

The Turismo Hotel
Mendoza, Mendoza
January 5, 1942

Dear Mr. Rogers:

All manner of people stop at the Turismo Hotel: Teachers from the Escuelas Superiores of Buenos Aires out Mendoza way for a week's excursion; members of show companies come to the provinces during the off-season to make bare living expenses until the regular theatrical season opens at summer's end; travelers bound for Chile on the Trans-Andine railroad; employees of the Buenos Aires Pacifico railroad; Mendocinos (such as I) who make it a boarding house; business men from San Juan, Junin, San Rafael, or elsewhere; all in all, a generous mixture of people from the middle class of the Argentine. There is one time of the day, or night, when the art of conversation is important at the Turismo Hotel; or, for that matter, in any part of the Argentine. That time begins with the dinner hour at 9:30 o'clock in the evening and continues until midnight is well past. After dinner the people of the Turismo gather outside under the still, clear sky of Mendoza to converse on any of the known subjects. No matter what the topic is at first and no matter how far in the background I may be, the subject of North America always arises and I become the logical person to whom eager questions are directed. The questions are more often amusing than not. In them I see the truth of Will Rogers' oft used expression: "All I know is what I read in the newspapers or see at the movies." Am I a New Yorker? Do I know Mr. Roosevelt or the Hollywood movie stars? Does everybody in the United States have a lot of money? Why does almost everyone get a divorce? Tell us about California. These questions indicate the superficial, impressionistic ideas which these people have of the United States. And yet, if I am not mistaken, they have the feeling that the United States is a phenomenon for which there is no comparison in the world. They want to know and see the United States; their eagerness is such that it could not be feigned. Behind this feeling there is the thought that the United States is a land of individual opportunity. Continually they ask in one way or another if the Argentine has the elements of growth and greatness which the United States has. These are the thoughts and reactions of the people who stop at the Turismo Hotel. They are not of the proud, important Criolla class; nor are they members of the very poor class.

Christmas eve I attended an asado, the traditional Argentine fiesta into which one can read the life of the Gaucho. In the years before the turn of the century when the estancias were larger than a Wyoming county, it was the law of this land that anyone might kill a cow and use its meat if he hung the hide up to dry for the owner. Meat had no commercial value in those days before the Frigorificos. Hides were a source of great revenue. Consequently, the roaming Gauchos killed cattle at their desire and built fires on the open pampas over which to cook the meat of the animal. They drove great iron bars into the flesh of the animal and stood the meat over the glowing coals. It was around the asado campfire that the Gaucho composed, or improvised, his songs of adventure, of love and daring. That was the asado of those days; except for a little more finesse, it is the asado of today. The technique of eating is primitive. One merely secures two or three ribs and eats the meat from them like a savage. A single week in the Argentine will convince one, even though he does not attend an open-air asado, that nowhere in the world is there more bounteous meals, more tender or flavorful beef. And though the Frigorificos have given the meat of the Argentine a value, it is still cheap enough to make one from the prairie land of the United States envy this feature of the Argentine and to wish that, in this respect, the United States had more to offer.

It was a safe and sane Christmas, according to the wishes of the provincial government. "Claro," one of the young men at the Turismo told me. "However, New Year's eve there will be much shooting. Lead will rain from the skies. Friends will shoot friends." He spoke these words with a terrible finality, as if they were true. I asked him why friends would shoot friends. His answer was: "Because it is diverting." Naturally nothing of this nature occurred. Because when the New Year came almost everybody in the city of Mendoza, young and old, were drinking real, or synthetic, champagne, toasting the new year, drinking to "ilusión" and a "noche de olvido." At the Turismo it was no different. The tables were lined up, a huge bowl of Monitor, the champagne of Mendoza, was brought forth and served with slices of fresh pineapple and pan dulce, the fiesta bread of Spain. Never since my arrival here (I make full confession) have I been so quick with my Spanish as at this celebration. My Argentine friends were well pleased when I dared to use several slang expressions, the fine meanings of which I only half know.

The University of Mendoza closed its doors December 29. It is a pity, for I had begun to know a number of the younger instructors and professors. With the closing of the University, practically all the instructors and professors left on temporary or extended vacations. Fortunately some of them are to return early this month and I am to scout the possibility of instruction and study. There are other angles which may produce something. I am to talk over my plans with Ing. Jorge Christensen at his house tonight. Christensen, a native of Córdoba and an expert on grape culture, is working for the government in Mendoza. He is slated to go to the United States in the fall either as a Rockefeller or Guggenheim fellow. Felix Albani, a professor of the Facultad de Agronomía, is to return shortly from Buenos Aires. His department is planning two or three field trips during the summer season to various parts of Cuyo. In any event, I should like to see something of the richer agricultural provinces during February and March. Corn picking is done in March. It will be time enough later to plan University study if such seems practical. The University really does not get started until April.

I arrived in Argentina in the heat of the summer. Mendoza, in temperature readings, is as hot as any place in the Argentine, save possibly a few of the semi-tropical provinces and gobernaciones. However, it is a dry climate and there are few nights when it is too hot to get a good rest. I am slowly getting used to the change from late fall to summer, to the different kinds of food and to the effects of higher altitude. When I first arrived in Mendoza, these things did not seem to affect me. During the past week it was a different story. In spite of every precaution, I developed the colitis of Mendoza. It is a mischievous kind of business and it kept me from taking a trip or two to the campo which I had intended to make. Señora Metraux took me in hand, prescribed the proper remedy and eating regime. Today I am confident that I have won the battle which nearly everyone who comes here must fight.

I am slowly catching on to some of the simple outward signs of Argentine life. I can hail a waiter with a penetrating "sst", just like an Argentine. I can now dodge cars the wrong way, having become used to left-handed traffic. I know now that the Argentine does a lot of indirect talking, that many times his eyes give the cue. I know now that many Argentines dance to meet people and do not dance to dance. I know that the reason the butter tastes so different is that there is no salt in it. I know that the afternoon lasts until the sun goes down and that morning, afternoon and night are not regulated by the clock as the precise Anglo-Saxon would have it.

Sincerely yours,

Francis Herron