

History of Siuna, Nicaragua

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Introduction

Siuna is a town with an estimated 2005 urban population of 10,000 people located in the mountainous interior of Nicaragua, approximately 240 kilometers northeast of the capital Managua and 154 kilometers west of the Caribbean port of Puerto Cabezas (INEC 2005:65). Siuna and the towns of Rosita (46 kilometers to the east) and Bonanza (38 kilometers to the northeast) form the Mining Triangle of Nicaragua. In the late nineteenth century, gold was discovered in Siuna, an event that has shaped the town ever since. The history of Siuna is one of conflict as various actors competed to control the precious ore beneath Siuna's hills.

Today, the gold mining has ended. The mineshaft has flooded with water. The company commissary has long burned down. Cattle ranching now dominates Siuna's economy, and the discussions in the market mostly concern the prices of milk and beef, not gold.

As they go about their daily business, most *Siuneños* take little note of the concrete ruins and the toxic lagoon that are relics of mining era. The significance of the ruins only emerged when I sought out the eldest *Siuneños* in 2008 and 2009. They told stories of the people drawn to Siuna's gold: entrepreneurial Chinese merchants, Miskito workers who toiled in the mine's depth, and of a greedy American overseer said to have made a pact with the devil to become rich.

This document explores the largely untold history of this colorful gold mining town based on a review of the available literature, archival research, and interviews conducted with members of the Siuna community in 2008 and 2009.

Before the Gold

Isolated in the interior, Siuna was less integrated into the colonial system than the more assessable Pacific and Caribbean coasts of Nicaragua. To the west, the Spanish established their colony in the Pacific region in the sixteenth century, but never gained a successful foothold in the northeast interior where Siuna is located (Bourgeois 1981:28; Perez-Brignoli 1989:37). To the east of Siuna on the Caribbean Coast, the British forged an alliance with the indigenous Miskito in the seventeenth century in order to challenge Spanish control of the isthmus (Hale 1994:38-39; Sollis 1989:483-484). With the support of their British patrons, the Miskito became an effective military force, raiding as far north as Trujillo, Honduras and as far south as Bocas del Toro, Panama. They fought off Spanish domination and supported the British by periodically attacking Spanish settlers and forts. The combined efforts of the Miskito and the British kept the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua largely independent from Pacific Nicaragua until 1894 (Bourgeois 1989:27; Hale 1994:39; Sollis 1989:484).

Although Siuna had little direct contact with the British or Spanish, their presence did have an impact. Miskito attacks probably pushed a second indigenous group, the Mayangna, from the Caribbean Coast into the Siuna area. The Mayangna people were the principle inhabitants of Siuna when mining operations began (Cunningham and Barbeyto 2001:45-50). Today, the Mayangna continue to speak their own languages and live in the village of Sikilta within the municipality of Siuna as well as the other mining triangle towns of Rosita and Bonanza (Hale 1994:38-39; Rinne 2006:137; Von Houwald 2003:84-88)

José Aramburó and the First Days of Mining in Siuna

Gold first attracted attention to Siuna in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, an era of increasing U.S. ventures in gold mining, logging, rubber, and banana plantations on the Nicaraguan Caribbean littoral (Gismoudi and Mouat 2002:852; Hale 1994:39; Sollis 1989:485-486). The earliest written evidence I found of gold mining in the Siuna area was an 1891 *New York Times* article that identified Paul Rener, Gusta Schultz, and Señor Don Aramburó as the discoverers of “several gold mines” along the Prinzapolka River (New York Times 1891).

The article boasted that the mines contained “chunks of gold as large as his finger and flat pieces as big as an egg” (New York Times 1891). The article also described the difficulty of journeying to the mines by traveling upriver on the Prinzapolka River from the Caribbean:

The journey to the mines is a dreadful one, and has deterred the search for the treasures ero [sic] this. It is difficult to conceive the dangers which must be passed. First, there is a four days' journey in a pierogue up the river to the rapids. The latter are terrific, and it takes four days of careful and constant work to get through them. Then the daring gold seeker is confronted with a tropical jungle, so thick that every step of the way must be cut through with machetes (New York Times 1891).

The three prospectors had apparently already been at work for quite some time, as the article explained that it had taken them “eight or ten years” to export gold out of the wilderness. The prospectors planned to install a gold processing mill by shipping the parts in small boats upriver and reassembling the mill in the mining camps (New York Times 1891). Although this article does not mention the Siuna camp specifically, other sources indicate that José Aramburó was the first Siuna miner (Garcia Izaguirre 1998:7; Scorey 1920:6).¹ As Wunderlich (1989: 49) explains, Siuna in the 1890s was only one mining camp among many in the area: “The La Luz [in Siuna] and Bonanza were only two of the many mines that since 1890, in a short period had emerged in the headwaters of the Prinzapolka, Bambana, and Waspuk rivers.”²

According to Siuna legend, Aramburó began searching for gold after he witnessed a Mayangna person using a gold sinker to fish.³ It is said that a Mayangna woman named Seuna revealed the location of Siuna's gold to Aramburó in exchange for the freedom of her husband imprisoned in the Caribbean town of Bluefields (Garcia Izaguirre 1998:5-6).⁴ An alternative account suggests that the Mayangna originally showed Gusta Schultz rather than Aramburó the location of the gold (Sr. Maria del Rey Maria 1968:18-19; Thayer Lindsley Records 1915:10).^{5, 6}

In these early days, there were prospectors who worked independent from the Company referred to as *güiriseros*. As the Company became more organized in later years, it prohibited such independent prospecting on its concessions, which grew to encompass a large area (La Luz Mines Limited 1940:10-11; Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:18).

One elderly *Siuneño* said that during these first years gold was so plentiful that nuggets could be found in road drains after rainstorms. An account from an American Maryknoll nun and an interview I conducted with a retired miner in 2009 state that mine

owners gave workers old Quaker Oats or kerosene cans to fill with gold (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:19).

Despite the richness of the claims, the earliest mine workers were desperately poor. Many arrived expecting to strike it rich but instead found the best claims already in the control of capitalists such as Jose Aramburó. These new arrivals from western Nicaragua had no choice but to work for the claim owners. Compounding the problem of low wages was their dependence on merchants who charged exorbitant prices for food and clothing because of high transportation costs and limited local agricultural production. Frequently, workers became indebted to the merchants (Wünderich 1989: 52).

The Mayangna people who inhabited the Siuna region had no input or say in the development of gold mining on their land. Like the miners, the Mayangna became indebted to merchants as they purchased commercial goods such as tools, fabric, alcohol, and food. Debts forced some Mayangna to work for the mining company to repay the merchants (Wünderich 1989: 50-51). Wünderich (1989:51) succinctly explains that the Mayangna emerged as the most marginalized group in the emerging mining region: “The Sumo [Mayangna] suffered continual abuse from the prospectors and found themselves at the lowest class in a society they had never known or wanted.”⁷

The early mine owner José Aramburó did achieve his dream of building a gold processing mill in Siuna. This first mill in Siuna used to crush ore for processing ran on steam (Tonopah Mining Company Records 1938). He formed a company, Compañía Minera La Luz y Los Angeles, and in 1897 he began formal extraction of alluvial deposits and processing of ore via gold-mercury amalgamation (Scorey 1920:6).

La Luz and Los Angeles Mining Company and President Zelaya

In 1905, a group of Pittsburgh capitalists purchased the gold mine from Aramburó (Scorey 1920:6).⁸ The mine would remain in foreign hands until the Sandinista Revolution of 1979. Shortly after the Pittsburgh group purchased the mine, Siuna was thrust into the center of Nicaraguan politics when President José Santos Zelaya moved to annul the mine’s concession in 1909. Zelaya was increasingly hostile towards U.S. investment since Panama had been chosen over Nicaragua for the site of the transoceanic canal in 1903. Zelaya also became frustrated with U.S. businesses that sold goods imported duty-free for company use on the open market and failed to complete promised infrastructure projects, such as building railroad lines (Gismoudi and Mouat 2002:853-859). For their part, U.S. companies in the Caribbean region of Nicaragua disliked Zelaya’s tax increases and his monopolies on important supplies, such as meat and dynamite. American businessmen preferred the liberty with which they had operated before Zelaya. It had only been in 1894 that Zelaya occupied Bluefields and overthrew the independent government of the Mosquito Reserve that had previously controlled Nicaragua’s Caribbean region (Gismoudi and Mouat 2002:849-854; Hale 1994:41).

The Pittsburg group acted aggressively to protect their investment in Siuna from Zelaya. In October 1909, the La Luz and Los Angeles Mining Company backed a rebellion against Zelaya. William Alder, a Company stockholder, sent a boat full of weapons from New Orleans to Bluefields to arm the rebellion. Adolfo Díaz, the Nicaraguan secretary for the Company, fundraised \$600,000 for the effort. Leonard Groce, the mine’s American manager, even enlisted in the rebel forces. Groce was captured laying mines for Zelaya’s boats on the San Juan River. Zelaya decided to

execute Groce and a second American prisoner on November 16th, 1909 (Gismoudi and Mouat 2002: 866-867; Langley and Schoonover 1995: 82-88).

As Langley and Schoonover (1995:91-92) explain, Zelaya's execution of the Americans stirred up U.S. public support for the rebellion and more American "soldiers of fortune" from New Orleans and the Panama Canal construction site flocked to the rebel ranks. On December 1st, 1909, U.S. Secretary of State Philander Knox struck the fatal blow to Zelaya's Government. In his famous "note" to Zelaya's Chargé d'Affaires in Washington, Knox severed diplomatic relations, calling Zelaya a "blot upon the history of Nicaragua" (Gismoudi and Mouat 2002:864; Nearing and Freeman 1925:153).

Knox's decision to end diplomatic relations with Nicaragua was not a capricious reaction to the execution of the two American rebels captured on the San Juan River, but a deliberate response to Zelaya's regional ambitions. Zelaya's aspirations of reuniting Central America under his leadership and partnering with the Japanese or the British to build a Nicaraguan canal threatened the supremacy the U.S. enjoyed in Central America and the Caribbean in the wake of the Spanish-American War of 1898 (Walker 2011:18). In addition, lobbying from the La Luz and Los Angeles Mining Company influenced Knox's choice to sever diplomatic relations. As Gismoudi and Mouat (2002) explain, Knox was a Pittsburg native and previously a corporate lawyer in the city. Henry Fletcher, who worked as a diplomat in Knox's State Department, was the brother of La Luz and Los Angeles's President, Gilmore Fletcher. Knox was clearly well acquainted with the Pittsburg owners of the mining company.⁹ Throughout 1909, the Pittsburg investors lobbied their ally in Washington, Secretary Knox, to protect their mining concession (Gismoudi and Mouat 2002:846-878). The influence of La Luz and Los Angeles on Knox's foreign policy in Nicaragua exemplifies the "dollar diplomacy" of Secretary Knox and President Taft, in which military action was considered justifiable to defend American business interests abroad (Nearing and Freeman 1925).

