

American's view progress and problems in Nicaragua

by Robert Lothian

This is the second article in a series about the experiences of a group of Portlanders who were in Nicaragua in February helping harvest cotton in an international brigade.

We spent our first night in Managua in a stuffy, windowless room behind an open-air "chicken shack" restaurant. The room had a single neon light and a fan that didn't work. We weren't there ten minutes when a large cockroach jumped down the back of one of us. We caught it and put it out for the night.

It was hot and sunny when we went for a walk the next morning. Pedestrians crowded the street. Some carried things on their heads. Trucks and busses with bad mufflers filled the air with noise and fumes. Taxis honked.

Walking along, we noticed a Four-Hour Martinizing laundry with a revolutionary banner draped across the front. Nearby was the Mercado Oriental—an exotic old market, sprawling for blocks, where everything under the sun is bought and sold. We breakfasted on fried cheese and bananas with gallo pinto (small red beans and rice, the national breakfast dish), served up by a woman cooking over a charcoal fire on the sidewalk.

Central Managua is still a wasteland of vacant lots, overgrown streets and shells of old buildings left over from the 1972 earthquake which killed 20,000. Families occupy ruined buildings, haul water in buckets, burn trash in the vacant lots, and hang their wash out to dry over the rubble. Scrap lumber and thin plywood shacks with rusty tin roofing take up block after block.

Resources which could go toward alleviating poverty must go into defense against the CIA-financed contras. In spite of economic problems caused by the border war and US trade embargo, the revolutionary government has instituted reading, inoculations, subsidized food, free health care and education programs. Nicaragua

remains poor, but we were told the poor have it better there than in the other Central American countries.

We passed a several-block-long mural depicting the history of Nicaragua in bright colors. Slogans decorated the walls and banners flew over the streets patrolled by guards toting the ever present AK-47. East German troop trucks with Sandinista drivers roared by. We noticed many slit trench bomb shelters and sandbagged guard posts.

The next night, we met for orientation at a conference center outside Managua. We learned that we would be going to a 4,000-acre state-owned cotton plantation on the northwest coast, called Apascali. In the three days remaining in Managua, we

surrection as bullets whizzed through the thin walls of their house. We were told that plans for Ciudad Sandino include paved roads, a new hospital, more telephones, a bean and corn cultivators' cooperative, and a cultural center.

We arrived at Apascali after dark. Our first impressions were formed in the revolutionary greetings offered by farm leaders, who led the crowd of workers, soldiers, children and Americans in revolutionary chants. Then, with a lot of feeling, the Nicaraguans sang the Sandinista Hymn for us, which we were to hear many times during our stay. Singing with the campesinos under the stars in Nicaragua Libre—a moving ex-

We were up at 5 a.m. for breakfast and our first daylight views of this wild and adventurous place. We discovered a small village with several dozen farm buildings, workers' row houses, a store with minimal supplies and a baseball field arranged around a dusty open area bordered by a row of dusty trees. The cotton processing plant droned nearby. Crop dusters buzzed the fields down toward the ocean, which stretched away to the west. Trucks and tractors raised clouds of dust. It was early, but already young

girls were washing clothes by hand. Women patted ground corn into tortillas. A large group of Nicaraguans took off for the fields, riding on a trailer.

Looking north over the fields and across the Gulf of Fonseca, we could see the mountains of Honduras and a huge volcano in El Salvador. We learned that on the day of our arrival, contra airplanes had attacked a Sandinista military post near the road to Apascali. The Nicaraguans told us that sinister planes flew over the farm, and that

they could see the lights of US warships off the coast at night. They had built several bomb shelters and we helped them build another. The farm was guarded by a militia detachment.

The Nicaraguans seemed more than happy to have us. Aside from the spectacle of having 150 North Americans in their midst, with their fancy paraphernalia from the wealthy north, we seemed to offer them some protection from contra attacks.

Next: We pick cotton.



Nicaraguan children with their puppies. (Photo: Kris Altucher)

listened to lectures, visited markets and talked to Americans from New York, Georgia and many other states.

We also took a day trip to Ciudad Sandino, a former shantytown on the outskirts of Managua which is becoming a showcase of the revolution. We toured a free health clinic there, organized and built by neighborhood women ("while the men played baseball," said the head nurse). We also talked to a family who had spent three days in their tile-lined shower during the 1979 in-

perience.

We had our first meal on the farm—salty fish, beans, rice, tortillas and coffee. Then, dog tired, we claimed our bunks in the dusty old wooden bunkhouse with a naked bulb hanging from the ceiling. Some of us soon found that large mice inhabited this bunkhouse. They scratch on the walls and run over faces. Also, by now, many of us had diarrhea and must take trips to the latrine throughout the night. We didn't get much sleep.



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