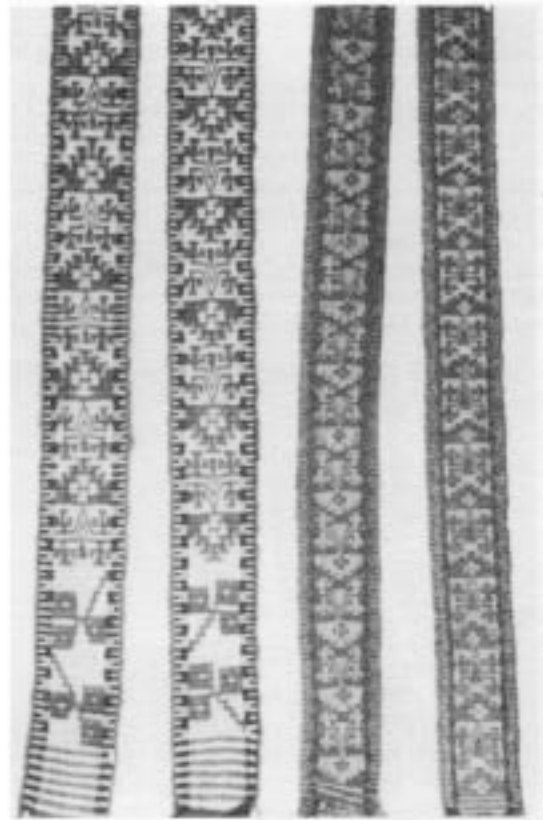


ILLUSTRATION No. 1—*Women's Belts. The narrower one is quite old, the other is new.*

of the Mapuche, "People of the land", as the Araucanian Indians call themselves. These belts are done in double weave in quite heavy wool. The colour schemes vary. White and two dark colours are used, the third colour always coming as a streak down the center of the belt. Red and blue, blue and henna, red and brown or purple and blue are some of the colour schemes that I saw. The designs show men with the hands held up or bent down and very recognizable cows. Ill. 3.

All the elaborate weaving and colour of the Mapuche is used on the horse trappings and the horsemen. One large poncho I have is a full bed size woven in one piece with the head hole woven in and is made of exceptionally fine wool. Ill. 4. The plain weave dark and light stripes are of blueish-black and white and the pattern stripes of a purplish blue and white. The technique is the same as the women's belts and the design is a variation of that on the belts. They are made on huge upright looms and each row must be picked up with two different sticks all the way across for each pick of the weft. The weaver has to move from section to section of the loom for each row. Each poncho takes three



ILLUSTRATION No. 4—Section of a very large Poncho.

or four months to make. This type and size is very rare and I was extremely fortunate to be able to find one. There is one like it in the Heard Museum of Textiles in Phoenix, Ariz.

My smaller and much more usual poncho is in a peculiar red, brown and white and has many different designs altho it is in the same technique as the large one. Ill. 5. I saw many horse men come into town with these on. They hang over the shoulders only slightly.

The saddle blankets are the most colourful of all the weaving. They are in white with brilliant purples, reds, browns, greens, oranges, and magentas, but with not more than two brilliant colours in any one blanket. In size they



ILLUSTRATION No. 5—Small Red-Brown Poncho.

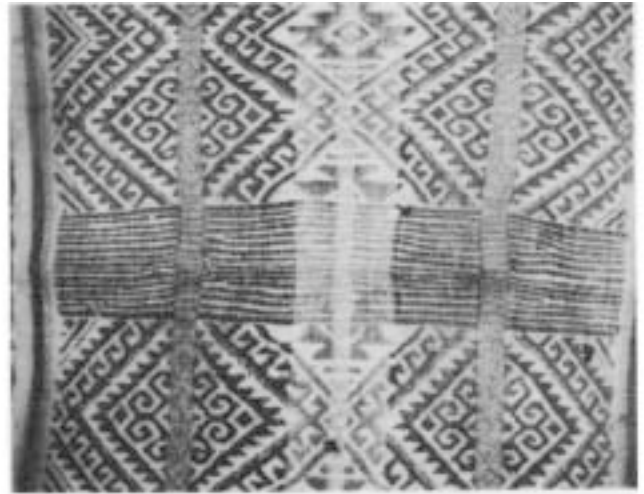


ILLUSTRATION No. 6—Old Saddle Blanket.

are almost square being about three by four feet. The technique is the warp over-shot that is used so much in Mexican belts and also in the Scandinavian belt and garter weaving. The design thread is loose in varying length over-shots going from back to front of the article as needed and making the back the exact reverse of the front. The designs are bold geometric patterns based entirely on diagonal lines. Ill. 6 & 7.