Just days after Knox cut off diplomatic relations, Zelaya resigned the Presidency and appointed a supporter in his place. The United States soon forced Zelaya's designee out as well and ushered the leaders of the U.S.-backed rebellion into power. Adolfo Díaz, La Luz and Los Angeles' secretary and a leader in the rebellion, became President of Nicaragua in May 1911 (Gismoudi and Mouat 2002:869-871; Langley and Schoonover 1995:112). President Díaz insured the foreign gold mining concession in Siuna remained valid, and he continued to receive a monthly \$100 salary from La Luz and Los Angeles while President (Gismoudi and Mouat 2002:874). His government also arranged a series of loans for the Nicaraguan government by American banks that gave the banks and the U.S. government control of Nicaraguan state finances, custom tax collection, and railroads (Nearing and Freeman 1925:162-165; Walker 2011:19).

Anger over the threat to Nicaraguan sovereignty from the growing American influence sparked a rebellion against President Díaz in July 1912. It was only with an American military intervention that Díaz managed to stay in power. In August 1912, U.S. marines landed in Nicaragua and quickly put an end to the rebellion (Nearing and Freeman 1925:164). The United States continued to occupy Nicaragua until 1933 (with a brief withdrawal for a few months in 1925). Protecting American banks and business was one aim of the occupation, but far more important was Nicaragua's strategic importance to the United States. A compliant Nicaragua was critical to maintaining American

dominance in the region because of Nicaragua's proximity to the Panama Canal and because it was a site for a potential second canal (Walker 2011:20).

La Luz and Los Angeles Mining Company and General Sandino

With a cooperative government installed and protected by the American military, the La Luz and Los Angeles Mining Company continued its gold mining operations in Siuna. Although the political situation no longer immediately endangered the mine, the remoteness of the Siuna site continued to pose a challenge. The Company was forced to ship fuel and other supplies more than one hundred miles from the Caribbean Coast up the Prinzapolka River via riverboat (Gismoudi and Mouat 2002:859; Plecash and Hopper 1963:624; Scorey 1920). A 1920 report as well as accounts by elderly residents of Siuna state that the company employed oxen as well as local women in hauling supplies from river docks at the villages of Wani and Amparo the five miles from the Prinzapolka River to the mine. The working conditions under which the one hundred or so employees worked were harsh: women are reported as carrying a burden of eighty pounds for only \$2.00 per ton-mile (New York Times 1928c; Scorey 1920).

In 2008 and 2009 I interviewed Juan Blanco, a ninety-five year old retired miner and native *Siuneño*, who had memories of the 1920s mining period in Siuna. He remembered Adolfo Díaz visiting Siuna via riverboat from Bluefields to inspect the mines. He described Adolfo Díaz as a short, rotund, *bienvestido* [well-dressed] man who was the owner of three small mills in Siuna used to crush gold ore.¹⁰ Siuna, explained Blanco, was nothing more than a small mining camp macheted out of the jungle at this time.

In 1928, Siuna once again became a flashpoint in the tumultuous relationship between Nicaragua and the United States when Augusto C. Sandino sacked the mine. Sandino was leading a surprisingly successful guerrilla war to kick out the occupying U.S. Marines. Sandino was a nationalist whose principle grievance was that American occupation violated Nicaraguan sovereignty (Walker 2011:22). Sandino habitually targeted U.S.-owned corporations as they symbolized what he saw as a colonial American presence (Macaulay 1967). The La Luz and Los Angeles mine in Siuna was a particularly appealing target for Sandino, as he must have been aware of the Company's involvement in the 1909 overthrow of Zelaya (Gismondi and Mouat 2002: 845-846). Macaulay (1967:119) writes that "according to one of his admirers, Sandino was obsessed with the idea of ravaging these American mines, for he considered them a source of much of his country's troubles."

On the evening of April 12th 1928, Sandinista guerrillas unexpectedly arrived in Siuna. They immediately entered the Company mess hall, where they threw out the miners and ate their dinner (Denny 1928b; New York Times 1928c). The guerrillas proceeded to sack the mineworks and town, stealing gold, money, merchandise, and animals (New York Times 1928c). The raiders captured five foreign workers, one of whom died of malaria in captivity (New York Times 1928a). At least one Chinese merchant received a note from the Sandinista promising future reimbursement for confiscated wares. *The New York Times* reported in 1928 that such Sandinista promissory notes ordered U.S. President Calvin Coolidge to pay the bearers (Denny 1928c; Wunderlich 1989:47). The Chinese merchant in Siuna is said to have dutifully saved the promissory note. With the triumph of the modern Sandinistas a generation later in 1979, he hoped to finally be reimbursed for his 1928 goods, but he never received his money.

Before retreating into the jungle, Sandino spectacularly destroyed the processing mill using twenty-five boxes of the company's own dynamite (Plecash and Hopper 1963:624; Wunderich 1989:46). Juan Blanco, the ninety-five year-old Siuna native remembered vividly this impressive explosion that scattered metal and flattened trees. A second long-time Siuna resident said she was told that the company cashier, Mr. Brown, hid nearby during the attack with company cash, only to distribute the money later to Siuna's most indigent residents. This account is partly corroborated by a *New York Times* article reporting on the attack: "So great was the explosion at La Luz, which is in the Prinzapolka district, that trees more than a mile away were uprooted and felled, according to the cashier at the mine, a Mr. Brown. Brown, who had seen the rebels approaching, was hidden in the brush to await their departure when the terrific blast occurred" (New York Times 1928b). After destroying the mill, Sandino penned a letter on April 29th to the manager of La Luz and Los Angeles: "I have the honor to inform you that on this day your mine has been reduced to ashes by disposition of this command to make more tangible our protest against the warlike invasion that your Government has made in our territory without any right other than that of brute force" (Ramirez 1980:192). The manager of the mine discovered the letter in the ruins when he returned to survey the damage with a U.S. marine captain (Denny 1928c).

By all available accounts, the Sandinista raid inspired fear rather than nationalist pride among Siuna's residents. Juan Blanco recalled residents fleeing into the surrounding hills as the Sandinistas raided the town: "We couldn't sleep in our houses, we had to sleep in the hills. During the day in the houses, during the night in the hills." *The New York Times* also reports residents fleeing the guerilla attack (Denny 1928b, New York Times 1928b). Two additional raids in 1930 and 1931 by Sandino's general Pedro Altamirano, nicknamed Pedrón (Pedro the great) undoubtedly worsened the atmosphere of fear (Macaulay 1967:201-220; New York Times 1930). Pedrón is remembered as being particularly cruel: "just the sight of his dark hulking form was enough to inspire terror" (Macaulay 1967:129). Three *Siuneños* recalled being told by now older relatives that Pedrón was no revolutionary, merely an "assassin." Indeed, Pedrón was nothing more than a gun-slinging outlaw before his association with Sandino made him into something of a revolutionary (Macaulay 1967:128-129). In 1930, Pedrón chased the Siuna judge, Remigio Pinel Padilla, into hiding in the wilderness around La Cruz de Rio Grande. After evading Pedrón, Padilla returned to Siuna, only to suffer from a grave lung infection. Prayer to a crucifix of Señor de Esquipulas is said to have cured him (Jarquín and Altamirano 2003). The Señor de Esquipulas crucifix had apparently been brought to Siuna in 1908 by a pious, single mother who sold small goods out of an alligator skin bag. Catholics in Siuna continue to venerate the crucifix today (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:22). Juan Blanco summarized that in the years following Sandino's raid, "the bandits came to kill and rob."

According to La Luz and Los Angeles, Sandino's 1928 attack cost the company US \$2 million in damage (Denny 1928a). The raid also occurred at an inopportune time. By the time the war in Nicaragua was over, the world economy was in the midst of the Great Depression, which likely made financing the repairs more difficult. During the early 1930s, La Luz and Los Angeles Mining Company continued to control the mining operations, but production was operating at low capacity, and sometimes suspended (New York Times 1936; Tonopah Mining Company Records 1938). Adolfo Díaz directed

efforts by the company beginning in 1934 to restart profitable production, but to no apparent avail (MacLeod 1998). La Luz and Los Angeles was unable or uninterested in further explorations to determine if further infrastructure and equipment investments would be profitable (Tonopah Mining Company Records 1936).

In 1936, Tonopah Mining Company of Nevada (headquartered in Philadelphia) and Ventures Limited of Toronto purchased a two-year option on the La Luz and Los Angeles property (Tonopah Mining Company Records 1936). One of the first people to visit Siuna on behalf of this new venture was the engineer William MacDonald.¹¹ On March 11, 1936 MacDonald penned a letter to a Vice President of Tonopah Mining Company from the Bragman's Bluff Lumber Company in Puerto Cabezas. Although MacDonald's initial characterization of Siuna as a poor prospect turned out to be incorrect, his letter provides insight into the depressed atmosphere in Siuna at the time:

Returned yesterday from La Luz... As it appears to me, the La Luz is pretty well worked out... I would not believe there would be any profit by buying into the project ... There is much confusion and conflicting authority on the job, due largely to Mr. Fletcher's idea of remote control... Adolf Diaz will return the 19th and probably will make some changes in La Luz management... had a mild bandit scare at La Luz. They reinforced the Guardia detachment, and sent out warnings, but nothing happened. Have had a very pleasant visit so far. A sprinkling of red bug bites and some profane perspiration being the extent of the hardships. The La Luz was a lucky assignment for a tenderfoot in this country... (Tonopah Mining Company Records 1936).

Air travel made MacDonald's trip to Siuna both quick and comfortable compared to the early days of grueling travel up the Prinzapolka River through the jungle. The introduction of air transport would soon revolutionize the town.

After investing in a two-year exploration project that indicated extensive profitable gold ores existed on the site, Tonopah and Ventures exercised their option and formed a new company in 1938 called La Luz Mines Limited to operate the mine in Siuna (Plecash and Hopper 1963:624; Tonopah Mining Company Records 1938). La Luz Mines Limited controlled a concession 12 miles long and 2 miles wide (Thayer Lindsley Records 1948). Ventures Limited and associates controlled 88% of the company and Tonopah Mining Company owned the remaining 12% (Wall Street Journal 1938). However, the mining entrepreneur Thayer Lindsley was the President of all three companies—La Luz Mines Limited, Tonopah Mining Company, and Ventures Limited (Catanese 1992; Tonopah Mining Company Records 1938).

