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Argentina's Irish discover the old country

LETTER FROM ARGENTINA/Nicole Veash

South America is home to Ireland's forgotten community. While their cousins in the United States are vocal about their roots, this group of immigrants in Argentina have long been invisible to the people of Ireland.

Yet according to the Irish embassy in Buenos Aires, some 300,000 people - whose ancestors settled on these far-flung shores in the 19th century - make up this part of the diaspora. It is the largest non-English speaking Irish community in the world and a hard-core of descendants are still keeping the traditions of the old country alive.

Despite being born in Argentina, Luis Delaney speaks English with a pronounced Irish accent. The 70-year-old is a third generation immigrant, whose family hailed from the Westmeath area.

"When I was younger, we had very little contact with the people in Ireland and I think they forgot that there were so many of us living over here," he said.

"But we've always had a very strong sense of our roots and I for one was brought up surrounded by traditions. I even went to an Irish school run by priests who taught us in English in the morning and Spanish in the afternoon."

Delaney believes that the huge distance between Argentina and Ireland - some 11,000 miles - made it hard for the immigrants to keep in touch with their relations. "Until fairly recently we couldn't afford to travel to Ireland and it was very expensive making phone calls to our relatives over the water, so I suppose we became rather isolated."

Jonathan Conlon, at the Irish embassy, explained that Argentina's lush pastures were the initial attraction for the families that emigrated. Most had a farming background and hailed from Longford, Meath or Westmeath.

"This community is somewhat different from the one that went to Boston," he said. "Emigration started before the Famine in around 1815 and went on until the 1890s.

"The people that came to Argentina generally had a little more money, including enough to buy some land or start a business. They also had to pay for the passage on the ships, which was more expensive and of better quality than on the route to the US." Conlon says that the Irish immigrants were often the second sons of comfortable farming stock.

With religious sustenance from a handful of Irish priests the immigrants turned inwards and found support in one another. Although they started out as farmhands or meat salters, those who worked in agriculture soon profited from an Argentine law that allowed them to take a small percentage of the sheep they managed as part of their yearly wage. They then bought land to start their own farms and within a few decades the community began to prosper.

Today there are still around 2,000 people who, despite being third and fourth generation, can trace a pure line back to the first settlers because their families only ever married other Irish immigrants.

Despite speaking English with a heavy Spanish accent Teresa Deane Reddy, a retired teacher, explains how her family hung onto their roots by never marrying out of the community.

"My family only ever married other Irish people," she said. "We weren't like other immigrants who settled in Argentina and mingled. We really kept ourselves to ourselves."

Having married another direct Irish descendant herself, Reddy remains an active member of the present-day community, intent on preserving a sense of Irishness.

"We are a long way from Ireland. My parents never thought of going back because it was too far and I think that's why our community has always placed a lot of importance on preserving the old customs.

"But it used to be hard. We couldn't buy Irish music over here and our hurling club folded soon after the war."

Reddy says that it is only in recent years that the ArgentineIrish have started to go back to Ireland. "Things have really changed for us in the last 10 years because of cheaper air travel and now the Internet," she said.

"Because of this there has been a revival of customs in Argentina. We now have several Irish music bands and you can even buy Guinness in Irish pubs. It really helps the younger people connect with their heritage."

Apart from the ubiquitous drinking houses, the community has its own newspaper - The Southern Cross, which was founded in 1875 and is written in Spanish - over 40 regional organisations, including a Joyce Society and Celtic League, and 20 Irish schools.

Jorge Mackey, the editor of a Buenos Aires-based Internet magazine, is at 35 one of the youngest active members of the Argentine-Irish community. "We are all discovering Ireland again," he said. "I've been to Ireland twice and perhaps the most difficult thing is trying to understand what has happened since our ancestors left.

"Because we are so far away, our community has tended to have very romantic views about the country." Mackey is among those who are trying to establish a sense of modern Ireland in Argentina.

"It's important that the younger generation look at Ireland differently. If we want to have strong links in the future then we have to realise that it's no longer a place of leprechauns and castles."