

The Gaucho Juan Moreira by Eduardo Gutiérrez [1879, a blend of fact & legend]

[Comments by Prof. Slatta in brackets. "See" refers to Slatta, *Gauchos and the Vanishing Frontier*. The poem *Martín Fierro* by José Hernández, also written in the 1870s, reinforces the points made in this excerpt. See *Gauchos*, ch 11.]

Until the age of thirty Juan Moreira was a hard-working resident of Matanzas, a pampa neighborhood [in Buenos Aires province, Argentina] where he was generally held in high esteem, though he had only a flock of sheep and a few cattle. His specialty was breaking horses [*domador*], and his neighbors brought him animals that nobody else could come near.

No one had ever seen Juan Moreira drunk. He wasn't the sort of gaucho who wastes time drinking and gambling at the rural stores [and taverns] called *pulperías*. He took no part in the rowdy gatherings that normally ended in a fight, with another cross sprouting in the graveyard and another poor soul sent off to join an army unit on the southern frontier, where so many gauchos are sent as punishment, simply because, having lost their homes, they've become "vagrants," a crime punishable by forced conscription. [See *Gauchos*, ch 8] But let's get back to Moreira, who only appeared at the *pulpería* on days when the whole neighborhood was there for big horse races. Quite a figure he cut, then, on his magnificent dappled bay horse, with saddle and bridle to match, gaucho finery.

The only time Moreira was known to draw blood was when an Indian raid struck nearby. On such occasions, they called up the national guard, and dutiful gauchos like Moreira put down lassos and branding irons and rallied around the local military commander. Moreira did not hesitate to take his best horses into the fight, during which he always distinguished himself, and after which he returned home without any thought of reward, considering that he had merely done his duty.

He won a reputation for fleetness and bravery among his neighbors, who eventually considered that no attempt to control frontier Indians was likely to succeed without Moreira's participation. Moreira lived happily married with a local girl, daughter of a poor but honest neighbor, and their little boy was his pride and joy. Aside from his wife, whom he idolized, he desired nothing more out of life. [See *Gauchos*, ch 4]

He never went to fight Indians without first squeezing little Juan tightly in his arms, and never returned without pulling the child up to the pommel of his saddle and taking him for a ride. Soon the little boy got a pony of his own, expressly trained by his father, who also lovingly braided the animal's bridle with a dexterity that few could equal. Then little Juan began to accompany his father, often, on little excursions to town or a friend's ranch. Moreira also had several large, two-wheeled pampas carts and oxen to pull them. Much of what he earned came from the loads of hides, wool, and other local products that he carted to the train station on behalf of local ranchers. The landowners who entrusted him with their goods for sale never asked him for a receipt, much less payment in advance. Nobody for miles around had a better reputation among his neighbors than did Juan Moreira, whose word was his bond.

His neighbors also knew him, in earlier years, as a sort of roving troubadour or, as they would say, *payador*. Moreira had a fine voice, and when he tuned his guitar to sing at a country dance, surrounded by friends, he always impressed them with his tender lyrics, normally the ten-line *décimas* beloved by our gauchos. Such delicate sentiments are not rare among our gaucho troubadours, whose emotions fill the singers' dark, intelligent faces and go straight to their listeners' hearts. When a gaucho sings, his

voice takes on a rare quality of sadness and yearning. In song the gaucho finds release from his long string of misfortunes, his eyes brighten with tears, and his feelings flow from fingers to guitar strings. A true *payador* of the pampas, like the famous *Santos Vega*, produces a sublime, other-worldly sound that completely enralls the listener. [See the glossary at the end of *Gauchos*, p. 235, for definitions of Spanish terms.]

All gauchos possess an artistic sensibility, however, and all play the guitar more or less by instinct, without any musical instruction whatsoever. Juan Moreira possessed these qualities in a high degree. When he began to play the guitar at a dance, the assembly fell silent, and his plaintive verses moved men and women alike.

Moreira was thirty-four years old at the time [I met him in 1874] —tall, and not thin. His dress was the picturesque stuff that gauchos wear, more or less the national costume. Instead of trousers he wore a black wool *chiripá* [diaper-like pants] and white cotton *calzoncillos* [pants worn under the *chiripá*] with fringe around the bottom, like a real old-time gaucho, and around his waist, the typical wide leather *tirador* decorated with silver coins. All his clothing was scrupulously clean, even his spotless white shirt.