La Luz Mines Limited and the Beginning of "Company Time"

Beginning in 1938, La Luz Mines Limited provided the needed capital to transform Siuna from an isolated mining camp into a full-fledged company town. 1938 is the beginning of what I refer to as "company time," the period in Siuna's history in which La Luz Mines Limited dominated every aspect of the town's life.

In its first years, La Luz Mines Limited built an impressive infrastructure in order to mitigate the difficulties of operating a large gold mine in such a remote location. Juan

Blanco, the ninety-five year-Siuna native, explained, “there was nothing here until the Canadian Company [La Luz Mines Limited] came. There were no electric lights, no planes, no cars.” The increasing size and infrastructure of the company gave it tremendous power over its employees and the Siuna community. One retired employee told me that Harry McGowen, one of the company’s *gerentes* [general managers] would tell the workers: “Somoza is in charge in Managua, and I am in charge here.” Another former worker described John Plecash, another *gerente* as “the sole owner of knowledge. If it wasn’t his idea, it wasn’t going to happen.”

The company built a new mill and cyanidation plant to process the ore and recover gold as well as silver. By 1941, the mill processed 1,000 to 1,200 tons per day. Three 40,000-gallon diesel tanks provided fuel to produce electricity. A new 100,000-gallon storage tank supplied drinking water (La Luz Mines Limited 1941:3-9).

Among the company’s most important infrastructure investments was a hydroelectric dam. Begun in 1939 and completed in 1942, the 22-meter Mistrook Dam on the Yy River provided electricity for the mining operation and the burgeoning town (Begochea 1963:15; La Luz Mines Limited 1940).¹² Hydroelectricity improved the profit margin of the company, as it reduced the expense of transporting diesel fuel to power the mills that crushed ore (La Luz Mines Limited 1942:4).

In addition to the dam, the company built an exclusive neighborhood to house the forty foreign managers of the mine, mostly Americans and Canadian (Tonopah Mining Company Records 1941). “The Zone” was situated on the tallest hill in Siuna and was strictly off limits to Nicaraguans, unless they were workers maintaining the grounds, performing housework, or acting as guards. The Zone included a golf course, tennis court, swimming pool, social club, and a private school for the children of the foreign employees. The best drinking water was pumped directly to the Zone, bypassing the Nicaraguan neighborhoods. The idea of an exclusive neighborhood for foreign workers was not unique to Siuna, but a characteristic of many company towns in Nicaragua and across Central America. The nearby mining town of Bonanza and Bragman’s Bluff Lumber Company in Puerto Cabezas also operated exclusive zones for managers (Pineda 2006:113-114). Bourgois (1989:4) describes a zone in a Costa Rican banana plantation that is similar to Siuna’s:

In the center of the plantation, surrounded by tall fences and manicured hedges and lawns, is the luxurious housing complex reserved for the top echelons of management, called the White Zone. It includes an exclusive sporting complex known as the club, with a nine-hole golf course, a swimming pool, a bowling alley, a tennis court, and an air-conditioned bar and movie hall. For the vast majority of the plantation population access to the club and the White Zone is strictly forbidden (Bourgois 1989:4).

I expected to find that *Siuneños* resented the opulence and exclusivity of the Zone, but most people I discussed the Zone with were more interested in describing its elegant features (beautiful orange trees, a gas-powered lawn mower, horses for riding) rather than portraying it as a symbol of segregation or exploitation. Several people I spoke with were angered by the way the Zone fell into disrepair after the 1979 Sandinista Revolution, complaining that Sandinista bosses had robbed the place and did not maintain the

buildings and grounds. To many elderly *Siuneños*, the Zone is a symbol of the lost prosperity of company time rather than a catalyst for class-consciousness. The perspectives of elderly *Siuneños* on the Zone reflect the generally positive attitudes towards company time, attitudes that will be elaborated on below.

In 1941, the company also extended the landing strip in Siuna to 2,700 feet in order to accommodate regular air service (La Luz Mines Limited 1941:9).¹³ There were still no roads to Siuna, so air service became the most important transportation link. After the end of World War II, Taca Airlines purchased war surplus aircraft (including DC-3s, C-46s, and C-47s) to serve Siuna and other destinations. Airstrips were also built at Mistrook, to serve the settlement at the hydroelectric dam, and at the Prinzapolka river port of Alamikamba, to facilitate the shipping of goods from the Caribbean to Siuna (Plecash and Hopper 1963:634). In the first two decades of its operations, La Luz Mines Limited transported an impressive amount of cargo to Siuna by air. From 1936 to 1956, 79,360 tons of cargo arrived in Siuna by air at an average cost of \$31.40 per ton (Plecash and Hopper 1963:635). Unlike today, working-class *Siuneños* could afford to travel by air during company time.

Air travel to Siuna was exotic enough to attract the attention of Hollywood. In 1946, a Paramount News crew traveled to Siuna and produced a two-minute newsreel entitled “A Town Survives By Jet Plane.” The film shows a DC-3 bringing supplies to Siuna accompanied by dramatic orchestral music. The narrator explains that “deep in the heart of Nicaragua’s dense mountainous interior: the gold mining town of Siuna, a town that keeps going, amazingly enough, thanks to jet-equipped planes!”

Favorable investment conditions and security by the Somoza dictatorship encouraged the company to continue to grow. Anastasio Somoza, who came to power in Nicaragua after organizing the assassination of Sandino in 1934, was a strong American ally. He spoke English, was educated in the U.S., and unequivocally supported American foreign policy in Latin America and around the globe (Walker 2011:25-28). Around 1938, Somoza approved La Luz Mines to operate for thirty years with a low export duty of 1.5 percent (Plecash and Hopper 1963:625). Foreign companies favored by Somoza no longer had to fear the type of attacks they suffered from Sandino, as Somoza’s loyal National Guard patrolled the country and protected the dictatorship. In Siuna, the company apparently paid to maintain the National Guard garrison (Plecash and Hopper 1963:624,635; Walker 2011:26-27). The National Guard Captain in Siuna also padded his wallet by selling liquor licenses, collecting fines from drunks found in the streets, selling marriage licenses, and collecting various other fines and taxes (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:48-49). La Luz Mines 1942 Annual Report described the relationship between the company and Somoza in glowing terms that suggest the importance of the dictatorship in assuring profitable operations: “... your Directors take great pleasure in recording the mutually pleasant and cordial relations existing between your Company and the Government of Nicaragua and its highly esteemed and respected President, Don Anastasio Somoza” (La Luz Mines Limited 1942:3). In a 1950 internal letter, the general manager in Siuna, Harry McGowan, offered a more detailed appraisal of the company’s relations with the Somoza regime:

“The Government of Nicaragua is a military dictatorship and is firmly under the control of the dictator, General Somoza... I am firmly convinced

that this type of government is the only practical one for a country such as Nicaragua even if our own State Department does not concur with this opinion. The people of Nicaragua are not far enough advanced to live under a democratic system such as we know ... Regarding the company's relations with the Nicaraguan Government, these have always been very friendly and we have found the Nicaraguan Government extremely cooperative. The Nicaraguan officials have stated publicly that they need foreign capital and technical assistance in order to develop and exploit their natural resources and they are only too happy and pleased to encourage investments of this type in the country ..." (Thayer Lindsley Papers 1950)

McGowan's statement that Nicaraguans were "not far enough advanced" to enjoy a democracy was expedient considering the low taxes La Luz Mines Limited enjoyed under the dictatorship.

The infrastructure built by La Luz Mines Limited required tremendous labor power. By 1941, the company employed approximately 1,073 people including about 40 American and Canadian supervisors (La Luz Mines Limited 1941:11; Tonopah Mining Company Records 1941). The vast majority of the laborers in the 1940s and 1950s migrated from other areas of Nicaragua. Few, if any, of the local Mayangna indigenous people worked for the mine, but it is unclear why. The few *Siuneños* I asked would shrug, simply saying the Mayangna were not interested in working for the company.

Five of the six people I interviewed who arrived in Siuna before 1945 came from the banana town of La Cruz de Rio Grande, closer to the Caribbean coast. One man told me he walked fifteen days from La Cruz to Siuna as part of a caravan of forty families. The collapse of the banana plantations in La Cruz stimulated migration to Siuna.¹⁴ Those that immigrated to Siuna from La Cruz remembered a banana blight (probably the Panama disease) and storms (probably a strong hurricane that hit the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua on September 27th, 1941 or October 23rd, 1940) as ruining the bananas in La Cruz (Cuéllar and Kandel 2007:5; Gallenne 1940; La Luz Mines Limited 1940:5; Sumner 1941:265). Sollis (1989:490) writes that La Luz Mines preferred employing former banana workers because they were already accustomed to the demands of working for a company. Many of the workers coming from the failing banana plantations along the coast were indigenous Miskito (Adams 1981:59).

Workers were paid in Nicaraguan cordobas every Saturday beginning at noon. Several former employees claimed the company paid in U.S. dollars, but the Somoza government exchanged the dollars into cordobas, which were worth less. The Government was said to have pocketed the difference in the currency exchange. Favorable prices for goods in the commissary may have compensated somewhat for low wages, but it also made workers further dependent on the company for services, especially since workers could buy on credit (Adams 1981:65).

Many of the eldest Siuna residents in 2009 arrived in Siuna from other parts of Nicaragua shortly after World War II, suggesting a major jump in production and activity at the Company following the end of the War. I interviewed seven individuals who arrived in Siuna from 1945 to 1949. They came to Siuna from Bluefields, Boaco, Chontales, Matagalpa, and Nueva Segovia.

El Pozo, The Underground Mine

In 1941 La Luz Mines Limited began building a mineshaft to extract underground gold ores in Siuna. In 1944 the underground mine [*el pozo*] began production (Plecash and Hopper 1963; La Luz Mines Limited 1962:7) Workers remember jobs in the mine as the most difficult, dangerous, and lucrative employment the company offered. Before the mine, production had concentrated on superficial, open-pit mining, but by 1954 the company abandoned the open-pit mine completely and efforts were concentrated on *el pozo*. The mineshaft was dug in the center of Siuna and the flooded entrance is still visible today. At the surface, the shaft is 17-feet wide and 12-feet long rectangle, reinforced by wood beams and concrete walls. Previously a 105-foot tower containing elevator equipment stood at the surface, but the tower collapsed in the 1990s. At multiple levels underground, various tunnels and shafts were also dug. By 1963, the mine was 1,710 feet deep. Miners ascended and descended into *el pozo* by elevator, and ore was hauled to the surface in gigantic buckets to be milled. The mine required continuous pumping of water from the tunnels and shaft to prevent flooding, and a ventilation shaft and large fan blew fresh air from the surface into the mine. The fans were necessary in part because of the intense heat of some of the mine's areas. The hydroelectric plant on the Yy river provided electricity for pumping and milling (Plecash and Hooper 1963:627-630).

