

## LAST OF A BREED

# The Gauchos

By ROBERT LAXALT

Photographs by

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I GOT UP in the first light and pulled on cowboy boots and a warm jacket against the Argentine winter. It was early September, and the whitewashed ranch buildings of Estancia Aguay were shrouded in cold mist.

The gauchos were already up and about. They had wakened in the darkness to a breakfast of maté, the bitter Argentine tea that is said to dispel fatigue, and *mbaipoi*, a porridge of cornmeal and meat. By the time Victor Carrillo, the ranch manager, and I had our warming coffee, they were already saddling their horses.

Varjona, a gaucho I had gotten to know, touched the brim of his low-crowned hat and murmured, "Buen día." He was a classic gaucho of Argentina, of mixed Spanish and Indian blood, with fierce black mustache and upward-tilting eyes against a copper skin. Though not yet 20, he had already

*Tense as toreros before a bullfight, gauchos dress for a rodeo near Ituzaingó, Argentina. Once lawless nomads of the plains, then heroes of wars against Spain, gauchos became symbols of freedom—and remain today a romantic evocation of skillful horsemanship and manly conduct.*



**WILD SPIRITS TAKE FREE REIN** as Argentine gauchos race across a lake near Berón de Astrada. The riders belong to a group dedicated to the memory of Gen. José de San Martín and the gauchos who fought beside him in the early 1800s for independence. In 1978 seven made a 300-mile round-trip ride to Yapeyú, where San Martín was born 200 years earlier.





**Flinging his lasso at a rushing steer, a gaucho shows his style at a rodeo in Bagé, Brazil (right). The rawhide rope and sharp knife are among the man's most prized possessions (below). The name "gaucho," first given to renegades of Spanish and Indian blood, now belongs to cowhands of diverse ancestry in several countries (map).**

DRAWN BY JANE WOLFE  
COMPILED BY MARGUERITE B. HUNSIKER  
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC ART DIVISION



gained a reputation as a superb horseman.

While a *peón*, a ranch hand, saddled my horse, Varjona finished putting on his own multilayered saddle topped with a thick sheepskin fleece. Kneeling, he buckled spurs onto bare ankles and sandaled feet. When I remarked on this, I learned that the early gauchos actually clutched a stirrup strap or shank between their first and second toes, a practice that eventually caused their toes to curl downward.

Varjona reached behind him to make sure his wicked 14-inch knife, called a *facón*, was firmly in place. Sheathed in hard leather, it was slanted between belt and sash, ready to his hand for work or fighting. The horse's mane was roached except for one hank of hair at its withers. Grasping it, Varjona sprang lightly into the saddle and was away at a lope to join the other gauchos.

