

An Argentinian Adventure, (a true "Who do you think you are?" story!)

For as long as I can remember I have wanted to visit Argentina. Not because it is a vast country of differing climates, dramatic landscapes and cultures. It isn't even that, as a big "Strictly" fan my favourite dance is the Argentine Tango! My main reason for wanting to go was because my late father, Richard, was born there.



Dad was the son of missionary parents and lived there with his four siblings, until, when he was 17 years old, the family came to live in Bangor, County Down. My childhood was filled with stories of his life there, his friends and his adventure. One tale concerned the killing of a large snake that was about to bite his youngest sister (and we now have the skin as proof of the incident!). I grew up loving family get-togethers at my Nana's house, where we ate South American delicacies such as empanadas, milanesas, kipi and stuffed vine leaves. At the back of her fridge there was always a tin of boiled condensed milk, that she had turned into "Dulce de Leche", and which we spread on slices of bread and butter!

This summer my dream became a reality when I was able to travel out to Argentina to spend some time with my cousin, David, his Argentinean wife, Mariel, and their family, who live in La Banda, in the province of Santiago del Estero.

However my family link with Argentina goes back even further, to the start of the 20th century. My Great Grandfather, Alfred Furniss, was a pioneer missionary in SdE. Born on 18 October 1877 in the city of Sheffield, England, the youngest of three children, Alfred and his sisters were raised in a



Christian home. Young Alfred was diligent in his studies. On completion of primary schooling, he obtained a scholarship for higher education, with architecture and design as principal subjects. As a young student Alfred heard and responded to the call of God by giving up his chosen career to become a pioneer missionary. His idea was that all missionaries went to Africa and so he decided to learn everything he could about this part of the world. He was almost ready to go when he came across a godly man who questioned him about his calling and the decision to go to "the Dark Continent". "Why Africa?" the man asked? "Because everyone goes to Africa," or words to that effect, was Alfred's reply! The man then told him that South America was also a needy place, and this message changed young Alfred's plans. Instead of Africa

he set off for Argentina.

After some very basic training and a boat journey of some 6 weeks, 27-year old Alfred arrived in Buenos Aires in July 1904 to open a new chapter in the history of the country. He lived in the capital for some time working as a photographer to help with his living expenses (a genetic reason, perhaps, for my enjoyment of photography!). At the same time he was learning Spanish and got involved in church activities wherever there was a need.

He eventually moved around the country with other missionaries and finally set foot in Santiago del Estero on 7th June 1907. He commenced evangelical pioneering work throughout that province and ministered there for the next 40 years. In Cordoba he met a young Canadian lady, Mary Mitchell, who was working in an orphanage. They were married and were later blessed with the birth of a daughter, Florence, my paternal Grandmother. Subsequently, they gained a son-in-law and five grandchildren, one of whom was my Dad. My Grandfather, Bertie Bennett, had gone out from Londonderry as a missionary with the Irish Baptist Foreign Mission. He lived and worked in SdE until the family came to Northern Ireland in 1957.

Alfredo Furniss, as he was known in Argentina, had 40 years of ministry struggles, hard work, anxieties and gave of himself without reserve, leaving a legacy that remains to this day. One Christian magazine referred to him as the greatest Christian missionary ever to reach Argentina. His sincerity and calling was such that he once said, "God called me to serve Him in this part of Argentina and here I will remain until He takes me to His presence for all eternity".



Alfredo moved to his celestial home on Thursday, 24th July 1947, having established 17 churches throughout the province of Santiago del Estero, as well as another 24 openings where the Word of God was preached. It was a truly humbling and moving experience for me to visit my Great Grandparents' grave during my visit.

In 1997 my father's brother, Rodney, co-founded 'The Esperanza Trust (Argentina)' a UK based voluntary Christian registered charity. He was keen to try to meet the immense material, social and spiritual needs of SdE in collaboration with local evangelical churches and Christian groups, and in some way maintain the family legacy in the Province.