The underground mine is the setting for some of Siuna's most colorful lore. For example, in the *Canta Gallo* [Singing Rooster] mineshaft, miners supposedly heard and saw a rooster made of pure gold crowing during the middle of the night. The social club in the foreign worker zone was named the *Canta Gallo* in honor of this story. A 1914 letter by Mr. W.C. Abbers addressed to Mr. J. E. Spurr of the Tonopah Mining Company also mentions a mineshaft called the *Canta Gallo*, suggesting that multiple areas were probably given this name: "This [the Potosi] is the property that won the first premium at the St. Louis Exposition on eleven bags of ore with the best geological description on exhibit. This ore was from a vein called the Canto Gallo" (Thayer Lindsley Papers 1914).

I was also told stories about a Canadian or American named Mr. John¹⁵ who worked as the manager of operations in the mine beginning in 1949. Mr. John was nicknamed by the workers *el tigre amarillo* [the yellow tiger] because he possessed what was referred to as an "imperative" personality. Eleven individuals I interviewed described *el tigre amarillo* as *mal creado* [bad-natured], while two others described him as a fair boss. Two former miners I spoke with claimed he had physically abused workers. One retired miner I interviewed told me straight out that he believed John had made a pact with the devil. He revealed this after having describing the fairness and generosity of other foreigners, making it clear his suspicions were specific only to Mr. John. This retired miner said that Mr. John would "give" the miners who died in accidents to the devil in exchange for the devil's help finding gold. Mr. John was happy when miners died because, the miner said, leaning in close to whisper in English, "where the dead man is, plenty gold." When I inquired, three other longtime *Siuneños* confirmed that people believed John had made a pact with the devil.

Adams (1981:76-77) reports that a *Siuneño* miner related a similar story to her of an American manager who made a pact with the devil. That account does not name John specifically, but it corresponds with the stories I heard about him in 2008 and 2009: "It

got to the point that when men would die in mine accidents, the supervisor would say: ‘good, good, good, now we’re going to find more gold’” (Adams 1981:76).

Similarly, Nash (1979) and Taussig (1980) detail supernatural beliefs revolving around mining among Bolivian tin miners. Aspects of this belief system bear resemblance to the story of John’s devil pact in Siuna. Bolivian miners offered sacrifices, such as a pair of llamas or liquor, to the masculine deity *Supay*. *Supay* is also called *él Tío* [the uncle] or the devil, and sometimes took the form of a Northamerican manager who embodies danger, power and wealth. The sacrifices to *Supay* brought luck and protection in the mines, and accidents or mining deaths were blamed on the failure to properly appease *Supay* (Nash 1979:122-194; Taussig 1980:143).

A lone miner desperate for money could also beg *Supay* for special help by offering liquor, cigarettes, coca leaves, and, ultimately, his own soul. The miner would become a “superman” capable of earning in one day what others made in two months: “Whoever plays with Tío becomes like a demon” (Nash 1979:192; Taussig 1980:145). The devil contract brought ephemeral riches, but ended in the miner’s death: “A contract with *Supay* brings luck and the chance windfall that might change one’s circumstances but inevitably causes death in a short time” (Nash 1979:123).

Taussig (1980) argues that the beliefs revolving around *Supay* represent the reaction of people living in a non-capitalist, subsistence economy to the introduction of capitalism. The new workers, Taussig believes, implicitly compare the two economic systems: “The peasant producer lives in a system that is aimed at the satisfaction of an array of qualitatively defined needs; contrarily, the capitalist and the capitalist system have the aim of limitless capital accumulation” (Taussig 1980:25). The comparison between the two systems informs the beliefs that associate the capitalist mining industry with evil and the devil: “From this concrete condition of critical comparison the devil-beliefs emerge, as the situation of wage labor in the plantations and mines is contrasted with the drastically different situation that obtains in the communities from which these new proletarians have come, into which they were born, and with which they still retain personal contact” (Taussig 1980:19).

Supay in Bolivia is similar to the devil beliefs reported in Siuna in important respects. In both cases the devil is associated with the capitalist mining industry and Northamerican overseers. In both, sacrifices to the devil were said to bring luck in mining.

A belief that the devil had a presence in the underground becomes understandable when considering the very real dangers of the mine. Many miners were injured or died in accidents involving falling rocks, poisonous underground gases, or dynamite. Production bonuses that encouraged miners to enter dynamited areas before gases and dust had cleared put workers at higher risk (Adams 1981:79). One former miner¹⁶ believed that 36 miners had died during his years in the mine from 1946 to 1968. This number is similar to the one a miner told Adams (1981:79) of approximately one death per year from 1938 to 1968. These arbitrary deaths and injuries, in which one miner might die and another live due to chance accidents, must have encouraged supernatural beliefs about *el pozo*; such beliefs frequently attempt to explain destructive aspects of reality that are beyond control and understanding.

Relatives received a small indemnification if a family member was killed. *Siuneños* said the company, National Guard, or Somoza took the majority of the

compensation for a dead miner, leaving the family with only a pittance. Not included in these death estimations are the many miners who became sick and died later from silicosis from breathing rock dust. The company regularly radiographed miners' lungs in the company-owned hospital, and I was told that workers who developed silicosis were fired to avoid the medical liability (Adams 1981:79). Many of the underground mine workers were Miskito and probably returned to their home villages to die after developing silicosis, making estimations of the number of dead difficult (Adams 1981:79) Nearly every elderly *Siuneño* I spoke with mentioned the silicosis deaths, indicating that the number of dead must have been significant. A common refrain is that the company left nothing behind for Nicaragua but a hole in the earth and a hole in the lungs.

In his novel *Balastro*, Nicaraguan Pedro Avellán Centeno has written a haunting description of *el pozo*. The passage elucidates not only a sense of the unceasing movement and production of the mine, but also how the power of the mine to injure seemingly at random could instill a feeling of helplessness:

From afar, you could see the peak of the mine's tower and hear the sound of the piercing work whistle that was lost in echoes until it was faint and distant. The whistle marked the hour of the shift change, when the miners exited the mine and flicked off the lamps attached to their yellow helmets. Hundreds of other haggard men entered the hole to continue the exhausting and hard labor that mining demanded, to maintain indefinitely the rhythm of the mining company's exploitation.

There, below in the tunnels, within the icy shadows of death that accompanied the miserable miners, there was no difference between day and night; no difference between life and death. The miners, like black dung beetles, pressed forward into the darkness of the tunnels, coughing, panting, tired, sweating, working without rest, convinced that, in this blessed earth of so much wealth, their miserable lives were worth nothing (Centeno 2006:7).¹⁷

Strikes and Unions at La Luz Mines Limited

Some of my first questions about the history of Siuna concerned unions and strikes. I wanted to know how *Siuneños* had advocated for themselves in their relations with the mining company. Considering the global context of antagonism between mining companies and miners, I expected to hear stories in Siuna of brave labor organizing in the face of oppressive management. Although I did hear a few stories that corresponded to these expectations, the majority of former employees I spoke with remembered the company as a benevolent, or at worst, a benign employer.

All but the oldest of the retired workers I interviewed denied that a union had ever existed in Siuna during company time. They said that the company, backed by the muscle of Somoza's National Guard, strictly prohibited labor organizing. It does appear that little labor organizing occurred after 1954, but oral histories from the oldest *Siuneños* and previous scholarship describe organizing efforts in Siuna during the 1940s and early 1950s.

According to Gould (1987) 1,500 workers in Siuna struck in April and June 1945 to protest the company's failure to adhere to the new national labor code. Somoza's Labor Code of 1945 legalized unions and striking, set a minimum wage, and required worker's compensation and paid vacation. The strike in Siuna occurred within a national labor movement in 1945. Pro-Somocistas organized the strike in Siuna. Somoza traveled to Siuna himself to support the workers, while simultaneously campaigning for a truce. Somoza probably wanted a settlement because his Foreign Minister was the company's lawyer, and, as described above, the relationship between the company and the regime were usually favorable. It is unclear how the parties settled the 1945 strike, perhaps the firing of the strike leaders was enough to deaden the effort (Gould 1987:358-374).

Efforts at developing a labor movement in Siuna reemerged in the early 1950s. Seven of the oldest *Siuneños* I interviewed recalled this activity culminating in a second strike in 1954. Low pay is remembered as the principle grievance that precipitated the organizing and eventual strike. In 1953 organizers were fired and forced to flee Siuna. In 1954, the workers managed to mount a strike, but as one retired Creole worker explained, the effort was short-lived:

Yah [I remember the strike.] The *sindicato* [union] the people them, they came. Plecash [the Manager] came, and say, "Work! Work! Work!" But the people, no they won't. But Somoza and the Company were just so, you know. They were just so. So the company sent to Somoza. And Somoza say, "Wait a while," he say, "I'm going to send down some of my people them and things. So the plane come down, so everybody come out to the field, you know, and things. So the guy who is going to give the speech he say, "I come here for one reason," he say. "You people wishing, looking to strike, you do this thing right now: Get up and go back to work right now! So when he said that everybody get up and they gone back to work again! [laughs]... yah, they get a little scared.

Intimidated by the National Guard, the strikers "hauled" away from the airstrip as fast as they could and went back to work. The account above closely matches one documented by a Maryknoll nun. After the strike, the company gave workers a trivial raise of five centavos an hour, a move that workers characterized as a "joke" and was probably designed to further demoralize organizing efforts. The 1954 strike was the last serious effort to organize the miners in Siuna until the 1979 Revolution. Retired workers said there was no further organizing, stating simply that such activity was "prohibited" by the Somoza regime and its National Guard. Considering the well-earned reputation of National Guard brutality, the reluctance of workers to engage in labor organizing is understandable.

By the 1960s, John Plecash, the company manager, summarized the labor situation as idyllic: "The supply of labour is adequate, and a good percentage of the Nicaraguan employees are capable of acquiring the ability to perform the duties assigned them quite satisfactorily. The Nicaraguans are inclined to be a cheerful people and, on the average, are quite friendly. Law and order is maintained by National Guards, who are stationed throughout the country" (Plecash and Hopper 1963:624).

