

Hotel Nogaró  
Buenos Aires  
March 29, 1942

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The simple textbooks of the Argentine schools announce, like those of the United States, that the history of Argentina actually began in 1492 with the discovery of America. But the economic history of the Republic, as Mr. Paul Nyhus points out, is scarcely more than 50 years old. It should not be confused with Spanish galleons, the campaigns of San Martin or Almirante Brown's maneuvers on the high seas. It really begins with the people like Don Santiago Campion and Eduardo Casey. I mention Eduardo Casey because he is the founder of Venado Tuerto, the sizable country town from which I have just returned. In the central plaza there is a statue of Eduardo Casey, an Irish promoter, who was given a tremendous grant of land by the Argentine government in 1885 with the understanding that he bring a specified number of settlers to it. Casey offered the land to the public at nominal prices, but few were interested in venturing to Santa Fe province while there was plenty of land nearer the coast and the port of Buenos Aires. Failing to "populate" the land within a designated period of time, it would again become the property of the state. So Casey, at his own expense, brought two shiploads of Irish immigrants to Argentina and set them up on the land, trusting that he would be paid from the crops which they would raise and the livestock they would own. Even with these immigrants, Casey had not fulfilled by a great deal the letter of his contract with the Argentine government. There was still a deficiency of settlers. At the end of the time allotted for the settlement of the land, the Argentine government sent officials to see if there were the proper number of settlers on the hundreds of leagues of land which composed the grant. Casey received the government agents trusting that God would provide an answer, according to the story. In taking the agents on inspection trips, it was the technique of Casey to insist that the agents drink generously of the liquors and wines which he carried with him. When they came to sparsely settled areas, Casey often returned twice and three times to the same estancia; the agents by that time were seeing through rose-colored glasses and did not realize that the farmers whom they met again and again were the same people. That is how Eduard Casey met his quota and that is why there is a statue to his memory in the plaza of Venado Tuerto.

Venado Tuerto has approximately 15,000 inhabitants, though an individual unused to the sight of an Argentine town would guess that it had no more than 5,000. It has 30 blocks of concrete streets, a double-large plaza, good looking stores and merchandise, a large convent normal school for young women, a fideo or macaroni factory and a huge flour mill. The last two institutions which I have named are indication enough that Venado Tuerto is in the heart of the Argentine cereal zone. There are no large towns for many miles in any direction, thus placing Venado Tuerto in the position of a trading center. Even so, one wonders why Venado Tuerto is as large as it is. Economically speaking, half the population would suffice. The biggest single industry is the Fenix mill, owned by an "anonymous society." While I was in Venado Tuerto the employees of the mill proclaimed a strike. Through a friend, Rogelio Guardia, I was able to meet and talk with some of the strikers and to get their viewpoint. All I know of the management's side is what I read in the way of a statement in the local paper, La Opinión. The directorate, of course, is not in Venado Tuerto. The Fenix Company has a chain of flour mills, doing an export business and domestic trade in wheat and corn flours. The employees of the company, with the exception of responsible officials, are hired on a day-to-day basis. They may work steadily for four or five months, but day after day they are hired over again. At the end of each day's work they are paid four pesos. They have no seniority rights and are hired, or fired, at pleasure. The men demand more security in their jobs and a 20-percent wage increase. When I left Venado Tuerto the strike was still on.

Venado Tuerto and the towns of the pampas region will be better understood if we treat in a small way the story and the evolution of the Argentine town. The town does not have the importance in rural Argentina which it has in the United States. In the livestock and alfalfa zones the estancia is the headquarters of the peons. In the cereal zone the chacareros, or farmers, crop the land of the estancias. Forty and fifty years ago an estanciero owning a tremendously large area of land had cattle or sheep grazing upon it. At key points on this land he placed helpers, sometimes men with families, and instructed them to keep a watchful eye on his livestock. These men built adobe houses in the middle of the campo, raised their families and subsisted on meat and mate. Thirty years or more ago the fence came and there was no need to have these caretakers of herds and flocks. The fence could do the job even better than they. So the families moved into central points, forming communities. The Argentine town, in its evolutionary form, is simply a concentration camp of surplus agricultural help. In many respects it is still that today, although on a larger scale and combined with other factors. The problems resulting from this condition are enough to make the head of any social and economic student swim. How do these people live? How can they make a living? Those who hire out on estancias devoted to livestock raising make 40 to 50 pesos a month. Their families live in the towns in an adobe or cheap brick building, for which the rent may be 10 or 15 pesos. What do they buy with their money? When they have purchased food to eat there is nothing left. And the food which they buy is mostly meat. The price of meat, the cheapest food in the Argentine, is rising in value. Today a kilo of meat, 2.2 pounds, costs 60 cents mfn (Argentine money). The hard, dry bread (galleta) which they eat has a nominal price. Many of the people have a garden of sorts, raising a few potatoes, some green vegetables (verdura), and squash, of which they are most fond. Obviously these people do not have money to buy proper clothing or much else. There are many undernourished children. Tuberculosis and other diseases are common. Mortality is high among the young. If children grow into young manhood or womanhood they may find salvation by hiring out as chore boys or servants, earning enough for their own wants. Relatively few of them, if any, have proper educational advantages. In many cases the youngsters manage to go to the second and third grades and learn a few of the elements of reading and writing. In the smaller Argentine towns this is pretty much the dismal picture which obtains.

