

ARGENTINA: Land Of

Once outnumbering whites five to one, blacks were absorbed and inundated by massive immigration

By Era Bell Thompson



Sergio Montero, 50, and wife Orfilia, 45, call their family good example of country's vanishing blacks. African-Indian-Italian-mixed parents classify daughters (l. to r.): Leticia, 25, black; Mirta (Pepper), 23, mulatto; Celina, 15, white. Sixth generation of Monteros in Argentina, they consider selves Negroes. Leticia is an assistant book-keeper and model. Celina attends secondary school. Father, who holds down two driving jobs, says Pepper "just eats and sleeps." All three girls date white boys.



"If you are looking for black people, why," they asked helpfully, "did you come to Argentina? Why don't you go to Brazil?"

Well, I had been to Brazil (*EBONY* July, September 1965), the "most mulatto" nation in South America, hopefully in the process of becoming white through amalgamation. Now I was in Argentina where massive European immigration was the catalyst that converted an erstwhile mixed-blood people into the whitest nation on the continent.

I had read that there were no more blacks in that Spanish-speaking country. But I had also heard rumors of a small black colony in Buenos Aires, the capital. So what happened to Argentina's involuntary immigrants, those African slaves and their mulatto descendants who once outnumbered whites five to one, and who were for 250 years "an important element" in the total populations which is now 97 percent white? Had they been entirely absorbed by, or simply inundated in successive waves of the new Argentines?

Last May, *EBONY* sent me to that sprawling cattle country in search of the remnants of a race that was. And to see what kind of society has evolved as the dominant group.

What I found was not a viable, but a vanishing black people: relatively few in numbers, relatively free of racial discrimination and relatively content. Summarized one gentleman, "If there were more of us, perhaps it would be different."

The white Argentine, who is overwhelmingly of Italian and Spanish descent, doubts there ever were many blacks in their section of the old Rio de la Plata viceroyalty and are unaware of those still within their midst. The ranks of the few slaves channeled into the port of Buenos

Aires, they believe, were decimated largely by disease and war. The survivors who did not emigrate to neighboring countries were absorbed by the mestizos.

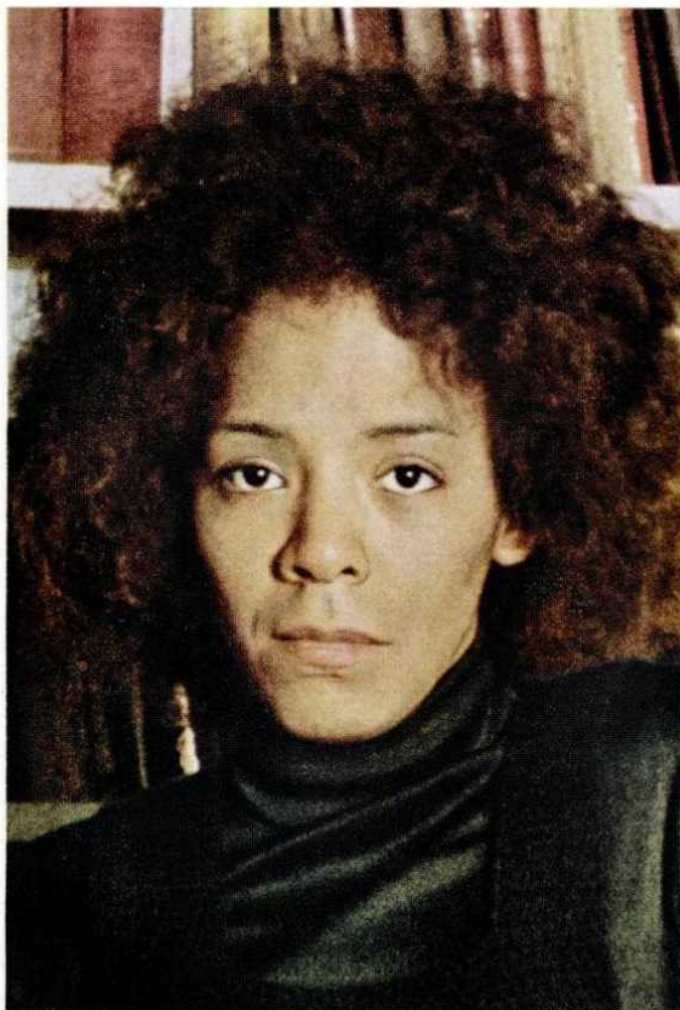
The question of what happened to Argentine blacks is not a new one. Ysabel P. Rennie, author of the book, *The Argentine Republic*, calls it "one of the most intriguing riddles of Argentine history." In his book, *Argentina, a City and a Nation*, James R. Scobie says "the disappearance of the Negro from the Argentine scene has puzzled demographers far more than the vanishing Indian."

