

# TO SAVE THE ARGENTINE CRIOLLO

Part 2

BY DONNA BOWMAN  
BRATTON

On 23 April 1925 Swiss schoolteacher Aimé Tschiffely set out on a 10,000-mile journey from Buenos Aires, Argentina, to Washington, D.C. His companions were Mancha and Gato, two Argentine Criollo horses, a hardy breed that evolved from small herds brought over by the Spanish conquistadors in the 1500s. Although his friends declared the idea suicidal, Tschiffely was determined to prove that the Criollo horse was capable of amazing feats of endurance. If he succeeded in this mad exploit, perhaps the world would take notice and preserve the dying Criollo breed from extinction. But first the trio would have to travel through jungles, deserts, blizzards, forests, raging rivers, and the mighty Andes Mountains.

## NIGHTS WERE NEVER

predictable. More often than not, Tschiffely slept on hard dirt floors of poor village inns, in empty cells of local police stations, or under a blanket of stars with nothing but his campfire, his journal, and his two "pals" as company. Rarely did he enjoy a full night's sleep. There was always the worry about surviving the next stretch.

By this time, Mancha and Gato had grown so fond of Tschiffely, they no longer needed to be tied. Even if he slept in a lonely hut, the horses would never go more than a few yards away. In the morning, they would greet him with a friendly nicker. Tschiffely believed that "in order to appreciate fully the friendship of a horse, a man has to live out in the open with



him for some time, and as soon as the animal comes to a region that is strange to him he will never go away from his master but will look for his company and in case of danger seek his protection.”

As they ascended the Andes Mountains, trails were often so steep and rocky that Tschiffely and the horses had trouble making it over the crest. When the incline grew too steep, Tschiffely divided the pack between the horses, then held on to Mancha's tail and gave commands from behind. Mancha loyally obeyed.

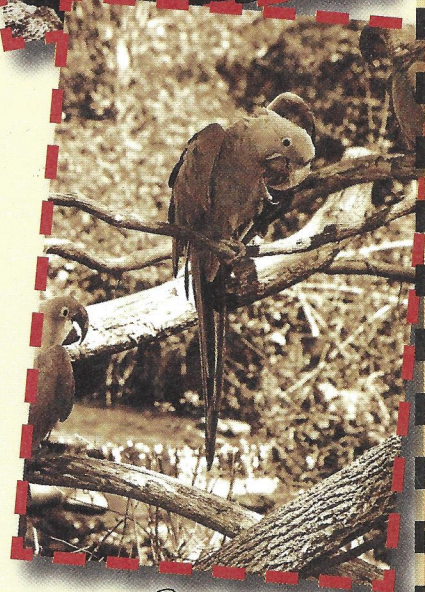
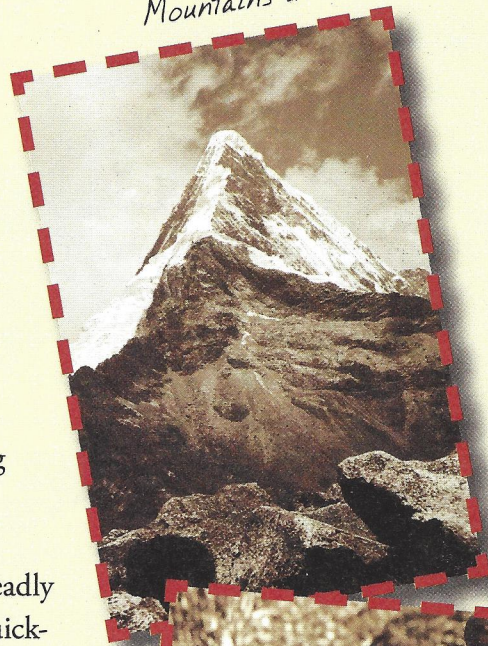
By the time Tschiffely and his companions reached the Bolivian border, they had traveled 1,300 miles, but the hardest stretches of mountains were yet to come. The higher the travelers climbed, the harder it was to breathe the thin, cold air. Many times, Tschiffely's fingers were so cold and stiff that he had to tighten the saddle girths with his teeth. The horses' moist breath froze, and icicles hung from their manes and tails. Soon they reached 13,000 feet above sea level and sent superstitious Indians running at the sight of the fair-skinned man in his protective face mask and sand goggles. "They must have taken me for some evil spirit," Tschiffely recalled.