Siuna Grows at Mid-Century

In 1945, a primary school opened under the direction of American, Catholic, Maryknoll nuns. The school quickly became one of Siuna's most important institutions. In its opening year, the school had 302 students, and by 1968 it boasted more than 800 (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:88,151). Maura Clarke, one of the Maryknoll nuns assassinated in El Salvador in 1980, was the director of the school for a time in the late 1960s (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:151). The Catholic school in Siuna is now named in her honor. In addition to the school, the nuns ran a health center (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:157). Older *Siuneños* who attended the school continue to be proud of the quality education they received from the nuns and remember the school fondly. Miskito, Creole, and mestizo children all attended the school. The nuns maintained a close relationship with the American and Canadian managers of the Company and were invited to meals or parties hosted in "the Zone" (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:165). Sister Maria del Rey's memoir of her time teaching at the school, *Prospero Strikes it Rich* is the most comprehensive account of Siuna during the company era. The school transitioned to Nicaraguan Catholic management in the late 1960s. In addition to the Catholic Maryknoll school, Siuna also had a Moravian school in the Jamaicatown Creole neighborhood, as well as a public schools in the La Luz and Miskitotown neighborhoods. All of these schools—and many more—continue to serve students today.

During the 1950s, La Luz Mines Limited further improved its infrastructure to reduce the high cost of transporting cargo in and out of Siuna. By 1956, the company had built 46 miles of road from Siuna to Alamikamba, the river port on the Prinzapolka River. The following year the company completed an additional 19 miles of road that connected the Siuna-Alamikamba road to Rosita (where the company planned to develop a copper mine), 22 miles from Alamikamba downstream to the second river port of Limbaika, and 17 additional miles of road around the Yy hydroelectric reservoir. Once the road to Limbaika was completed, the company unloaded river cargo originating from the Caribbean at Limbaika rather than Alamikamba. Limbaika had the advantage of being navigable all year long, even during the dry season (Plecash and Hopper 1963:634). Sister Maria del Rey recalled a conversation with company manager John Plecash¹⁸ in which he describes the difficulty of these road building projects in the wet, tropical forest of Caribbean Nicaragua: "All the rain may be the farmer's delight but we roadbuilders take a dim view of it. We've made one hundred three miles of road here; it cost us a million dollars. . . roadmaking can't be a year-round job here. From June to January the rain stops us. That's when we struggle to maintain what's already built" (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:166).

Siuneños who are old enough remark that the dirt roads were in better condition during company time than they are today. John Plecash, the company manager, was infamous for being a stickler about road quality, complaining to the road crew stationed in *El Empalme* [the intersection or Y] (midway between Siuna and Alamikamba) of even the smallest potholes. *El Empalme* was the site of the first gas station in the area, but does not currently support a formal gas station (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:143).

In 1954 La Luz Mines Limited formed a wholly owned subsidiary, Rosita Mines Limited, to operate the new copper mine at Rosita, located 46 kilometers from Siuna. The processing of the ore at Rosita required that large amounts of copper concentrate be shipped out of Nicaragua for final processing and extraction of the copper. To increase

the efficiency of shipping the copper concentrate as well as the equipment needed for the new Rosita operation, the company began construction on an ambitious ocean dock project on the Caribbean in 1957 named Puerto Isabel. From the ocean dock three miles south of the Prinzapolka River's mouth, supplies would be trucked on a three-mile road to a smaller river dock on the Prinzapolka. From the river dock, barges propelled by tugs would carry cargo to Limbaika 65 miles upstream of the river's mouth and fifteen miles downstream of Alamikamba (Plecash and Hopper 1963:634,635). The Limbaika dock was built to replace the Alamikamba dock probably because lower water levels and increased silt from deforestation and erosion made Alamikamba inaccessible to the company's boats during the dry season.

Royal Netherlands Harbor Works completed Puerto Isabel on contract in 1959, the same year the new copper mine in Rosita began operations. The dock extended an impressive 2,800 feet into the Caribbean. With the construction of Puerto Isabel La Luz Mines Limited had developed an extensive private infrastructure in eastern Nicaragua (Plecash and Hopper 1963:635,637). In addition to the Siuna gold mine and the new copper mine at Rosita, the company controlled four air strips at Siuna, Rosita, Yy, and Alamikamba; a hydroelectric power plant at Yy; two river docks at Alamikamba and Limbaika; and the new ocean dock at Puerto Isabel.

Siuna's Ethnic Communities

In 1960, the company employed on average 1,070 workers in Siuna (La Luz Mines Limited 1961:9). As has been mentioned above, the extensive operations of the company required a large workforce, and employees hailed from many different communities and ethnicities. One Northamerican manager of Scottish descent even paraded through town with kilt and bagpipe. Once in Siuna, workers were divided into a few ethnic categories: the American and Canadian managers; Miskito indigenous laborers; Spanish-speaking *mestizos* (sometimes referred to as *españoles* or "the Spanish" by English and Creole speakers); English and English-Creole speaking Creoles or blacks that included all Afro-Caribbeans regardless of their nationality as Nicaraguans, Jamaican, or Cayman; and finally the Chinese who did not work for the mine but operated a group of successful stores and businesses in the La Luz neighborhood.

The Afro-Caribbeans held many of the most comfortable and skill-based jobs at the company. This may seem counterintuitive considering the racism and segregation against African-Americans in the United States during the twentieth century, but the company especially valued Creole workers for their ability to speak English. Creoles held most of the office jobs such as secretaries, assistants, and accountants.

The Spanish-speaking *mestizos* occupied jobs at all levels within the company, from grunts in the depths of the mine to management positions. Like the Afro-Caribbeans, the *mestizos* who worked beside the Northamericans in higher-level positions remember the Northamerican managers as fair and willing to share their technical knowledge.

The Miskito tended to work the most dangerous, highest paying jobs as miners in *el pozo* as opposed to the more comfortable but less lucrative jobs in other departments. The Miskito provided the majority of the unskilled labor for the mine from 1940 to 1970 (Adams 1981:59). *Siuneños* explained the disproportionate number of Miskito working in the mine by describing them as fearless, hardworking, eager for the bonuses available in the mine work, and easy to exploit because of their more limited fluency in English and

Spanish. Adams (1981:59) characterized the Miskito as a migrant, reserve labor force for the company. Miskito workers frequently traveled back and forth between Siuna and their natal villages to the east. They would work for the company for a period of months or years and would return when the company cut jobs or they earned enough to return home. The transitory nature of the Miskito workers meant they were less likely to become embroiled in labor organizing and more likely to retreat home if they became sick from their dangerous work rather than demand treatment from the company (Adams 1981:59).

John Plecash, the company manager, told the Maryknoll nun Maria del Rey in 1968, that the vast majority of underground mine workers were Miskito: “In the early days the *pozeros* [underground mine workers] were forty per cent Spanish, ten per cent Jamaican Negro and fifty per cent Miskito Indian. Now the Jamaicans are practically out of the ‘hole,’ the Spanish are only twenty per cent, and the Miskitos constitute eighty per cent” (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:169). Because so many Miskito worked in the mine, they surely suffered disproportionately in terms of accidents and silicosis. In 2008 and 2009, I interviewed only a few retired Miskito miners because many had long ago returned to their villages on the Caribbean Coast, or perhaps perished from silicosis. These interviews occurred in Alamikamba and Limbaika.

Unlike the other ethnicities, the Chinese did not work for the company. They operated independent stores in the La Luz neighborhood. The Chinese community in eastern Nicaragua was based in Bluefields on the Caribbean Coast, where by the 1920s they dominated commercial activity in the port (Wilson 2009:215). One elderly *Siuneño* as well as MaryKnoll sister Maria del Rey remember Chinese merchants buying gold in exchange for goods such as food and clothing in the early days of Siuna: “On Luk Yong, seated on a rough stool just inside his doorway, would take a jeweler’s glass carefully out of his pocket, remove the old leather wrappings and adjust it deliberately in his eye... The glass, of course, detected flaws [in the gold]. The tiny scales he kept on his counter had Chinese figures... And Rodrigo would go back to the hut he shared with Ramon, delighted with the new shirt, the bag of black beans and the few pieces of money allotted to him” (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:20).

In addition to the occupational segregation at the company, housing was also segregated. Northamerican managers lived on the literal and figurative apex of town in the Zone, while Miskito lived in the Miskitotown neighborhood and Afro-Caribbeans in the Jamaicatown neighborhood. The company owned much of the property and housing units in Siuna, and thus probably dictated the segregation by neighborhood. One *Siuneño* suggested that the company segregated ethnicities in order to discourage labor organizing, but little is known about the company’s motivations, if any, in separating ethnicities by neighborhood.

Life in Siuna at Mid-Century

Life in Siuna at mid-century was tough. The town was dirty, disease-ridden, poor, isolated and dominated by *cantinas* [bars]. Often, the only work available was hacking away at rock thousands of feet below ground. Still, the standard of living had certainly improved since before La Luz Mines Limited had begun operating in 1938. The company, despite all of its faults, had brought electricity, water, airplanes, consumer goods, and jobs. The town had a winning baseball team, and even a movie theater.

Despite all of the growth and infrastructure improvements, at mid-century *Siuneños* still frequently suffered from preventable illnesses. Sister Maria del Rey

reported treating childhood malnutrition, malaria, pneumonia, whooping cough, tuberculosis, and Beri-Beri (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:112-121). One elderly woman told me that when she arrived in Siuna in the 1940s, there was an epidemic of yellow fever that attacked humans as well as monkeys in the jungles around town. Although I found no other evidence of such an outbreak, at that time yellow fever did exist in Nicaragua and monkeys are frequently infected as well as humans (Galindo and Trapido 1957).

The company maintained a hospital in Siuna and employed a well-trained staff that included doctors and nurses from Managua and beyond. Care was free for employees, but others were required to pay (Adams 1981:65). The company frequently performed chest x-rays on the *pozeros* [underground mine workers], presumably to look for signs of silicosis and tuberculosis. The expense of the hospital in 1967 was reportedly US \$121,000 (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:167). The interviews I conducted suggested *Siuneños* remember the hospital as clean and providing good food. However, Adams (1981:65) writes that many *Siuneños* were unhappy with the treatments and did not trust the independence of the doctors, believing they had been “bought” by the company. The company turned over the hospital to the Nicaraguan government in 1967 (La Luz Mines Limited 1966:4). By 1968, the government also sprayed buildings in Siuna with insecticide to prevent malaria (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:147).

In addition, the Maryknoll sisters ran a health center and public health program, including vaccinations campaigns in Siuna and the surrounding villages (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:157). The wives of the foreign managers of the company who lived in the Zone volunteered for the nuns by organizing records and rolling bandages. Sister Maria del Rey wrote that Carol McGowan, the daughter of one of the general managers of the company returned to Siuna to work for the Maryknoll clinic: “I grew up in The Zone... and always felt I owed some service to the people of Prospero [Siuna]. So as a nurse, I returned for a year to help the clinic here” (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:160).