#### Lariats Replace Boleadoras

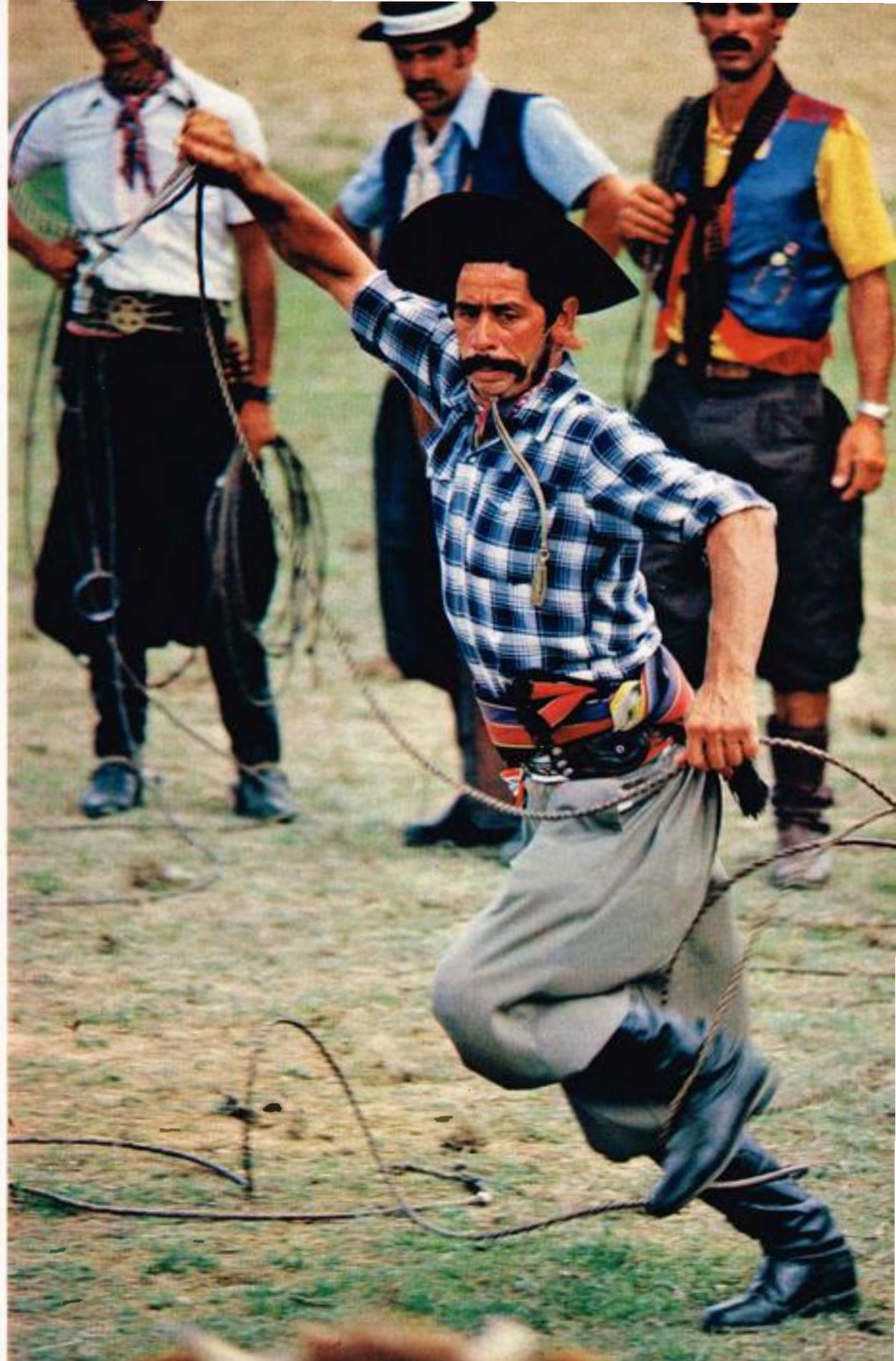
A molten red sun was rising off the flat horizon of the grassland. The riders passed in shadows across its face and vanished into the mist, like phantoms of all their gaucho forebears who had ridden out onto the rolling plain.

Victor and I followed them at a trot. The sun was burning off the mist to reveal a sparkling winter morning. Black-and-white lapwings swooped over our heads. Hawks perched on fence posts and tiny white-collared owls eyed us gravely from the tall grass. Ostrichlike rheas fled with springy, high-stepping strides at our approach.

"A century ago," said Victor, "the pampa was filled with rheas. Gauchos on horseback caught them with *boleadoras* for their feathers. Now the hunting of rheas is forbidden, for there aren't many left."

Victor explained that the *boleadoras*, a symbol of the South American gaucho, were round stones wrapped in leather and attached to three long rawhide thongs. They were whirled about a gaucho's head, and when thrown, tripped up the legs of rheas, wild horses, and even wild cows that gauchos once killed by the thousands for their hides. "Today," he said, "they are usually only ornaments in a gaucho's dress-up costume. The lasso has taken their place."

The grassland that lay before us was overwhelming in its immensity, an unending



**Explosion of horsepower** sends a gaucho flying during a bronco-busting contest (right). The distinguishing marks of his breed, both at this rodeo in Bagé and at work on the range, are the bombachas, or baggy trousers, leather apron, broad-brimmed hat, and spurs, here being lashed to his boots (below). Once gauchos rode barefoot, holding stirrups between the toes.



ocean of grass stretching farther than the eye could see. Neither hill nor stone formation rose to break the distant horizon. The old-timers claim they found their way across the grassland not only by the Southern Cross but also by the winds. Hot equatorial wind came from the north, dusty wind from the west, high wind from the east, and cold wind from the south. Now, they said, broken up as it is by fences and pastures, the plain could be navigated by anyone.

I wondered about that as we passed into a pasture encompassing a thousand acres.

