

Colonia Finlandesa:

The Second Ship, and Some Factors that Led to the Demise of a Finnish Colony in Northeast Argentina

Enrique Tessieri



Colonia Finlandesa, a Finnish colony founded by Arthur Thesleff in mid-1906 in Misiones province in Argentina, has attracted a great deal of interest from historians, social scientists and journalists in Finland. With the help of new empirical data collected from the Centro de Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos (CEMLA) database of Buenos Aires, this article aims to look at the following matters: (1) show with greater accuracy the amount, composition, ships and dates of arrivals of the first group of Finns that founded Colonia Finlandesa 102 years ago; and (2) some factors that led to the colony's demise.

CEMLA is an electronic databank based on passenger lists given to Buenos Aires immigration officials during 1882–1930. The CEMLA lists are an excellent source of information on Finnish immigration to Argentina. Such lists provide

Enrique Tessieri is a journalist and anthropologist who has done fieldwork and research on Colonia Finlandesa since 1977. He recently finished his Master's thesis on Colonia Finlandesa that is presently under review at Turku University's social science department. Some salient findings of the thesis appear in this article.

the following data: surname and first name, age, marital status, profession, religion, name of the ship, port of departure, destination and date of arrival. Birthplaces of the immigrants are included on such lists from 1923.

When I first got access to the CEMLA databank in August 2007, an instant surprise awaited me: the first Finns who arrived with Thesleff to Buenos Aires sailed on two as opposed to one ship. Up to know, historians like Olavi Lähteenmäki and others had maintained that the first group that founded Colonia Finlandesa arrived to Buenos Aires in June 1906 on the *Frankfurt* (Lähteenmäki, 1989, p. 168). However, the majority – 88 out of the total of 112 settlers – had sailed on the *Cap Verde* operated by Hamburg Süd.

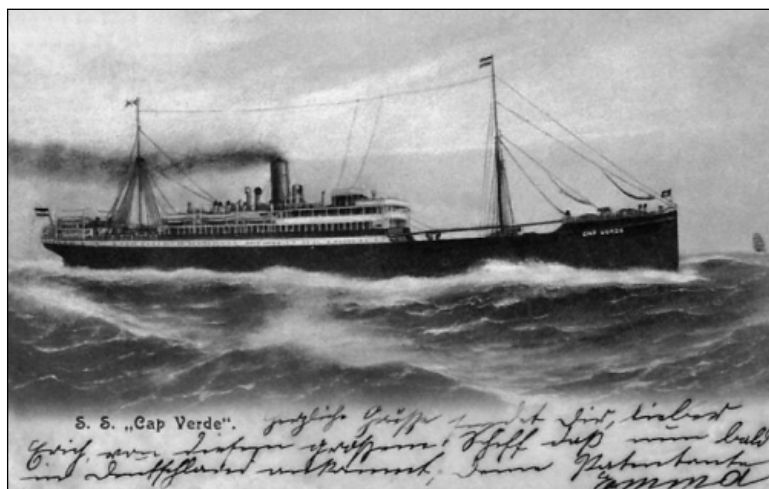
First Finnish Settlers of Argentina

Certainly one of the great mysteries surrounding Thesleff's journey to Argentina is why had the group travelled on two as opposed to one ship? A partial explanation can be traced back to events in the German port of Bremen after the group had arrived by train from Lybeck from their journey on the

Linnea from Helsinki. Supposedly, Thesleff's group had been told by Norddeutscher Lloyd, the company that operated the *Frankfurt*, that the ship's departure had been delayed by a week. The bad news had upset the group considerably (Lähteenmäki, 1989, p. 166). The disappointment felt by these Finns eager to travel to Colonia Finlandesa is understandable. Waiting for a ship to leave is just as bad as waiting in a foreign city for a flight that's been delayed for days.

Norddeutscher Lloyd representatives did everything to appease the Finns, who would now be treated by the company as special passengers as opposed to immigrants. As a gesture of the company's good will, all the women, children, Thesleff, Bengelsdorff and his mother were given second-class tickets on the *Frankfurt* (Lähteenmäki, 1989, pp. 166 & 168). One logical reason why the majority chose to sail on the *Cap Verde* was because it was the first ship that left from Bremen to Buenos Aires.

