President Peron's Wife Wields Power, Too

This is the fifth of six articles by Paul Miller, editor and publisher of The Times-Union, on an air trip to South America with a group of U. S. publishers, radio executives and government officials, as guests of Pan American World Airways.

By PAUL MILLER

They call her Evita, diminutive of Eva—and some of us were to hear the name chanted in schools and on the streets of Buenos Aires.

Much is said, less written, of her background, but apparently it is not such as to qualify her for high society. Her age is 28 or 31 or 32, depending on who is asked. She came up with her husband in the Peron revolution. She is of slightly more than medium height, carries herself like a Powers model, dresses as if for Twentieth Century-Fox, and withal has as many ideas as the Eleanor Roosevelt of the 1930s.

She is Eva Peron, First Lady of Argentina.

Chic and poised, she entered the room of the Presidential Palace where our group of North Americans, on a flying visit to Buenos Aires as guests of Pan American World Airways, had been interviewing her husband for an hour.

She slipped into a chair at her husband's side. They were in the middle at one side of a long table around which we sat, some 40 and more. President Peron motioned toward Eva and smiled around the table, as if to say:

"Well, see what you can do with her."

• • •

Nearly everybody who reads has heard of the Social Aid Fund which Eva Peron heads and runs. Judging by the stories, nearly everybody in Argentina has "contributed," one way or another. One story: A union, signing a new contract with a big retroactive pay increase, contributed one month's pay of each member to Evita's Fund. (Why not—Evita had "favored" the settlement!) Another: A musician, during intermission at a night club, said he "contributed" by working one day in 10 at a fine downtown restaurant run by the Fund.

How Eva Peron autographed menu in her restaurant.

"The Fund has been built up by contributions from workers," said Eva Peron. "That's where it comes from."

No figures were mentioned ever, but even the president conceded the Fund is enormous. He said:

"If the Fund succeeds in the future as it has in the past, it will soon have more money than Peron has to work with!"

• • •

Evita proved as adept at avoiding getting out on a limb under questioning as had her husband while he was being interviewed before her arrival.

What was her greatest ambition?

"To help build a bridge of understanding between the government and the people. Because only by bringing the people and their leaders together can we defeat Communism." And so on.

She was asked about her Fund's projects — a model orphanage, the Children's Village, working girls' hotel. Her reply was an invitation that got 8 or 9 of us up at 7 a. m. two days later for a three-hour tour as her personal guests.

But in all things, she emphasized repeatedly, she was merely a collaborator. Her husband was responsible for just about everything thereabouts.

(Wives, please note: In one short paragraph of a recent speech, Eva Peron referred to her husband as "a star," "a seer" and "our illustrious president.")

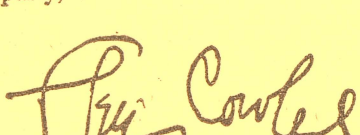
• • •

Amon Carter, publisher of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, spoke up to thank the First Lady for giving her husband "some credit." Mr. Carter said he hoped word of this commendable attitude would get around among the wives back home. Chuckling, the interpreter translated all this for Evita, who joined in the laughter.

Actually, many say that Eva in time may outshine Juan. Some say, too, that if it were not for her influence, some of the extreme measures of the Peron government might never have been taken. Some among the opposition say that they might be able to "get along with Peron" if it were not for the influence of Evita.

• • •

Later, I confessed to Fleur Cowles, editor of Flair magazine, who with her husband "Mike" we were fortunate to have in our party, that I'd never be able adequately to describe Eva Peron back in Rochester. I said I would like to sign Fleur as Buenos Aires Fashion Expert for The Gannett Newspapers. So here's the way Mrs. Cowles writing in my notebook, described Eva Peron:



