

Nicaragua moves towards the 20th century

by Robert Lothian

This is the fourth article in a series about the experiences of a group of Portlanders who were in Nicaragua in February helping with the cotton harvest.

We were resting after picking cotton one afternoon when Cecelia Gutierrez, who swept out the bunkhouse each day, invited us to her house. She, her husband who picked cotton and their four children lived in one of the workers' rowhouses next to our bunkhouse.

Their one-room house was smaller than many American living rooms. It had a sink, but there were no windows. The door and louvers under the eaves provided light and air. A hammock was stretched across the room and in a corner some cardboard boxes were stored. Behind a partition was a bed. Her children and some friends, some naked, were having a good time playing with sticks and tin cans on the cement floor.

Cecelia told us she was from Honduras, where she started working at age 12 and had her first child at 16. She was now 23 and had lived at Apascoli for six years.

Her husband picked about 200 lbs. of cotton a day. Their combined income provided subsistence with no frills. Her stained and tattered turquoise dress would cost over three days combined wages to replace, she said.

She wanted to live in Managua some day, but thought it would be too expensive with four children. She also wanted to travel all over the world, especially to Cuba and the U.S. Some people on the farm had been given the opportunity to study in Cuba, she said, as a reward for their hard work.

Cecelia offered us probably one of the nicest things she could offer, a bowl of warm milk, but flies were buzzing around it and we were already a little sick so we declined.



Cecelia and her child.

(Photo: Kris Altucher)

After talking to Cecelia we played with the children. Kris went to get some crayons and paper we had brought from the states. She was soon mobbed with ecstatic children clamoring for her attention with their pictures of houses, chickens, volcanoes, busses, pigs, tractors and even a portrait of martyred Sandinista leader Carlos Fonseca. The children politely returned the crayons when they were done, and the next morning they waited at the bunkhouse door for another art session. Kris had a fan club for her remaining time at the farm.

We learned of the tragic experience of one family after their 14-year old daughter, Angelina, died in a trailer accident. We were on a Sunday outing to the beach when the tractor went out of control and she was thrown from the trailer it was pulling. In talking to an American woman who accompanied Angelina to the hospital, where she died that afternoon, I learned that two of Angelina's brothers had died in a previous accident.

I learned also that the family had lived in Potosi, a port town on the Gulf of Fonseca about 18 miles from Apascoli, until a bomb dropped from a military plane flying from Honduras destroyed their house. Luckily, they escaped injury. But they lost everything and came to Apascoli shortly afterwards. Reagan and the CIA-financed contras assert that the Sandinistas ship arms through Potosi and across the Gulf to Salvadoran rebels. The town's civilian population has been evacuated due to repeated contra attacks. At the time of Angelina's death, her family had been looking forward to farming a small plot made available to them free through Nicaragua's revolutionary land reform program.

It became apparent in our two weeks at Apascoli that the revolution hadn't solved all of Nicaragua's problems. Labor and resources, needed for solving problems, went into the war against the U.S.-backed contras. The economy was suffering from a U.S.

trade embargo. Many farmworkers worked long hours for a subsistence wage. They lived without sewers and indoor plumbing and drank water that might make them sick. But at the same time, thousands of Nicaraguans were enabled by the revolution to have a small piece of land, had learned to read, and had inoculations against polio and other diseases. They had enough to eat, could speak freely and organize unions. The Nicaraguan revolution, in the context of life at Apascoli, seemed to be about peasants raising themselves out of feudalism into the 20th century. The revolution appeared aimed at achieving the material well being and human rights that many white Americans take for granted.

One Friday night, we traveled over to Apascoli's sister farm, Punta N'ata, for a celebration. A large contingent of Sandinista youth had been there helping with the harvest and they were leaving. They chanted revolutionary slogans around a pile of burning tires. Farmworkers, Sandinista Youth and Americans stood talking around the bonfire. An older Nicaraguan man and an American fluent in Spanish carried on an animated conversation. The old man said he fought with Sandino in the mountains in the 1930's. Sandino was so popular, he said, because he fought on the side of the poor so there would be no more dictatorship. He said the attitude of the youth worried him. They were too unafraid of death. The enemy has the same attitude, he said, and much death and suffering could result.

"Nobody can imagine the horror of war," he said. However, if another invasion happens, he said, the Nicaraguan people will fight fiercely to hold on to the gains won by their revolution. "We won this earth with our blood," he said. "It is now part of us, and cannot ever again be separated from us."

Commission documents Salvadoran abuse

by Cathy Siegner

Oregon was the target of a massive information campaign May 10th and 11th, as Central American and U.S. spokespersons visited Portland and other cities. Central America Information Week was sponsored by the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization in New York and the Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon.

Its purpose, according to campaign coordinator Sharon Haas, was to "reach as many communities as we can with the truth about Central America."

"Right now, there are a lot of myths circulating about Central America," she said. "People are confused about who's fighting whom and what they're fighting for."

In order to help clear up some of this confusion, the *Observer* interviewed several of the visiting spokespersons: a representative of the El Salvador Human Rights Commission, now living in exile here in the U.S.; an American who has spent time in Nicaragua as a Presbyterian volunteer with Witness for Peace; a freelance writer and social services consultant from the U.S. who has lived and worked among the Indians of Nicaragua's east coast, and a minister with the American Baptist Convention of Nicaragua.

Each shared his or her first-hand experiences of the effect U.S. government policies are having in the region.

Secundino Ramirez

Ramirez, 26, is one of two U.S. representatives of the non-governmental El Salvador Human Rights Commission. His organization, based in Chicago, has received several nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize.

