



TO SAVE THE ARGENTINE CRIOLLO

Part 3

BY DONNA BOWMAN
BRATTON

On 23 April 1925 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 breed from extinction.

The trio traveled through jungles, deserts, blizzards, forests, raging rivers, and the mighty Andes Mountains. Leaving South America, they journeyed north through Central America. In Mexico, Gato was attacked by a mule and seriously injured. Tschiffely shipped his companion by train to Mexico City, hoping that veterinarians there could save his life.

NOW TSCHIFFELY wondered if he and Mancha could traverse Mexico's coastal swamps and mighty Sierra Madre alone. Fortunately, travel through Mexico was at a slower pace owing to dinners, parties, and bullfights held in honor of the Argentinean and his two Criollos.

Yet the pleasantries of Mexico were interrupted by fears of civil war. The Mexican people were so supportive of and concerned for Tschiffely and Mancha that the government ordered an armed escort to see them from one garrison to the next.

Many weeks later, nearing the outskirts of Mexico City, the weary and malaria-stricken Tschiffely received a great surprise. A reception of cowboys and cheering spectators rode toward him kicking up clouds of sandy dust. Suddenly, the circle opened, and Tschiffely spotted his old pal Gato. "I forgot everything around me and went to pat his neck, to tickle his nose, and to rub his forehead, as I had often done before when we were all alone out in the open. When he saw Mancha he gave a low nicker, opening wide his nostrils and

slightly quivering his upper lip." Gato was fully recovered and ready to continue the odyssey.

The trio crossed the International Bridge to Laredo, Texas, where the U.S. Army welcomed them at Fort McIntosh. Now, dodging American motorists proved the greatest danger as the travelers navigated their way through Texas, Oklahoma, over the Ozarks, and on to St. Louis, Missouri. There, the unexpected traffic of motor cars made it dangerous to lead a second horse, so Tschiffely left Gato on a farm until he could safely retrieve him. Nothing was worth risking the lives of his beloved horses.

Crossing the Blue Ridge Mountains, Tschiffely and Mancha met with near disaster when a driver crossed the road and intentionally crashed into Mancha, knocking him down before speeding away. Tschiffely was heartbroken. "There lay my dear companion who had taken me over mountains, through deserts and jungles, over a distance of some 10,000

SOMEBUGGY
HIT MANCHA
ON PURPOSE?

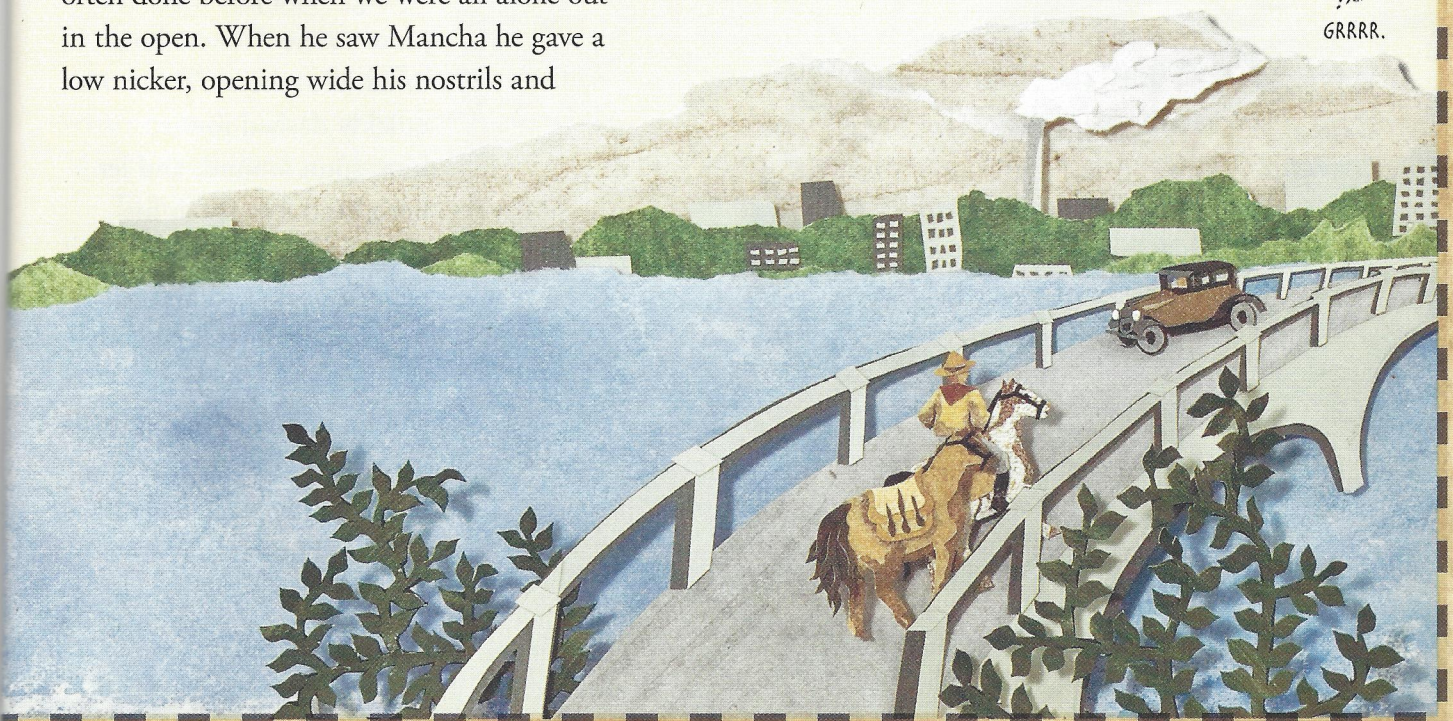
NO!!



