

1970

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Recommended Citation

H&S Reports, Vol. 07, (1970 winter), p. 31-32

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Letter from BUENOS AIRES

By Wilbur D. Harris

It's *still* true! Water *does* (sometimes, at least) circle in the opposite direction south of the Equator!

About one year ago I wrote something that started with this statement and used it to lead into our family's reactions to our first three months of living abroad—in Buenos Aires, Argentina. At that time I compared our situation to being caught in a whirlpool of new facts, ideas, customs, likes and dislikes. It seemed as if our family were in the center of this whirlpool, and we were expectantly wondering what new experience awaited us.

I had come to Argentina on special assignment in connection with technical coordination of the DPH&S Latin American practice, which has based us in Buenos Aires. Today we know the city much better. We can even locate places and streets to which we wish to go and, when you consider the lack of street signs here, this is no insignificant accomplishment. As we have become more familiar with the city, we are convinced that Buenos Aires is a fine place in which to live, and we have

become deeply impressed with its commercial, industrial and seaport activities, and with its people, who number more than six million.

In some inexplicable way, Buenos Aires looks different from sister cities on this continent. New and modern buildings are just beginning to intrude on its basic skyline of older Spanish and European-influenced architecture. It is a joy to walk its fabulously wide *avenidas* (main thoroughfares generally of four or more lanes) and tight little *calles* (streets) and look at all the tiny little shops and *gallerias* (groupings of many tiny shops) among the many massive, square, grand old buildings with their tile roofs, painted cement exteriors, high-arched windows and iron-railed balconies. It is a pleasure as well to view its tree-lined streets and many, many parks, its flowers and flowering trees and shrubs offering gorgeous year-round displays of vivid colors, beautifully contrasting the tropical flora with those familiar to us from most of the United States.

To me Buenos Aires is a city in motion: the frantic, scurrying street traffic; the hundreds of people continually rushing through Retiro railroad station (more than through Grand Central in New York, it seems to me); or a trip to the famous "Boca"—the old port area, a tourist-attracting Bohemian section. Above all, to me it is a walk among thousands of other pedestrians down its most notable street, Florida. Here, I think, you really feel the life of this great city. You hear the sounds of its crowds, you are bumped and jostled, and you find a new facet of interest with each such walk.

One thing that forcefully strikes the average U.S. transferee on arriving here is the heavy reliance on manual labor, which is apparently the most economical way of getting things done. Construction workers can be seen passing materials along by hand, in ways that remind you of the old bucket brigades. Sand and gravel are often moved in small pans looking like slightly over-sized angel food cake pans. And it really looks like hard work when you see two members of a railroad crew sitting on their little boxes cutting a rail with what appears to be an oversized, two-man hacksaw. The most important position on such construction crews seems to be that of the member assigned to cook the noon *asado* (open-fire barbecue); it seems very odd to

Since writing this article, Wil Harris has transferred to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to be partner in charge of that office.

see the smoke and smell the cooking meat even on *Avenida 9 de Julio*, which has been reported to be, or to have been at one time, the world's widest avenue.

I would term the people of Buenos Aires happy people; they appear to love to talk together rapidly and are continually smiling or laughing when in such group conversations. The people on the streets here are quite different in appearance from those found in other large South American cities. Here they are generally taller, fairer and more European in appearance, thereby reflecting the assimilation of the many nationality groups from both the northern and southern regions of that continent.

The women of the city need bow to none, for they include an unusually large number of fine-looking women. Their outstanding traits would include lovely hair and complexion and beautiful eyes. And they seem to pull out all stops in selecting their vividly colored dresses, which often belie the contention that girls cannot attractively wear stripes running in the "wrong direction."

The Argentine men, quite opposite from the girls, dress quite conservatively, most often in very quiet gray, blue and black suits with only a few browns. Many comb their hair straight back and moustaches are fairly common. Perhaps the most interesting thing we have noted about them is the proclivity of the men in the street to be very avid girl-watchers. It is quite common to see men on the big avenue, Florida, just stop and watch a girl passing, particularly if she is wearing a short skirt.

Season and weatherwise, living south of the Equator causes us quite a bit of confusion because the seasons are the reverse of those in the North. We must continually explain whose winter and summer we are talking about, because summer in the Argentine is winter in the U.S. and vice versa. Having lived in the northern part of the United States all of our lives, we just cannot feel natural to be holding our swimming parties at Christmas time. And it seems most strange that at that season the only bells you hear tinkling on Florida are those of the local equivalent of the Good Humor man.