The gauchos were rounding up cattle for branding, castrating, and dehorning. The horsemen were tiny figures in the distance, their yips and shouts faint to our ears. We broke into the ground-eating lope for which the short-coupled criollo horse of South America is famous.

Soon we were in the midst of furious activity, helping the gauchos cut out a portion of the herd and drive it to a corner of the pasture. The gauchos were a blur of bright sashes and bandannas and striped outer pants that served as chaps. I marveled at their

horsemanship. Man and horse seemed fused into one. Twirling their nimble mounts to right and left, they seemed to anticipate every move the herd would make.

But there were incidents. Once a dozen cows and calves bolted away in a dash for freedom. In an instant Varjona and another young gaucho were after them. Varjona reached the stampeding animals first and headed them off in a way I never expected. Instead of circling the bunch, Varjona rammed his horse at full speed into the leader of the runaways. The impact caught the

cow at shoulder height, and it flew into the air in a near somersault. The runaways floundered to a stop and began milling about. With the dazed cow following behind, they were soon on their way back to the herd.

I asked Varjona where he had learned the trick of ramming. "From my grandfather," he said. "It is rarely done now. It is dangerous. If you miss by a hair, then you and your horse will be the ones who will go down." He shrugged. "But I am a gaucho, and danger is part of a gaucho's life."

I asked him whether he had ever wanted to be anything but a gaucho. He shook his head emphatically. "Once a friend of mine went to the city, to Buenos Aires, because a gaucho is supposed to be something special there. They admired him, all right, but when it came to getting a job, they gave him one washing dishes. Can you imagine! Women's work."

The branding and dehorning irons were immersed in a fire of cow chips and already red hot. Braided rawhide lassos were uncoiled and thrown. Unlike the American cowboy, who holds one loop in his throwing hand, the gaucho grasps several coils, the end tied to an iron ring behind his saddle. As thrown in this gaucho way, the lasso can snake out for as much as ten yards with great accuracy.

One by one the calves were caught, hauled to the fire, and thrown down. Their ears were punched with marks to designate the year of their birth, and their budding horns were burned out with a straight iron. Bull calves were castrated neatly by two gauchos who handled their *facóns* as skillfully as scalpels.

So it went, and in the hours of hard riding I learned the practicality of a gaucho saddle. It has neither horn nor cantle, but I was locked firmly into the thick sheepskin fleece. When we returned to the ranch, I was not saddlesore in the least.

I wondered if the same were true of my horse, so I watched carefully as Meza, a gaucho with a saturnine face, unsaddled him. It was a complicated procedure.

"The fleece goes on top," he said. "We call it a *cojinillo*. It is to protect the rider. The rest of the gear protects the horse." He peeled off the layers: A piece of soft leather called *correón* to which narrow metal stirrups are attached; two bars of leather called *bastos*, making up a saddle frame that rests on each side of a horse's backbone; a supple square of cowhide called a *carona* that prevents the saddle frame from hurting a horse's back; a *matra*, a kind of blanket of rough woven

wool; and finally the *sudadera*, a waterproof sweat pad next to the horse's moist hide.

I told Meza that I was impressed with the care taken to protect a horse from bruising. "A gaucho without a sound horse is no gaucho at all," he said. "We say only three things are sacred to a gaucho. His horse, which is his freedom from the earth. His *facón*, which is his companion and protector in a fight. And his *china*, his woman."

I was tempted to ask him which came first in a gaucho's life, but decided that that question had already been answered.

#### Horse Training Begins Early

One day I watched the gauchos bring in the fresh mounts they would use for the next week's riding. The herds revealed the gaucho penchant for horses matching in color—bays, blacks, and sorrels. Whites and grays were notably absent.

Gregorio Aguirre, the *domador*, or horse trainer, explained how he trains horses suitable for gauchos. Since a horse ranks first in gaucho priorities, it is a delicate process. "When a foal is two months old," he said, "some domadores will keep it tied to a post near where they live, so that it becomes accustomed to man. Every day, it will be stroked by hand for hours on end. Our forebears learned this lesson from the Indians, to gentle a horse forever with kindness instead of brutality."

