

CHAPTER SIX

A COOPERATIVA'S ONGOING PROJECTS

In a nearby clearing, four wooden school desks and a couple of benches were scattered under a tree. Soledad stopped momentarily.

“This is our sixth grade,” she announced.

Hiking up the dirt road leading through the center of the community, we arrived at the pavilion where supper would be served. A long wooden table was set with white plastic dishes, cups, and a pitcher of water, and several women were cooking over a clay fireplace. On a second fireplace a large black vat was filled with dough for tortillas. A door to the right led into a supply room, and from time to time several women peered out, curious about their visitors. Another table in front of the building held large basins for washing and rinsing dishes.

Since supper was not ready, several of us walked over to a field next to the pavilion to watch an all-girls softball game. About 12 to 15 years old, the girls laughed and shouted encouragement to their teammates, while onlookers behind the plate and along the third base line, yelled and cheered. It looked like any sandlot game back home, except for two differences. First, the batters. One after another, they stepped up to the plate, took a couple of practice swings, then when the pitcher threw the first pitch, rather than waiting to see if it was any good, they swung away, often connecting with the ball, then racing toward first base. The other difference? No boys played. They were either sequestered in the holding camps for the guerrillas, or in the army, or casualties of war.

At supper, our hosts served heaping platefuls of guacamole, beans, and fried *platános*. Then, eager to please, they ladled more food on our plates. I was stuffed. And in the back of my mind I could hear Torriera's warning not to waste any food. "The communities will be going without so we can eat," she had said.

"If anyone can't finish the food," Ventura announced, coming to the rescue, "give it to me."

Several people took up his offer and scraped their beans onto his plate. But instead, on impulse, I picked up a couple of beans in my fingers and fed them to a scrawny duck rummaging for scraps under the table. That was a mistake.

After we finished with the meal, we noticed a young girl, decked out in a white polka dot dress, white shoes, with white ribbons in her long brown hair, standing in the doorway to the supply room. It was her birthday.

That was all Gradie and Kempton needed to hear. Immediately they scrounged through their bags, producing a collection of worry dolls from Kempton and a box of crayons from Gradie. The child accepted the gifts, and stood wide-eyed and smiling from ear to ear as we sang "Happy Birthday."

With darkness falling, we stood in twos and threes under the shelter of the roof when Willison walked over to me.

"Ralph, let's talk," he said, leading me away from the others. "You really have to be careful with what you do. These people have no food. They are trying to give us what little they have, and it upsets them if you feed the ducks. I know you didn't mean anything by it, but the women are upset."

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We left the pavilion and picked our way single file in the dark back toward the road that ran through the center of the community.

"I want to introduce you to the missionary nun responsible for working with the people from several surrounding communities," Sinclair said.

A bright moon threw our shadows on the ground as he stopped at a path that veered left through tall grass leading to a small, one-story building set back among trees. The house was dark.

"It looks like she's sleeping," he said. "But I think she would really like to meet the group, so we'll go in."

Sinclair went up to the front door and knocked. In the moonlight we could make out open windows, a front doorway, and a hammock and chairs on a porch. At first there was no answer. A few seconds later, a woman appeared in the doorway.

He hurriedly explained who we were and why we were there, and the nun, reassured we meant her no harm, told us that she served in the region as the link to religious services. "I'll be traveling to each of the communities tomorrow," she said.

"Is there a Mass here tomorrow?" someone asked.

"Yes," she said. "We'll be celebrating Mass for the community later in the afternoon."

Several people in our group said they hoped to be able to attend. Then, realizing we were keeping the good nun up, we wished her a goodnight and left.

"Sunday is a big day for her," Sinclair said, as we walked back to the road and started toward the bunkhouse where we had left our gear earlier. The night air was still unbearably hot and my pants and shirt were soaked with sweat.

"If anyone's interested," I said, "I'd like to try and cool off in the stream."

"If you go," Sinclair cautioned, "keep your head above water. And don't open your mouth."

Back in the bunkhouse the question foremost in everyone's mind was what the other accommodations looked like.

Reid sat down on the cot next to the door. "This is fine with me," he announced.

"I'll stay here too," I said.

Ventura said he'd join us, indicating he'd take the cot draped with the netting. I had packed netting that fit over the head from old camping trips, so I figured if the mosquitoes proved nasty, I'd survive.

“What about that swim?” I asked after the others left to scout out their sleeping arrangements.