The *tirador* supported two *trabucos*, old-fashioned short-barreled shotguns with wide, flaring bronze barrels [rather unusual for a gaucho as they favored the knife] and, thrust under it at the small of Moreira's back, within reach of his right hand, his *facón* [sword-like knife], with its two-foot blade and silver handle, inlaid with gold. More gaucho finery. Add high boots and spurs (also of silver), a black jacket, a silk kerchief at his neck, and broad-brimmed hat. A silver-handled riding whip hung from the wrist of his right hand, and on the little finger shone a gemstone ring. Finally, across his chest on one side, a gold watch chain descended into a side pocket of his *tirador*. [Moreira's dress and equipment is richer than your average gaucho.]

There weren't enough lawmen in Buenos Aires province to take him prisoner, and he said it so often, that he knew the day they caught him would be his last. An inquiry concerning the criminality of our countryside should start with the general picture, which is simple. Our gauchos have only two options, to become bandits, in the manner I will describe, or be drafted into the army as cannon fodder. Gauchos are routinely deprived of their civil rights and even, one could say, of their human rights. [See *Gauchos*, ch 7] Both military and police authorities abuse our gauchos, who have no recourse, because if they resist, it's into the army and off to the southern frontier.

Gauchos cannot find honorable work at all, and their crime? To be native sons and citizens of Argentina! No one wants to hire the native born when foreign laborers can be used instead. A landowner who hires gauchos will lose his workers for days at election time, when the Justice of the Peace and the local military commander herd them like sheep to the polling places, or for weeks or months, when the National Guard mobilizes to fight Indians, or for years, if he's been drafted into the army. Foreign workers neither vote nor serve in the armed forces, and their presence has made the gaucho a pariah in his own country. [See *Gauchos*, ch 10]

The gaucho lives in horror of being drafted into the army, and with good reason. Off he goes to the army as punishment, and why? Because he can't find work, so he's called a vagrant. Or because the local military commander is angry (the gaucho voted for his employer's candidate, not the commander's) and won't give him papers [gauchos had to carry a passport to travel]. Or just because his wife is pretty and someone wants her, someone powerful. So off he goes to the frontier with shackles on his feet, like a

common criminal, to suffer two years of enlisted misery, without adequate food or clothing, receiving horrible treatment.

He counts himself lucky if, at the end of his two years, he gets discharged as promised. Back home he rides, hoping to forget his suffering in the quiet of his humble little house on the pampa, in the company of his cherished wife and children. But it's at home, precisely, that the worst awaits him. His horses, all his animals, are gone, taken and divided up by whoever ransacked his house. His wife now lives with the someone powerful who wanted her and who had sent him to the army in shackles to get her. It's not her fault. She had no other choice, poor thing, if she were not to starve.

And his children? They've been given out as servants to various families, committed to serve them for God knows how long. The gaucho's heart overflows with pain and shame as he contemplates the desolation of everything he loves. It overflows, and then absorbs the venom and hate that have been poured over him by this awful wrong. He wants revenge, and gets it, which makes him an outlaw, pursued night and day. He'll never stop fleeing and he'll fight to the death, because if he surrenders he'll still be "killed resisting arrest" on the official report. The authority who did him such great harm, a local Justice, for example, lives in fear that the gaucho will come some night to settle accounts, and he'll try anything to escape the gaucho's vengeance, which is a sure thing, sooner or later.

Meanwhile, the miserable outlaw lives on the run, stealing to be able to eat, killing to defend himself and, eventually, killing out of habit, and even, in the fullness of time, killing for pleasure. Life on the run has driven him to drink, and to acquire all the other vices that go along with it. This is how a good man, such as Juan Moreira, becomes a criminal. What right do we have to condemn him? And yet, our prisons are full of men like this, not born to a life of crime but forced into it, eventually suffering the ultimate punishment with courage and serenity. Such, in general outline, horrible but undeniable, is the destiny of our gauchos. [Owing to such persecution, many gauchos never experienced the joys of family life Moreira had in his younger years.]