Perspective

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Paul Witte spent eight years studying to become a Roman Catholic priest. Then, just before he took his vows, he fell in love. His bishop wisely advised him to marry and then seek some other way to serve God rather than through the priesthood.

Now Paul, Genny and their two small children are serving as faith missionaries in South America. Still loyal to their Roman Catholic faith, they have left behind the affluent society and are living among a small tribe of Andoke Indians south of the equator in the Amazon jungle.

I spent last Wednesday night with them in a tiny clearing in the jungle, a place which is surely one of the most remote sections of the earth. Two days before a friend and I had flown a single engine Helio Courier over Cuba, across the Caribbean, and over the Andes to the Amazon basin in Colombia. The next day, Tom Smoak, one of the jungle bush pilots that I am writing about in a new book, flew me 400 miles south into the Amazon jungle to carry supplies to the Wittes.

Paul and Genny have been with the Andokes for almost a year, coming out of the jungle only occasionally to get help on their prime mission, which is translating the Bible into the Indian language. It took them six weeks to get into the tribe by river canoe. We flew in in less than four hours, landing on a strip which Paul and his Indian friends had literally hacked out of the towering trees.

The Wittes' thatched hut was exactly like the Indian huts: two tiny rooms built high off the ground on stilts to protect them from the roving wild boars, tigers, and boa constrictors. One room was a bedroom, where all four of them slept. The bed, by the way, consisted of a wooden platform covered with a thin cotton mat. The other room was a combination kitchen and study where, after dark, by the light of a gasoline lantern, this brilliant linguist spent hours listening to the sounds the Indians had made on his tape recorder and then translating these sounds into an alphabet.

Darkness comes quickly in the equatorial jungles. At 5:15 the sun was already below the trees. The only relief from the heat during the day had been a dip in the jungle river. But at night, following a drenching shower, the temperature dropped until I had to scrounge around in my bag and come up with a plastic raincoat to cover me in the hammock.

Sleeping in a hammock, especially when surrounded by the shrieks and howls from the jungle, is not my idea of a vacation. Vivid in my mind were the stuffed tiger's paws I had seen on Paul's steps. The animal had been shot by an Indian with a poison blowgun only yards away from where I was swinging in the hammock.

The next morning we loaded the airplane and roared out over the treetops. Climbing to 11,000 feet, we headed back toward civilization. An engine failure would have meant certain death, for, as the Indians say, the "jungle eats the airplanes."

"The Wittes must be a special breed of people," I remarked to Tom as we droned northward toward the distant Andes.

"No, very ordinary folks," Tom said, "with extraordinary faith."

Three days later I would be back in Florida and the jungle would seem only a dream. But I don't think I'll ever forget Paul and Genny Witte — and the night I spent with them in Amazonas.