

MAGIC MUSHROOM

A New York banker goes to Mexico's mountains to participate in the age-old rituals of Indians who chew strange growths that produce visions

By R. GORDON WASSON

The author of this article, a vice president of J. P. Morgan & Co. Incorporated, together with his wife, Valentina P. Wasson, M.D., a New York pediatrician, has spent the last four summers in remote mountains of Mexico. The Wassons have been on the trail of strange and hitherto unstudied mushrooms with vision-giving powers.

They have been pursuing the cultural role

of wild mushrooms for 30 years. Their travels and inquiries throughout the world have led them to some surprising discoveries in this field in which they are pioneers. They are now publishing their findings in Mushrooms Russia and History, a large, richly illustrated two-volume book, which is limited to 500 copies and is now on sale at \$125 (Pantheon Books, New York).

ON the night of June 29-30, 1955, in a Mexican Indian village so remote from the world that most of the people still speak no Spanish, my friend Allan Richardson and I shared with a family of Indian friends a celebration of "holy communion" where "divine" mushrooms were first adored and then consumed. The Indians mingled Christian and pre-Christian elements in their religious practices in a way disconcerting for Christians but natural for them. The rite was led by two women, mother and daughter, both of them *curanderas*, or shamans. The proceedings went on in the Mixeteco language. The mushrooms were of a species with hallucinogenic powers; that is, they cause the eater to see visions. We chewed and swallowed these acrid mushrooms, saw visions, and emerged from the experience awestruck. We had come from afar to attend a mushroom rite but had expected nothing so staggering as the virtuosity of the performing *curanderas* and the astonishing effects of the mushrooms. Richardson and I were the first white men in recorded history to eat the divine mushrooms, which for centuries have been a secret of certain Indian peoples living far from the great world in southern Mexico. No anthropologists had ever described the scene that we witnessed.

I am a banker by occupation and Richardson is a New York society photographer and is in charge of visual education at The Brearley School.

It was, however, no accident that we found ourselves in the lower chamber of that thatched-roofed, adobe-walled Indian home. For both of us this was simply the latest trip to Mexico in quest of the mushroom rite. For me and my wife, who was to join us with our daughter a day later, it was a climax to nearly 30 years of

CONTINUED

PREPARING FOR CEREMONY at which author chewed hallucinogenic mushrooms and had visions, *Curandera* Eva Mendez ceremonially turns fungus in the smoke of burning aromatic leaves.



AUTHOR WASSON sits in New York home with recorder, mushroom pictures and "mushroom stone." A onetime newspaperman, he took up banking in 1928.