When Josephine Baker visited the country during Juan Peron's first term as president, the entertainer asked Dr. Ramon Carrillo, mulatto minister of public health, "Where are the Negroes?"

"There are only two," he laughingly replied. "You and I."

My first impressions of Buenos Aires were: the man was right. In Buenos Aires, the city, and Buenos Aires province, where the preponderance of the entire population is found, Afro-Argentines, especially the fair-skinned ones, are not easily distinguishable from Latin-type whites. And then there is a matter of definitions. The terms Negro and mulatto are still used, but with slightly different connotations. Negro (small 'n') is the Spanish word for black. It took me some time to get used to hearing *négro* sprinkled throughout conversations that had nothing to do with race. Mulatto (or *moreno*) is an African-Spanish mixture, as differentiated from *mestizo*, which technically means only Spanish-Indian, but more often than Argentines care to admit, includes an admixture of black blood. *Zambo* (not *Sambo*) means African-Indian, but the term—if not the practice which produced it—has been discon-

The Vanishing Blacks



Map shows size (1 million square miles), location (10½ jet hours from New York) of white Argentina, noted cattle-raising country. Federal capital, Buenos Aires was once an important slave port of entry.

continued, as have the names of two social classes: the gaucho, now cowboy, and *cabecitas negras*, or little black heads, as people fresh in from the provinces were once called. A creole is an Argentine-born white.

When I posed Josephine Baker's question, the average creole could recall only a doorman here or a porter there. Brown people who were not mestizos were Brazilian tourists. A secretary in a government office said she was 16 before she saw a black man. Fortunately, I did not have to wait that long.

Aside from three or four settlements of recently arrived Cape Verdians, no organized black colonies have survived. Lost somewhere in the three percent of the Argentine population classified as mestizo, were officially 2,827 "Africans," based on the 1960 total census of 20 million. The projected number for 1971 was 0.01 per cent of the current 24 million population, a slight but significant drop. Individual estimates, however, vary upwards to 10,000, not counting those inextricably mixed with the dark-skinned people in the provinces. "If all Argentines with black blood were counted," said journalist Narciso Binayan Carmona, "there would be two or three million."

The subject of race in that proudly white nation, is a sensitive one. After four generations of miscegenation, who can say who is black or how pure is white; whether or not first president Bernardino Rivadavia was really a mulatto, or a victim of political smear? Argentines who come to the United States sometimes find that all of those years of blood diluting and absorbing have been in vain. In California, where there are many Chicanos, and in New York where the Puerto Rican community is large, "Argentines are lumped with all of the rest of the Spanish-



Little Chapel of the Negro, in Chascomus, was built by slave Soler Alsina "after 1836." Guillermina Eloisa Gonzales de Luis, 79, his great granddaughter, is caretaker. On altar (below) is statue of Black Virgin, brought from Africa 200 years ago. Chapel was dedicated as public monument in 1950. Once large black community, Chascomus has less than 50 blacks, is noted for annual fishing contest in lagoon—and chapel.



ARGENTINA *Continued*

speaking peoples," a student confided. "Even though we are white."

The descendants of African slaves are not the only Africans in Argentina. There are three girls from Upper Volta working in a restaurant run by French missionaries in Lujan and 3,000 or more Cape Verde Islanders from Portuguese West Africa, most of whom are seamen and citizens of their adopted country. There are no African students, but the government has invited eight African UN Ambassadors to visit the land. Object, trade.

Other foreign blacks include Haitians, North Americans and an undetermined number of emigrants from border countries. Haiti has the only black embassy in Buenos Aires. Half a dozen families live in the capital and there are 30 Haitian students studying in Cordoba. Says Ambassador Marcel Charles Antoine, "We are very adaptable. All of the Haitians here are making good."

