

Life on the Nicaraguan cotton crew

by Robert Lothian

This is the third article in a series about the experiences of a group of Portlanders who picked cotton in Nicaragua in February as part of an international solidarity brigade.

Each brigade had a name. We named ours after Maura Clark, the American nun murdered in El Salvador. She had spent considerable time helping out in Nicaragua. The brigade previous to ours was the Martin Luther King Brigade. They left a large wall painting of King at the farm next to ours.

By 7:30 on our first morning at Apascalí, it was already getting hot. We waited—organizing 150 Americans was not easy. Orientation went through the morning. We were filled in on the history of the farm, its problems, and changes brought by the revolution.

Apascalí had been owned by millionaire landowner Alfonso Robelo. He was anti-Somoza and a member of the first revolutionary government, but later split with the Sandinistas, decapitalized his vast land holdings and left the country. Now, allied with Eden Pastora's contra forces on the southern border, he has been mentioned in the news, lately, as a possible candidate for leader of a contra government.

For four years, Robelo reaped the profits but returned little to the farm. Debts piled up. Equipment broke down. The farm was nationalized in 1983, but the effects of war, decapitalization and a closing off of trade with the U.S. are evident. Due to the U.S. trade embargo, parts for U.S. made equipment are unobtainable. When a U.S.-made tractor or pump breaks down, it can't be repaired. Production problems result and water, the lifeblood of the farm, isn't always available. A labor shortage added to the farm's problems. The Nicaraguans worried that they might not be able to get the entire harvest in, even though the cotton was desperately needed for foreign exchange.

We picked cotton for the first time that afternoon, plucking "beards" of cotton from star-shaped brackets on the six-foot high bushes and stuffing it into bags tied



A Nicaraguan family.

(Photo: Kevin Gerian)

to our waists, which we dragged along the rows. About 20% of the cotton is harvested by hand, and 80% by combine machines. The fields had been dusted with herbicides, which removed the leaves and made picking easier and the cotton cleaner, but which made us worry about poisoning.

The picking wasn't hard, just extremely hot and dusty. We drank a lot of foul-tasting iodine-purified water, talked and took breaks. The Americans picked an average of 30 lbs. in a 5- to 6-hour day, for which we received board and room. The Nicaraguans picked 150-200 lbs during ten-hour days and up to 300 lbs. some days, six and seven days a week. They were paid one cordoba for every two pounds of cotton picked, or about \$2.50-\$3.00 per day. It's a meager wage, but according to a CBS report from El Salvador, cotton pickers there get about \$1.00 per day. Kitchen workers at Apascalí received approximately the same wage as field workers for their long shifts.

Some children worked in the fields, although they appeared to come in at noon while the adults stayed. School vacation coincides

with the harvest, which runs from January into March.

The cotton went from the fields to the processing plant, the "gin", in tractor-drawn trailers. There, modern machinery operated around the clock to clean and bail raw cotton ready for export.

Santo Torres worked in the processing plant, operating a bailing machine on the graveyard shift. He worked 12-hour shifts, seven days a week for 70 cordobas a day; about \$2.50. It wasn't clear whether the long hours were required, were worked out of dedication to the revolution, or whether the workers just wanted to get the work in while the harvest lasted. When I described for Santo wage scales for factory workers in the U.S., he seemed truly amazed. I wondered whether he could comprehend these riches or I his poverty.

Santo's ten-year old daughter, Rosa, and six-year old son, Elmer, weren't shy around the Americans. Elmer's pet parakeets perched on his head to the delight of the camera happy foreigners. Rosa washed clothes by hand, but need a block of wood to stand on to reach the sink.

Obvious results of the revolution at the farm included polio vaccinations, subsidized food, a popular militia and a farmworkers' union. A women's group was just getting organized.

The union meant power to change wages and conditions of everyday life which the workers never had under Somoza. Union leaders and government managers met weekly as equals, and they worked out a new agreement each month. There was a meeting while we were there during which wages for field and kitchen workers were adjusted. Prizes for the most productive workers were also discussed. The grand prize was to be a furnished house worth 40,000 cordobas and a trip to Cuba.

Discussing the problem of alcoholism at the farm, the workers told the manager that they were keeping a list of problem drinkers and would call in the police if someone got out of hand rather than try and take care of it themselves. One man had been killed in a brawl the previous week, and farm equipment had been damaged by drunken operators. The workers also confronted the overall manager of six state-run farms in the area

about the labor shortage, and requested that a detachment of soldiers be sent to help with the harvest and guard against contras.

Our routine at Apascalí was: up each day at five, breakfast, gather and move out to the fields by 6:30, then work until noon. Then lunch and a long break during the hot early afternoon. Sometimes we worked again in the late afternoon, sometimes we didn't. Food was rice, beans tortillas, sweetened coffee, and sometimes beef, vegetables, fish and fruit juice. We drowsed through the nights, sweating in our bunks. Rice and beans stuck in our throats. Many of us got sick.

While we probably didn't help much materially with our picking, we learned a lot and made friends with many of the Nicaraguans at the farm. We promised to write. Back in the U.S., we established an aid campaign for Apascalí. A tractor repair kit and a new pump will be sent soon.

Next: We talk to more workers about their lives, play with children and experience a tragic accident at Apascalí.

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Street Beat
by Lanita Duke and Richard Brown

With the Election returns now counted, the Street Beat team asked, "How did you feel about the election results?"

Patricia Andrews
House Mother
"My three sisters live in Columbia Villa. We voted against Ivancie. We did not like the way he treated Commissioner Jordan."

Connie Leachman
Student
"I think there would be a change. I see the change coming from Bud Clark."

Lori Joseph
Unemployed
"I'm very happy for Margaret Carter. It seems like she was a good candidate. I started to vote for Ed Leek, but when I found out he let juveniles out that commit crimes, I did not want him to represent me."

Pat Shockey
State-wide Fund Raiser for NOW
"I feel terrific that Bud Clark won. It is time for a change to get some of these hack politicians out of the way to make way for someone who could make a change. It's time for women to make a change"

W.M. Pixie
Retired
"I'm not really interested. Politicians do not have any guts. They spend all our money for the state."

Betty Ehresman
Nurse's Aid
"I hoped Mondale would have gotten it but after Hart's speech, I don't know."