While Lähteenmäki did a great deal of work to put together the many scattered and lost pieces of the first Finnish group that settled Misiones in 1906, he relied more on interviews, newspaper clippings, passenger and passport lists to formulate a picture of Thesleff's



Picture 1: The first Finns that founded Colonia Finlandesa travelled to Argentina on two ships as opposed to one. The *Cap Verde*, seen in the picture operated by Hamburg Süd, shipped 88 of the 112 passengers that arrived in Buenos Aires on June 17, 1906. The *Frankfurt* arrived 9 days later on June 26, 1906.

Table 1: Arrivals of ships with Finnish nationals to Buenos Aires in 1906

Ship	Date of arrival	Men	Women	Boys	Girls	Total
Cap Verde	June 17, 1906	88	0	0	0	88
Frankfurt	June 26, 1906	5	11	4	4	24
Helgoland	Aug. 7, 1906	9	2	0	1	12
Ortega	Aug. 13, 1906	3	0	0	0	3*
Weimar	Nov. 14, 1906	4	2	3	3	12
Total		109	15	7	8	139

Source: CEMLA.

All children are under 14 years.

*Of all the above-mentioned ships that brought Finns to Buenos Aires in 1906, only the *Ortega* sailed from Liverpool compared with the other four ships that sailed from Bremen. Norddeutscher Lloyd operated the *Helgoland* and *Weimar*. The *Ortega* was owned by Pacific Steam Navigation Company of England.

group. He did not have access to the *Frankfurt*'s passenger list since it was destroyed in World War 2 (Telephone interview with Reino Kero, October 2007). The original passenger list for the *Cap Verde* no

longer exists as well (Telephone interview with Hamburg Süd's Thorsten Paschburg, September 2007). Even so, the names on the CEMLA lists for both ships are based on those handed by the crew

to Buenos Aires immigration officials.

So what new information can we uncover from CEMLA that differs from Lähteenmäki's findings? Before answering this question, let's take a quick look at what Lähteenmäki's findings are. According to him, there were a total of five expeditions that brought the first settlers to the colony in 1906–07. The first expedition, which arrived in June on the *Frankfurt*, comprised of 112 Finns. Joining that group at Bremen were 8 Swedes, raising the total amount of settlers to 120 people (Lähteenmäki, 1989, p. 167).

After the first group, two other ships followed in the summer bringing separately 8 Finns/1 Swede and 7 Finns to Colonia Finlandesa. The final two expeditions took place in autumn and in 1907, when a total of 7 Finns and 2 Swedes arrived. If we add at this point the total number of Finns and Swedes that Lähteenmäki claims arrived to the colony, we end up with 134 Finns and 11 Swedes, or a total of 145 settlers (Lähteenmäki, 1989, pp. 140–141). However, the late historian does not stop here. He believes that a more precise figure for the last expedition in 1907 was 16 versus 7 Finns. With the total now rising to 143 from 134 Finns, he adds 11 more Finns to Colonia Finlandesa's population in 1906–07, bringing the grand total to 165 colonists, comprising of 154 Finns and 11 Swedes (Lähteenmäki, 1989, pp. 140–141).

If we compare Lähteenmäki's findings with CEMLA's, we can conclude that they are generally in the same "ballpark." One interesting coincidence between the two is that the total number of the first group of

Finns that docked in Buenos Aires in June matches the widely acknowledged figure of 112 Finnish passengers. Another near-coincidence is that while Lähteenmäki speaks of a total of five expeditions, CEMLA cites five ships that brought Finns to Argentina in 1906.

There aren't, however, any port entries of Finns to Buenos Aires in 1907 as Lähteenmäki claims.

The five ships that brought Finns to Argentina in 1906 can be placed in two groups: two (*Cap Verde* and *Ortega*) that comprised of men; and three (*Frankfurt*, *Helgoland* and *Weimar*) that were made up of men, women and children.

Some discrepancies worth mentioning between Lähteenmäki and CEMLA are differences in the age structure of the first settlers. If we look at Lähteenmäki's findings, which are in five-year age groups, the only one that matches is the 20–24 age group, with the biggest age group being 25–29 years (39 people) followed by 20–24 years (35) (Lähteenmäki, 1989, p. 146). Contrarily, CEMLA shows the op-

posite, with the 20–24 –age group being the biggest (35) followed by 30–34 years (31). Lähteenmäki states that only 19 Finns belonged to the latter group (Lähteenmäki, 1989, p. 146).