The trio crossed the border from Bolivia into Peru. They forded dangerous rivers and zigzagged up mountainsides only to come back down into deep, hot valleys where screeching parrots and swarms of mosquitoes assailed them. One day they found themselves crossing a swampy plain. Odd, soft puddles of

water gurgled underfoot. As they approached a broad strip of water only four inches deep, Gato came to a sudden stop. Tschiffely tried everything to make the horse continue, but Gato reared with "the stubbornness of a bad-tempered mule." Suddenly, an Indian man in the distance ran toward them, yelling a warning in Spanish. The deceiving strip of water was a deadly bog similar to quicksand. Gato's instincts had saved them.

There were other dangers as well. Vampire bats often attacked the horses during the humid jungle nights. Villagers claimed that the bats flew in circles around an animal, hypnotizing it with the soft humming of their wings. When the natives warned Tschiffely that the bats attack the big toe of a sleeping man, he made sure to sleep with his boots on. Indeed,

*Snow-capped Andes Mountains in Peru*



*Parrots in Bolivia*

WHAT AN AMAZING  
ADVENTURE—WITH ...  
AMAZING HORSES!

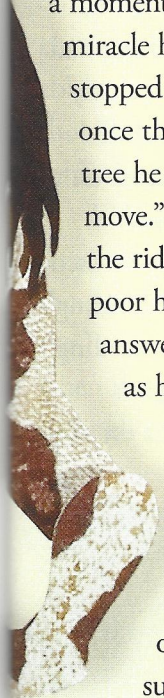


SOUNDS GREAT, EXCEPT FOR THE  
GIANT, BLOODSUCKING BATS!

... MEWY-EEK!



nights in the tropics were miserable. Tschiffely draped a large mosquito net over himself and learned to smear the horses with an herbal mixture to deter bats and insects. Despite the heat and discomforts, they averaged 20 miles of travel each day, until the narrow mountain trails almost proved the end of Gato.



High in the Andes on a steep, winding trail, Gato stepped off a cliff and tumbled downward. Tschiffely recalled his shock: "For a moment I watched in horror, and then the miracle happened. A solitary sturdy tree stopped his slide towards certain death, and once the horse had bumped against the tree he had enough sense not to attempt to move." Tschiffely carefully climbed down the ridge and tied a lasso around Gato. The poor horse let out a pitiful neigh. Mancha answered with a shrill tone of desperation as he pranced excitedly above. Tschiffely tied the rope's other end to Mancha's saddle horn. On Tschiffely's command, Mancha pulled, sending ripples of muscle through his legs and chest until Gato landed safely on solid ground. Amazingly, Gato suffered only minor scratches. But trouble was far from over.

Past the second Andean range near Ayacucho, Peru, Tschiffely was faced with a daunting rope bridge no more than four feet wide and about 150 yards long. The middle sagged like a hammock hundreds of feet above the ground. "We had crossed some giddy and wobbly hanging bridges before," Tschiffely wrote, "but here we came to the worst I had

ever seen or ever wish to see again. . . . Bits of rope, wire and fibre held the rickety structure together, and the floor was made of sticks laid crosswise and covered with some coarse fibre matting to give a foothold."

A hired guide led Mancha in front while Tschiffely followed, giving gentle verbal commands. Later he recalled the drama of the incident: "When we stepped on the bridge [Mancha] hesitated for a moment, then he sniffed the matting with suspicion, and after examining the strange surroundings he listened to me and cautiously advanced. As we approached the deep sag in the middle, the bridge began to sway horribly, and for a moment I was afraid the horse would try to turn back, which would have been the end of him; but no, he had merely stopped to wait until the swinging motion was less, and then he moved on again." When Gato's turn came, he went eagerly to catch up with his companions.

Torrential rains soon turned mountain paths into rushing streams. The travelers fought their way up a neck-breaking trail to Ticlio, at 16,500 feet above sea level the highest point in the third Andean range. The altitude exhausted Tschiffely, who was battling mountain sickness and malaria. Yet, even three miles above sea level, Mancha and Gato showed very few effects from the extreme altitude. The trio then traveled the long, weary path down ravines and steep slopes toward the Pacific Ocean and Lima, the capital of Peru.

