

## From Manchester to Mulukukú

By Helene Crill, News Journal, Feb. 1, 1995; photos by Martha Miller

Thirteen is as lucky as any number for Dr. Ed Miller, leader of Manchester College's annual January term medical practicum to Central America.

Miller, along with the Manchester College Medical Practicum Team, left Jan. 3 for his thirteenth trip to a third world country in this hemisphere in dire need of medical attention. With Miller went a group of physicians, dentists, and medical students and pre-med students. Their destination was Mulukukú, Nicaragua.

Manchester residents who accompanied Miller were Martha Miller, Julie Garber, Julie Houseworth, Ben Jarman and Helene Crill. Physicians and their wives included Dr. Donald and Joyce Parker, Dr. Lee and Glea Smith, Dr. Elaine Shafer; Dentists were Dr. Mark Shafer, Dr. Eugene Petry and Dr. Yoshiyuki Sato. College students are Shayne Black, Christopher Fegley, Bridget Loker, Takayuki Sato, Stephen Stose, Zachry Waterson and Christian Willig.

A two-day orientation awaited the group in Managua.

Since the horrible earthquake in 1972, Nicaragua has had a series of devastating natural disasters in addition to the civil war between the Contras and the Sandinistas---extremely serious problems for one small, bankrupt country to face alone. We met with government officials, an economist, physicians and health care workers and visited a hospital and government health clinic. We saw earthquake results still visible these 25 years later.

Friday plans were for the group and all of our personal luggage to be put into one large, open cattle truck and two pickups (camionetas) and to stop by the airport to pick up the over \$20,000 of medicine and medical supplies being held in customs. Then our 10-12 hour trip to Mulukukú would begin. We had been assured of the release of the 17 boxes. But it wasn't quite that simple. It took eight hours of patient negotiating while 26 people passed the time reading, sleeping, karate and people watching. At last, at 4 pm the final signature was received and the boxes were loaded along side the large bags of rice, beans, cabbage, fruit and sugar which would feed our group for the next two weeks. Nearly a dozen persons traveled with this cargo. The remainder were standing or sitting on their luggage in the two smaller trucks. The caravan was a spectacle to see! The day had been hot, but the night turned cool in this desert-type area. As we travelled along the road from Managua, the stars shone more brightly, and seemed much nearer, away from the city lights. The first day on the road was only two hours north to Matagalpa, the second largest city in Nicaragua, where we stopped at a hotel, had supper of chicken and rice, and spent the night in a small, clean rooms with rationed water.

Morning brought the next 8-10 hours of the trip to Mulukukú. The road changed from paved, to stone, to dirt. The scenery was beautiful (especially from the panoramic viewpoint of the open trucks) very similar to the American Southwest. The three trucks stayed close together to help each other if there should be problems. And there were. The brakes of the large truck got too hot, and would need cooling periodically. A tire went flat on one of the camionetas. Lunch was sandwiches at the side of the road near a dam. Men found their privacy behind bushes or trees on one side of the road, and women on the other. The road got rougher and

steeper. Those on former trips recalled huge water-filled potholes that swallowed trucks to their axles in sticky, slimy mud, and all riders had to get out and walk to the other side in order for the truck to be light enough to make it through. But this year, although there was some mud and a bit of water, it remained passable, and the riders could continue to ride. The villages we passed through got smaller and farther apart.

We came to Rio Blanco, about two hours from Mulukukú. Here we stopped to visit the medical clinic. It was a small building with nearly bare rooms. It did have running water. But it was obviously struggling to meet the bare needs of the emergencies it received. This was where Mulukukú sent the very sick (or further on to Matagalpa). But we, as healthy people who went by truck over these rough roads, shuddered to think what the road must feel like to a very sick person.

Finally, Mulukukú!

Because January is a vacation time for the local school, our group which by now was 28, was to sleep in four large empty school rooms. Wooden cots had been framed by mosquito nets (malaria is prevalent) and covered by a foam rubber mattress on which we put our sleeping bags. There were two "showers" framed by black plastic; in each was a large drum of carried water which had been brought from the Habitat for Humanity well over a block away in buckets on the heads of women and girls or on wheelbarrows till each of the drums was full. Then we, the guests, would shower by soaping ourselves and pouring a bowl of the water (not warm!) over ourselves for a rinse. And we were consciously aware that the women had carried every drop to make it possible for us to be as nearly clean as we are accustomed to being.

Each morning Segunda would come by with a large sack to collect our dirty clothes which she carried to the riverbank of the broad, beautiful Rio Tuma. Here she laboriously scrubbed them one by one on the flat rocks until they were clean. Colorful patterns were formed as they were hung on all available bushes and fences to dry.

The four-room Women's and Children's clinic built by the women's cooperative was about a block from the school. Here Dorothy Granada, a former head nurse in a large Oregon hospital who had visited this area and fallen in love with the people, holds a clinic for women and children several times a week. If men came by and needed help, she helped them, too.

These four rooms sheltered six physicians---three with the Medical Practicum and three Nicaraguans from Matagalpa and Managua who had become interested in the North American visit and wanted to work together, sharing their knowledge and concern for those in Mulukukú.