Aguirre said that when the horse is a year old, it is turned out to pasture again. When it is three, it is brought in and tied halter to halter to a trained horse until it knows what is expected of it. He said he knew one domador who always dried the young horse with his own shirt, so that the animal becomes familiar with the trainer's scent. "Then the horse is mounted for the first time," Aguirre said. "It may buck then, but rarely if ever after. A horse that bucks is a disgrace to its trainer."

I was already familiar with how sacred a gaucho's *facón* is. On my first visit to a South American estancia, I had wandered down

*Generation to generation, gauchos such as 65-year-old Simón Gaspar have lived sparsely in such dwellings as this dirt-floored adobe house provided for him by his employers. Foreman of a remote section of a large estancia near Salta, Argentina, Gaspar bounces his great-grandson.*





*Islands of luxury in a prairie sea, houses built by wealthy 19th-century cattlemen often rivaled Mediterranean villas in elegance. Since 1900, however, most pampa estates*

*have been subdivided. Estancia La Margarita (above), a 5,000-acre Argentine cattle ranch near San Miguel del Monte, was once part of a 250,000-acre property.*

**Market-bound steers** raise a cloud of dust on a cattle drive in Corrientes Province. Some 15 million head a year are slaughtered in Argentina, the leader in South American beef exports. Only cooked or canned meat may be shipped to the United States, however, since Argentine herds suffer outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease. To the original stock of Spanish cattle, ranchers here have added new breeds such as Hereford, Aberdeen Angus, zebu, and Santa Gertrudis.



with the ranch foreman to the gauchos' row of little living quarters. It had been a long day, and the weary gauchos were gathered in a circle outside, sipping their maté from gourds with metal straws called *bombillas*. One gaucho's *facón* was resting on a log beside him.

I asked the foreman if I could inspect the *facón*. Obliging, he knelt and reached out for it. In an instant the figures of the gauchos became taut, their tension almost palpable. The foreman's hand stopped in midair. He murmured, "*¿Permiso?*" The gaucho whose *facón* it was considered for a moment and then nodded. When the *facón* was handed to me, I drew the long blade from its scabbard, tested its razor-sharp edges, and quickly replaced it.

As we were walking away, the foreman

said with chagrin, "That was stupid of me. I just forgot. It is forbidden ever to touch a gaucho's *facón*."

Later I was to learn that the *facón* is no more an ornament than the U. S. cowboy's pistol was in the lawless days of the West. At a lonely crossroads near Luján in Argentina, I went to a *boliche*, a store that is the gaucho equivalent of a saloon.

The *boliche* was a tiny, century-old structure with hitching rails outside. Its gloomy interior was lighted by a lone kerosene lantern, revealing sagging floors, a scarred wooden bar, and crude wooden tables. There were two gauchos inside, drinking raw gin and playing a card game called *truco*. They accepted my presence with distance, but they seemed peaceful enough despite the ever present knives stuck under

their belts. The bartender, a formidable woman named María Natividad, informed me otherwise.

"You can finish your drink," she said in a low voice, "but it would not be advisable to be here when the others come. It's Saturday night, you know." She nodded at the hulking back of one of the gauchos at the card table. "And he is seeking revenge."

#### A Lesson in Knife Fighting

An *estanciero*, a ranch owner, filled in the pieces of the puzzle for me that evening. Saturday night was when the gauchos gathered after the week's work. The *boliche* was like their private club, and they resented strangers. The hulking gaucho had had a brother who was disemboweled in a knife fight over a girl. I had been wise to leave.

In these days of heavy penalties, killings are rare. Gaucho combatants will settle most often for drawn blood. Still, killings do occur and the rule of self-defense still holds. My *estanciero* friend took me to an old gaucho with a long history of killing, warning me that he rarely spoke to anyone, much less a gringo. But luck was with me.

After sharing maté from the same gourd, he told me: "When there is surely to be a fight, you cannot hesitate. In the same movement, you must draw your *facón* and slash your enemy's face to show that you mean business. If it does not end there, you must fight to kill. Then your knife must wave in your hand like a snake. And when you strike, it must be like a snake—once, and mortal."

Though many of the duels seem to be over



women, paradoxically a gaucho's china is rarely seen in public. Her role is confined to household, cooking, and children.

At the estancias I visited, I had watched the chinas sweeping out living quarters with great gusto and washing clothes in a stone tub. But when I tried to approach them, they fled inside and closed the door.