Ex-boxer Calvin Respress went to Argentina 50 years ago to train Louis Firpo, "Mad Bull of the Pampas." He married an Argentine white woman and became a "professor of scientific boxing" and a proponent of physical fitness. At 81, he still makes house calls. Mr. Respress has

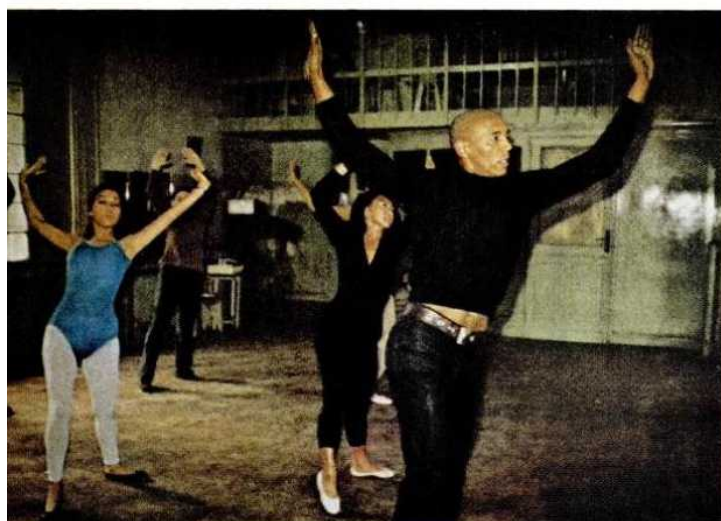
Painting of black soldier decorates wall of El Chaleco Colorado where Uruguayan Miguel Angel Herrera Edad, 21, is only black entertainer in club once famous for red-costumed black employees, colonial atmosphere. Many unskilled blacks from Uruguay come to Argentina to find work.



Senior buyer for duPont, C. W. Palaci King, 56, joins wife Elsa, daughter Ada, 16, in front of attractive suburban home. Ex-railroad man has been in importing division 13 years. Firm has black engineer.



Designer of costumes for theaters and dressmakers, Alecia Juarez, 34, works and lives in high-rise apartment with sons Ramon Camilo 4, Javier Martin, 6. Her husband is Italian, father heads annual candombe fete.



Choreographer Jorge Zombrano, 30, instructs Afro-jazz class at Olga Kirova's dance studio. Many of students are wives from Embassy row. Half-sister Susanna Isabel Laccone, 24, is only black girl in chorus line at Theater Maipu. A professional dancer at 15, Zombrano refused offer to travel with troupe, says "I wanted to make it at home."



ARGENTINA *Continued*

retained his U. S. citizenship and hopes to die in Chicago, where he has relatives. His son Vernon has become a U. S. citizen, but a daughter, who is a supervising nurse at a navy hospital, and an invalid son, have not. Besides the Respresses, the only other known U. S. citizens are Tyrone Kemp, assistant cultural affairs officer at the American Embassy, and his family.

White Argentines are quick to point out that there is no racial discrimination in their country. Many, but not all, blacks agree. There was the young man who was not refused, but discouraged from enrolling in a military school, a kindergarten in an upper middle-class neighborhood that turned down a mulatto tot and the white porter at the Mau Mau club who refused to admit a black model. The highest ranking government employe is a male secretary. A movie, *The True Story of the Negro Race in America*, recently upset black and white pro-North Americans as much as the showing of *The Comedians* incensed the Haitian Ambassador.

"As far as I am concerned personally," said C. W. Palaci King, "I

have experienced no racial discrimination or segregation either in my work or in our social life. Indians," he emphasized, and was not the first to do so, "are the only ones with such a problem, and there is a movement to improve their conditions."

"I have no problems here with employment or in my social life," declared Tomas Platero IV, "but I can feel race in the air, as this is a white country and I am a Negro. When I was a child in school, the children would say, 'Negro Platero, go away!'"

Mrs. Celina Calaza de MacLean, white director of Open Door, a U. S. student exchange program operating in Latin America, says, "Yes, there is racial discrimination here." Since 1966 she has brought five black youths to Argentina. "I approach an average of three families before finding one that will accept them into their homes," she said. One boy did not want to leave the country when his 30 months were up. "Here," he told her, "I am more comfortable." Ironically, a white boy asked to stay with a black family in the States and "loved it."