With the help of the CEMLA databank, we can also get a picture of how many Swedes travelled on the same ships as the Finns that went to Buenos Aires. All in all, there were 31 Swedes that were registered in the port of Buenos Aires in 1906. Of these, only eight (six on the *Frankfurt*) travelled on the same ships as the Finns. Lähteenmäki claims that 11 Swedes had sailed to Argentina to found Colonia Finlandesa.

While it is clear that the final destination of the Finnish settlers that travelled on the *Cap Verde* and *Frankfurt* was Colonia Finlandesa, with what certainty can we claim that the same was true for the three ships that followed? Excluding the *Ortega*, which brought three Finnish men, many of the names of the Finns on the *Helgoland* and *Weimar* can be found in my field

notes. Before 1906, Argentina was an unknown destination for Finns until after that historic year. Of the 230 Finns that were registered at the port of Buenos Aires during 1882–1919, 60.4 % came in 1906.

How reliable are the CEMLA lists? Thanks to the field notes from three visits I made to Colonia Finlandesa in 1977–78, when I actively collected kinship data on the settlers, I noticed that some colonists who had settled the colony in 1906 were missing from the CEMLA list. Two that come immediately to mind are Johan Jansson and his wife Fanny Virtanen (Telephone interview with Lars-Erik Häggman in November 2007). There are other settlers as well: Olof Appelgren, Magnus Sand, a postal official from Haukipudas called Nordling and Nyberg, who was probably a Finn (Tessieri's field notes, June 1978).

Even though the CEMLA databank provides a wealth of hitherto-unknown information on the first Finns that settled Colonia Finlandesa, it does not give us the final picture since there are settlers who do not appear on the list. This suggests that the original number that settled the colony was a bit higher than the 139 cited by CEMLA. Moreover, CEMLA could not substantiate Lähteenmäki's claim of 154 Finnish settlers during 1906–07.

Some Factors that Led to the Downfall of Colonia Finlandesa

In my opinion, one of the key factors that caused Colonia Finlandesa's demise was self-inflicted environmental destruction caused mainly

Table 2: Finnish passengers arrivals registered in the port of Buenos Aires during 1882–1919

Period	Males	Females	Total
1882–1899	30	0	3
1900–1909	123	25	148 ¹
1910–1919	71	8	79
1920–1930	583
TOTAL	197	33	813

Source: CEMLA

1) In 1906 there were 139 Finns; 116 males and 23 females. Of the total 230 Finns that were registered at the port of Buenos Aires during 1882–1919, 60.4% (139 Finns) came in 1906. NOTE: The first Finn that arrived in Buenos Aires was a day labourer called George D'Ofthan, age 30, married. He arrived on November 27, 1886.

by tobacco farming. If the land was poor to begin with as many claim, the impact of environmental degradation was even greater. Alongside untenable farming practices, which made it difficult for the settlers to attain a level of economic security, were volatile tobacco and yerba mate (*Ilex paraguayensis*) prices, a popular tea consumed in Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay and southern Brazil. During the Great Depression years of the 1930s, we can see a drastic fall in global agriculture commodity prices that impacted Argentina especially hard. Other factors that hindered the progress of the colony were cultural- linguistic barriers and the fact that the settlers were small farmers who were at the mercy of commodity price fluctuations like tobacco, which fell during the early part of the 1930s (Lunnasvaara, 1932, pp. 14–15).

While the land at Colonia Finlandesa was rocky and poor, there is no empirical data that shows the extent of land that was poorly suitable for farming. However, since good orchard cash crops like yerba mate require a minimum of three meters to grow (Robert Eidt, 1971, p. 28), it shows that some of the land at Colonia Finlandesa was good enough to sustain such a cash crop. Viljo Niskanen, a

Finnish-Argentine farmer, stated that in a 25–50 hectare plot one could find 10 different types of soils. “Some was good and some was poor land,” according to him. (Telephone interview with Viljo Niskanen, November 2007).

