

BOER EMIGRATION

FROM the moment I was informed by my superiors that I would be joining the Argentine Embassy in South Africa as the Naval Attaché, I made it my first concern to try and discover whether any connections could be found in the history of South Africa and Argentina prior to the relations that have developed between the Navies of the two countries during the past few years.

The result of these efforts is expressed in this modest paper, the sources of which are old articles and photographs published in back numbers of the Argentine daily "LA PRENSA" and the magazine "CARAS Y CARETAS", which I discovered in the State files of the Argentine Republic.

It is fitting that I express here my sincere gratitude to the persons who so generously contributed to my task: — DR. ARMANDO BRAUN MENENDEZ, distinguished Argentine historian for his valued and spontaneous collaboration in lending me a complete work on the subject, a book that was presented to the Department of History of the University of Pretoria in 1970 on the occasion when he was the official guest of the South African Government; — CMDR BRIAN HEGARTY, Armed Forces Attaché for South Africa in Argentina, for his friendly cooperation in letting me have a copy of the South African Digest dealing with the subject; — My predecessor, CAPT E. A. GALMARINI, for the wealth of information provided prior to my taking charge of my post and



↑
The "Hotel Boer" in Comodoro Rivadavia, under the ownership of Messrs Fernandez and Bertinat, with a group of Boers and Argentinians posing in front.

◀
Comodoro Rivadavia as it was in 1903. The mountain "Pico de los Indios", where the Boers settled, can be seen in the background.

TO ARGENTINA



The writer of this article on Boer emigration to Argentina is Capt Mario Raul Chingotto, the Argentine Naval Attaché to South Africa.

Captain Chingotto made investigations into South African-Argentinian relations prior to the present good terms between the two navies and then wrote this article.



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for precise details — and lastly the head of the Department of Historical Studies of the Argentine Navy, CAPT LAURIO DESTEFANI, for his willing encouragement and bibliographical help.

Before dealing with the phenomenon of the "Boer Emigration to Argentine", a brief reference to the situation existing in both countries at the beginning of the present century is of interest.

General Julio A. Roca was President of the Nation in his second term of office (from 1898 to 1904).