In the hinterland, however, I stopped at a remote *puesto*, a sort of line camp situated at the far reaches of vast range holdings—so isolated that the preferred language is Indian Guaraní rather than Spanish. There a gaucho named Baez was entrusted with the task of keeping watch on cattle, particularly the ones who needed treatment after eating toxic species of plants.

I talked with his wife, Catalina, a lively young woman with dancing black eyes, about a gaucho china's day, and she said, "Cook, sweep, wash clothes, take care of the garden, take care of my children. That is my day, every day."

She said the little family had not been to a town in many years. "In fact, I have never been to a church."

"Not even for your wedding?"

"Weddings are for rich people," she said. "Anyway, many gaucho women do not get married to their men." She laughed at my puzzlement. "If I were married, and he," she said, pointing to her husband, "turned out to be lazy or a drunkard or a wanderer, I would not be free to leave him."

At Estancia Aguay, I told Mary Ann Carrillo, Victor's wife, about my conversation. "It is an old, old thing," she said. "In the days before the pampa was settled, the gaucho was a nomad, usually running from the law. He had no time for things like marriage and children. The women preferred it that way. They value their freedom."

I saw examples of the independence of gaucho women in the fastnesses of the Andes foothills in the northwestern Argentine province of Salta. Here estanciero Marco Aurelio Campos explained to me that Salta horsewomen are known as *amazonas* or

*gauchas*. It is said that ever since they fought alongside the gauchos in the 1800s for Argentina's independence from Spain, they have shared equal standing with men. In this region of thorny underbrush, where saddles are fitted with flaring, protective batwings of stiff leather called *guardamontes*, the gauchas are regarded as fine horsewomen. To see them riding over a brutal mountain, clad in low-crowned black hats and the brilliant red-and-black ponchos of Salta, is a sight not easily forgotten.

Gauchas are not to be found in many other places, and in other countries of South America gauchos themselves do not quite fit the rugged image the Argentines have created. They are known by different names from country to country. In Argentina and neighboring Uruguay, both working horsemen and ranch owners are called gauchos. But in Chile a cowhand is a *huaso*, or "man of the country," and in Venezuela and Colombia, a *llanero*, or "plainsman." In the state of Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil, he is called *gaúcho*, and revels in a dangerous form of rodeo called *jineteada*.

And in Paraguay a gaucho is usually called a *vaquero*. Unlike Argentina, where gauchos consider planting women's work, in Paraguay a gaucho is also a farmer. Nearly every gaucho with a family has his little garden of corn, rice, and beans. At one estancia near Asunción I talked to a Paraguayan gaucho in straw hat and jeans about the Argentine distinction. "That is foolish," he said. "A man's duty is to feed his family." He explained that he made about \$50 a month, and though he was provided with some food staples, it was not enough.

#### Tourist Items Reflect Gaucho Myth

Paraguayan ranch owner Frederico Robinson, a contained, London-born man with a weathered face and a crisp British accent, approved of the Paraguayan gaucho's practical interest in farming. "The Paraguayan gaucho is not romanticized like the gaucho of Argentina. The Argentines," Robinson

*Quick as a polka*, the chamamé is performed in Ituzaingó by a dance club organized to preserve gaucho music. Dancing at village festivals offers gaucho women a rare break from drudgery. Many, fearing disastrous marriages, prefer the independence of common-law relationships.

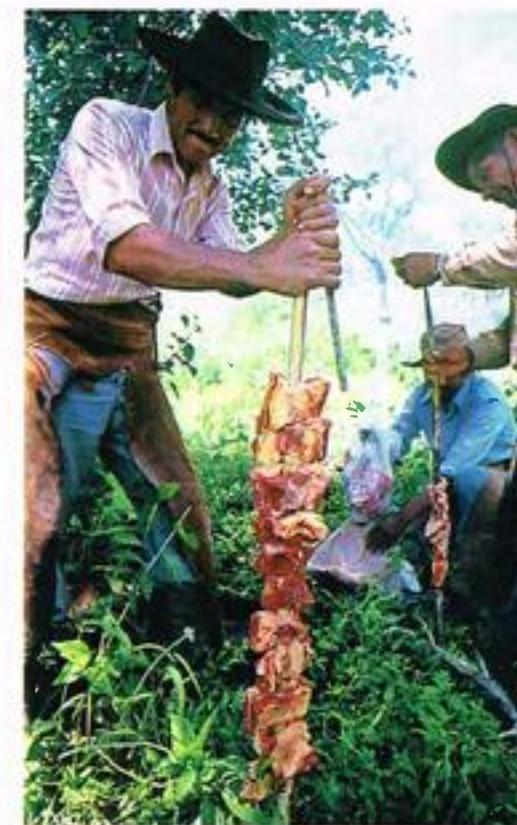


*In or out of the saddle, gauchos live in a male world. A group of Paraguayan cowhands, called vaqueros, take a break after lunch on a bunkhouse porch at Estancia Villa Santa near*