Reid and Ventura agreed to give it a try, so we grabbed towels and flashlights, walked out the front door, and followed the path through the woods to the stream.

The water was warm and the bottom smooth underfoot, and in the center of the stream we squatted until the water reached our necks. That was when Sinclair’s voice rang out.

“How’s the water?”

Standing at the edge of the stream beside Sinclair were Willison, Sacco, and Romeo.

“Just what the doctor ordered!”

“What’s the other sleeping quarters like?”

“You don’t want to know.”

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Back in the bunkhouse, some workers snored and others talked in low voices. In our room, I eyed the gaps in the rough planking in the wall by my cot, pulled on socks, jeans, and a long-sleeved shirt, and lay on the cot. In minutes my dungarees and shirt were damp with sweat and before long I heard the high whine of mosquito wings.

Ventura was snoring, then the teacher from Barcelona we met earlier tip-toed in, prepared for bed, tossed and turned for a few minutes, and was quiet.

At that point a loud “thunk” sounded on the corrugated tin roof above my head. Then “thunks” came at different intervals, sometimes two and three together, slamming onto the roof, rolling off, and falling to the ground. Mangoes were dropping off the trees.

Later, while trying to avoid the mosquitoes and moving in and out of a light sleep, I was jolted awake by a raucous call, then a cacophony of roosters, squawking and cackling. Meantime, the workers began to wake up, talking and turning on radios to play music.

The next thing I knew Reid walked in the door.

“How’s our group doing?” I asked.

“They are all up. They’re washing by the well.”

"How did they sleep?"

"What sleep?" he asked, laughing.

"What time is it?"

"Ten after six."

Outside the bunkhouse an early morning haze hung over the community, and up the road by the well two women pumped water into earthenware jugs. Then they placed the containers on their heads, and slowly walked off. At that point Willison came shuffling down a path toward the well.

"Where did you guys sleep?"

"We were squeezed into a one room shed. You wouldn't believe what we went through last night."

Bertsch limped by, her face ashen. "I have never experienced anything like last night in my entire life," she muttered.

Then I saw it. What came to be called, "The Hotel From Hell," a three-sided shack on a concrete slab, with black plastic walls, tin roof, wall-to-wall cots, and a hammock slung under the front overhang. McAllister, it turned out, had the good sense to commandeer the hammock, where he spent part of the night serenading the group with Scottish ballads then conversing with the roosters.

But the story everyone could not wait to tell was about this loud, incessant snoring coming from the back of the shed. Bertsch thought it was Sinclair.

"We couldn't believe he was sleeping so peacefully, and making all that noise. We were going to throw a shoe at him."

Finally, in desperation, someone did. But in the commotion that followed the loud snorting continued.

Then Sacco felt his cot shoved.

"I was about to tell off a roommate," he said, "when I realized it was a pig, grunting and pushing against the side of the shed."

All agreed, it had been a night to remember.

At breakfast Soledad proposed a tour of the community projects.

"I'd like to be able to check over your books," Ventura said, "so I can get a better idea of how the cooperative is running."

She agreed, so we left him in the community's office. In a nearby clearing, four wooden school desks and a couple of benches were scattered under a tree. Soledad stopped momentarily.

"This is our sixth grade," she announced.

A four foot square blackboard was perched against the tree's trunk.

"We don't have enough teachers, so the older students help with instruction."

As we continued through the community, half dressed children raced in front of us, crying out "*Norte Americanos!*" and men and women peered out of their shacks, the men pulling on shirts. We were a parade.

"We use every available space for gardening," Soledad said, pointing out small plots of corn and vegetables alongside the shacks.

Further up the dirt road we stopped under trees across from a large fenced-in field.

"This is the cattle project," she informed us, pointing to the area on the other side of a dry creek bed. To the left was a sizeable corn field, then a line of trees.

"The government will give the community fourteen head of cattle if we provide grazing and a source for water," she explained. "So we built the fencing," motioning to barbed wire stretched around the perimeter. "Then crews dug to find water."

Several sizeable craters marked the area where the men had dug with picks and shovels to locate water, but with no success. As a last resort, said Soledad, they turned to a padre in demand in Usulután for his dousing techniques. With that, she held her hands outstretched, demonstrating how the padre walked around the area with his divining apparatus, and when the end of the y-shaped twig dipped toward the ground, he told the men that was the place to dig.

"They found water fourteen feet below ground."

Next Soledad pointed to the corn field surrounded by branches piled at least six feet high.

