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My 19 year old daughter and I spent the month of August in Nicaragua, as part of a reforestation brigade composed of 37 people from all over the United States. We were sent with 13 others to the peninsula in the Northwest corner of Nicaragua which is separated from Honduras and El Salvador by the Gulf of Fonseca. We went hoping to gain a greater understanding of Sandinist Nicaragua, about which North Americans hear such conflicting reports. As our government goes deeper into military involvement in the region, we believe honest information is terribly important. The reforestation project appealed strongly to us because loss of forests deforestation is a major environmental problem for the world as a whole, and for Central America in particular. We know we could come home with only a beginning of understanding Nicaragua, and so we wanted to be sure that in our time there we had done some useful worrk. In addition, working as we did on a rural project which kept us in one place for weeks, we had an opportunity to get to know some farmworkers fairly well and to share there lives more closely than we could in more conventional travel.

I had rather arrogantly believed that I knew quite a lot about the lives of Third World peasants. For years I have read avidly both books about rural problems in the third world, and literature which depicts their lives. Not that my impressions were mistaken, but the reality is different than description can convey. It was hard. The heat, the dust, the monotonous food, the crowding, the poor sanitary conditions were harder to bear than I, who had tasted all of these conditions in small doses, could believe they would be.

Nicaragua has an almost entirely agricultural economy. Unlike much of the rest of Central America, it has a lot of land for its relatively small population (3 1/2 million people). 60 years ago, much of the country was small farms which produced for their workers and owners consumption and a small surplus for export. But in the past two generations production for export increased dramatically. Most of the forest land was cleared, and many rural families lost thier land to expanding cattle ranches and cotton plantations. As a result, hunger became an important problem even though Nicaragua has enough land. The number one goal of the Sandinista government is to ensure that everyone has enough to eat, and that goal is the basis of the land reform program.

The Coseguina region, where we worked, is typical of the phenomena I've been discussing. Almost all of it had become large plantation or cattle ranch with the last two generations. Now, both cotton and cattle are raised there. Since the Sandinista victory 7 years ago, fruit has been planted too as part of a nationwide strategy for achieveing food self-sufficiency and a more well-rounded diet for everyone. The farm I lived on had been entirely cotton land, but has now been converted to citrus and avocado orchards.

DAILY LIFE ON THE FARM

We lived on a state farm, San Marco. 62% of Nicaragua is privately owned farm land, 18% is state farms, and the rest is divided between co-operatives of various types and land loaned to refugees from El Salvador, but not permanently owned by them. On our farm, as on state farms in general, each family has a private plot on which to grow food