

CATEGORY: ARGENTINA: 1900

CONCEPTS: RACE/ETHNICITY, agriculture, migration, social class

ACTIVITY: A BRITISH TRAVELER'S DESCRIPTION OF HUMAN GROUPS

ON AN ARGENTINE RANCH, 1911. Walter Larden was a British traveler who visited his brother's large ranch or "estancia" in Argentina twice, in 1888 and in 1911. He wrote a lengthy book on his impressions of the agriculture, economy and social life that he observed. His book is of interest not only for the information on Argentine life, but also for its perspective, that of an Englishman who views Argentina as a natural site for British influence and investment. The reading we have chosen provides a description of some of the social and ethnic groups which have gone into making modern Argentina while at the same time giving insight into the ideas of the economically dominant group of British who had controlled Argentina for some time.

OBJECTIVES: Students will gain an awareness of the "melting pot" character of Argentina. They will also be exposed to the historical bias of one observer and be able to discuss the reasons for this bias.

MATERIALS: Reproductions of the following reading.

PROCEDURE: Have the students read and discuss the selection from Estancia Life. Here are some suggested topics for discussion:

1. Larden describes a definite hierarchy based on national origin. How do you think each group felt about the other groups? Remember especially that one group, the gauchos, were native Argentinians, while the other two groups were from Europe.
2. The author describes the gauchos and the Italians as "races." What is his definition of "race" and is it the same as the one we use?
3. In the reading, we see an author who obviously feels superior to the people he is describing. Point out places in the reading where we see this. Why do you think he felt superior? Do you think he was justified? Do we ever feel this way about people of different nationalities?
4. Larden says the gauchos are becoming more "civilized." What does he mean?

**LEVEL: MIDDLE GRADES**

Source: Gibbs, Virginia G. *Latin America: Curriculum Materials for the Middle Grades*. Center for Latin America, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. 1985/1989.

5. When the gauchos rode the pampas and the first generations of Italians settled in Argentina both were considered a problem or even dangerous. Now the gaucho has disappeared, and much like our cowboy is a symbol of heroism, independence, and national spirit. The Italians have become a strong part of the Argentinian middle class and have shaped much of Argentinian culture (ravioli is a common Argentinian food). Discuss how this came about based on what you know of U.S. history.

HELPFUL HINTS: This exercise will produce the best results if used in conjunction with the prior exercise on Martín Fierro.

VOCABULARY: estancia, class, race, peon, gaucho, hierarchy, patriarchal, tenant-colonist, bias



Walter Larden was from England but his brother was the wealthy owner of a ranch in Argentina. On two visits, in 1888 and 1911, Larden observed life in Argentina. He then wrote a book which described what he saw. The British had a major influence in Argentina from the 1830's to about 1920. Many or most of the large ranches, banks and railroads were owned by English families. Therefore, Larden's book describes what he sees from the perspective of a man interested in informing his fellow citizens of the situation of one of their major areas of foreign investment. We can learn a lot from his description of the gauchos and Italian immigrants in 1911, but we must also be careful of some of the biases he shows and which are the result of being an observer representing a group of people who control a nation which is not their own.

### ESTANCIA LIFE

Walter Larden

(T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1911)

It is in the countryside that we can find the true Argentina of whose wealth and progress we hear so much. Here we have scattered over the vast plains, estancia after estancia (large ranches), each in the center of a huge property where stock is raised; here too we have the tenant-colonists with their relatively small holdings and their crops.

Passing over the proprietor or manager and his mayor-domo (assistant or foreman), who, as likely as not, will both be Englishmen, one may say that the population in the camp is composed of two distinct classes, who are also of two distinct races.

First let us consider the native peon. He represents the gaucho class of older days, but has changed in more than one way. In the first place, he has lost his independence: he is a paid servant, lives in quarters provided for him, and is practically under orders for twenty-four hours a day. Inevitably the old free gaucho spirit has nearly disappeared.

As first known to the estancieros (English ranch owners) who employed him as peon (day laborer) on their cattle runs, the gaucho was a hardy fellow; capable of sleeping out of doors even when there was a frost, and that without grumbling; quite content with meat and yerba (an Argentine tea) only as rations; working often from before sunrise until dark; understanding thoroughly the handling of horses and cattle, though in a crude and perhaps even brutal way; generous, I am told, to his fellows. He was in the main a good servant as regards the rough work for which he was wanted, and his labor was cheap; further, in general he would not rob his employer. But he was ignorant, very stupid where mechanical appliances were in question, full of strange oaths (he swore a lot); not the sort of person who could be allowed to come in contact with the rancher's family. There was a vast gap between him and his employer; he could hardly be and certainly was not, treated with the kindly familiarity with which a proprietor in one of the older countries can, and often does, treat his farm hands.

During my first visit of 1888 I received the impression the gaucho class, as represented by the camp peons, was of a low type and not intelligent or adaptable enough to be of use in helping in the development of the country. In my visit in 1908-1909, I noticed a great change for the better. I found peons trusted more; I found them digging wells, making terraces, driving sowing or reaping machines. I noticed also kindly relations between them and the child of the estancia; and I myself found more than one quite companionable when acting as my coachman.

The head man, or capataz, who was chief under my brother, had a strong strain of Indian in him; but he was a most reliable man, and gentle and courteous in manner. Another man, Gomez, was markedly Indian in type. He certainly looked like a murderer when he was being photographed; but his face lit up wonderfully when you "got at him" suitably; and he was, I believe, a warmhearted man and fond of children.

Beside the variety of work that is starting into existence everywhere, there appear to be two new influences that tend to raise the gaucho class in the scale of civilization.

Firstly, the cattle work is being humanized. The animals are no longer being knocked about as they were; they are too valuable. They are now, to a large extent, handled by means of ingenious devices in the way of sliding gates, etc. Hence the peon's work is far less brutal than it was.

Secondly, there is growing up more of the patriarchal spirit. All over the country there are now estancias belonging to married Englishmen who had none of the rough pioneering work. The estancia owner looks after the peons, and helps them to get their sons out into the world; his wife is their doctor in illness, and looks after the women and children. At some of the larger estancias, schools have already been started.

Let us now turn to the agricultural population. This is composed mainly of North Italian immigrants. South Italians appear to keep to the towns and to do odd jobs; they are not such steady workers. The North Italian colonists form a population by themselves; so far they never intermarry with the natives. Habits, ideas, food, ways of life - all are different in the two races.

The industry of these colonists is wonderful; man, woman, child, all work; and, though they are obliged to ride and to deal with cattle, they seem to take to agricultural work as naturally as the Spanish-American did to hunting and stock work. You would hire Italian colonists for ploughing or haymaking, but not for work involving lassoing or the handling of horses or cattle in matters unconnected with ploughing. They never seem to ride for pleasure; but I have seen the mother of a family managing five none-too-well trained oxen

yoked to a plough, and quite little children will ride off bareback to bring cattle or horses in. Those who came, as some still come, to the country with no money at all would take land on "halves" - that is, the owner would supply them with everything and would take half the produce. My brother had to deal with such people at first, and he found them very troublesome. But for many years he has had plenty to pick from, and he takes none but those who have some capital. These pay a quarter of the produce as rent for the land they use.

(Walter Larden's complete book of Argentine memoirs has been reprinted by Blaine Ethridge Books, Detroit, 1974)