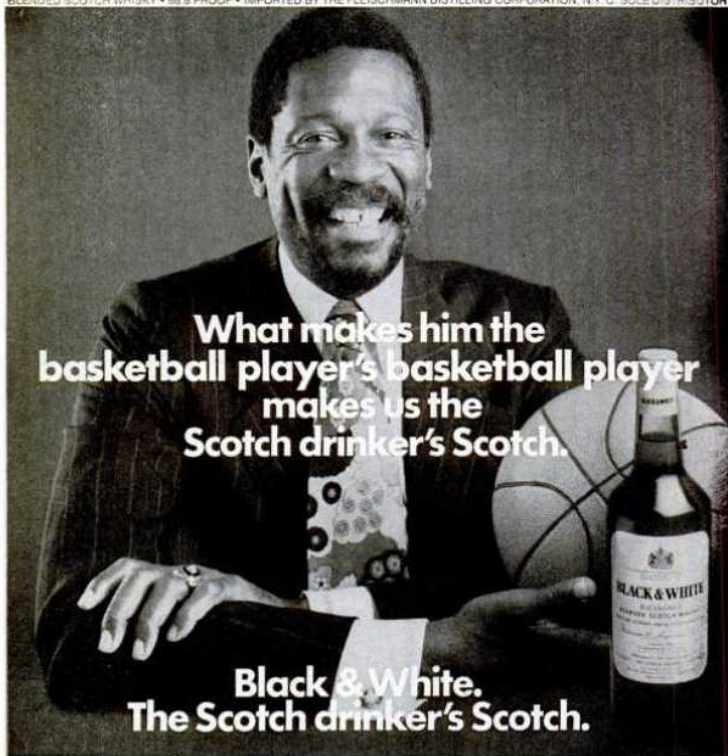
The biggest problem Calvin Respress has to contend with is how not to attend all of the social events to which he is invited, but son Vernon, a foreman at a shipbuilding company and secretary for the La Plata



Singer-actress Carmen Platero Saravi, 39, accompanied only by two guitarists, performs on stark stage at historic Cortada Theater in dramatic effort to revive tango music. Wife of Irish journalist plays on roof of apartment building (right) with children Juan, 2; Jose, 3; Facundo, 4; Marie, 5. Says, "People often mistake me for Spanish."



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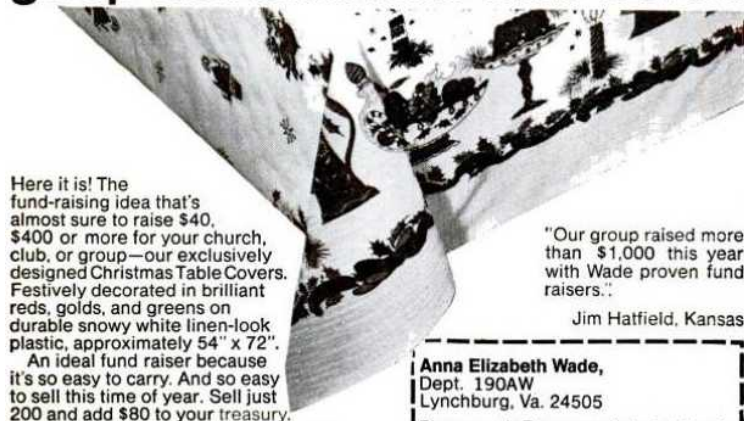
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Ex-U.S. boxer Calvin Respress, 81, wife Marie, 68, daughter Gloria, 46, a nurse, live with invalid son and adopted Indian girl, 13, at family home in La Plata. Son Vernon, 48, and Chilean wife Delia (right) live nearby. He is shipbuilding foreman. They have two children.



