

# The other Nicaragua

by Gloria Fisher

It could be Albina. The serious-faced minister, dressed in black, shakes each hand as his flock leaves the small white church. Little girls, in ruffled dresses, clutch their Sunday School papers in their hands as they make their way home over cobblestone streets.

Young men in the park—running shorts, knee-high socks, hats riding jauntily on Afros, giant stereos close to the ear—rock to the latest Michael Jackson sounds. The basketball court resounds with shouts as the tall forward lays in his best stuff shot. The older, more serious minds discuss politics—their curlers carefully hidden under stocking caps, their eyes hidden behind shades.

Here the similarity ends. Scrawled on the wall in English and in Spanish is "The children want Peace". A soldier, age 15, stands nearby, rifle in hand.

This is not Albina. It is Bluefields, a city of 20,000 on Nicaragua's Atlantic coast. Bluefields is a fishing/farming community; its residents are English speaking Blacks with a minority of Mosquito Indians and Spanish speaking Nicaraguans.

## The Revolution comes to Bluefields

The Revolution has come to Bluefields and the people have responded. Over 600 young men and women voluntarily serve in the nation's military; others are members of the militia, guarding the city and the nearby fields from attack. The women and older men join "vigilance" brigades—walking the streets at night to guard against "contra" activity.

The village seems peaceful enough, steaming in the tropical heat. But this belies the fact that it is considered to be a prime target for a U.S. backed invasion. The mission (as planned for the Bay of Pigs attack on Cuba) would be to gain some territory, set up a provisional government, and let that government ask for massive U.S. aid to overthrow the legitimate Nicaraguan government.

If that invasion does come, the minister in his black suit, the little girls in their ruffled dresses, the basketball players in the park and the young soldier will be its victims.

## People planning for a brighter future

Isolated from the Spanish-speaking Pacific Coast by miles of mountains and jungles, Bluefields is reachable only by bus and boat—a 10-hour trip—and by air.

Bluefields missed much of the terror of the Somoza regime but the people suffered from years of neglect and mistreatment by government officials who owned most of the business and took the profits while giving nothing in return.

Willie Hammond, manager of the Bluefields Hotel, explained, "The Somoza officials treated people in an insulting way and they took but never did anything for the people. The new government is trying to make Bluefields a part of Nicaragua—they consider the peoples' wants and needs. Life is much better now."

Do the people support the Sandanista government? "When people receive the gift of reading, do they support those who gave it to them?"

The 1980 literacy campaign taught many residents of Bluefields—previously illiterate—to read and write. Adult education programs assure their continued progress. Bluefields has free public schools, for its children, where they are taught in English and in Spanish.

Prior to the Revolution, only those who could pay went to government schools or to schools operated by the Moravian and Catholic churches.

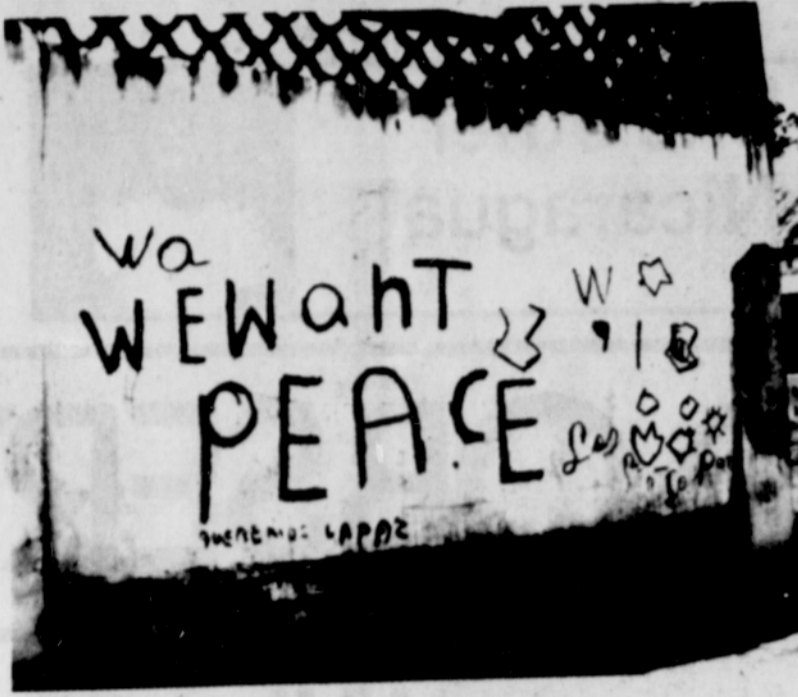
Thirty-five young people recently graduated from Bluefield's new nursing school and other vocational courses are available. Young people can attend the university in Managua, studying in English, or can even study in Cuba or the Soviet Union.

A new hospital is under construction and medical care is free for everyone, with an emphasis on prevention. Before, the poor had no medical care and the life expectancy was 50 years.

## "Production and Defense"

Bluefield's link with the rest of Nicaragua and the outside world will be improved with the opening of the international airport under construction. Landings on Bluefield's old airport, which slopes downhill and has no lights, are hazardous and infrequent. The new port facilities will allow direct trade with the Caribbean and Europe, avoiding the long trip through the Panama Canal to Corinto, Nicaragua's only seaport. The first 15 kilometers of new highway linking Bluefields and Managua have been built; the distant future holds a railroad and perhaps a canal through southern Nicaragua.

Bluefields is dotted with new houses and some streets, now a sea of mud, are being paved with Nicaragua's traditional paving stones. "The people asked that the streets be repaired, so the government is working on it," Hammond explained. A new water system—Bluefields is now dependent on rain water and wells—is in the planning stage. The city has telephones for the first time and a tower on a nearby hill brings television from Managua. Newspapers arrive every day by boat and a local quarterly is published in English. A new library serves the new reading public but books in English are still in short supply.



A common theme in Nicaragua is the desire for peace. "Contra" raiders kill peasant families and burn homes and crops.



A mother and her children are off to visit their neighbors.



A new bicycle for Christmas...



The main street of Bluefields—with its outdoor markets—could be in any U.S. city.



Jesus is Black: Manger scene in the City Park.



Home from Sunday School at the neighborhood Moravian Church.

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Matthew Henson, the Maryland-born Black who placed the flag of the United States at the North Pole in 1909, was a skilled navigator with a fluent command of the Eskimo language.

Ray Robinson, who won fame as one of history's greatest boxers, got his nickname "Sugar Ray" when a sportswriter described him as the "sweetest fighter... sweet as sugar."

The Romans named the Mediterranean Sea. The name means *middle of the earth*.

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