*Concepción. Around them hang parts of their saddle gear, including the sheepskin fleece, at left, that allows them to ride comfortably for hours. At Estancia Los Manantiales, Miguel Angel Bonze (lower left) makes leather straps for his saddle, while Ramón Herebio (upper left) plays a game of checkers with markers sliced from a bicycle inner tube.*



**Heads or tails** are both fair game when gauchos throw a steer (left) to search it for ticks and read its age by its teeth. Gauchos must work hard on this 90,000-acre ranch near Salta to keep track of some 3,000 branded cattle. At midday, foreman Fernando Galeano (below) makes an asado, or barbecue, of beef on a stick.



said, "have laid a cloak of sentimentality over their gauchos."

In sophisticated Buenos Aires, capital of Argentina, I saw how deeply the gaucho folk hero is embedded in the national character. The fashionable shops along Avenida Florida are filled with boleadoras, souvenir silver spurs with outsize rowels, bright ponchos, and wood carvings, books, and paintings portraying the gaucho. Every *porteño*, citizen of Buenos Aires, seems to be a fierce and possessive authority on things gaucho. The word has even become incorporated into an act. When a *porteño* seeks a favor from a friend, he will say, "*Hacéme una ganchada*. Do me a good turn."

It was not always so.

"There was a time when the gaucho was regarded as nothing more than a renegade and outlaw," Juan José Güiraldes told me in his colonial manor house near San Antonio de Areco in Buenos Aires Province. A descendant of the landowning aristocracy, he nevertheless refers to himself as a gaucho. He wears the typical gaucho dress costume of his province—short, black embroidered coat of fine wool, flared pants called *bombachas*, and high leather boots.

The era he was referring to began more than two centuries ago, when outlaws forced to flee from Buenos Aires went to the open grassland. Intermixing with Puelche, Araucanian, and Charrua Indians, they learned their amazing skill in capturing and

training the wild horses that were descended from Spanish conquistadores' runaway mounts in the 1500s. These were the rootstock of the criollo horse of South America.

"In the early 1800s," Güiraldes said, "two things happened to transform the gaucho from outlaw to hero. Argentina decided to throw off the yoke of colony to Spain, and military leaders like José de San Martín and Martín Miguel de Güemes saw the potential of a ferocious mounted guerrilla force in the gauchos. They served in our War of Independence. They were pitiless in battle, indifferent to suffering, and had huge powers of endurance. All they needed to survive were a horse, a knife, and a lance."

The third element in the transformation

of gaucho into hero was an epic poem, *The Gaucho Martín Fierro*, written in 1872 by José Hernández.

*A son am I of the rolling plain  
A gaucho born and bred. . . .  
And this is my pride: to live as free  
As the bird that cleaves the sky. . . .*

Such unforgettable lines sped through the country. "Hernández provided a code of conduct for a young nation seeking an identity," Güiraldes said. "*Martín Fierro* embodied the independent spirit and rough virtues that Argentines most admired."

My host's uncle, Ricardo Güiraldes, also celebrated the gaucho character in his novel *Don Segundo Sombra* in 1926. But by that



**Bone-thin calves** flee before a drive to fresh grazing grass—and a fattening life—at Los Manantiales. Crossbreeds of zebu and Brahman cattle are favorites in subtropical Paraguay.

time the free-roaming life of the Argentine gaucho had changed. The noble and the wealthy had seen the lucrative potential of raising imported cattle and wheat on the pampa. The unpeopled plains had been divided up, and gauchos had attached themselves to estancias as herders of cattle and defenders against Indian attacks.