"Why the branches?"

"The deer come to eat the young plants," she said, "so we cut down the branches as barriers."

"I have to get a better look at this," said Willison, jumping into the creek bed and scrambling up the other side.

Satisfied with what he saw, he walked back.

"Farmers had the same problem back home in Indiana," he said. "The deer and raccoons would eat the corn, so they devised a planting system that fooled the deer."

"How?" Soledad asked.

"The outer two to four rows of corn would be planted later and the animals would get to the unripe corn, and then they would lose interest in the rest of the crop. So they wouldn't touch the corn in the middle."

Soledad thought about that. "I'll tell the men what you said, and see if they think it would help."

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At the top of the community to-do list, according to Soledad, was the construction of new ecology toilets invented in Scandinavia. The old toilets, simple framed structures with raised conical clay seats over holes, she said, allowed waste to leech into the ground.

"The water table under the ground is close to the surface."

A prototype toilet, a wood-frame structure on a concrete base, was set on an embankment about twenty-five yards behind a family shack. Inside were two holes, one capped with a wooden cover, the other with a portable clay commode that separated urine from feces. A pail of ash and lime, to turn the waste into fertilizer, sat on the floor.

Two concrete boxes behind the toilet held the waste. After a few months when one box filled, it would be sealed off and the clay commode moved over the other hole. By the time the second container filled, the waste in the first box was compost, ready to be added to the garden soil.

"This summer," she said, "the plan is for our construction crew to build ecology toilets for each of the community's seventy-eight families."

Next she led us to a working well, one of several projects repatriated families learned to build in Honduras. Two wheels were fastened to each end of a pipe shaft, with one end submerged in water underground. Plugs attached to a rope revolving around the wheels turned by a handle on top caught the water below, pulling it up to flow out a pipe into a concrete basin. Soledad demonstrated how it worked by turning the handle until water spurted out.

The following stop was at a squat structure in the center of a clearing. Roughly six feet high, with a shelf half way up the front, "*El Proyecto de Panadería*" resembled a small igloo.

"The older women of Nueva Esperanza asked for the oven to be built so they could bake bread for the community," explained Soledad. "They were feeling useless and left out of the cooperative's activities, and thought they could contribute to the community by setting up the bakery. Everyone supported the idea, the oven was built, and the women baked two days a week. Then the rainy season arrived and the women went on strike. They couldn't bake the bread in the rain, so the whole operation stopped."

The solution, she said, was to build a roof over the oven with space for tables and benches. "For about one thousand dollars, we could build the roof and pavilion, and the *panadería* would be operating again."

Earlier, Sinclair had praised Soledad as a shrewd community spokesperson with a knack for eliciting funds and materials from visiting delegations and international donors which, at the moment, was exactly what she was doing. She wasn't asking us to donate the money. But she was laying out the facts, talking about a specific need.

"Eilene," I whispered. "They need a thousand dollars. This could be a project for us. What do you think?"

"That's a great idea."

I walked over to Sinclair. "Do you think this would be a good project for us to get involved in? We could raise the money ourselves before we go home."

"What you do as a group is up to you," he said. "If you decide to do something like this, it will have to be a group decision. But

empowering the people within an impoverished community is a good idea. The only thing I would be careful about is to make sure any monies donated to the community were stipulated for this project. You'd need to ask Soledad to draw up a contract."

"Would you ask her about this if the others agree to do it?"

"Sure," he said. "I'd be happy to help out any way I can."

"You think it is a good idea?"

"It's a great idea. Just be sure the rest of the group supports the idea before saying anything to Soledad."

Reid thought it sounded like a possibility. "But it would be up to the group. Maybe not all the people would want to donate money."

If each person donated \$85, I figured we could make it happen.

Torriera was not convinced. "I still have to find my school for *La Hispanidad*," she said, "so I have to keep that in mind."

Ventura was checking books in the office, but the others tentatively went along with the idea, so Sinclair said he'd talk to Soledad.

"You'll need a written proposal," he said. "I'll ask her to write one up."

He explained our offer and she went into the other room to consult information in a file cabinet. When she returned she said a proposal would be drafted and sent to the hotel before we left.

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Heading toward the infirmary, we passed a little girl, no more than a year-and-a-half old, sitting in the dirt in front of a two-room shack, dressed in a soiled green T-shirt, her bare bottom on the ground, wearing a small beaded wristlet. Blotches covered her face. Her older sister, about eleven, walked out of the shack, picked her up, and was joined by her two brothers, one about eight and the other around four. Everyone pulled out cameras as the children posed together.

