

Among the Daunting Vistas, a Dauntless Mayor

By Shirley Christian

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PUERTO CISNES, Chile – “You didn’t expect to find such an entertaining mayor here,” declared the woman who rules Puerto Cisnes, population 1,098.

Then Eugenia Pirzio Biroli pounded the table with both fists in obvious delight at her own running commentary on Chilean politics and the world in general.

The woman in the black turban, immense blue tinted glasses, wool poncho and strands of beads was born in Turin 82 years ago, the daughter of a general who served the Italian monarchy. She was educated to be a Greek and Latin scholar, and married a Chilean professor who studied in Italy and brought her to Chile.

Today she and her town are a stop on the recently inaugurated Carreterra Austral or South Highway. The name is a euphemism for a one-lane gravel road stretching across 650 miles of awesome, and little known natural wonders in Southern Chile.

A Victorious Campaign

It is not fully accurate to say that Puerto Cisnes lies on the South Highway. It sits beside the sparkling blue waters of a fjord about 25 miles off the highway connected by another dirt and gravel road that is a monument to the determination and style of Mayor Pirzio. Officials say that to get the connecting road built, the Mayor used such tactics as going to Santiago and sitting outside the offices of cabinet ministers with her knitting until they received her.

The South Highway is part of President Augusto Pinochet’s geopolitical vision of uniting all of this skinny land – as long as the United States is wide, stretching from one of the world’s hottest, driest deserts in the north to windy, frigid Cape Horn of sailing legend in the South.

It is also of importance to the general’s campaign to win voter approval in the coming plebiscite to extend his rule for eight more years.

Only 84,000 live in the area served by the road but the general’s campaign message is that it represents promises fulfilled and hope for a better future for the entire country.

Planning Preceded Pinochet

The political parties seeking to block the general's continuance in power point out that planning for the road began in the early 1960s and that several segments were built by the elected governments that preceded military rule.

They contend that if an elected government had ever been allowed to hold power for 15 years, time that General Pinochet will complete on September 11, then it also might have finished the road.

For all practical purposes, Mayor Pirzio has been running Puerto Cisnes since she arrived from Santiago in 1957 to create a school for troubled urban children. Later, she was appointed *regidor*, or manager, and eventually the post was upgraded to mayor.

Indeed up and down the highway, people tend to express support for the President or lack of interest and ambivalence about politics. But in more populace areas of the country, polls indicate that the general's victory is far from certain.

The newest stretch of the road includes three long ferry crossings in the area just south of Puerto Montt. Until the new road was opened, Puerto Montt was the southern most point that could be reached by land from the capital, a distance that slightly more than 600 miles on the paved Pan American Highway. Cochrane, the new road's end is 1,250 miles south of Santiago.

The new road winds through the densest of forests, skirts lakes and fjords, clings to mammoth rock formations and passes within sight of spectacular water falls and ice and snow formations.

It cost \$192 million to build, including the ferries and hundreds of miles of side roads linking small towns. Of that amount, \$155 million was spent by the Pinochet Government on work done since 1976. About 1,500 men worked on it, from the army, the Ministry of Public Works, and private contractors. At least 10 workers died in construction accidents. Trees cut down to open much of the path for the road were used to form the roadbed under the gravel surface. Millions of tons of rock were dynamited.

How the Area was Colonized

Antonio Horvath, a road engineer for the Ministry of Public Works described it as a "penetration road" that provides access to 16% of the Chilean territory. He called the region one of the most diverse in the world, one of the least populated, and one of the least contaminated.

Average annual rainfall varies widely from 40 to 100 inches. The weather is usually crisp and cool with weather seldom rising above 70.

Almost no one lived in the area until the early part of this century, when colonists began to cross the Andes from Argentina mostly to raise cattle.

As a young man in the Sudetenland, Walter Hopperdietzel read a book about the region by an explorer named Hans Steffen. In 1935, at age 24, he arrived with three friends and built a grass-roofed house beside the fjord at Puyuguapi.

He now lives in a two-story wooden house on the same site and looks out from his kitchen window at vacationers camping at the water's edge.

Now 77, small and bold, he spends everyday at his rug factory, where about thirty women earn about \$70 a month making hand-tight wool carpets ordered by clients in Santiago and elsewhere.

There is widespread hope that the road will bring more people to the region and increase production and exports of forestry products, fish, and minerals.

Over the next two years the Government intends to complete an additional 77 miles of the highway from Cochran to Puerto Yungay but beyond that point, nature appears to represent an insurmountable obstacle.

Just south of Puerto Yungay lies an ice field covering 5000 square miles. It extends from the Argentine border until it drops abruptly into the fjords and channels of the Pacific. This creates a stretch of about 200 miles in which engineers say there is not enough dry land on which to build a road. Solid land resumes in the area just north of the Strait of Magellan.