With the expansion of cattle raising in South America, the gaucho and his counterparts flourished not only in Argentina and Uruguay, but also in Peru, Chile, Bolivia,

Colombia, Venezuela, Paraguay, and the southern regions of Brazil. At the same time, the classic Spanish and Indian bloodline of the gaucho underwent a change.

“With the big European immigration around the turn of the century,” blood-horse raiser Marcelo de Coud told me at his estancia in the pampa near Buenos Aires, “Scots, Irish, English, Italians, and Basques became gauchos. The Basques were the most readily accepted of all. They were austere, strong in body and mind, and good with

horses—all qualities that the gaucho admired. The Basques had a special name. They were called *acriollado*—one of us.”

Human bloodlines are not the only ones that have changed on the pampa. The original criollo descendant of Spanish cattle has been joined by shorthorn, Aberdeen Angus, Hereford, Holando-Argentino, Brahman, zebu, and Charolais. The latest breed, the Santa Gertrudis, was introduced by the King Ranch of Texas, one of the world’s largest ranching networks.

“Our Santa Gertrudis was developed in Texas to produce a huge beef animal resistant to heat and disease,” said Argentine-born Abbott Reynal in Buenos Aires. The introduction was successful not only at the King Ranch’s sprawling estancias in Argentina but also in Rio Grande do Sul of Brazil.

King Ranch has also introduced the American quarter horse to South America, crossbreeding with the native criollo horse. “The criollo that Argentine ranchers breed is quite small,” Señor Reynal said. “But its qualities of endurance crossed with the quarter horse provide a bigger and stronger animal for the gaucho.”

#### Folkways May Be Vanishing

Change has come also to the institution of gaucho song and dance, which has disappeared or become much altered in other South American countries such as Brazil, where the samba rules. Even in Argentina the tradition has begun to fade, and the humid Argentine pampa is one of the last strongholds of old gaucho music.

There, in a barn filled with the savory scents of barbecued lamb stretched out on a crosslike frame of branches, I watched gauchos in a festival of song and dance. Though the wandering gauchos of times before danced alone for their pleasure, modern-day gauchos prefer dancing with their women. I watched as black-clad gauchos and chinas in wide red skirts performed such passionate courting dances as the *gato*, full of whirling turns and staccato heel-tapping confrontations.

El Gordo, a gaucho with a broad impassive face, sang a shouting song called “Una Milonga,” describing the lonely gaucho life of old. Another gaucho clad in black sang a counterpoint. Since the song was filled with archaic idioms, I asked him to tell me of what he had sung.

“It is a lament,” he said, and then told of a gaucho warrior who fought in the Desert War of 1878-80 against mounted Indians

with their streaming black hair, fearsome lances, and deadly boleadoras. After the war, the gaucho chanced upon a deserted village and laments the disappearance of the last fierce adversary he would know—the Indian. “You see,” a gaucho said, “after the Indians, the gaucho had no more wars to fight. Peace lay heavily on his heart.”

He was wrong about that. Unknown to the gaucho, because it was subtle and insidious, the most threatening adversary of all was undermining his way of life.

#### Roads Intrude on Pampa Life

In the humid pampa generations of equal family inheritance and division of land have reduced the average estancia to less than 2,000 acres. Gone is the open pampa where Martín Fierro roamed “free as the bird that cleaves the sky.” It is now crisscrossed with fences.