The company commissary was another central feature of the growing gold mining town, one that *Siuneños* mentioned as quintessential of “company time.” As Adams (1981:65) explains, the company effectively had a waiver on import duties from the Nicaraguan government until the late 1960s and could import an unlimited amount of consumer goods. This gave the commissary a considerable price advantage. It supplied workers and their families as well as local merchants. Employees could purchase on credit, further increasing their dependence on the company (Adams 1981:65). Nonetheless, *Siuneños* I interviewed appreciated the commissary because of the low prices and the variety of imported products such as chocolate, Campbell’s Soup, Crisco, canned fruit cocktails, apples, breakfast cereals, and boxed cakes. These products were otherwise unavailable. The commissary also sold meat from Matagalpa and seafood from Bluefields. An older woman remarked that the men were especially proud of the commissary because it provided liquor unavailable in other areas of Nicaragua.

One man told me that *Siuneños* used scented toilet paper from the commissary when Nicaraguans in the Pacific were using corncocks to wipe themselves. This was a clever inversion of the usual stereotype of Caribbean Nicaragua as more “primitive” than the Pacific region, and illustrated his opinion that company time was the apex of Siuna’s history. Despite its apparent success in the memories of *Siuneños*, Sister Maria del Rey reports John Plecash stating that the commissary was operated at a loss: “We lost \$7,000 last year [1967] over there. We try to break even but the books always come out red.

Basic commodities—rice, beans, sugar, work clothes, etc.—are sold away below cost. We try to make up the loss on cosmetics, ribbons, fancy clothes. Try—but never do” (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:168). As in other towns in Caribbean Nicaragua the commissary in Siuna introduced the community to American consumer culture (Pineda 2006:109).

Despite the relentless three-shift schedule of the company and the grinding of ore in the processing plant twenty-four hours a day, Siuna also supported some recreation. There was the movie theater, baseball and the ubiquitous bars and clubs.

Company records indicated that La Luz Mines Limited built a movie theater in 1941 (La Luz Mines Limited 1941:9). Sister Maria del Rey also described an early outdoor theater operating with a 16mm projector in 1945 (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:83). A later movie theater named La Luz de Los Angeles was located adjacent to the current municipal museum and was described simply as “the best.” Tickets were bought in advance and the theater served ice cream. This is probably the second theater that Sister Maria del Rey describes in her book as being operated for the benefit of the MaryKnoll school:

I went to the movies almost every night in Prospero [Siuna]. All social classes meet in the big wooden building, so much like a tobacco-drying shed. Canadians and Americans from the Zone, Jamaicans and Spanish, Chinese shopkeepers and a few Miskitos sit on benches below or pay extra for seats in the balcony. Children are half price; dogs are free. You can buy popcorn from a machine, if you wish, or get a cool drink” (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:140).

Sister Maria del Rey wrote that the new, 35 mm projector for the movie theater was purchased by the Catholic priest (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:140). Today the movie theaters have long been replaced by televisions with signal via a bootlegged local satellite and cable system as well as DVD players.

Baseball was—and continues to be—the favored athletic pastime of the town and all of Nicaragua. A diamond was initially located at the end of the airstrip, and was moved to its present location besides the airstrip in the early 1950s. I was told that gasoline was sometimes used to dry off the field during the rainy season. Some of the Northamerican managers of the mine played alongside Nicaraguans. The town had several youth and informal teams and an all-star team that represented the town in the Atlantic Series, an annual tournament between teams from across the Caribbean Region. Hosting the Atlantic Series rotates to a different town every year. The Series is one of the few events that brings isolated *Costeños* [Coast people] together. During “company time,” multinational companies in the Mining Triangle and across the Coast financed the Atlantic Series (Pineda 2006:159). Siuna won the Atlantic Series in 1953, 1957, and 2004. One of the players of the 1957 championship team, whom I interviewed in his home in Pearl Lagoon, said the players received fifteen days off from the company after the victory to celebrate.

Celebrations of any kind and much more drama took place in the town’s numerous bars and clubs. The finest venue was the company’s club, the *Canta Gallo* located on a hilltop in the Zone next to the Zone’s swimming pool. There was also a

Chinese Club located in La Luz neighborhood, a Jamaica Town Club, a “Spanish” Club for *mestizos*, and many other *cantinas*.

Parties at the *Canta Gallo* were restricted to the Northamerican staff and a few favored Nicaraguan workers and guests. Annual parties included 4th of July (U.S. Independence Day), September 15 (Central American Independence Day), a Halloween costume party, and New Year’s Eve. Invitations for these special parties were issued to those lucky enough to attend, and a company truck did a loop around town at the appointed hour to transport the guests into the Zone. The *gerente* [manager] and his wife would greet the guests at the door. Food and drink were provided, but any guest exhibiting indecent, drunken behavior such as spitting or vulgarity would be immediately kicked out. The dancing would continue until one or two in the morning, and the company truck would return guests to their homes. The wife of a Nicaraguan manager who attended the parties and later became a stalwart Sandinista told me, “I can’t speak bad [of those times], because I enjoyed all those things.” Another man who attended these parties said, “You just asked for anything you wanted, but you had to have discipline, you couldn’t end up [on the floor]. Know what you are doing, when you had enough you go home, yah.” One group of lower-level workers who did earn invitations to these exclusive parties at the *Canta Gallo* were musicians. The most celebrated Siuna musician was Amos Johnson, nicknamed Tipi, a Creole man originally from Honduras who played the saxophone, sang (in English, Miskito, and Spanish), and worked in the company’s machine shop. Tipi repaired the carts that hauled ore through the underground tunnels. A Canadian manager of the mine tried to entice Tipi to travel to Canada with him to record his music, but Tipi decided to stay in Nicaragua. He did, however, record music in Nicaragua that continues to be passed around Siuna today on CDs. The commissary manager, Mr. Wolf, brought a new drum set from abroad for Mr. Henry, the drummer who accompanied Tipi. He apparently brought the drum set right to Mr. Henry’s door using one of the company’s trucks. In addition to playing at the exclusive parties in the *Canta Gallo* the *conjunto* [band] played in a variety of venues across the town. Many *Siuneños* I spoke with cherished the memory of listening and dancing to this music, a happy memory that contrasts with so many of the tragedies that befell the town in the subsequent years.

Besides the more formal clubs, there were also many *cantinas* [bars] in Siuna. The most active and dangerous night of the week was Saturday, payday. In *cantinas* in the *La Salida* Barrio, I was told a lot of people got “shot up” and “chopped up” back during company time. Sister Maria del Rey watched a drunk attack a priest with razor blades he stole from a barber as the priest attempted to say mass in one of the Chinese stores. The attacker’s behavior was blamed on his drink being laced by a poisonous herb, which Sister Maria del Rey mentions several times but I heard no stories of (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:96,115). Prostitution also occurred in *La Salida*. Another nun described riding on a horse through town in the late afternoon, after the day shift had finished and the workers moved into the *cantinas*: “Men, boys, and women, too, reeled from cantina to cantina spending their miserable wages on drink. Every store here sells liquor, no matter what else it sells” (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:47).

Fear of the National Guard did temper delinquency and crime to some extent. Several *Siuneños* told me crime was rare in town because punishments from the National Guard were severe, including summary executions. A Maryknoll nun described the free

reign of the *Comandante* as follows: “It’s up to him to register births and deaths, quell riots, apprehend criminals, hold them in jail for as long as seems good to him, and, if he wishes, to execute them” (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:48).

Opinions about the Company and the Northamerican Managers

The majority of elderly *Siuneños* I interviewed described the company and the Northamerican managers in positive or neutral terms. There was a broad consensus that life was better in Siuna during company time. Nostalgia for company time was compounded by the comparison of the company era to the subsequent years of war and destruction and Siuna’s ongoing struggles to prosper. One man I interviewed in Bluefields who had worked for the company said he has never returned to Siuna even to visit because he wanted to remember it as it was before, in better times.

Elderly *Siuneños* stressed the following advantages of life during company times compared to the present day: the affordability of potable water and electricity provided by the company, the company commissary and the variety of consumer goods it sold, cheap prices, the availability of work, and the consistency of the Saturday pay day. Even if wages were not very high, the company always paid the workers on Saturday, a predictability that workers told me they much appreciated.

One word that retired workers used again and again to describe the personalities of the Northamerican managers was *recto*. The literal meaning of *recto* is “straight,” and, as in English, the word also implies responsibility and industriousness. Many former workers said that only lazy people got into disagreements with the Gringos. “I wouldn’t give them a bad name,” “I don’t have complaints about the mining company,” “All you had to do was do your work. Do what you have to do. No trouble.” Several *Siuneños* described close relationships with particular Northamericans. One former worker, Hernan Sosa, said he saved a Canadian’s life when a bull charged at a rodeo. The Canadian brought him boxes of shirts from Canada to thank him and invited Sosa to travel to Africa to work at a mine there. Mr. Sosa declined the offer. Allen Drebert, a Canadian manager of the auto shop, helped his Nicaraguan foremen, Jose Rocha, immigrate to Waco, Texas in August 1963. Drebert and Rocha maintained a close friendship in Texas. Former workers also expressed admiration for some of the Northamericans. Two *Siuneños* said Mr. John Clark (who worked in the processing plant at the Rosita copper mine) was “the best chemist in the world.” A Chinese businessman and future mayor of Siuna, Rufino Chow, said that the *gerente* John Plecash “cared for me very much.”

Those that expressed criticism of the company often limited it to individuals such as the infamous manager of *el pozo*, Mr. John. One man told me he had gotten into a fistfight with a Northamerican manager in a *cantina* in *La Salida*. The Nicaraguan ended up in jail, and ironically he was bailed out Mr. John, the same manager who had a very poor reputation with other workers. A few people I interviewed did express sweeping condemnations of the company and the Northamericans, such as “the Nicaraguan workers were like flies to them [the *gerentes*].”

The largely favorable opinions surprised me considering the exclusive control of mine profits by Northamericans, the deaths of an innumerable number of miners from silicosis, and the later efforts by the Sandinista Government to encourage Nicaraguans to view the Company as exemplifying foreign colonialism. Certainly my identity as a Northamerican must have influenced the opinions I heard from the elderly workers. My suspicion that I heard softened criticism of the company because of my own identity grew

after two elderly *Siuneños* asked if my father or other relatives had worked for the company.