Argentines appear outwardly to experience relatively little discomfort from the humid summer heat, but they show extreme reaction to the cold of the winters (which I consider quite mild). How I envy them in the sum-

mer when I, literally melting, look around on my daily commuter train and see them appearing cool and collected. However, I get my revenge in the winter when I see them hurrying down the street huddled in heavy coats and suits, and often wearing bulky sweaters as well. Then I am usually strolling casually and comfortably wearing only my normal summer-weight suit and a light raincoat.

All of our family can now get along reasonably well in Castellano, a term generally used in South America to identify the Spanish language. It's a big relief from those early days in our house when I had to be our primary spokesman with our cook and housemaid, Mary. It was not unusual for me to arrive home from the office, completely washed out from a full day of trying to translate working papers, to be met at the door by both Pat, my wife, and Mary, each wanting me to explain something to the other. We could, and should, be much more adept in speaking Castellano but none of us *has* to speak the language well to survive. We have learned enough to communicate with Mary and when shopping, and for me to be able to read reasonably well, so we do not progress as much as we would like.

Inadequate housing may be Argentina's most pressing problem and this causes rentals to be as high, or higher, here than in any part of this continent. Our rental situation was further complicated because we did not bring our furniture. This greatly limited our choices on arrival, but we were able to find and negotiate successfully for a house on the fringe of what one of our partners here terms the "American Ghetto."

Shopping is really quite different. Department stores and supermarkets as known in the U.S. are nearly nonexistent. In their place one must patronize small specialty shops, each often selling only one type of product. Canned and frozen foods are rather recent innovations here, limited in variety, and often not too good. Most housewives will shop almost daily at their favorite little stores. Generally, beef is quite good and, while expensive in relation to local salaries, is cheaper than in the U.S. Vegetables are quite expensive compared to anywhere, and you never know from day to day what will be available or at what price. I should add that fruits here and elsewhere on this continent are simply delicious. All in all it seems to me that planning a family's meals here takes

more ingenuity than in the U.S. But the shopping, more than any other activity, has led Pat to improve her Castellano. She has done all of ours since we moved to our house, and none of us has suffered.

Our breads here are very tasty and usually quite inexpensive. We buy most of ours at our gate from a *panadero* (breadman) who comes down the street in a horse-drawn cart. This service adds to the price of a standard loaf, so we have to pay all of five cents for a small loaf. Local cakes and pastries, we find, are too different for our taste; they just do not live up to their appearances.

Most houses here have a dog, and ours is one of them. On the first day we moved into our house we picked up our boxer pup, which is now fully grown. Dog foods here are not easily available, so dog owners usually buy low-cost meats for use in the daily preparation of their food. Our dog, different from most others, is really quite friendly with everyone—which was not our idea when we got him. But we are making some headway in training him to "defend" our house, and now he usually barks at noisy little boys and old women as they pass.

Most people in the so-called American Ghetto have a live-in maid, and we have our Mary. As might be suspected, "Mary" should really be "Maria" but, as she says, there are thousands of Marias here but only a few Marys. We have been fortunate, because Mary has been with us from the start, is a very hard worker, a good cook, and most of the other things that really count. Most important, she enjoys our kids and she and they are continually playing tricks on each other.

While our oldest girl is in college in the United States, our two youngest children attend high school in the American Community School, which is really quite good, or "tough," as they say. It is certain that academic competition here is very keen. Many of these youngsters evidence a sophistication and knowledge beyond that of a similar group back home. We think this results from their having experienced several years of international living, and exposure to different ways of life. The high school has about 250 students and their activities are perhaps more what Pat and I consider "normal" for high school youngsters than those in the United States. The boys generally use *remises* (private taxis) to pick up their dates and bring them home. And although their social affairs usually last

much later than in the U.S., Pat and I feel more at ease here when our high schoolers are out in the evening.

In general, I would say we have enjoyed most aspects of our foreign service. Our two children with us here, especially my youngest daughter, really consider it something special, and our daughter at college has been thrilled with her vacation visits. Since she is 6,000 miles from us and from whatever counsel and assistance we might give her and because our son also will be at college in the United States next year, Pat and I have remarked how much more wonderful the assignment would have been had it taken place six to eight years earlier. Then our whole family could have experienced it. Or perhaps this assignment could have come later when our children had finished college and were making their own way. But then, that is life. You live it as it comes, and we are here now.

Additionally, the substantial traveling that has been a part of the assignment since February 1968 does, at times, cause some mixed emotions. Not long ago, for no particular reason, I counted up and found that I had been absent from Argentina 77 days during just the period July 24 through December 14, 1968. But I rather enjoy this unique opportunity to visit the major cities of this great continent, and getting to know the fine new people with whom it has brought me in contact.

I'll close with this: we have found our time here is something we wouldn't have missed. □