Venado Tuerto has this type of people. But it also has a middle class of sorts. There are storekeepers, professional people, railroad employees, workers in the factories and public officials of one kind and another. In the strict sense, perhaps, many of these people ought not to be placed in the middle class. To make a group of it, I am placing all those who make more than 150 pesos a month in the middle class. This kind of classification would not obtain in Buenos Aires or in some of the larger provincial cities, particularly the former. Guardia says there are a fair number of merchants in Venado Tuerto who make considerably more than a thousand pesos a month. The estancia owners form the richest part of rural society. Their bright and shiny North American cars come to town in the evenings, on Saturdays and Sundays, or take their owners on periodical vacations to Mar del Plata. Some estancias, economically speaking, are going to seed because of the propensity of their owners to follow an entertainment program the year around.

I have spoken of the poorer people, the middle class and the estancia owner. There is left the chacarero. Many students of the Argentine social-economic problem look to the chacarero as the individual who will solve the landed estate difficulty by buying farm property from the estanciero and converting the landed system into one of small units on which diversified farming is practiced. The realization of this ideal is in a future which does not yet seem in sight. There are few chacareros who make enough money cropping the land to purchase farm property. Approximately half of the land in the Venado Tuerto district is devoted to cereal farming, rented to the chacareros by the estancieros. In the case where land is rented on a cash basis, the chacarero, in general, is hopelessly in debt. He lives in as cheap and primitive a house as the one in which a town-rooted peon has. However, he does have more inde-

pendence, for he is certain of his subsistence living. In the rich agricultural zones, like Venado Tuerto, it is possible when prices are high and farming is done on a share basis for the chacarero to make some money. If the land is rented from the estanciero on a cash basis the owner shoots the rent up with the rise in prices and when prices fall the chacarero is penniless. In a sense the owner exercises a kind of tyranny over the chacarero, allowing him to plant only that which he orders. In most cases he forbids the chacarero to have more stock than the few work horses he needs for his work. With such restrictions the farm system is extremely rigid and the chacarero can do little or nothing to accommodate himself to such market dilemmas as those caused by the present war; or, what is worse, to work out his own financial independence. In the large sense there is no market for cereals. On the other hand there is a tremendous demand for all kind of livestock. Nevertheless, the chacarero has to continue planting corn, wheat and flax. There is talk now of an export tax on livestock to pay for the subsidies which it has been necessary for the government to provide for the chacareros. In effect, this would be a tax on the livestock raiser, or the estanciero. Of all the cereal problems the corn problem is the most hopeless. The 1941 corn crop is of no earthly use. The way corn is kept here it is perishable. There is some talk of disposing of part of the corn by burning it wholesale, right where it is on the farms. The corn stocks have caused an increase in vermin and insects. Rats are moving from the campo into Venado Tuerto. Good clothing is being punctured by the weevils when they are in the moth stage. Moths are everywhere in the cereal region. They seem to prefer the fideo factory in Venado Tuerto above all else.

Yet with all the disheartening aspects of the general picture, the people of rural Argentina do manage to have lighter moments. From time to time the community of Venado Tuerto has its dances, with the town's own tipica orchestra playing. The three movie theatres show Argentine and North American cinemas at 80 cents an entrance m\$. On the outskirts of the city there is a beautiful public park, with a swimming pool that would cost \$35,000 in the states, a dance floor and many acres of garden land for strollers to view. There are few who can afford a radio, so a public address system is rigged up on Belgrano Street, broadcasting a program of music, poetry and advertisements each day before noon and each evening during the promenade hours. The promenade is, of course, the simplest and most common entertainment. The evening drive in the family automobile is the North American counterpart. On Sunday nights there is an extra special promenade, with literally hundreds of people thronging Calle Belgrano. On these occasions all traffic, including cross-traffic, is suspended by order of the comisario. If one does not practice the piropo, he soon comes to it; for it is only the part of politeness to reply Adiós to the Señorita who says it to you. Venado Tuerto is the first place in the Argentine where I have seen young women make use of the piropo. Guardia taught me a bit about the technique. If her eyes meet yours, you must say a piropo, he instructed. If her eyes do not meet yours, perhaps they will the next time you meet her. Perhaps you can make them meet yours.