ARGENTINA *Continued*

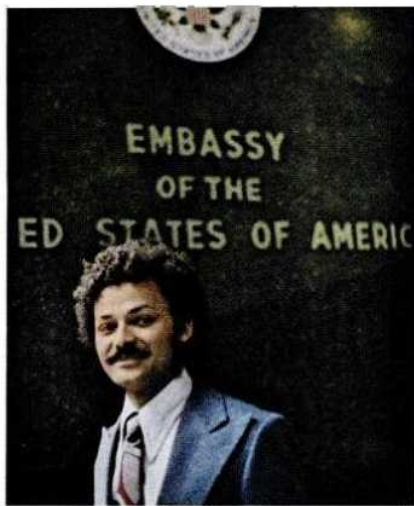
city deputies, finds that fellow workers resent a black man having two jobs and being promoted.

World-famous ukulele and guitar artist Oscar Aleman is accepted everywhere because he is a celebrity. "With another black man," he said, "it might be different." His Spanish wife, Marie, told of a young nephew just returned from a visit to the States. He kissed her but refused to kiss Oscar. "I got so mad," she recalled, "that I ran him and his mother out of the house before dinner." Son of a Spanish father and an Indian mother, Mr. Aleman calls himself a Negro. "Some of my six brothers are even darker than I," he smiled. "We think there was a black man somewhere."

Hugo Juerrero Martinheitz is a popular midnight disk jockey from Peru. The son of mestizo-West Indian parents, he believes racial problems exist in all Latin American countries. "It is sometimes hidden," he added, "but it is there." When fans call in objecting to "Negro music" being played, tell him he is "Negro and also Jewish," he replies: "I am black and I cannot hide it,



Top black model Alaa Oyanella, 23, poses in studio of photographer Sylvia Lappas for Eveready battery ad. She is paid \$150 (U.S.) for each picture used. Uruguayan-born model has appeared in TV soap operas and plays. Brother is also model.



U.S. Embassy assistant cultural affairs officer Tyrone Kemp, 37, of New York, speaks fluent Spanish. Only black staffer at Embassy, he went to Argentina 18 months ago with wife Meatta, who is of Liberian-Lebanese ancestry, and their two children.

Haitian Ambassador Marcel Charles Antoine, 26-year veteran diplomat, and son cultural attache Jean Claude, 28, head only black Embassy in Argentina. Serving his second term in Buenos Aires, Ambassador Antoine says, "I am diplomatically well received."



but there are whites who cannot hide their blackness."

The ranks of the Afro-Argentines may be dwindling but not pride in their heritage. This is surprisingly true of the mulattos whose social mobility has brought them a shade away from absorption.

The Sergio Monteros, who have a six-generation history of black-white-red miscegenation, believe their family to be an excellent example of how the black race in Argentina is vanishing. Their three attractive daughters range from black to white, with an Afro-haired mulatto in between. So great are the physical differences among the girls that people refuse to believe they are sisters. The Monteros, however, consider themselves Negroes and have a shelf full of books on race and a stack of Aretha Franklin, Roberta Flack, Ike and Tina records to prove it.

Tomas Platero, poet, librarian and member of an old mulatto family, spent five months in West Africa in 1968 as Argentina's official representative to a cultural exposition. He is eager for a return trip. "Over there," he enthused in halting English, "Afri-



Black manikin in window of Modart men's fashion shop, is one of several mostly male manikins in country that has few blacks. "Until the subject was brought up," said an Argentine woman, "I never saw black people in the streets."

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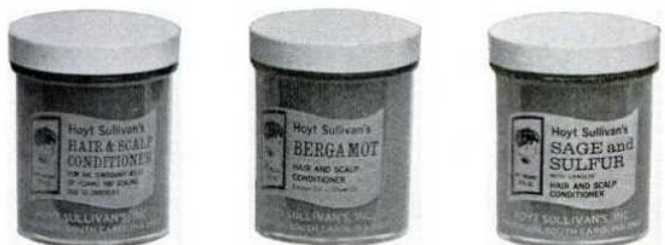
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Highest ranking black in government is Carlos Boot, 32. He began as bell boy in Government House (Pink House) 16 years ago, has been secretary in protocol department 10 years.



Congress orderly Hector Nunez, 32, follows father in family tradition begun by Muratures four generations ago. Retired uncle Alejandro Murature was an orderly for 64 years.

ARGENTINA *Continued*

cans call me 'Brother.' They tell me I am not an Argentine, that Africa is my country. They say to me, 'Come back.'

Like the blood of the African slave, his contribution to Argentine society is minimized. Centuries of miscegenation may have lightened his genes, but some evidences of his culture, his cuisine and language, remain.