In order to understand how land degradation occurred at Colonia Finlandesa, one must look at the growth cycles for a hectare of land. If a farmer wanted to plant tobacco every year and obtain cash, the colonist had to clear 7–9 hectares of forest during 6.5–8.5 years in order to plant tobacco on the same land a second time. A typical growth cycle at Colonia Finlandesa was the following: slash and burn about a hectare of land, plant tobacco and harvest 4–5 months later, plant and grow subsistence crops such as maize for 3–4 years, and allow the land to fallow for 3–4 years until it became a *capuerón*, or second-growth forest. Thereafter, the second cycle would begin: slash and burn, grow tobacco followed by subsistence crops.

Depending on the soil, growing tobacco a second or third time on the same land was risky because the fertility of the soil could have been undermined during the first cycle. The colonists did not apparently use any fertilizers such as compost at Colonia Finlandesa

(Tessieri’s field notes, May-June 1978). Table 3 gives a picture of how much land was degraded versus the first, second and third growth cycles.

Another problem that settlers faced at Colonia Finlandesa was that it was very prone to frost. Located in a valley 60 meters above sea level, frost data collected during 1907–48 from 7 meteorological stations in Misiones show that Colonia Finlandesa had the least amount of frost-free days (281) and the coldest minimum average

(-4.8C). The average frost-free days recorded at the other meteorological stations was 321, with the average minimum temperature being -2.2C (Eidt, 1971, p. 16). Certain plants like citrus fruits had to be planted at higher altitudes to avoid being damaged by frost.

Since environmental degradation was one important factor that undermined Colonia Finlandesa’s ability to maintain settlers and offer a dependable livelihood, it offers us a good explanation why there was such a drastic drop in the 1930s in the number of Finns that settled the colony compared with the previous decades. During the 1930s there were already signs that Colonia Finlandesa’s population was retreating and greying. By the mid-1930s, about 30 years had passed

Table 3: Percentage of farmland degraded due only to tobacco farming (hectares deforested/percentage of total land).

Size of farm	Plantations	6.5–8.5 years	13–17 years	19.5–25.5 years
25 hectares	1	7–9ha/25–36%	2 nd growth	14–18ha/56–72%
	2	14–18ha/56–72%	2 nd growth	21–27ha/84–+100%
50 hectares	1	7–9ha/14–18%	2 nd growth	14–18ha/28–36%
	2	14–18ha/28–36%	2 nd growth	28–36ha/56–72%

Note: The majority of plots at Colonia Finlandesa were on average between 25ha and 50ha.

since Thesleff's group had arrived in 1906 and 20 years by the mid-1940s, when some 40 Finns from Kitee in eastern Finland settled the colony in the 1920s.

Since Colonia Finlandesa never became economically prosperous for the reasons stated previously in this article, the children of the original settlers on reaching adulthood started to move out of the colony to other parts of Misiones and Argentina, fuelling the greying process of the small community. The impact of the second generation moving out and the lack of new Finns settling the colony exacerbated in the 1940s, when the Finnish community became a minority for the first time since it was founded. During this period, the colony was also hit by a long drought that caused forest fires and widespread devastation (Telephone interview with Liisa Makkonen, December 2007 and national weather bureau Servicio Meteorológico Nacional).

Various estimates of the population of Colonia Finlandesa place it in the 1930s between 300 and 500 inhabitants. Even though this sum may include the adjacent municipalities of San Martín, Bonpland, Mártires and Almafuerite, they are very rough estimates and do not tell us if they include the Argentine-born Finnish children and grandchildren of the first generation.

Alcohol Consumption and Colonia Finlandesa

While a lot has been written about "excessive" alcohol usage at the Finnish colony, there is some empirical data that supports this.

The role of social drinking of the Finns at Colonia Finlandesa did not differ from other European countries. The main role of alcohol was to fortify the group and create boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (Douglas, 1987, p. 11). Drinking alone at the colony was seen as a negative matter (Interview with Viljo Niskanen, November 2007).

I asked Artturi Heino, a Finn from Tampere who visited the colony for the first time in 1933 and later lived there, how much alcohol he sold at his store in Colonia Finlandesa, which he owned during 1952–73. Apart from other spirits like *caña*, an alcoholic drink made from sugar cane, vermouth, wine and beer, he claimed that he sold 480 litres of pure alcohol in less than a month (Tessieri, 1978, Field notes May 26, 1978). Apart from alcohol that could be purchased from Heino's store, it was common for the settlers to make a homemade wine called *vino colono*. Some farms distilled spirits as well.