THAT'S SICK.



GRRRR.



miles. Had all our efforts been made to reach this spot, and be robbed of victory through the guilt of a low-down 'road-hog,' and this when we had almost reached the goal?" After the initial shock, Mancha rose, bleeding from the open gashes in his flank. Thankfully no bones were broken. Tschiffely washed

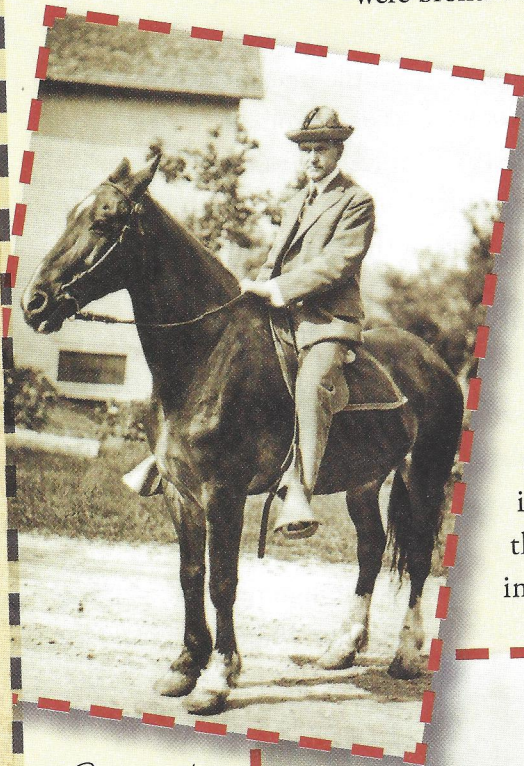
him off at a stream and treated his wounds at a nearby farm. Washington couldn't come soon enough.

At long last, after two and a half years in the saddle, this unassuming schoolteacher

and his "old" horse arrived in Washington, D.C. Ironically, they got lost. Embassy and local authorities rescued them and escorted the two to the luxurious Wardman Park Hotel. Mancha was given a comfortable stall at the hotel's stables. A whirlwind of activities ensued. Photographers and reporters barraged Tschiffely for interviews and photographs. *National Geographic* asked him to write an article about his journey with Mancha and Gato. He was invited to the White House to meet with President Calvin Coolidge.