The Shiny Club, last of the African societies, was dissolved six months before I arrived, but former members get together for carnival and social affairs. One of several dance groups, The Morenos of Montserrat, hold an annual fiesta where costumed "gauchos and mulattos" recite and dance the African candombé.

The tango in Argentina refers more to the music than the dance. Whites say it originated with the gaucho. Blacks contend the gaucho inherited it from the African, that it evolved from their candombé. In her one-woman show at the Cortada Theater, Carmen Platero Saravai describes, in soulful song and commentary, how the tango was banned, later vindicated and why it should be revived.

White Mr. Carmona has a list of words whose meanings in African and Spanish are identical. He is trying to get a chapter



Oscar Aleman, 64, once world's greatest guitarist and ukulele artist, teaches students in home. He met first black Americans in Europe, led Josephine Baker band five years. Peruvian-born disc jockey Hugo Martinheitz, 48 (r.), conducts popular midnight radio show. Fans say his Spanish diction is "perfect."



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Cape Verde seamen, part of 3,000 Portuguese Africans in Argentina, gather in front of Society of Mutual Help, Dock Sud. Half are Argentine citizens.

ARGENTINA Continued

on black Argentine history into the public schools.

Mr. Aleman had told me that he and black American entertainers who visited his country, have a secret. I found out what he meant when I ate at a typical Argentine restaurant. Among such grilled animal "tid bits" as sweetbreads, kidneys and hog's breast, was a curly white item called *chinchulines*. I don't know what its equivalent is in any African language, but in the ghetto, we call it plain old chit'lins.

Interracial marriages continue with and without the blessings of white parents of bride or groom. In fact, such marriages are so commonplace that an article in the magazine CLARIN noted that Government House secretary Carlos Boot has a black wife. And in the San Telmo section of Buenos Aires, near the Boca (Little Italy), they tell me, there is much intermarrying between Cape Verdians and Genoese Italians—an extension of a practice begun by the Conquistadors, who mixed with first Indian, then slave women in the early history of the country.

Information about slavery in Argentina, which spanned three centuries, is sketchy, indeed. Research in libraries, supplemented by interviews with historians, sociologists and writers in Argentina, revealed the same tragic story of black bondage that took place elsewhere in the Americas. But with a different ending.

There is an old Stateside saying: "The Indian fought and fought and died, the Negro laughed and multiplied." In Argentina, the Negro also fought—and was nearly wiped out. Up North, blacks laughed, fought and have multiplied until their number today equals that of the entire population of Argentina. The definition of race in the United States—the one drop theory—forced our mulattos back into the black community, says historian John Hope Franklin. Whereas in South America, color, not drops of blood, is the basis for making racial distinctions. So like the mestizo, the Argentine black is fading away.

When a part of the Rio de la Plata viceroyalty, Buenos Aires was one of South America's main slave ports of entry. Thousands of Africans passed through the port to other territories, but many remained in what is now Argentina. How many, no one knows for sure, but by the mid-19th century, there were 125,000 blacks, 653,000 Indians and mestizos and according to José Ingenieros' book, *Sociologia Argentina*, whites made up less than three percent of a total population of 800,000.

Large scale smuggling and lack of records contributed to the paucity of facts and confusing figures on the black slave and his mulatto descendants. The Immaculate Conception is the only church in that Roman Catholic country that has not destroyed its records of black people. Written in ink browned with age, in seven slim, flaking volumes, is meticulously recorded the baptismal data of "Mestisos, Mulatos and Negros, 1753 to 1857."

In the town of Chascomus, 130 kilometers from Buenos Aires, stands the Little Chapel of the Negro, built by slave Soler Alsina sometime after 1836. Its records of the black community, as well as the graveyard, were washed away by a flood.

We do know, however, that blacks revolted against slavery. As freedmen they fought for equality and published two newspapers to espouse their cause. And we know all were not servants and field hands. Bernardo Kordon, in his pamphlet, *The Negro Race in the Rio de la Plata*, says slaves were often rented out as

artisans, and that so many blacks became small-time bar and store keepers that white merchants banned together to put them out of business. When slaves of cattle barons were no longer needed as domestics, they became gauchos, those landless pampas cowboys of the 18th and 19th centuries. *Martin Fierro*, Argentina's epic poem, vividly describes the hero's encounter with a black gaucho and their guitar-song duel which reveals the deep animosity between the two groups of social outcasts.

