

The Hotel Savoy
On The Paraná
Resistencia, Chaco
July 11, 1942

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Tucumán surprised me! There was nothing in Santiago del Estero to modify my conception of it. Poor Santiago del Estero with its poverty and its handful of people! It was much like Alfredo Palacios (he is the liberal, one-man political party who is known throughout the Argentine for his reforms and his churrasco, handlebar mustache) had pictured it in his book, The Abandoned Peoples. Santiago del Estero is dry, flat, brush-covered country. Dust possesses the air. Water is precious. Inhabitants of the little communities dig ditches to catch some of the rain which falls. The poor beg for water at railroad stations. What matter if it come steaming hot from the locomotive itself. It is water. The huts, or houses, of the people are of brush wood, straw and adobe. Many time there are not four walls to them. Some have nothing but a roof. The wealth of the region is goats, a few scrub cattle, cactus and red quebracho wood which the tanning industry uses. I did not see much of Salta. The rail line of the state did not pass the oil fields. I went to Metán, thence east to the Chaco. There are cane fields in a restricted area. In the valleys of the mountains there are some maize fields and a modest number of goats and scrub cattle. The Chaco region through which I passed is a vast plain. There are quebracho trees which sprung from seed before the coming of the Spaniards. The territory, along the lines of communication, is being penetrated; the brush is being cleared away and cotton plantations are springing up. Roque Saénz Peña in the center of the territory is scarcely more than 20 years old. A surprisingly modern city it has a large percentage of Czechoslovakians. Fifty kilometers west of Resistencia, approaching the city, one begins to traverse the marsh lands which characterize the country adjacent to the Río Paraná. Resistencia is young and progressive looking. It is the site of cotton mills and plants of the quebracho industry.

But Tucumán! A great range of mountains, with peaks much higher than those of the north American Rockies, flanks the plains of Tucumán. There is an eminence of the range less than 20 kilometers from the City of Tucumán which commands a view of much of the sugar cane land of the province. Frosts have come often this winter. Cane, the color of ripened wheat, climbs up the gentler slopes of the mountains. One fancies he can see the fringe of the cane land to the east. To the south it goes beyond the horizon which the eye commands. The soil of Tucumán is black with richness. Unlike nearby arid Santiago del Estero the climate is humid. Rains come often in the summer months. They are tropical rains and they are followed by tropical heat. More than half a million people live in the rich, tight little province, almost all of them on the flat 40 percent which is perhaps the richest single area of the Argentine. Tucumán is the smallest province in the Argentine. It is the most thickly populated too. There are only 325,000 acres used in the cultivation of sugar cane, an area smaller than two fair-sized Iowa counties. Seeing Tucumán from the mountains one is impressed by its cane fields and its fields of citrus plants. Once again I have broadened my estimate of the productive capacity of the Argentine. The plains of Tucumán extend to the southeast until they become the plains of Córdoba, then those of Santa Fe and, finally, those of Buenos Aires. There is no natural obstacle of any importance in all that extension. The same plains stretch east to the Paraná and beyond. Such incredibly extensive plains of thousands upon thousands of kilometers there can be in no part of the world. Tucumán is not altogether what it seems to be from the mountains. Its social system makes sad, but necessary, commentary.

My companion of the School of Economic Sciences and I went up and down Tucumán. We visited Ingenios, the curious name that sugar factories go by. We saw the juice crushed from Java cane in great presses which bore the mark of German industry. We observed the process by which the juice became 'honey'. And finally we saw the grains of sugar which centrifugal force contrived to make. We watched the peons of Tucumán, Catamarca and La Rioja bring the cane to the factories in ox- or mule-drawn wagons. We talked to the peons who cut the cane in the fields--poor, apparently resigned men who are forced by the law of survival to bring their wives and children into the harvest fields. We inspected the makeshift houses which bear the romantic name of Rancheritas. Such living quarters are hard for the mind to conceive. A few uprights of wood, a roof of straw or zinc sheeting and walls of cane. For the past four or five weeks cold such as has not been experienced in the Argentine for more than 20 years has made the life of Tucumanos impossibly difficult. Many times the bitter, humid air has gone to 20 above zero fahrenheit. Some children survive this kind of life and grow to maturity, maintaining the criollo race in this part of the Argentine.