There is another thing about Venado Tuerto which I want to write about. It was a stage presentation shown at the Teatro Verdi by a dramatic company. It was called La Canción de Los Trigales (The Song of the Wheat Harvesters). It was a melodrama more emotional and sentimental than a first class medicine show. It was Spanish in spirit and criollo to the core. It was billed as the "Sad Story of an Impossible Love." It was not for these reasons that the melodrama impressed me. In fact the melodrama didn't impress me nearly as much as the people who saw it. What if the plot were trite and the acting theatrical! What if the dramatic interpretations were lacking in technique! This was the kind of drama to thrill and entertain the people of Venado Tuerto. Most of Venado Tuerto was present, jammed into every palco and box and literally piled one upon the other. It was a humid, impossibly hot night, for the pampas was brewing an electrical storm. No one bothered to buy seats for the children or to leave them at home. The young Señora who sat next to me merely said: "Disculpe, señor;" and placed her little girl on my lap quite as a matter of course. Old enough to talk, Maria was no trouble at all. She stood up during most of the

thrilling scenes. Only once did she throw her arms around me in fright. That was when the Gaucho pulled out his knife, a mean looking cuchillo, and chased one of the principal villains off the stage. Don Isidro, to sketch a bit of the plot, was the estanciero. His daughter Isabellita was a beautiful blonde. One of the young men working at the estancia was a "son of the campo." He did not know who his parents were. Naturally, he fell in love with Isabelita. Don Isidro wouldn't stand for it. (I am skipping other details of the plot which includes two other love affairs and three villains, one of whom was blackmailing Doña Donata because he had some love letters, indiscreet ones too, which she had written in the days of her youth). Finally, Don Isidro had to tell the lovers that they are brother and sister. The shock is too great for the beautiful Isabelita who pines away and dies in the middle of the second act. From then on there is death and sadness in every scene until the company is decimated. All the women and girls in the Teatro Verdi cry and sob and enjoy themselves immensely. As the curtain goes up for each new scene the young men say: "Continue crying." At the end of the drama Atilano Ortega Sanz, the author and director himself, comes out upon the stage and recites a 10-minute plática about how he got the idea for the original play and how pleased he is with its reception. Everyone thinks it is a fine speech he makes, and although they would like to walk out in the middle of it they do not. Instead they wait until he has finished and applaud him, for that is a part of his salary as a dramatist.

The morning following my return to Buenos Aires, Don Santiago Campion appeared on the scene. When Don Santiago is about, life has a tempo about twice as fast as normal. And as he is anxious that I do not overlook anything in the Argentine which interests him, we proceeded to see the livestock part of Buenos Aires, a chore which took us the better part of two days. We spent one morning at Liniers, the great stockyards of the Argentine on the outskirts of the city. Two criollo ponies were placed at our disposition and we rode from one end of the place to the other, Don Santiago studying with practiced eye the quality of the novillos and vaquillones which had come to market. There were a surprising number of underfed steers, Don Santiago explaining that they were from the northern provinces. Apparently there is no profit in sending them into better feeding zones; for they were going straight to the slaughter. We inspected the Frigorífico Municipal, an Argentine-owned packing plant of which Juan Campion, Don Santiago's brother, is president. It was apparent there that the long-talked-of expansion in the Argentine hog industry is making progress, for one big section of the plant, in operation only three months, has been equipped to take care of new hog receipts. Especially in demand is lard. Surplus Argentine lard is being bid for by Central American markets which cannot now get it in the United States. At any rate that is the explanation given here.

In that part of my last letter in which I tried to give some of the outward evidences of the recent political campaign, it strikes me that I was a shade naive in the conclusion I made about the strength of the administration and opposition parties in the Chamber of Deputies. For the sake of accuracy I have been trying to determine what the actual strength of each party in the Chamber is. There are 158 deputies. So far I have seen no tabulation in any newspaper of the strength. Argentines who are interested in politics cannot even give an accurate answer. They state that this party or that party has a "Mayoría", meaning that it has a numerical superiority over any other particular party. It is difficult to have them distinguish between a plurality and a majority, for "Mayoría" means both. Dr. Castillo's party has at least a plurality in the Congress. Before the election the P. D. N party posted the following as its election slogan: "Dr. Castillo needs a 'Mayoría' in the Congress to guarantee order and prosperity." I mention this situation because it is an outward sign of Argentine politics, showing a general lack of interest in the final political results. When the official tabulation of election returns is available, I shall send it. The election Junta of Buenos Aires province has announced a rest period and won't take up counting for some time yet, probably mañana.

Sincerely,

*Francis Heron*