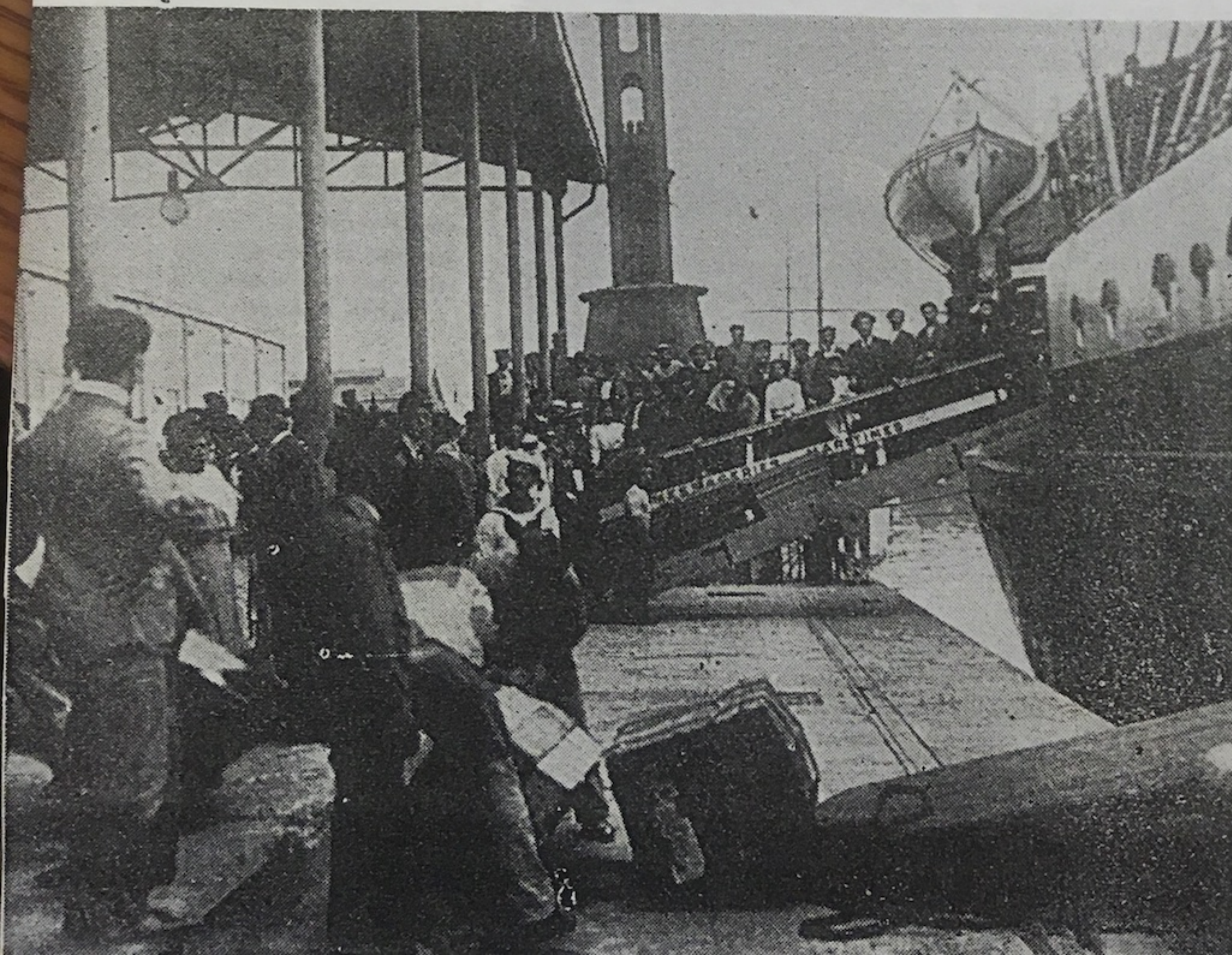
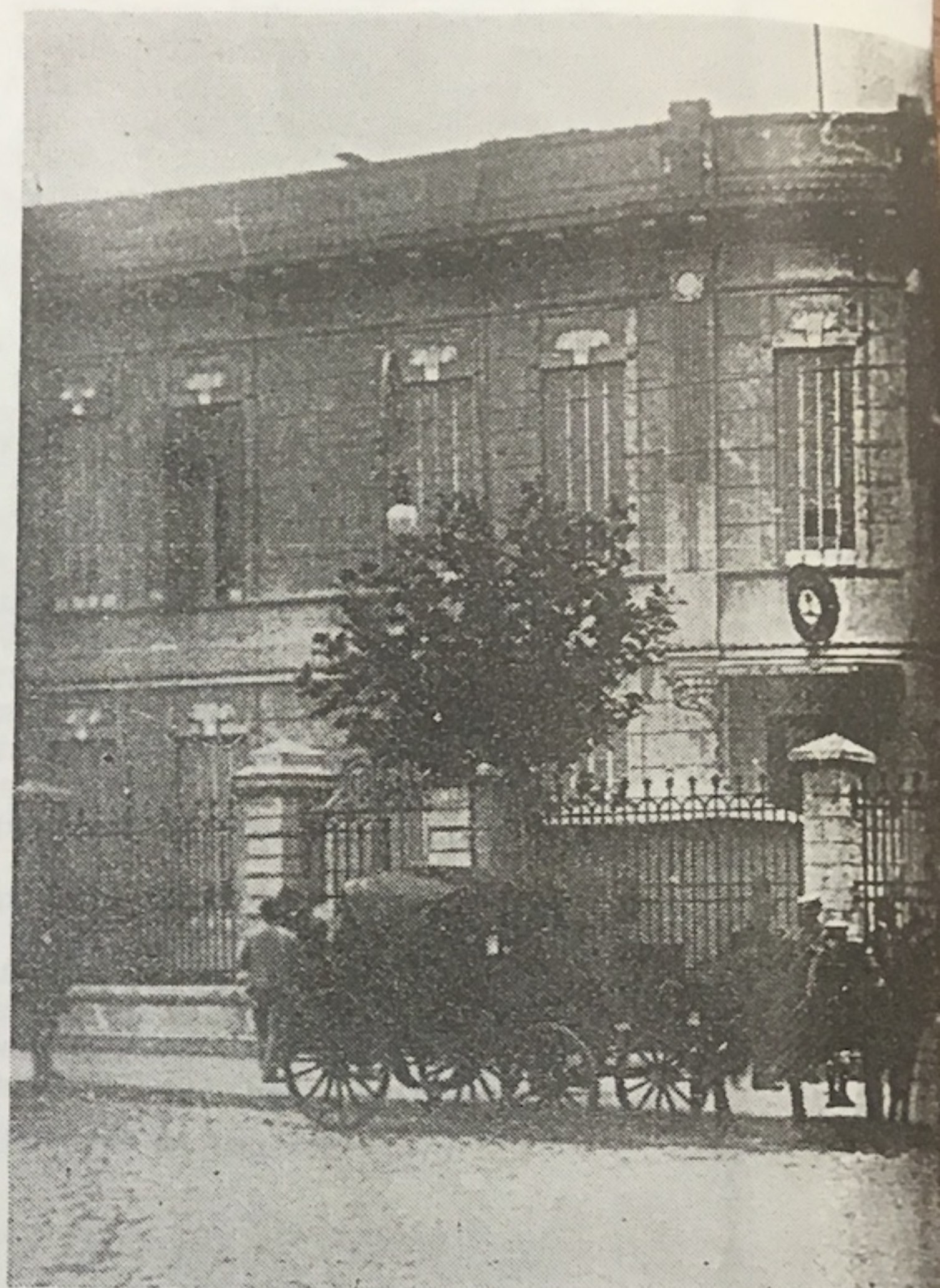
During his first term (from 1880 to 1886) this distinguished President had consolidated control over Patagonia. The Argentine State thus became responsible for the task of initiating the exploration and administration of the region.