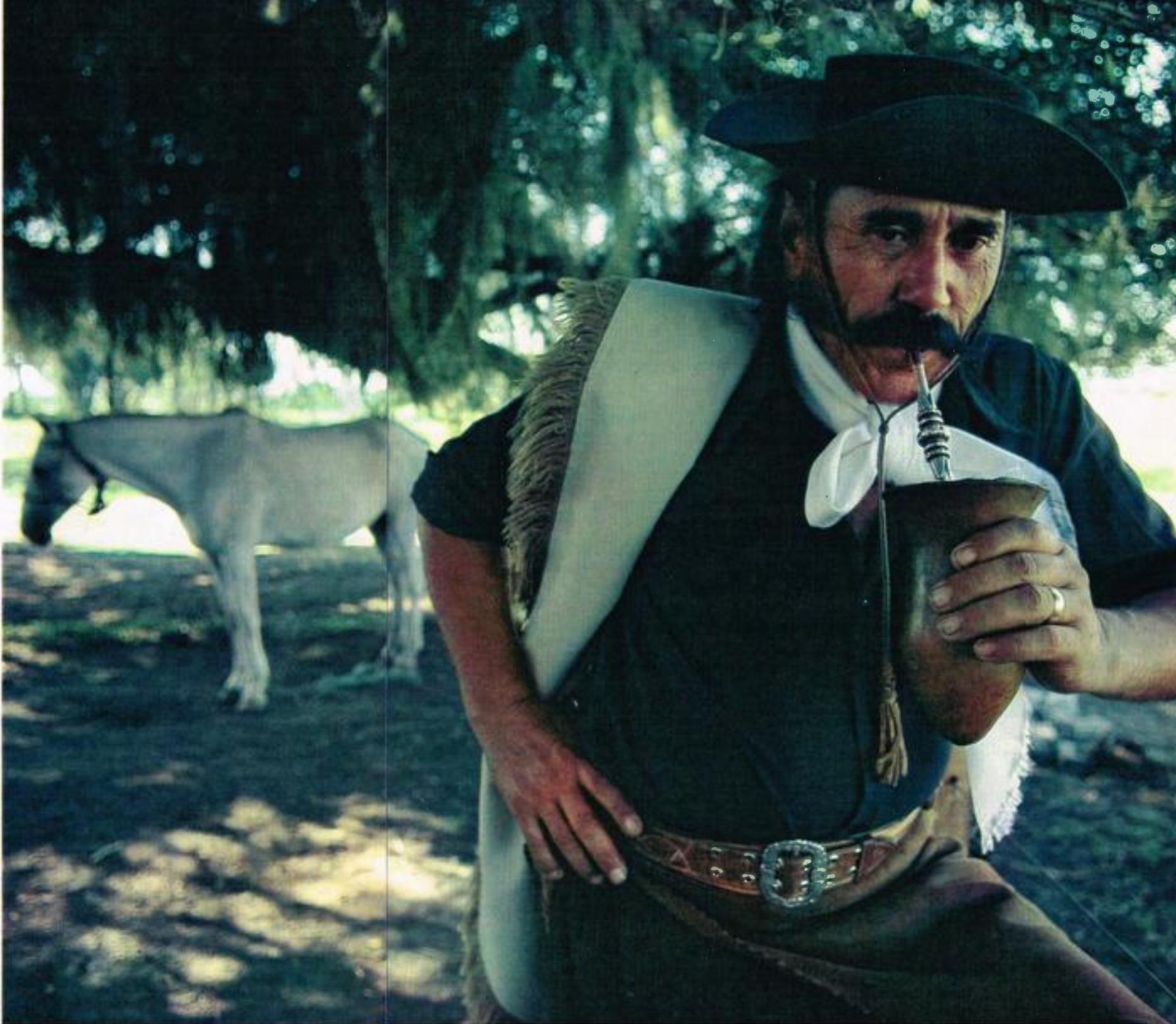
The gaucho’s last bastion is the Argentine interior, where estancias can still encompass 100,000 acres or more, and modern ways and people are still far away. But paved roads are already beginning to penetrate the vast grasslands.

“The beginning of the end,” ranch owner José Antonio Ansola told me in Corrientes Province. “When the roads are here, the old gaucho way of life will be gone. No longer can we live untouched by the corruption of outside influences.”

In the Argentine manner, Don José is another man who describes himself as a gaucho. Basque by heritage, his face is creased with age and a lifetime of exposure to sun and wind. His attire is out of the past—a long gray cape, elaborate belt of inlaid silver, and high leather boots that cup over his knees. Among the last of a breed, he rides with his gauchos on trail drives lasting for weeks, sleeping on the ground and living on maté and barbecued meat cooked over cow chips on the nearly woodless pampa.

“All this must change when the outsiders come with all their modern ways,” he said with an overpowering sadness in his eyes. “Adiós, gaucho.”

There was nothing I could say to bring solace to him. But to myself, I thought: *Here at least, in this land of lonely plains and few people, it has managed to hold on longer than most good things.* □



**Between fact and fiction,** gaucho Sady Cardozo works both as a ranch hand and as a greeter of tourists at

*Pôrto Alegre, Brazil. Braced by hot maté, the bitter herb tea gauchos have savored for two centuries, he stands midway between two worlds: the hard life of the gaucho cowhand and the romantic life of the gaucho myth.*

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