He became involved with the commission in the late 1970's, when death squad killings were on the rise and Salvadorans saw the need to fight increasing threats and repression.

"Our goal was to document abuse and provide human and legal assistance to refugees," he recalled. Ramirez's and others' success with their work also made it dangerous, and he came to the U.S. in 1980. Since he left El Salvador, Ramirez reports that five members of the commission have been killed, including its chairperson, Marianella

Villas.

The commission nevertheless maintains an office in San Salvador, the capital, because "we would not be able to continue our work otherwise," he said.

In Chicago, the commission has support and office space donated by several religious groups and Ramirez continues his work with refugees.

"There are 15,000 Salvadoran refugees in the Chicago area," he said. "10% of our population now lives in the U.S. That's more than 500,000 people."

They work in construction, clean people's houses and hold jobs like that. Most don't speak any English. It's very hard for them."

Ramirez said the two recent elections that have been held in his country have not solved any problems there. "In 1984, they said 1.8 million people went to the polls. That's the actual number who could vote. In the election of 1982, they said 1.5 million people voted. The Catholic University did a study and said only about 600,000 people came to the polls."

"It's not possible to have 1.8 million when 30% live as refugees, with 10% in the U.S. and the rest in other parts of Latin America or Canada," he said.

Ramirez rattled off data to illustrate the situation in El Salvador: "30% of the national territory is now under guerilla control. There have been 50,000 people killed in 4 1/2 years. That's one in one hundred Salvadorans killed."

"Out of 261 municipalities, 60 didn't vote (in 1984). The third largest department (state) of San Miguel in Eastern El Salvador had no polling places at all. How can you have an election when there's a war going on?"

"The war will not stop until the U.S. stops sending arms and money to El Salvador."

Ramirez said the problem in his country "is poverty—its misery. The U.S. can play a positive role by providing technical assistance, food and money to the people. But it must stop the war and forget about advisors."

Ramirez said he misses his country and plans to return to El Salvador "when the war is over." Meanwhile, he wants to study political science and U.S. history here and finish the formal education that ended when the University of San Salvador was closed by the

government in 1979.

He wanted to express this message to the people of Oregon: "No matter what is their race, color or religion, this is the government the people of the U.S. elected, and it is their responsibility to stop the killing the U.S. government is supporting. The U.S. people cannot remain silent."

"Salvadorans have much in common with the people of the U.S. We're peace-loving. We have the

same president; whether we want it or not, it's imposed by force. We have the same responsibility to defend the right to life of our people."

"We are asking the U.S. People to be loyal to their own principles, to their own traditions, to their own revolution of more than 200 years ago. They should respect what Salvadorans want."

(Continued next week)

South Africa athletes

(Continued from page 1, column 3) the International Olympic Charter, which states that a naturalized competitor "may not participate in the Olympic Games to represent his new country until three years after his naturalization."

Even more successful than Budd in international competition is Sydney Maree, a 26-year old Black South African (and former Springbok) who specializes in both the mile and the 1,500-meters.

Recruited six years ago by Villanova University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1981 Maree married an American and shortly afterward, obtained U.S. permanent residency clearance. This status allowed him to participate in international track meets, where he proved a good Olympic prospect. On May 1st, Maree received full American citizenship.

Having held the 1,500-meter record briefly last year, Maree inspires high hopes for the U.S. Olympic team in this race as well as the mile.

Other South African Athletes who have opted for the second-country route to this year's games include:

Mark Handelsman, a Springbok middle-distance runner who presently works on a kibbutz in Israel and hopes to represent the Jewish state in Los Angeles;

John Da Silva, a physical education graduate from the University of Port Elizabeth and a Springbok steeplechaser, who has been included on the Portuguese team after a three-month stay during which he won that country's national steeplechase championship;

Mathews Moshweteau, another Springbok and holder of South Africa's 5,000- and 10,000-meter records, who has become a citizen of Botswana in order to par-

ticipate in the Olympics; **Koos van der Merwe**, the present South African javelin record holder, who was given West German citizenship after only six months in that country and is expected to represent Germany in Los Angeles;

Vincent Rakabele, a marathon runner attached to the Bracken Gold Mine in South Africa, who represented Lesotho in the 1980 Olympic Games and hopes to do the same this year should that country need him; and

Cornelia Buirki, who was recently voted Swiss athlete of the year for the eighth consecutive year and hopes to represent Switzerland in the 1,500-, 3,000- and the 5,000-meter events. On a recent visit to her place of birth, she said, "In my heart I am still very much South African."

Although South Africa has been barred from the Olympics since 1970 and from the International Amateur Athletic Federation since 1976, the white government has avidly pursued sporting contacts whenever possible. In addition, South African promoters often pay top dollar to attract star athletes to compete in the sports-hungry country.


By some accounts, the South African Olympic Committee is currently making an attempt to regain membership in the world body. Press reports suggest that the South Africans may plead in foreign courts that their exclusion from international athletics goes counter to signed agreements covering sport.

The Soviet pull-out announced on May 8th has so far received no concrete support from African countries, but some observers believe that fall-out from the U.S./Soviet tiff may yet affect Third World participation.

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When President Washington decided to take a three-month tour of the South he simply climbed aboard his coach and took off—without Secret Service men or press of any kind. Because of a mixup of mails and the unmapped roads, the government did not know for nearly two months exactly where the President was.

Big Ben in London is not the clock and not the tower, but the bell that strikes the hour. It weighs 13 tons and was named for Sir Benjamin Hall, commissioner of works when it was installed.

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