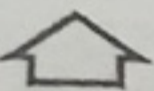
During his second Presidency, General Roca, on the advice of his Minister of Agriculture and Livestock, Dr. Wenceslao Escalante (let us remember this name), endeavoured to stimulate the colonization of Patagonia by means of laws designed to accelerate the process.

This situation was made known to South Africa through Argentine officials who were in this country on a trade mission.

The South African War (October 1899 — May 1902) lasted almost three years.

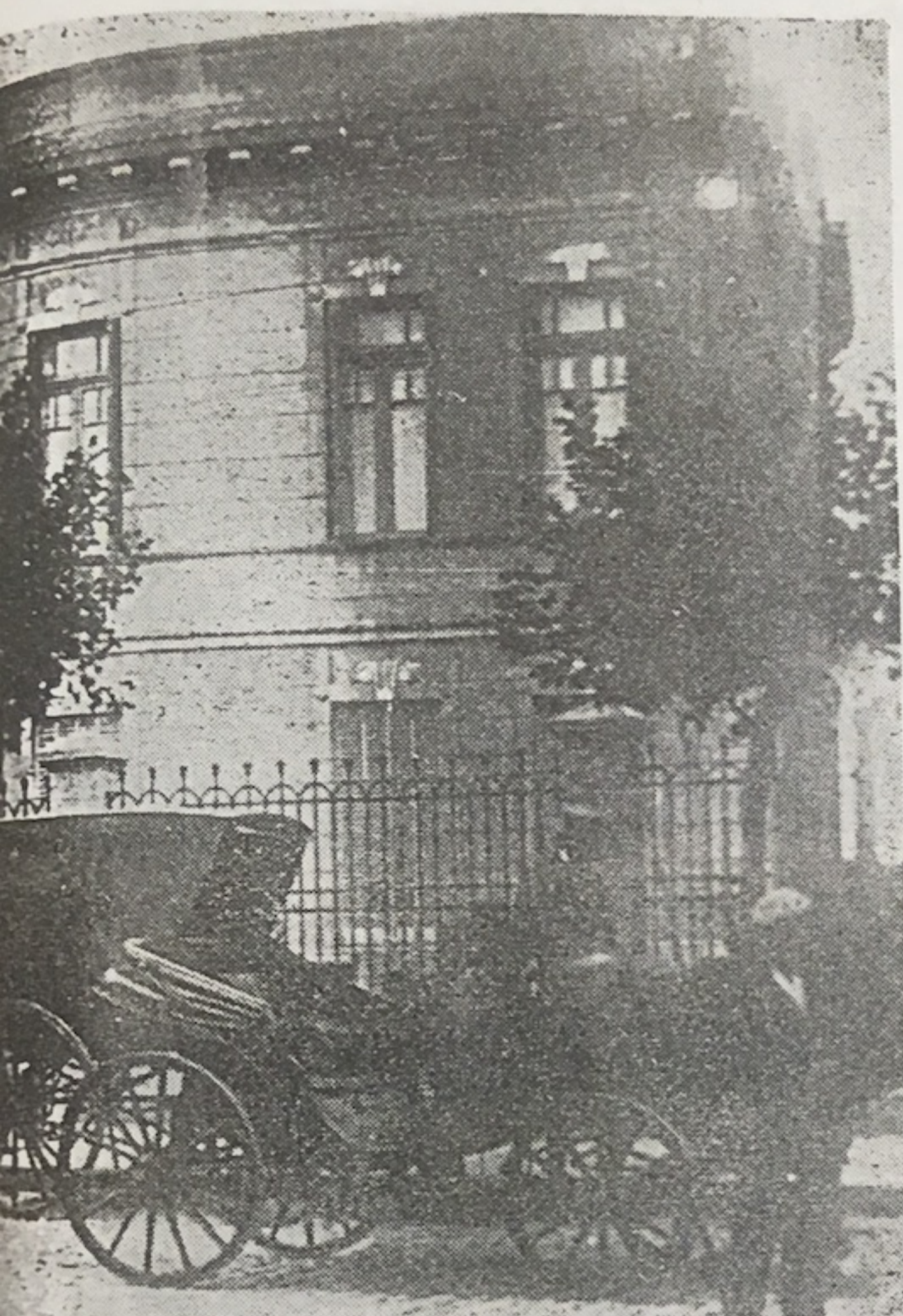
The triumph of the powerful United Kingdom over the small Boer nations, the Republic of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, was the cause of many families of moderate means emigrating to seek new horizons, taking with them wagons, animals and tools of every description.