Towards the end of my stay in Siuna, a professor from URACCAN (University of the Autonomous Regions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast) lent me a copy of the novel *Balastro* by the Nicaraguan Pedro Avellán Centeno, which includes a fictionalized account of Siuna during company time. In the book, Northamericans are referred to as *machos*, a word in Spanish that implies hypermasculinity, sexual prowess, strength, aggressiveness, and hubris. When I asked a few *Siuneños* if it was true workers had referred to the Northamericans as *machos* they smiled or laughed. Yes, I was told, the Northamericans were called *machos* because they beat workers or because they were *bravo* [rough, aggressive]. This insight, however, did not change the overall positive impression I heard from elderly *Siuneños* about the company and the Northamericans.

In retrospect, I believe I probably heard little criticism of the company not because of my background, but because of two far more important factors. First, life during the company time of the 1950s and 1960s compares favorably to the struggles Siuna—and Nicaragua as a whole—suffered through in the ensuing decades. Probably even more important, however, was that the majority of people I interviewed had good jobs as foremen, shop workers, or truck drivers. Few of the people I interviewed worked as grunt laborers in the mine itself. Many of these miners, who were largely Miskito, died of silicosis as a result of their underground labor. The voices of these miners are missing from these pages, but I imagine their appraisals of the company would be far more critical.

The 1968 Disaster and Its Aftermath

On August 12th, 1968, the hydroelectric dam on the Yy River collapsed under the weight of floodwater (La Luz Mines Limited 1968:5). The system that provided Siuna with the cheap electricity crucial for the operating of the company vanished in a deluge of water. *La Prensa* on August 15 reported that the heavy rains had flooded 13 villages: Wasakin, La Boca, Mistrook, Punta de Pan, Bambana, Pantabana, Walpatara, Woman Town, Prinzapolka, Buena Vista, Limbaki, Santa María, and Río Abajo. Two villages, Wasakin and La Boca had “disappeared completely” (Maltes 1968). The Moravian Church in Rosita housed many of the refugees from these villages, but there was insufficient food and medical supplies to support them (Maltes 1968, Rodríguez 1968). On August 18th, the Nicaraguan Red Cross announced that there appeared to be no deaths from the flooding (La Prensa 1968b). Assisted by the Nicaraguan Air Force, the United States Southern Command in Panama sent a helicopter to Siuna on August 24 and 25 to evacuate more than 200 stranded people from El Salto and Dos Bocas, two communities located near the collapsed dam (La Prensa 1968a).

Mining operations in Siuna immediately ended. Without an affordable source of electricity for the water pumps required to keep the mine dry, the mine began to flood. Electrical equipment, pumps, locomotives and crushers were quickly hauled out of the mine to the surface, and the mine abandoned. The 1968 La Luz Mines Limited reported that in its thirty years of operating the Siuna mine, the company had milled 17,110,114 tons of ore and produced 1,852,696 ounces of gold (La Luz Mines 1968:3).

The nearby Rosita mine, also operated by La Luz Mines Limited and previously powered by the Yy hydroelectric dam, remained operational. The diesel generators previously located in Siuna were moved to Rosita, and the mine and mill there were able

to resume operations at full capacity in November 1968, processing 850 tons of ore per day. The company decided to devote its resources on the Rosita mine and expanded operations there to process 2,000 tons per day by 1970 (La Luz Mines Limited 1968:2; 1970:2).

The company's shift in focus from Siuna to Rosita made economic sense as Rosita was much more profitable than Siuna. For example, in 1967 Rosita had an operating profit of US \$5.9 million while Siuna had an operating profit of US \$915,000 (La Luz Mines Limited 1967:2-3). Although Rosita produced some gold and silver, its primary product was copper concentrate (La Luz Mines Limited 1970:1). The copper concentrate was transported by truck and river barge to Puerto Isabel at the mouth of the Prinzapolka River. From Puerto Isabel, the company shipped the concentrate abroad (apparently to Europe) for final processing. Rosita was profitable in part because increased copper demand from the Vietnam War pushed copper prices to historically high levels in the period from 1964 to 1969 (Edelstein N.d.:39-40).

The company maintained the existing machine shop, garage, sawmill and some workers in Siuna to support the operations in Rosita (La Luz Mines Limited 1969:3). Other workers moved to Rosita. More than half of Siuna workers simply lost their jobs with the collapse of the dam.

With the sudden loss of mine, circumstance forced Siuna's residents to take on the challenge of developing an economy independent of the company. According to Sister Maria del Rey, before the dam collapse company manager John Plecash had been pessimistic that Siuna could survive the loss of the company: "The jungle would gobble up the roads in no time... Also, when we go, the farmers' market will be gone. The mine commissary now buys practically everything raised around here" (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:167). In response to the loss of the Siuna's economic mainstay, the town moved towards agriculture and cattle ranching. Even before the dam collapse, interest in agriculture as an economic alternative to mining had grown in Siuna. A catholic priest organized an agricultural cooperative that bought beans, rice, and corn from farmers and offered credit, seeds, and Brahma bulls for use by its members (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:172-3). These early farmers had sold their produce to the commissary, but, as John Plecash had predicted, with the closing of the mine that market had largely disappeared (Sr. Maria del Rey 1968:174). Other former employees panned for gold as *güiriseros* with primitive equipment for lack of economic alternatives (Barricada 1983).

The Somoza regime also had facilitated the growth of agriculture and cattle ranching in Siuna and across the Caribbean region. Somoza encouraged landless western Nicaraguans to colonize the Caribbean as a strategy to relieve increasing land pressure in western Nicaragua. Nicaraguans with land were considered less likely to challenge the Somoza regime. The lack of available land in western Nicaragua stemmed from the consolidation of land holdings at mid-century for the production of export agricultural products such as cotton, sugarcane, coffee, and cattle. As part of its Caribbean colonization strategy, in 1976 Somoza government improved the trail that connected Siuna to Waslala and eventually to Matagalpa and western Nicaragua (Cuéllar and Kandel 2007:6). The road was poor and the trip could take weeks, but for the first time, trucks from western Nicaragua could reach Siuna. Some Sandinista *Siuneños* I interviewed claimed Somoza improved the road to ferret out the small number of Sandinista guerrillas hidden in the jungle nearby.

La Luz Mines Limited suffered another serious setback when the average price of copper dropped from US \$0.634 per pound in 1970 to US \$0.495 per pound in 1971. The company ended exploration work at Rosita and the operations continued only on a salvage level. 1971 operating profit for Rosita was US \$177,000 compared to US \$3.6 million in 1969 (La Luz Mines Limited 1971:2). On October 31, 1973 La Luz Mines Limited sold its Nicaraguan holdings to Rosario Resources Corporation in exchange for 50,000 shares of Rosario, valued at US \$1.3 million (La Luz Mines Limited 1973:2). Rosario also owned a 36% share in the Neptune Mining Company, located nearby in Bonanza. Rosario immediately began an exploration program to characterize the assets and reserves it had purchased from La Luz Mines Limited (Rosario Resources Corporation 1973:11)

Interviews with *Siuneños* indicate that Rosario took steps in the late 1970s to reinvest in Siuna. *Siuneños* explained that a steep rise in gold prices from USD \$125 per ounce in 1976 to USD \$308 per ounce in 1979 prompted the renewed interest in the Siuna gold properties (Officer 2010). Former Rosario workers said that in 1978 and 1979 the company worked to repair the road to the former Yy river hydroelectric dam, made plans to repair the Yy dam and build a second hydroelectric facility at the Copolar site west of Siuna near the town of Rio Blanco, and brought metal tubing to Siuna to repair the municipal water system. The growing movement to overthrow the Somoza regime soon derailed Rosario's renewed plans for Siuna.

The Sandinista Revolution

On January 10, 1978, gunmen linked to the Somoza regime assassinated a vociferous opponent of the government, the award-winning *La Prensa* editor Pedro Joaquin Chamorro. The murder was the beginning of the end for the Somoza dictatorship. Thousands of mourners and protesters took to the streets to memorialize Chamorro, and the U.S. canceled military aid to Somoza (Booth 1985:159-160). The assassination and protests came at a time of widespread frustration with the regime for embezzling funds intended for rebuilding Managua following a devastating earthquake (Walker 2011:31-32).

One alternative to Somoza was the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). Named for the anti-imperialist general Augusto Sandino, inspired by the success of the Cuban Revolution, and influenced by Marxism, the FSLN aimed to overthrow Somoza and build a democratic state (Walker 2011:40). The modern Sandinistas conducted a number of daring operations which brought them to the forefront of Nicaragua's anti-Somoza movement. Late in 1978, the FSLN guerrillas disguised as members of an elite National Guard unit took more than two thousand hostages at the National Palace. Somoza was forced to negotiate. In exchange for the hostages, the Sandinistas received \$500,000, the release of sixty imprisoned guerrillas, the publication of a communiqué, and safe passage out of the country (Booth 1985:163-164). Thousands of supporters lined the road to the airport to watch the guerrillas depart. The operation as well as others secured the FSLN's position as the leading alternative to Somoza.

Despite its isolation on the Caribbean Coast, the FSLN operated in the jungle around Siuna. Shortly before the fall of the dictatorship, the FSLN took control of the towns of Rosita and Bonanza for eight hours on May 28, 1979. Following this operation, dozens of idealistic but ill-prepared young men and women from the Mining Triangle rushed to join the FSLN guerrillas with little more than rubber boots, canned goods, and a

few assorted weapons. The young recruits promptly became lost and sick. On June 5th and 6th, only weeks before the fall of the regime, the National Guard troops stationed in Siuna and Rosita discovered the recruits hiding in La Rampla, Siuna and Nueva América, Rosita, and brutally massacred 56 of the youngsters. Only eight people survived (Centeno 2010). I interviewed one woman who had brought medicine, food, and other supplies to the young guerrillas. After the massacre, the National Guard came to her house in Siuna with a bag of medicine she had sent as evidence of her support. She and her husband were thrown in jail but were freed with the help of a Catholic priest. Another man I interviewed worked driving trucks filled with copper concentrate from the Rosita mine immediately prior to the massacre. He states he gave a ride to a few young guerillas fleeing from the disorganized column in desperation. The National Guard learned of his assistance to the FSLN, and he was placed on a “black list.” Fortunately, the truck driver was tipped off by a friend, and was able to hide for the few remaining days until the Somoza regime dissolved.

Although the Sandinistas remained outgunned and outmanned, their morale, discipline, and public support outlasted the National Guard. By July 13th 1979, the Sandinistas controlled most of Nicaragua except Managua, where Somoza and his lieutenants hid out in a bunker (Booth 1985:174-177). Fearing a supposed “second Cuba,” the Carter administration attempted to negotiate a settlement that would end the Somoza regime while avoiding an unconditional Sandinista victory (Walker 2011:38-40). When the Sandinistas continued to refuse to negotiate, it became clear that Somoza had run out of options. On July 17th, Somoza and his top aides fled to Miami; the Nicaraguan revolution had triumphed (Booth 1985:179-182).

