

New Guinea is his port of call

By John Jennings
Citizen Staff Writer

Ronald Perry is an ex-Tucsonian who will go virtually to any length to find quality pieces of New Guinea native art. And that includes dugout canoe trips of hundreds of miles and tramping for days through the jungle.

He brings back the art pieces — and tales of cannibals and the worship of giant yams by the natives.

Perry is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur L. Perry, 2132 E. La Madera Drive. He now lives in Sydney, Australia, and he and his wife, Barbara, are back in Tucson for a visit.

Born in Colorado and raised here, Perry was graduated from Tucson High School and attended the University of Arizona for four years. He left the UA in 1954 and went to Hawaii.

After a stint in the Army, Perry went to Australia on vacation in 1958. He fell in love with the country and his future wife. They were married in Tucson in 1960.

The couple returned to Australia, where they operated a sheep station in the bush country. "It's fine," said Perry, "if you like sheep and lots of flies."

It was in 1963 that Perry made his first trip to New Guinea. "I brought back quite a few artifacts and tried to sell them," he said. "I could have sold them, but not for the right price. Finally a dealer in Hawaii started buying them

from me. Since then I go on an expedition about every six months to New Guinea."

Perry usually journeys up the Sepik River and its tributaries. The Sepik is the longest river in New Guinea, meandering through the jungle for about 800 miles.

"The people are very primitive," he said. "There are some areas that have never seen a white man." About half of New Guinea is a territory of Australia, he said, and the other half is a United Nations trust territory under Australian supervision.

"I take two natives with me," he said, "one to run the dugout and the other to cook and keep things clean. We make a base camp on the river and set out from there for the first village."

Perry said the object of his last trip was to make a circular foray into the jungle, visiting villages, buying native art pieces and observing the people, and eventually end up back at the base camp on the river.

"The two natives with me spoke pidgin (a combination vocabulary of English, German, Malay and native words) and I speak it too, but they can catch things that I miss in listening to the people. There always are one or more people in each village who speak pidgin.

"I would hire porters from a village to accompany us to the



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next village, then I would hire some from that village to take us to the next one. By hiring different natives for each part of the trip, it didn't take them very far from their own village.

"At each village I would buy artifacts and list them. Then I would give the seller a slip of paper with a number on it and tell him to be at the base camp on 'day four' of the next week — that would be Thursday — with the slip of paper and the artifact. I would pay for all the items when I got back to the base camp," he said.

Perry said after he arrived back at the base camp he would pay for the artifacts

that were brought in, catalogue them and pack them in the canoe for the trip back down the river.

Salt, tobacco, knives and mirrors are good for trade. He often uses silver shillings for buying items in areas near trading posts, but they are seldom used in the remote areas.

Perry sold the artifacts mainly to museums. All museum-quality artifacts must be offered for sale to the museum in New Guinea before they can be exported, he said.

Perry said he and the handful of other white traders feared independence for New Guinea might put an end to artifact exportation. "It is dying," he said. "In another few years I doubt if any artifacts will be allowed out of the country. Independence is expected in the next couple of years."

He said even the remote areas are beginning to feel the influence of the white man. Angoram Patrol Post is one of his jumping off spots for trips to the back country. The patrol post has about 3,500 natives and about 20 whites, Perry said.

"I've seen a judge presiding over a court there and he had the long white wig and the red coat. It was a strange sight — he was in a screen shed holding court," he said.

Perry told of a recent case

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