Ophthalmologist Lee Smith and his wife, Glea, helped people with eye problems, giving out glasses donated by Indiana Lions Clubs. Most were far-sighted, Lee said, since few could read or had the opportunity to read.

Part of the continuing education focuses on sanitation, nutrition, and the importance of vaccinations. Here, where parasites are so common that the people consider them normal, where malnutrition is prevalent and anemia saps so much energy and where dysentery can cause dehydration and death, the crying need is for education.

The women's cooperative will soon start a class for new mothers.

The dental clinic was in a separate building. Here three dentists each had a room with large rocking chairs from village homes, propped with boards at the best possible angle. An assistant shone a flashlight into the patient's mouth. The patient, sometimes with the help of an interpreter, described where the pain was. The dentists would give novocaine and send them back to the waiting room for the 10 minutes for the numbing to take place. Without electricity or running water, often the only treatment possible for bad or infected teeth was to pull them. Some patients had been through enough pain that they wanted all of their teeth pulled. And in some cases, the dentist would agree that that was the only possible solution.

But human factors sometimes entered in.

One 30-year-old woman wanted her front three teeth pulled and a gold bridge inserted. When asked why, she explained that when her mother was 30, that was what she had had done. She obviously thought that was what needed to happen at age 30! Another young woman wanted five teeth pulled. Only one of the teeth had a problem. When the dentist asked her why, she said a neighbor had had four pulled and she wanted to go the neighbor one better. The dentist told her he would pull one or none. It took her awhile to decide to let him do it his way.

And so the patients came and continued to come, nearly 2200 of them for the two five-day weeks. They came on bare feet, or with shoes or boots. They came on burros, donkeys, poor old horses and newer, well-care horses. Seeing 15 or 20 mounts lined up along the fence makes an interesting study of expressions on the faces of the animals. Some poor, beaten, shifty-eyed; others standing tall and proud. Animals can say a lot with a look.

Those less able to walk came by borrowed truck, local bus, or were carried by hammock. Those from the mountains may have used several modes of transportation to get there. But come they did. The physicians, dentists, and their college aides worked from 7:30 in the morning until noon break, then from 1:30 until dark.

One reason this community has attracted the Manchester College groups year after year is the fact that it is made up of both ex-Sandinista and ex-Contra families---many of whom are women, who have determined to learn how to live together for one common goal: survival. And together, with the help of Noel and Grethel Montoya and with outside capital, they have created the Women's Cooperative. Julie Garber, of North Manchester, has twice driven a truck of machinery in a caravan from Chicago to help create woodworking shops in nearby Rio Blanco and in Mulukukú. The women build doors, window frames, shutters for the new houses that they were able to construct by working together making blocks and bricks. Habitat for Humanity was involved in some of the new houses.

Perhaps the most exciting and lasting effect of the January clinics is the evidence of reconciliation occurring as diverse elements interact in the clinic scene. One morning in January, 1994, a notorious ex-Contra leader---responsible for ordering or committing several assassinations in the area just weeks before---stood in line among those seeking medical care. A leader in the Sandinista cooperative, whose husband has received numerous death threats, graciously admitted this enemy to the clinic, and he received medications from the clinic pharmacy after being treated by one of the doctors. This year he returned bringing his mother and

sister. We learned that this powerful leader has lain down his arms and some villagers believe his continuing influence has protected the women's and children's clinic from attack.

Living for three weeks in Mulukukú is not like your typical vacation.

Our part of Mulukukú is built on a hill, safe from the flooding that sometimes occurs near the big river Tuma. The roads are mud with occasional stones, and wide enough for trucks and the few buses of the area to navigate. Lots of gentle cattle, most with Brahmin blood, roamed the streets.

One dark night one of the volunteers stumbled over a calf which had chosen the road for a sleeping place. Pigs of all sizes and colors roamed freely, and chickens were everywhere. Morning was announced about 3 or 4 am with persistent crowing, and was an unwelcome early alarm to fatigued sleepers.

Electricity was the product of a temperamental generator that would sometimes do its thing, and more often not. Evening light was usually by candlelight, flash light, or moon glow. Some of the younger members claimed they could read by the light of the moon, but the older ones, with tired eyes, didn't try.

Most residents of the community were people who had been displaced by the war from homes in other communities. Working together, running the women's and children's clinic, the block making and woodworking co-ops have helped give this struggling group a focus to build a new way of life for all. And to do it for all---Contras, Sandinistas---whatever their former identities, to build a happier, healthier place and way to live.

It was to help the people achieve these goals that the Manchester College Medical Practicum has returned three times. Besides learning about medicine practiced in poverty areas of the world, students and physicians alike are energized by the relationships formed, the progress that has been happening and the planning for the future. Participating, in a small way, has been a real inspiration to us---neighbors from a different part of this hemisphere.

A thank you note from a Mulukukú resident summed up this mutual sentiment:

"I, as one more Nicaraguan, want to express my gratitude for your interest and work. I hope you have learned something about the reality of this country and of yourselves, and hopefully this knowledge will help you achieve your goals.

"Most importantly, though, I wish to believe that you will share your experience with others back home and you will encourage them to learn about the rest of the Americas and the need for North and South to work together to create a more just world.

"Good luck and I hope you come back and lend a helping hand"