The Hotel de Immigrantes in Buenos Aires, where many of the Boer immigrants stayed prior to their departure for Comodoro Rivadavia.

A group of Boer emigrants land on Argentine soil for the first time after their long trip from South Africa.

EMIGRATION



The consequence of these two situations was the departure of many Boer families to Argentine who settled in Patagonia (at the time under the Government of the Chubut Province) close to the town of COMODORO RIVADAVIA, in a region geographically rather similar to the Karoo, and where, although generally arid, it was easy to breed animals for their wool.

The Boer emigration to Argentine took place in three stages, the first of which was essentially a "commissie trek", while the two following groups were larger.

A few Boer families, together with their servants, belonged to the first group.

Amongst its components were LUIS FRANCISCO BEHR and JUAN COULTER (who had fought with CHRISTIAAN DE WET's Commandos), DE MARILLAC, LEVINGSTONE, CALVERT, TRIEGARDT, LEGRANGE, COOK, GREYLING, etc.

On arrival at Buenos Aires, this group sailed for COMODORO RIVADAVIA on the 20th May 1902, on board the Argentine Navy ship 1° DE MAYO, under the command of Lieutenant ALDOA.

They took with them their own capital, building material and tools, their basic mission being to settle in the region and then report to their compatriots.

They arrived safely at COMODORO RIVADAVIA on the 4th June 1902. A few months previously, on April 1902, the Argentine Government had signed a decree allocating 2 500 hectares of land to each family in a region situated north of COMODORO RIVADAVIA, where 141 600 hectares facing the

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Brought all the way from South Africa — all the Boer's possessions await checking in the Customs hall at Buenos Aires.





General Christiaan Botha, Mr W. Steijn and Commandant Botha in Buenos Aires, 1903.

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Atlantic Ocean were reserved for the Boer settlers. As this allocation per family was four times that assigned to Argentine inhabitants, at the end of December 1902 a group of Argentine farmers signed a petition addressed to the Minister of Agriculture. They asked that the same concession be granted to them on the ground that their allotment of 625 hectares of land was totally inadequate, taking into account the annual increase of the animals bred.

It is to be noted that at the end of 1902, COMODORO RIVADAVIA had already 65 buildings and 215 inhabitants. The most prominent Argentine settlers of that region were the FONT, IBARGUEREN, PIETROBELLI (later to become the city's Mayor) and the OLIVARES.

The first task the Boers had to face was the construction of houses (with corrugated iron roofs) and a road linking their lands with COMODORO RIVADAVIA.

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The first group of Boer settlers on their way to their new homes aboard the Argentine Navy ship 1° de Mayo.



Boer Emigration

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Encouraged by the promising news received from Argentine, a second group of emigrant Boers was assembling in South Africa under the direction of CONRAD VISSER. This group was more numerous — 30 families of more than 100 souls in addition to 31 horses, oxen and working tools.

They arrived at COMODORO RIVADAVIA during the first half of 1903, on board the Argentine Navy transport "PAMPA" and "RIO SANTA CRUZ".

This small Boer colony was named "COLONIA ESCALANTE" after the Minister of Agriculture who gave it origin.

As an evaluation of the quality of this immigration, it is interesting to quote the comments of the Argentine magazine "CARAS Y CARETAS" of the 31/1/1903: "The ships recently arrived from Cape Town and Durban brought many immigrants who have departed for CHUBUT to join the 30 odd families of compatriots living in the Escalante colony.

"This immigration is even more important as it is not limited to workers, including as it does persons so necessary for integration with our emerging population, persons like DR RUDOLPH KRIEGER, a devoted physician and deserving patriot who preferred to leave his country rather than swear allegiance to the victors.