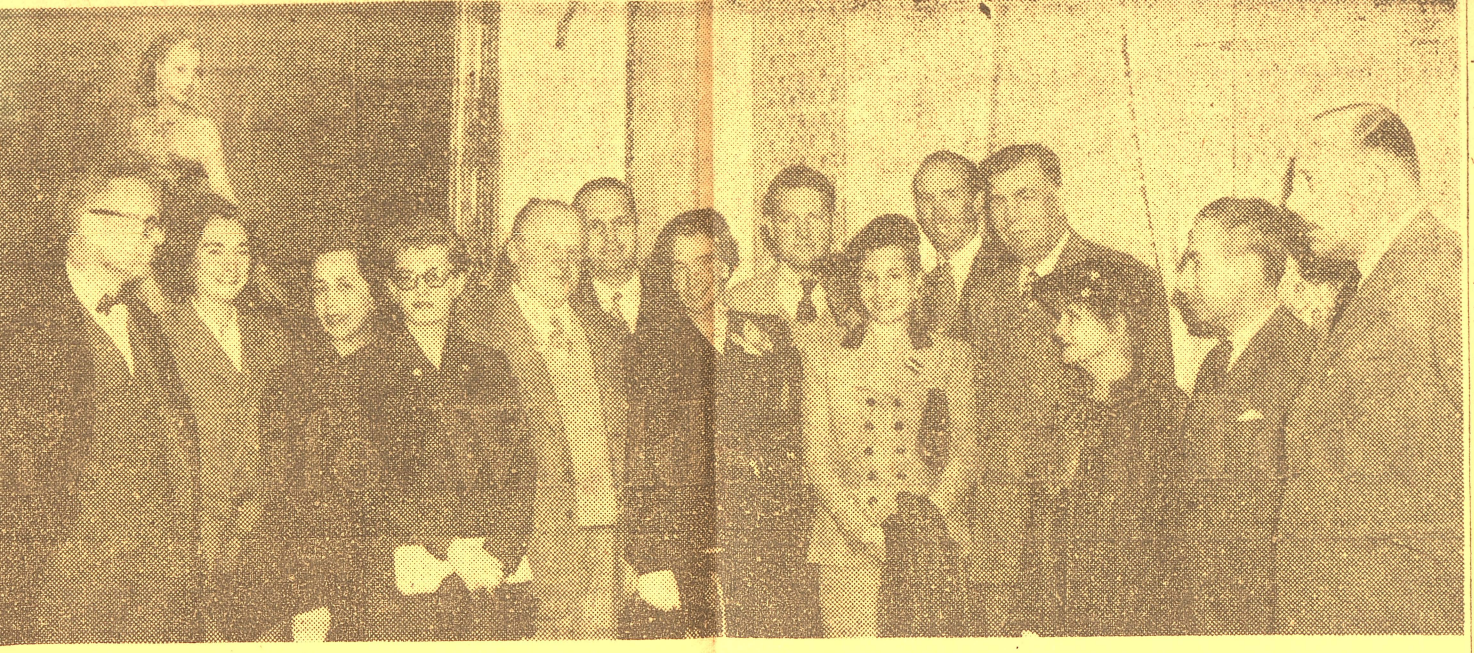
How Fleur Cowles signed her description of Eva.

Navy blue Jacques Fath wool suit, piped in black; under it a jacquard silk blouse of powder blue. SPIKED by a copy of a native orchid in diamonds and rubies (flown here for her from Paris) by Van Cleef and Arpels. The orchid was seven inches high and 'petal-spread' was five inches wide. Stones were probably a total of 2,000 carats!

Her hair is now worn sleek and straight, with a bun in back. Over it she casually planted a navy blue velvet beret embroidered in jeweled butterflies (also Paris).