In all these articles each piece is complete on the loom. There are no raw edges or tied fringes, or cut ends. The warp is woven from the looped ends on one end tight to the



ILLUSTRATION No. 7—Modern Saddle Blanket.

loops at the other. This means that the weaver weaves a short ways at one end of the loom and then she reverses her loom, begins at the other end and weaves to meet her first bit. As the space for weaving becomes narrower and more awkward the Mapuche weaver gives up all attempt at a pattern and just alternates her dark and light threads and of course eventually has to give up trying to put in any more weft. This leaves a "soft spot" in the article, as I call it. The better the weaver the least soft spot. The center area can be very plainly seen in my old saddle blanket in Ill. 6 but is very narrow and inconspicuous in the modern and

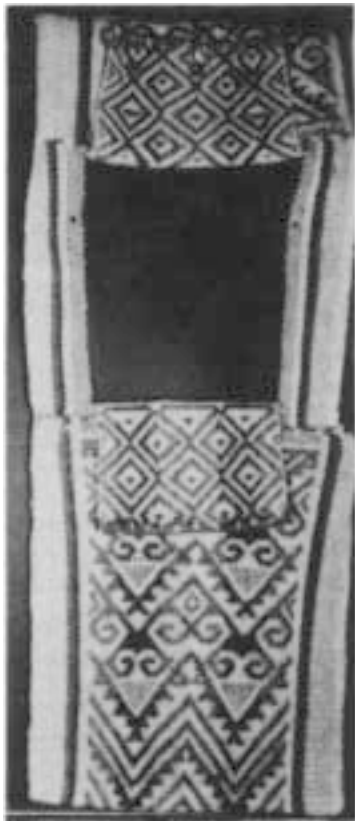


ILLUSTRATION No. 8 — *Saddle Bag*

coarser one shown in Ill. 7. The blanket is folded in the center and put under the saddle.

Over the saddle comes the most unusual piece of weaving of the Mapuche. I wonder how old a type it really is. It is the "choapina". The old ones are entirely in black or white. The newer ones come in colours and some with designs in brilliantly crude colours. Mine is an old black one of beautiful soft black wool worn to a satin smoothness. It looks and feels like a huge soft silky black pussy cat. The "choapinas" in the center are made with a tied knot like a Swedish "rya" knot but much closer together like an oriental rug with a very long thick pile. The wool is combed out at the ends so that

the effect is more of thick fur than of wool. Only by burrowing down thru the pile can one see and feel the individual strands of wool and feel the knot. For about six inches at each end of the "choapina" an area of flat plain weave has been made on which long very twisted threads have been laid in, giving the appearance of fringe but actually being a solid material. These rugs are supposed to be folded in the center and laid over the saddle as a pad. Now-a-days most of them are sold in town for small scatter rugs. All the houses in Temuco that I went into had many of them around, beside the beds, at the door ways, or in front of the fire places. The white ones look like white fur rugs.

Then there are the saddle bags. They are of all colours and of many designs altho all geometric and based on diagonal lines. They, too, are woven in the over-shot warp technique and have the pattern only on the front and on poles. She explained in Indian and the car driver translated to me in Spanish that this was not permanent but just the warp. The poles would be taken out when she was thru warping. They would then be put together again further apart and warp bound taut between them thus allowing the weaver to start weaving at both ends tight to the end of the warp.



Loom weaving a saddle bag. At the foot of the loom is a "choapina" and in the distance a "rucca".

Further on, after much enquiry of the Indian auto driver, we found another woman who had not yet taken down her loom for the winter. She was working on a saddle bag. The two bag parts are woven at the ends of the loom but in the center three wefts are used. The center which will make the flaps is woven at the same time that the side strips that make the handles are woven. When the bags or bag is finished the center part is cut in two making a flap for each bag. But this gives our weaver a difficult problem. She now has cut ends to attend to. The bags are of such heavy wool that there is no turning the ends under and fringe has not occurred to her so she blanket stitches them in heavy wool with very large coarse stitches in what ever colour comes at hand. My bag is white with red purple and blue purple and the ends are finished in brilliant orange. Ill. 8.

Unfortunately I arrived in Chile in April, just as winter was setting in so that I could not get far into the country and did not try to get down to the lakes. In the summer, in December and January, the weather is warm and sunny and one can travel around by car quite far into the farming lands. Chile is so far "down" that it takes 21 days by boat to get there and Christmas vacations are so short up here that most weavers cannot get down in the warm season. But if any of you can, I can heartily urge you to go to Temuco "where you can't see any Indians" and "they don't do any weaving."