My daughter, Claire has just completed two years of her course in Primary Education with Modern Languages at the University of Stirling. She was keen to improve her Spanish so decided to spend the summer vacation from university in Argentina. A large area of interest for the Esperanza Trust is education, so it was decided that Claire would give voluntary help in three of the schools within the Province. There she would work alongside staff, teaching some English, taking some culture classes about Ireland and also using the opportunity to share the Gospel. Staying with my cousin and his family, it was also a wonderful opportunity for her to improve her Spanish speaking skills, as well as assisting with local church youth and children's work.

Claire had the most amazing, blessed time in all the places that she worked and her Spanish improved dramatically in the ten weeks before I arrived. Indeed, I couldn't have done without her translating for me, even though I had tried to learn a little Spanish before I travelled out to Argentina. (Why, oh why, did my Dad never teach me?!).

It was a joy for me to visit two of the schools where Claire had been working. I will never forget the hugs and kisses of welcome from the children in the little school in Brea Pozo, where the Esperanza Trust has both helped with building projects and by sponsoring the education of children from nearby towns. Their greeting of *Bienvenido Tia Laura* (welcome Aunt Laura) is still ringing in my ears (staff are referred to Aunt or Uncle). It was wonderful to see the boarders' dormitories, where a donation from the Castlewellan Holiday Week family will help to provide air conditioning units, which will be well used during the blistering hot summer months when temperatures can reach

50°C!



Claire was also involved in an Evangelical campaign, helping as a translator for an American E3 team, in the town of Clodomira. In conversation with Fabian, the Pastor, she discovered that the premises they were renting for use as a church building had been used by Alfredo Furniss to hold prayer meetings and bible studies. As a fifth generation child, Claire was

sharing the same gospel message, as her Great, great grandfather before her! Tears flowed down my face as Claire took me to meet a lady in her eighties, whose mother had come to faith under my Great Grandfather's ministry. She even showed me a painting Alfredo had done for her as a gift.

Our time in Argentina was so special and I could relate many more stories. There were tears when we left our family in Santiago del Estero to have a holiday adventure of our own. We were privileged to be able visit Salta, and see the beauty of the pre-Andes mountains and the Rio Grande Valley in Jujuy Province. The spectacular grandeur of the magnificent Iguazu Falls moved us both to sing "How Great Thou art", with the sound of water rushing in our ears. Finally, before coming home, we spent some time in the capital city, Buenos Aires, visiting the iconic sights of the Casa Rosada, the Recoleta cemetery (with Eva Peron's grave) and even trying out a few tango moves!



For me the legacy left by my Great Grandfather has affected me the most. One afternoon I had the privilege of visiting The Colegio Evangelico Alfredo Furniss , a school named in his honour. At the end of the day the children gather for the lowering of the school flag. I was truly humbled when my name was mentioned and I was applauded just because they were honoured by the presence of Alfredo's Great Granddaughter! Yet since returning home and seeking out more information about him, I doubt that he would have wanted such recognition. I am proud to be a part of the great Christian legacy that he has left in Santiago del Estero. He endured many difficult times of oppression, even imprisonment, and from the excerpts that I have read from articles he wrote for a Christian magazine, there were times when he felt like giving up. He truly was a faithful servant of God and the ongoing work of the Esperanza Trust is a legacy that I now believe my generation, and that of my daughter, need to maintain.

It is very fitting that the dining hall in the little school in Brea Pozo has this text on the wall from Galatians 6 v 9, "*So don't get tired of doing what is good. Don't get discouraged and give up, for we will reap a harvest of blessing at the appropriate time*" (NLT).



Five generations on, the harvest that was sown by a young man all the way from Sheffield is a living reality. I thank and praise God for the life and witness of a remarkable man, my Great Grandfather, Alfredo Furniss.

If you would like to learn more about "The Esperanza Trust (Argentina)" you can do so here: <http://esperanzatrust-argentina.org.uk/>

I am also very willing to come and speak to any Church group about my visit and the work of the Trust. You can contact me at brianlaura.griffith@btopenworld.com



Laura Griffith