Another Finn that ran a store in San Martín, located next door to Colonia Finlandesa, was Argentine-born Olavi Putkuri. He said that in the 1940s he sold monthly the following amount of alcohol: 240 litres of pure alcohol, 1,200 litres of wine and 360 litres of *caña* (Tessieri's field notes, September 2007).

According to Esa Österberg, an alcohol researcher of the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (Stakes), Colonia Finlandesa was a "wet" community when it came to alcohol consumption. If we take the 480 litres of pure alcohol that Heino sold in a month and com-

pare it with what was consumed in Finland in the 1950s, consumption at the colony was 4–5 times higher if it had a population of 500 inhabitants. Consumption in Finland during that decade was 0.3 litres/month of pure alcohol. Österberg states that consumption at Colonia Finlandesa was as high as in Russia, where 12–13 litres of pure alcohol are consumed annually. If we look at Putkuri's store in the 1940s, alcohol consumption appears to be at the same level as in Finland in 2005, but four times higher than in the 1950s. The estimated population of San Martín in the 1940s was probably about 1,000.

Conclusions

One of the most revealing matters that the CEMLA databank shows about Finnish group migration to Argentina in the early 20th century is that there is still a lot of research to be done on Colonia Finlandesa. The findings of past researchers like Lähteenmäki, which have contributed greatly to our understanding of the beginnings of the Finnish colony in Argentina, offer a good starting point to expand and research meticulously new hitherto-unknown information that may still be out there.

Even though the only person that regulated alcohol consumption at the colony was oneself (Interview with Jussi Palo, August 1984), my research shows that while alcohol was consumed generously at the colony, there were clear rules in the community about what was considered "responsible" and "irresponsible" drinking. My thesis reveals that a "responsible"

drinker was a person that worked during weekdays and drank only on the weekends.

Bibliography

- Centro de Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos (CEMLA) database of Buenos Aires (1883-1839).
- Enrique Tessieri, *Kaukainen maani: Pääteypysäkki Colonia Finlandesa*, Juva 1986.
- Enrique Tessieri, *The second generation Finns of Argentina: A process towards Argentinization, Siirtolaisuus-Migration 2/1979*.
- Enrique Tessieri's field notes 1977-78 and 1984.
- Larry Sawers, *Income Distribution and Environmental Degradation in the Argentine Interior*, *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (2000), pp. 3-33.
- Mary Douglas (ed), *Constructive Drinking - Perspective on Drinking from Anthropology*, Wiltshire 1987.
- National weather bureau Servicio Meteorológico Nacional data from Caa-Yarí during 1910-49.
- Olavi Koivukangas, *Kaukomaiden kaipuu*, Turku 1998.
- Olavi Lähteenmäki, *Colonia Finlandesa Uudessa Suomen perustaminen Argentiinan 1900-luvun alussa*, Helsinki 1989.
- Olavi Paavolainen, *Lähtö ja loitsu*, kirja suuresta levottomudesta, Jyväskylä 1937.
- Robert C. Eidt, *Pioneer Settlement in Northeast Argentina*, Wisconsin 1971.
- T. Z. Sulin, *Suomalainen siirtokunta Misiones'issa*, Suomen silta No 1, 1952.
- Telephone interviews during 2007: Lars-Erik Häggman, Reino Kero, Liisa Makkonen, Viljo Niskanen and Thorsten Paschburg.
- V. Lunnasvaara, *Colonia Finlandesa. Misioneksen suomalais-siirtola*, Terra, Suomen Maantieteellisen Seura aikakauskirja 1932.

MEV-seminaari Siirtolaisuusinstituutissa 2.4.2008

Projektikoordinaattori *Elena Levantovskaja* Turun suomenkielisestä työväenopistosta (vas.) piti esitelmän: "Suomalaiset monikulttuurisessa Pietarin metropolissa".

FT, tutkija *Toivo Flink* Kansallisarkistosta piti esitelmän: "Kotiin karkotettavaksi. Inkeriläisten siirtolaisten paluu ja palauttaminen Neuvostoliittoon vuosina 1944-55".

Molemmat esitelmät olivat erittäin mielenkiintoisia ja kysymyksiä herättäviä. Jäämme uteliaina odotamaan Toivo Flinkin jatkotutkimusten valmistumista. Kuva: Jouni Korhiosaari.