On the way to the infirmary Soledad mentioned the upcoming celebration at the cathedral plaza in San Salvador for the returning

war-wounded convalescing in Cuba, the same event Mirna Anaya talked about the night we arrived.

“The people have been rehabilitated,” Sinclair said. “They expect about two hundred and eighty will be returning to El Salvador. These are ex-combatants who lost arms and legs, or received other wounds during the fighting. Those who were able to use their hands have been trained to make prostheses.”

“We plan to welcome about fifty of them to Nueva Esperanza with all their expertise,” said Soledad. “One of the men lost his arms and legs in the war, and somebody had asked him what he could do. The man said, ‘So, I still have my head. I can teach the people literacy.’”

Sinclair was hopeful we’d be able to attend the celebration.

Next on the tour was a coffee micro-factory. In a small shack an older man and a tiny bird-like woman ground corn into coffee with a series of machines driven by a gasoline engine. A blue fifty-gallon drum sat on a wooden platform by the rear wall with a pipe about eight feet long attached to the bottom. A foot from the other end was a joint with another pipe extending out about four feet to either side with spigots that fed corn into conical-shaped metal pails, then into grinding machines. The woman smiled and scooped up a handful of ground corn from a tray, letting the coffee dust slip through her fingers, proudly showing off the end product.

The community infirmary, run by a health promoter, turned out to be a three-room, cinder block structure. The middle room, a waiting area, included a bench and a rear wall partially stacked with medicines. An examination room with cots was to the left, and to the right was a small consultation room.

“Besides an infant mortality rate two to three times higher than other Central American countries, Salvadorans face three major health hurdles: malnutrition, respiratory illness, and diarrhea,” the health provider said. “As an example of the outside aid we receive, look at all those bottles of Metamucil,” she added, pointing to stacks of bottles against a wall. “We have no use for them. But that is what the international community sends us. And often when we

do get drugs, they don't come with instructions telling us what the drugs should be used for."

Later, Barker wrote about the clinics we visited, saying they did not resemble anything she was familiar with:

At one, as we toured, the leader was wiping away the dirt and grime from a table which held the bandages. There were no blood pressure cuffs, no thermometers, no exam tables, and certainly no EKG machines in sight. The clinics are run by women called "health promoters," who learned first aid, herbal medicine, and treatment of injuries in continuing education sessions, mostly as refugees in Nicaragua or Honduras. As I talked with these women, most of them less than twenty years of age, I reflected on their history. Community-based health care workers and clinics were the target of governmental repression during the war. Giving out advice, medications, and tender loving care was seen as subversive.⁷

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By the time we left the infirmary, it was getting late. Folks had indicated the night before after speaking with the nun that they would like to attend Mass, but Sinclair reminded us we were behind schedule and would have to leave.

When I arrived back at the bunkhouse, Ventura and the teacher from Barcelona were standing face to face in the center of the room, embroiled in a heated discussion in Spanish.

"What's going on?" I asked Reid.

"I think they're arguing the relative merits of capitalism versus socialism."

Neither was backing down. Finally, Ventura turned away to pack his clothes. I should have given him time to calm down. Instead, I tried to explain the *panadería* project.

"Would you be willing to join with the others and donate money to support such a project?"

“No!” he answered abruptly. “I will not support such a project. I don’t believe in handouts. These people need to become productive themselves. If, when they set up the bakery, we were to receive a 15 percent return on their profits, then maybe it would make sense. But the people need to be productive themselves.”

For Ventura, versed in international business, the project was just another ill-conceived, liberal-minded handout.

“I am not so sure about this place,” he added. “Did you see the houses of the community leaders?”

“No.”

“You should see the house that Soledad lives in. It is quite respectable. They build concrete houses for the leadership, while the rest of the community lives in plastic huts.”

He was upset. With the books, with the leadership’s houses, with the teacher from Spain. To me, it made sense for the community leadership to build modest concrete houses. They hosted visiting internationals. The rest of the houses would be built in due time.

But checking over the cooperative’s books had given Ventura a different perspective on Nueva Esperanza. “I don’t agree with their procedures,” he said finally.

Despite Ventura’s reservations, Nueva Esperanza had been an eye opener. The *campesinos* refused to be cowed by government forces and, while laying the foundations for a community, were scraping out their daily sustenance from an unforgiving land.