We also know that hundreds of blacks died of smallpox and yellow fever in 1667 and subsequent epidemics. But war took the major toll. The army, one of many methods of manumission available to Argentine slaves, was the only place where they were readily accepted. But placed in the front lines as "cannon fodder," it proved to be a bloody and dubious road to freedom. Says Rennie, 5,000 blacks fought in the Wars of Independence and an uncounted number in civil wars. There seemed to have been an unacknowledged but tacit government policy, he wrote, to get as many as possible into "dangerous military service," and that their "friend," Governor Juan Manuel Rosas (1829-1852) put them in the army "where they got killed off fighting Indians (another race Argentines were interested in exterminating)."

In 1812 all children born of slave parents were declared free. In 1852 slavery was officially abolished. Hard on the heels of emancipation began the great immigrations. By 1900, two million Europeans had settled in Argentina. Black and Indian percentages plummeted, and except for a handful of diehard mestizos, the country was European.

Striving to compete in an economic world controlled by whites, and blaming miscegenation for all of their ills, has prompted South Americans to send abroad their fairest diplomats and beauty queens, while running a purification contest back home. As winner, Argentina is whitest because it killed off her red men in wars of extermination, swallowed up her black men in a flood of white foreigners, and reduced her mixed-bloods to an endangered specie. As winner, Argentina should be rich and powerful. For years she was. But with the end of military rule and the "Second Coming of Peron," the acknowledged white leader of a "backward" colored continent is now less politically stable and economically more insecure than Brazil, once mocked as her "nigger neighbor."

Some sociologists suggest that continuing miscegenation in Latin America may produce "the embryo of a new universal race," thus solving the race problem. With only three per cent of her non-whites left, Argentina should be nearing the embryo stage. Dr. John Hope Franklin does not think so.

"The Argentine experience is not necessarily indicative of what might or could happen in other parts of the world," he says. "Its historical development in terms of numbers, sex-ratio, religion, etc., was determined by colonial policy as well as circumstances that made it unique even from other South American countries."

Argentina is also unique in the history of her black experience.

"**Falucho**" is statue of black hero who died defending flag in war of liberation against Spain. It is only statue recognizing part black men (and women) played in early history of country. Monument commemorating loyalty of volunteer "negroes, mulattos, Indians" in war against British was torn down to widen Avenida de Julio, now world's widest boulevard. Highest ranking black officer was Lt. Col. Lorenzo Barcala, called the "Great Mounted Warrior." Many blacks in army of Gen. San Martin died crossing icy Andes to fight for liberation of neighboring Chili and Peru.



Delfen^{*} Contraceptive Foam helps eliminate 6 real worries about birth control.

Side Effects Delfen is a "natural" form of birth control that doesn't have to be introduced into your system to be effective. (It can't change your hormonal balance.)

Interruption Many women find Delfen the least interruptive of the contraceptives you can buy without a prescription. You apply it up to an hour before. There's nothing to remove and no douching.

Discomfort Delfen is foam. Just foam. It can't shift around or annoy you hours later. It's "self-fitting"—that is, it spreads out and conforms to your own contours, neatly and easily. It's quickly absorbed. In fact, you probably won't even feel it.

Satisfaction Delfen is light and pleasant. It lubricates. It won't interfere with your pleasure or his.

Confusion The reason so many women use Delfen is that it's such a simple, unconfusing form of birth control. There's nothing to be measured and no prescription. There's only one step. The only device is the applicator. There's nothing to figure out, no days to count and nothing to wonder about. Just use it every time. If you follow the instructions, it's hard to make a mistake.

Effectiveness While no contraceptive is guaranteed fool-proof, a research study conducted in ten separate centers does indicate Delfen to be highly effective. Out of a total of 857 women, only 8 became pregnant when using Delfen regularly. Even when used irregularly, only 10 more became pregnant.

Delfen coats the entire cervix with one of the most effective spermicidal ingredients known. Delfen Foam is recommended by doctors.



Delfen.
A natural approach to
birth control.



The world's largest laboratories
devoted to family planning research.