"Publicly acclaimed for his courage during the first months of the war at SPIONKOP and PLATRAN, DR KRIEGER was later appointed leader of a group of scouts and distinguished himself at DALMANUTHA on the 19th August 1900, against the forces of General Buller. Subsequently, as surgeon and soldier, his performance was invariably brilliant until January 1902 when, in spite of having advanced with the white flag to ask for medicines on behalf of General Botha, he was taken prisoner and put into the concentration camp at UMBILO, Natal."

This statement, from one of the most highly reputed and complete Argentine magazines of the time, requires no further comment.

The following important events pertain to the development period of this group. In February 1903 DR JULIO B. LEZAMA was appointed Governor of the CHUBUT region. Already by the second half of 1903 substantial buying and selling of wool, cattle and horses was taking place between the Boer colony and the Argentine inhabitants.

In January 1904 the Boers, prompted by their characteristic and in this case, social spirit, requested Governor LEZAMA to start a Civil Register. The request was immediately complied with and the following month the Argentine citizen F. PIETROBELLI was appointed the Registrar. Later he became Mayor of COMODORO RIVADAVIA.

Existing evidence shows also that in September 1904 the Boer immigrants started planting trees to serve as base or defence, as a protective barrier against the strong winds that blow in that region. Especially mentioned are willows and elms.

We have to bear in mind that the region in which the colony was settled was arid (similar to the Karoo) and that in order to cultivate the soil it was necessary to take advantage of the few available streams and this, later, was the cause of a petition by the colony which was approved and which brought about consequences of great importance to the region, as we shall see.

It is worth mentioning that, in consequence of the settlers' zealous industry, and the results obtained from their work, the Argentine Government, by means of subsequent decrees, extended the area allotted to them for settling and for purposes of development.

In December 1905, the third group, consisting of more than 300 persons, arrived in the region where they were to settle. They sailed from Cape Town on board the "HIGHLAND FLING", a ship formerly employed as a horse transport, and landed at Buenos Aires where they were taken to COMODORO RIVADAVIA on board the Argentine Navy transport "PRESIDENTE ROCA".

It is interesting that some of the people who arrived on board the "HIGHLAND FLING" as infants are still living in that region. Some of them occupy prominent positions in local society.

Recently, on August 28th 1970, the magazine SOUTH AFRICAN DIGEST reported an interview with one of the settlers who arrived in Argentine at the age of three, on what is referred to by the report as the "Second Great Trek".

This interesting article points out that in spite of having integrated with the local inhabitants, the Boer colony has retained its own language and habits and follows with interest the problems of South Africa from where they regularly receive newspapers and magazines.

We should bear in mind that the arrival of the ships from South Africa did not always coincide with the departure for the South of Argentine Navy transports.

In these cases the future settlers were accommodated at the Hotel de Immigrantes in Buenos Aires, a building whose architecture was typical of the country at that time.

In this hotel the immigrants, united by a common spirit, nurtured their hopes which were so close to fulfilment in a country which, although in language and customs so different from their own, had opened its doors to productive workers.

They found temporary accommodation in its comfortable rooms whilst waiting to continue their journey towards the region where they were to settle and where they were to put to the test their ability and their creative efforts.

The Boer immigration represented for Argentine an introduction of people who, with their expert farming knowledge, changed in a few years the life of that region despite its aridity.

One result of their settling in the vicinity of COMODORO RIVADAVIA was that, while the Argentine Government was carrying out boring operations for water to satisfy the requirements of the settlers, oil was discovered which to the present day represents the main wealth of that region and, due to the high degree of exploitation, constitutes a powerful factor in the Argentine economy.

Worthy of mention is another event occurring in 1906 which decided many settlers to return to their home land. In fact, when the Transvaal and the Orange Free State obtained their independence and administrative autonomy, it was decided to call back the emigrants and restore them their lands with suitable compensation.

For this reason a substantial group decided to return to South Africa.

Others remained in Argentine to continue that productive work of development, the signs of which are evident to this day, and to integrate, themselves and their sons into Argentine becoming Argentine citizens and creating a progeny as characteristic as it is illustrious so that many of them, as has already been mentioned, occupy prominent positions in the country.

This modest research effort concludes here.

I wish to add my sense of satisfaction, as an Argentinian, at having dealt with a chapter of our history perhaps unfamiliar to many and affirm my belief that the acquirement of this knowledge may broaden my general outlook, and thus contribute to some degree to the success of the specific mission which I hope to accomplish in this country.

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