Tschiffely also accepted invitations to nearby horse shows and polo matches and met many celebrities who were anxious to see the famed Criollo. Among the celebrities was humorist Will Rogers, who met Mancha during a display at a polo match on Long Island. Tschiffely warned the wisecracking Rogers against entering Mancha's stall.

But Rogers wouldn't listen, saying, "You just leave the pinto to me. I know how to handle a horse." Mancha quickly dashed toward him, spun around, and let both hind legs fly in his trademark manner. Rogers tripped backward and fell to the stall floor. Tschiffely laughed and asked, "Do you know what's wrong with my horse? Evidently he doesn't appreciate your sense of humor."



President
Calvin
Coolidge



Will Rogers

After making the rounds of Washington, Tschiffely and Mancha traveled to New York for three weeks of hospitality and lectures.

Mayor Jimmy Walker presented Tschiffely with the New York City Medal, and from Governor's Island, Tschiffely reflected on how far they had come. "I looked at Mancha and then at these towering masses of concrete and

steel, one the product of the wild, arid and wind-swept plains of Patagonia, the other the result of the working of human brains, initiative, science and skill. Before I realised it I was again talking to my horse as I had become accustomed to do—"Yes, old boy, this is New York, but I know the rolling pampas are calling you—be patient, I'll take you back—you deserve it!" Tschiffely then returned to St. Louis to retrieve Gato while Mancha remained in New York.

Tschiffely had arranged to return to Buenos Aires aboard the ship *Vestris*, but a last-minute lecture caused a change in plans. This decision saved their lives. The *Vestris* sank a few days after sailing, killing more than 100 people.

Three weeks later, Tschiffely and his companions boarded the ship *Pan America* and arrived in Buenos Aires on 10 December

1928, after twenty days at sea. Tschiffely received a hero's welcome. His first talk upon returning to Argentina was to the

students of St. George College, where he had taught before beginning his journey. "What is particularly gratifying to me is the knowledge that I have been able to prove that the Argentine

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Criollo (Creole) horse is worthy of the reputation he has always held among the few that really know him, namely, that of being second to none for continuous hard work under any conditions. My two pals, 'Mancha' and 'Gato,' have shown powers of resistance to heat, cold, hunger, and every hardship imaginable that have surprised even the most sanguine admirers of the breed."

Mancha and Gato gave life to the fables and tall tales passed through generations of South Americans. As a reward for their tremendous sacrifice and example, Aimé Tschiffely released them to live on a beautiful ranch in the province of Buenos Aires. They lived to the ripe old ages of 35 and 40 years old. Their legacy will live on forever. Proclaimed "Heroes of the Pampas," the embalmed bodies of Mancha and Gato are on display at the Transportation Museum

of Lujan, Argentina. The Argentine Criollo has become a national symbol of Argentina, and the National Criollo Registry is flourishing with the help of Criollo breeders around the world.

Aimé Tschiffely's book *Tschiffely's Ride*, chronicling his 1925–1928 journey, became an international bestseller, which fueled his desire to become a full-time writer and journalist. His expeditions across Europe, Spain, and Tierra del Fuego inspired other books, including *This Way Southward*, *Bohemia Junction*, *Bridle Paths*, and *Round and About Spain*. He moved back to London and married in 1933, but he maintained a strong love for Argentina. When he died in 1954 at the age of 58, his ashes were spread on the Argentine pampas where he could be close to the spirits of Mancha and Gato and the wilds of South America.

Though their famous trek occurred eighty years ago, it still stands as a symbol of Argentinean pride. In 1997, Argentina President Carlos Menem presented two Argentine Criollo mares to President Bill Clinton on behalf of the Argentine Republic. The horses, a pinto and a buckskin, were named Mancha and Gato to commemorate the historic ride between the capitals of Argentina and the United States.

Tschiffely's original companions, Mancha and Gato, were the only horses of their time to traverse the Western Hemisphere from Patagonia to the Potomac, thanks to a "crazy" idea to ride almost 10,000 miles into history to save the Argentine Criollo, a breed that exists today thanks to the efforts of Aimé Tschiffely. 🐎

*Aimé Tschiffely
and Mancha*