Her pumps (simple) were navy suede. Her furs, eight skins of sable. Her ring, a 'badge' of enormous baguette diamonds. Her ear

ONLY ONCE did Eva Peron appear at any disadvantage. In three tries, she couldn't break the champagne bottle to christen the Clipper Friendship. Finally, she was persuaded to take a good, old-fashioned rolling-pin swing at it—and the job was done.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Gardner Cowles, president, Cowles Magazines Inc.; Mrs. George Smith, wife of Pan American World Airways manager at Buenos Aires; Mrs. Lester Mallory, wife of counselor at U. S. Embassy, Buenos Aires; Mrs. Fleur Cowles, editor of Flair; Richard E. Berlin, president, The Hearst Corporation; Willard L. Thorp, U. S. assistant secretary of state for economic affairs; Mrs. Juan Trippe; Paul Miller; Eva Peron; Angier Biddle Duke, second secretary of the U. S. embassy; Senator Edwin C. Johnson; Mrs. Ogden Reid, publisher, New York Herald Tribune; Percy Forster, Buenos Aires manager of International News Service; Raul A. Magueirat, chief of protocol to the president. Note life-size portrait of Evita on wall. Government photographer snapped this picture of group which Eva Peron took on personal tour of welfare projects.

rings, graduated baguettes in form of rings. Jewels were for tailored appearance—more lush of course for the more formal clothes.

• • •

If diamonds are a girl's best friend, Eva need never feel lonely. One of our party who knows about such things guessed that the jewelry she wore at that meeting might have had a total value of a quarter-million dollars!

Eva Peron's welfare projects are country-wide. A story is told, probably apocryphal, that seeing her departing on a tour, the president questioned the jewelry she was wearing, suggesting poor politics in such display.

But she won the argument, so the story goes, and went on to make some point like this to her cheering followers:

She herself once was a "descamisado." Now, as a Peronista, she wears diamonds!

"Descamisado" means literally "a man without a shirt to his back." It was the scornful nickname given to Gen. Peron's partisans during his early-day struggle to power. "I love the descamisados," says Evita repeatedly in her speeches.

• • •

Incidentally, Evita wore entirely different jewelry when she christened our plane—the Clipper Friendship—the next afternoon.. And still another complete change when she greeted some of us for coffee at the presidential residence at 8:30 a. m. July 5.

The coffee marked the beginning of an amazing display by this much-discussed woman—a display of energy, of political acumen, of organizing and executive know-how, and of entertaining ability.

In three hours, traveling in two government limousines escorted by motorcycle cops and accompanied by secret service men, we:

Traipsed in and through a model home-school for children with Evita and the mother superior explaining and describing, while the carefully-coached children shrilled repeatedly a song about Evita—or simply shouted "E-vee-ta!" at every sight of her.

Likewise the grounds and buildings of "Children's Village," a model six acre development of school buildings and halls, complete with kitchen and infirmary, but surrounded on the "streets" about the grounds by child-sized bank, bungalow, city hall, stores and so on, all completely—and richly—furnished.

Likewise also a five-story downtown building, with a restaurant on lower floors and a roof furnished for sun-bathing, erected primarily as a hotel for working girls. All operated by Evita's Fund!

One of our small party, a man who has spent years in politics, shook his head and said:

"I learned more about politics this morning than in all the rest of my life." Evita had a word, a smile, a pat for scores of teachers and workmen and children.

• • •

In the entire tour, terminated with cocktails in the lounge of the working girls' building, there was not a slip-up. It was a smoothly arranged and perfectly executed show for the popeyed visitors from the North.

As we would approach a classroom, the teacher would quickly distribute blue and white paper flags lettered Evita. The "Evita song" would swell up. Evita never tried to shush-shush the songs and cheers. She appeared neither embarrassed nor particularly gratified. Just accepted everything as a matter of course.

I, for one, thought the orphanage, the Children's Village, the hotel for girls—all of it—too showy to be anything else but show. Every toy brand new, every floor polished, every bed perfectly made, every dresser top immaculate and orderly . . . yet there were clothes in the closets and sheets beneath the bedspreads. While it looked like strictly a propaganda setup, I had to admit there were aspects that belied this conclusion. The politician who confessed that he learned politics from Evita said:

"I can't quite straighten out in my mind all that I have seen. I'll have to think it over a while before I can form any conclusions." I agreed.

Tomorrow: What do South Americans think of their neighbors to the North?