The people wear thin, inadequate cotton raiment. Their Alpargatas sometimes are worn half away. Some children walk the cold, damp ground barefoot. Some peons have title to a hectare or two upon which they can build their 'house', and upon which they can grow four or five rows of cane to 'swell' their income. Some times they have a few head of cattle, which are called scrub cattle because they have no pasture upon which to graze. I was told that calves of this breed might be placed on the best alfalfa land of the Argentine and fed the best corn and oats in the world and they would hardly gain. The short rations upon which the scrub cattle have fed, decade upon decade, have made them a wasted breed of skin and bone. So, too, with the people. Once a day they eat a mixture of maize, meat and perhaps a vegetable. Children often have only this one meal. In addition they have mate and dry bread in the morning and evening. It is said that the starvation regime of generations has made the criollo of this part of the Argentine a race of thin men. Those of them who have their little acreages must have recourse to the adelantado, or loan-in-advance, system of the Ingenio proprietors who buy the cane. This year frost has destroyed from 30 to 50 percent of the cane. The ordinary three-months harvest period has been cut to one and a half months. The one-crop system, the frost and the social system promise hard days for the peons of Tucumán. The 'conciencia' of these people is a riddle to Ingenio proprietors and large land owners. I have heard people of importance in the social system say that the peons have scarcely more than the minds of a child. Others, more social minded, say such opinion is a great underestimate and an injustice. Years of work at servile tasks have taught the peons not to complain for fear of consequences. A year ago some of them attempted a strike, but economic dependence on the adelantado broke it. The fear of starvation is a real and compelling force. Conform or starve. What choice is there? In Tucumán politicians argue the need of a high sugar tariff to protect a national industry and actually solicit the favor of the peons, pointing out the grave extremity to which they would be reduced if the tariff were removed. What eloquence of argument!

The sugar problem is too complex to treat in full here. I intend to send a more general survey of it to the Institute. In general, however, there are two other classes in Tucumán's society. There is the independent large land owner and the sugar factory proprietor, who often has great extensions of land. These two groups own most of Tucumán's rich soil. The sugar industry is protected by tariff, so that a price of approximately .41 cents m^sn per kilo is almost always assured (Buenos Aires basis). Because of overproduction, the province has instituted a system of Derechos (Privileges), giving quotas to sugar land owners. Only those with Derechos can sell their cane to the Ingenios. The result is that neither the Ingenios, the large land owners nor the small land owners can plant all their land to cane and sell it all. In practice the large land owners make good profits. Factories have been reduced from 40 to 28. Many of the Ingenios have come upon difficult times. They

have been forced to bid for the cane to assure a reasonable volume for their factories. It is said that some of them are not familiar with business and industrial technique and have not been able to adapt themselves to competitive practices. In any event 12 factories have been closed and others are mortgaged. The Derecho system and the national sugar monopoly have shot land values sky high, with the best being quoted at 1,000 pesos an hectare. The series of restrictions and other unforeseen factors have complicated matters. Beet sugar interests in the litoral are seeking recognition in the national quotas (the quotas are roughly Tucumán 78 percent, the rest of the nation 22 percent), thus bringing to the fore the factor of national competition. There is no man who can write out a prescription for Tucumán. Agriculturally, the province is rich beyond belief. It can grow other products besides sugar cane. Mixed farming will help. Perhaps it is the best single approach. The criollo population needs education and a helping hand--clothes, better living quarters, food to eat. The land problem obtains here as it does in every part of the Argentine. Society, by the very nature of its origin and tradition, fears change. Evolution is a longer, harder job than one who sees this country in a hurried way can imagine.

The four days that I traveled and lived with the student of the School of Economic Sciences in Tucumán taught me much. We discussed many problems. Sunday we sat beside the statue of Hipolito Irigoyen and talked of the conservative revolution of 1930. My friend admired Irigoyen. He thinks much of former president Ortiz, too. Yet he favors a strong, rightist government. He thinks that the sensation press of Buenos Aires should be suppressed, because it might give somebody wrong ideas. He has no faith in Democracy, principally because he has no faith in the great masses of people. He concedes that there may be some nations, with social and educational advantages for all, where the judgment of the people may be sane. But, in general, he believes there are few countries which can make a success of Democracy. He says that he wishes he could believe in Democracy in the liberal, complete sense. But he cannot. He told me that he did not like the Porteño complex. Once he went to Buenos Aires. Perforce he spoke in his musical, Cordobese manner. The cachadas and jokes which he faced at every turn robbed him of his tranquility. Porteños, he said, think they are cosmopolitans, that they know the world and are superior to other Argentines. Most provincial people pretend not to resent the cachadas of the Porteños, often feign that they do not notice them. The provincial Argentine, kindly and wishful of peaceful relations, does not like to have his life perturbed by unpleasant discussions or fights. He seldom calls the bluff of the Porteño or allows himself to be insulted. My friend had planned to stay in Tucumán another day or two after I left. He confided to me, as I prepared to leave for the north, that he was homesick and would take the next train to Córdoba. He asked me what the cure for being homesick was. I told him it was to go farther away from home and to stay there a long time. He said that he did not believe he could ever defeat the strangeness which he had. I think he judged himself correctly, for he is a Cordobese.

Sincerely,

Francis Herron