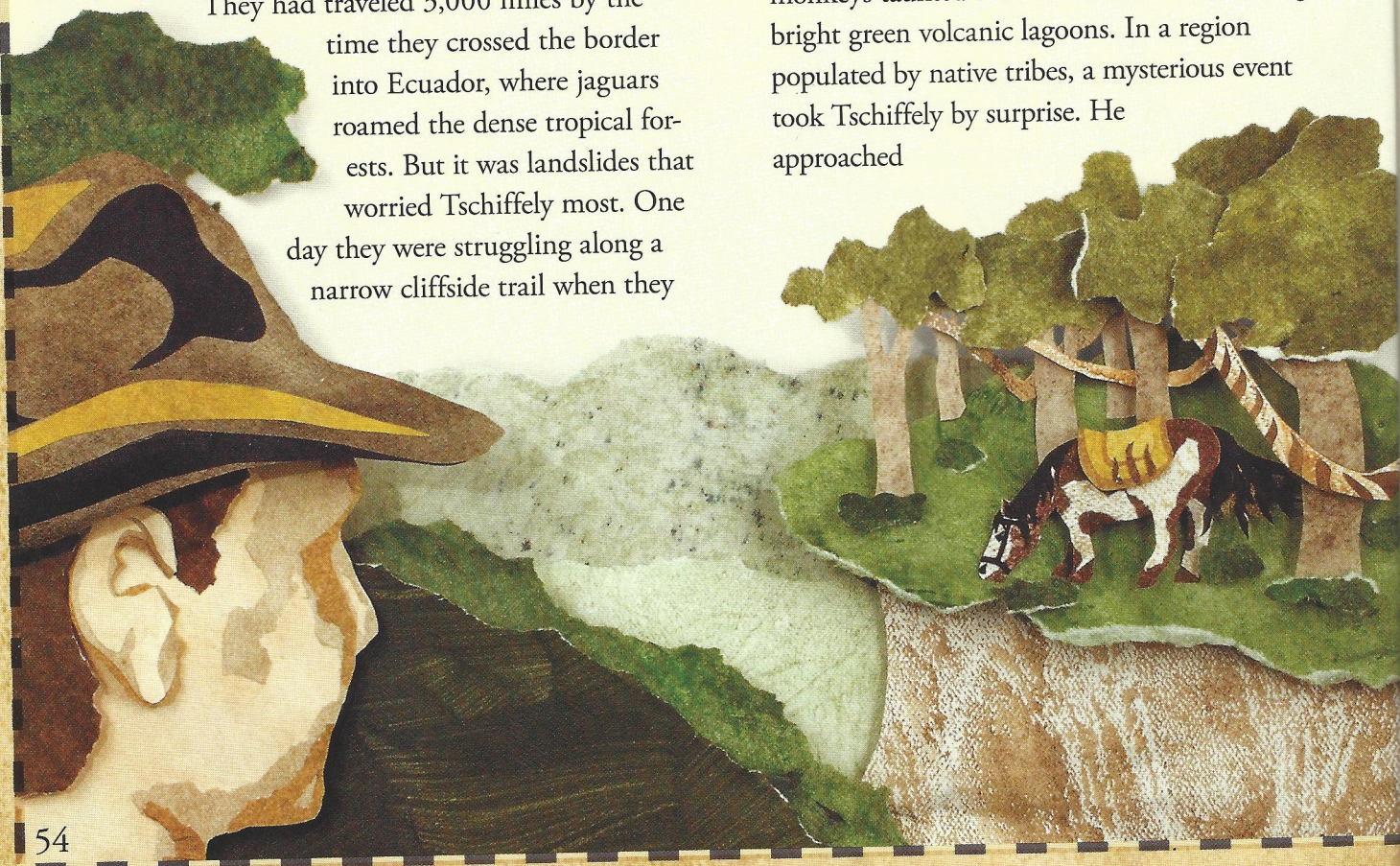
North of Lima lay the deadliest desert of their journey. The Mataballo (Horse Killer) desert had earned its name, so Tschiffely

planned to travel by moonlight. He made the difficult decision to pack no water. "I calculated that the energy wasted . . . in carrying water would be greater than the actual benefit derived from drinking it, so [we] only drank when we came to a river or some village." The 96 miles of endless sand dunes hissed under the horses' feet for 20 hours as they passed the bones and skulls of unfortunate animals. At times, the moon slipped behind the clouds and left them in total darkness. In those moments, Tschiffely's childhood fears of the dark seeped into his consciousness. Choking dust and sand engulfed the travelers as waves of the Pacific Ocean lapped at the shore, teasing them with the cruel sound of undrinkable salt water. Surviving the Mataballo, however, gave Tschiffely hope that he would finish his journey.

They had traveled 3,000 miles by the time they crossed the border into Ecuador, where jaguars roamed the dense tropical forests. But it was landslides that worried Tschiffely most. One day they were struggling along a narrow cliffside trail when they

came to an eight-foot section that had been swept away, exposing a several hundred foot drop. Tschiffely saw no choice but to turn back and accept the two- to three-day detour. He had dismounted to adjust Gato's pack when suddenly he saw Mancha inch closer and closer to the huge chasm. Before Tschiffely could stop him, the horse calmly jumped and landed safely on the other side. For a moment Tschiffely didn't know what to do. "Here was I on one side with Gato, whilst Mancha was on the other, as unconcerned as if nothing had happened." He unsaddled Gato, who quickly leaped like a goat across the divide. Tschiffely then swung Gato's pack and saddle across on a rope and leaped across the chasm himself.

Tschiffely quietly celebrated as they crossed the Equator and entered Colombia. Chattering monkeys taunted them from trees surrounding bright green volcanic lagoons. In a region populated by native tribes, a mysterious event took Tschiffely by surprise. He approached



Mancha and Gato one morning and noticed that Gato's mane was plaited tightly. Natives told him El Duende had come during the night. Tschiffely later wrote, "It appears that El Duende, according to these people, is a dwarf who lives in deep canyons and desolate valleys, where he can often be heard crying like a baby. . . . Natives firmly believe that he is very fond of horseback riding; but, being so small, is unable to sit on the horse's back, so he sits on the animal's neck, making stirrups by plaiting the mane in such a way as to be able to put his feet in it." Tschiffely himself thought that the horse might have simply rubbed against a tree during the sticky night.

The weary travelers passed into Central America, having traveled 5,500 miles across the South American continent. They crossed the Panama Canal by walking over a lock when the gates were closed. They continued on through the jungles and forests of Costa Rica, where they confronted massive crocodiles and kept a fearful watch for jaguars lurking in the foliage. The extreme climates and harsh conditions had taken a toll on Tschiffely's saddle and boots, which now began to rot and fall to pieces. But climate and wild animals weren't the only factors threatening success. Revolution had broken out in Nicaragua, forcing a detour by ship to El Salvador, a country infested with bandits and poisonous snakes.

At the Mexican border, military escorts met the trio and announced grand receptions in their honor. Within hours of reaching Mexico, Tschiffely received telegrams of congratulations from the government and other well-wishers.

People gaped in awe at Mancha and Gato, who showed hardly any signs of the tremendous physical hardships

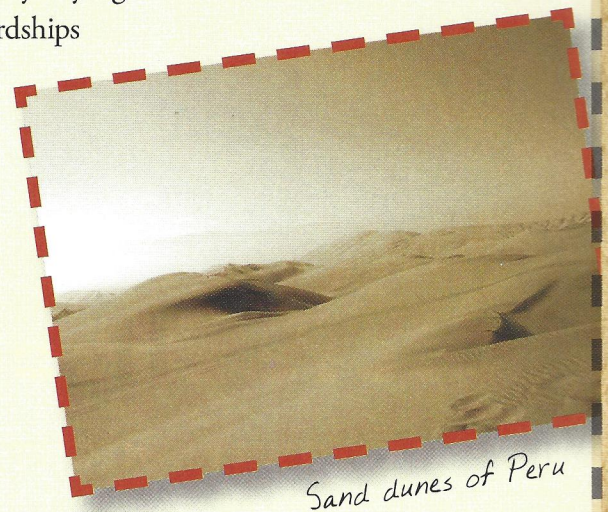
they had endured.

The legendary tales of the Criollo were coming to life.

But it was too soon to declare the trip through

Mexico a success. In a small railway village, Gato suffered an injury that nearly took his life.

Gato was peacefully eating one night when he was attacked by a mule fighting for food. Tschiffely awoke the next morning to find Gato's knee horribly cut and bruised by the mule's spiked shoes. He offered the best care he could, but soon Gato was in so much pain that he could no longer walk or lie down. "He looked so bad that some who saw him thought the kindest thing would be to kill him to put him out of misery." Tschiffely would never agree to do so. He loved Gato too much. So he made plans to send the horse by train to Mexico City, where Gato would receive the best veterinary care. "When all was arranged, sympathetic friends helped me literally to carry the invalid to the station. . . . I had a big lump in my throat when the train disappeared around a curve, for I really believed I would never see my dear old Gato again."



*Sand dunes of Peru*

*to be continued*