After the revolution, the Rosario Mining Company scuttled its plan to rebuild the Siuna mine. One worker I interview remembered going to Port Isabel to help unload posts for rebuilding electrical lines only to watch the boats sail away as the FSLN triumphed. The new government nationalized all mines in Nicaragua on November 2nd, 1979. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the FSLN asked Rosario to manage the mines and promised compensation for lost assets (Wall Street Journal 1979). In its report on the nationalization, however, the Sandinista official newspaper was less diplomatic: “The foreign companies not only caused environmental damage to our land, but also profound human damage—a wounded generation of sick, debilitated and poor people who will not recover the lives they left behind in the mines and in the pockets of three foreign consortiums” (Barricada 1979).¹⁹ All but three of the foreign supervisors left days before nationalization.²⁰

I interviewed one Creole *Siuneño* who had been a manager at the mine about the days following the revolution. Following the departure of the foreign supervisors, Sandinista officials arrived to survey the mining facilities. Supposedly, the *Siuneño* brought the visitors to the Cashier’s Office to show them boxes of precious wood filled with gold. The government officials refused to believe the wooden boxes contained gold, so he dutifully unwrapped a box to display bars of gold wrapped in aluminum foil. It took six days for the Sandinistas to secure an airplane to transport the gold back to Managua. Everyday, the man I interviewed would bring the gold from the Cashier’s Office down the hill to the landing strip to wait for a plane.

A nationalization ceremony in Siuna featured Carlos Mejía Godoy, the musical voice of the Nicaraguan Revolution. At least one of Godoy’s songs, “The tomb of the

guerilla” mentions Siuna: “The tomb of the guerilla... / is in the lungs of the miner Pedro / who died in Siuna.” Although the mine in Siuna was nationalized, it remained closed except for the artisanal gold mining activity conducted by individual *güiriseros*.

After the revolution, the majority of the Chinese merchants fled Nicaragua. Many *Siuneños*, including the two Chinese-Nicaraguans I interviewed, said the Chinese fled out of fear of the Sandinista’s anti-capitalist tendencies, especially since many had direct experiences of the communist regime in China. Sollis (1989:502) writes that Chinese merchants in Waspam fled in fear out of retribution for prior price fixing among the Chinese merchants, but I heard no accusations of such price fixing in Siuna.

The Contra War

The administration of Ronald Regan, who was elected U.S. President in November 1980, pursued a coordinated policy across Central America to prop up right-wing anti-communist governments and movements, regardless of their human rights abuses. In Nicaragua, the Reagan administration sponsored a group of right-wing contra-revolutionaries (referred to as “the contras”) that attacked the Sandinista government. By 1982, the contras were attacking bridges, oil refineries, and other infrastructure targets. Later, the CIA became directly involved, destroying oil facilities and mining the Nicaraguan harbor of Corinto. By 1984, the number of contra soldiers reached 14,000 and the U.S. had enacted a complete trade embargo on Nicaragua. Nicaragua remained an export-dependent economy, and the embargo had effects that ultimately were as devastating as the contra war itself (Walker 2011:47-55). The Sandinistas began to pay for the growing demands on their government by printing money, leading to a skyrocketing inflation rate. The inflation rate became so out of control that the government resorted to stamping new, higher denominations on paper bills rather than printing new bills with the higher values.

Within the crisis of the contra war, the Sandinista government made attempts to reopen the Siuna mine, but these efforts were largely unsuccessful. Eastern bloc engineers and equipment brought in to assist with the rebuilding efforts were ineffective. The embargo made new equipment or replacement parts from the U.S. unavailable. The extensive capital required to rebuild the infrastructure was not available in the context of the poor Nicaraguan economy. According to the official Sandinista newspaper in 1983 the mine employed 551 people, while 700 more worked as independent *güiriseros* (Barricada 1983). By all oral history accounts the mine never produced much during the early 1980s, and industrial mining operations in Siuna permanently ceased in October 1984 (Dinarte et al. 1989). In 1983, the Sandinistas did reach a settlement with Rosario for seizing its assets, paying the company US \$8.8 million for its assets in Siuna and Rosita (Seib 1983).

In the context of the mounting civil war, the Sandinistas rejected efforts by the Miskito in the Caribbean region to establish increased indigenous autonomy. The FSLN, which was inspired by Marxist class-consciousness rather than ethnic or indigenous identity, saw little room for increased indigenous local control in the context of the conflict (Hale 1994:99-101). In November 1981, the FSLN arrested Miskito leaders who had been critical of the Sandinistas, and this move prompted many Miskito to join the contras (Pineda 2006:192-193). The conflict was exacerbated when the FSLN conducted a forced evacuation of ten thousand Miskito from a remote area of intense conflict along the Río Coco, which forms the border with Honduras (Walker 2011:48-49). During the

evacuation, Sandinista soldiers executed as many as 150 Miskito prisoners (Walker 2011:49).

In response, the contras targeted the mining facilities that had been painstakingly built up over decades. Now that the mines had been nationalized, the facilities represented the Sandinistas rather than foreign corporations. In September 1983, the contras destroyed a river tugboat, the *Rosita II* along the Prinzapolka River near Limbaika. In October 1983, a largely Miskito contra force destroyed the Port Isabel dock that had been built by the company in 1959. The contras used diesel and gasoline stored at Port Isabel to burn the wooden dock. In 1984, the contras burned Limbaika, including the mechanic's shop and several large homes built by the company for foreign supervisors. From 1985 to 1987, the Siuna area saw little conflict as contras regrouped in Honduras for training at CIA-sponsored camps (Lemoyne 1987c).

During the 1980s, the Sandinistas imposed a draft on young men, requiring two years of military service (Walker 2011:50-52). In Siuna, as across Nicaragua, the draft split families with fathers and brothers fighting on opposite sides. In addition to the Sandinista draft, many men from Siuna were forced into service with the Contras as well (Lemoyne 1987b). *Siuneños* told me stories of both the Contras and Sandinistas killing men who refused to join their ranks. Two men, one in Siuna and the other in Bonanza, told me they were kidnapped as teenagers by the contras and transported to training camps in Honduras. Both of these men escaped the camps, only to be drafted into the Sandinista army.

The Sandinistas also organized rural subsistence farmers in the rural areas around Siuna into cooperatives in Uli, Wani, Labu, Floripon, Hormiguero, and Rosa Grande. Members of the cooperatives were armed and the system was designed to protect civilians from contra attacks (Lemoyne 1987c). However, those people who refused to join the cooperatives and remained on independent farms lost access to government food rations and were immediately suspected of supporting the contras. Sandinista patrols frequently arbitrarily attacked and killed these independent farmers and their families (Lemoyne 1987a, 1987c).

Siuna suffered disproportionately during the civil war because of its isolated location close to contra camps in Honduras. Not only were families ripped apart by the opposing armies, the town itself was the site of one of the largest battles of the war. After two years of relative quiet, the contras launched a major offensive on Siuna, Rosita, and Bonanza on the early morning December 20th 1987 as a show of force in the midst of peace negotiations. As many as 3,000 Contra soldiers attacked the three towns simultaneously (Lemoyne 1987d). Many *Siuneños* hid in mining tunnels as the Sandinista soldiers rushed to defend the town. The contras destroyed a radar station and an arms warehouse in Siuna. Unlike Sandino decades before, the contras left the mineworks untouched. The Sandinista Air Force bombed parts of Siuna during the battle to force a contra retreat, but the rebels held the town for about eight hours before withdrawing. Although the precise number of casualties are unknown, dozens of soldiers on both sides as well as civilians were injured or killed. A West German doctor working in Siuna reported to the *New York Times* that he treated seventy injured civilians during the attack (Lemoyne 1987d).

Despite successful contra attacks like the occupation of Siuna in 1987, the contras were suppressed but not defeated during the late 1980s. Nicaragua enacted a new

constitution in 1987 and a law intending to grant the people of the Caribbean more autonomy. The Autonomy Law greatly diminished Miskito indigenous participation in the contras (Walker 2011:54). Nonetheless, negotiation efforts failed to achieve an end to the war before the scheduled 1990 elections (Hazel 2007:24).

Just weeks before the 1990 elections, tragedy again struck Siuna. On the evening of New Year's Day 1990, four Catholic clergy traveling in a pick-up truck through Siuna on the way to a church conference in Puerto Cabezas were ambushed along the Siuna to Rosita road in the community of Ojo de Agua. The truck was hit with a rocket-propelled grenade and with small arms fire. Sister Maureen Courtney from Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Sister Teresa Rosales from Puerto Cabezas were killed in the attack and the other passengers were seriously injured. An investigation by Human Rights Watch determined the contras ambushed and killed the Catholic nuns (Americas Watch 1990).

The Sandinistas had won handily in the democratic 1984 Nicaraguan elections, but their support had waned as the war continued and the economy deteriorated. In the 1990 election, an opposition coalition led by Violeta Chamorro, the widow of the martyred *La Prensa* editor, defeated the Sandinistas (Hazel 2007:24). The UNO victory probably reflected a plea by the electorate for peace rather than a repudiation of the Sandinista movement. According to the Sandinistas, the Nicaraguan people had voted with a “gun held to their heads” (Walker 2011:57-8).

President Chamorro faced an immediate threat of continued violence between the Contras and the Sandinista-controlled Army. Chamorro quickly developed a “transition protocol” with the Sandinistas, authorizing continued Sandinista control of a downsized Army under the leadership of Humberto Ortega (former President Daniel Ortega's brother) and a demobilization of the Contras (Hazel 2008:32-33).

Postwar Siuna

Following the end of the civil war, Chamorro's government not only attempted to disarm the contras but also rapidly downsized the army; the army's size decreased from 87,000 soldiers in 1990 to 15,000 in 1994 (Rocha 2001b). Despite the demobilization, Chamorro's government was unable to provide the economic support for the many demobilized combatants to reintegrate into civilian life, especially in the Siuna area. Some former Contras (known as *recontras*), former Sandinista soldiers (*recompas*), and combined groups (*revueltos*) remained armed and clashed with the government and civilians throughout the 1990s (Walker 2011:65-66). Some of the armed groups were apolitical criminal bands while others had political ideologies (Rocha 2001a). The most active of the armed groups in Siuna was the *recontra* group “3-80 Northern Front” and the *recompa* group the Andrés Castro United Front (FUAC) (Rocha 2001b). The 3-80 Northern Front was made up of extreme anti-Sandinista contras who wanted the entire Sandinista—now Nicaraguan—Army disbanded (Rocha 2001b). On the other side, the FUAC was a recontra group that defended cooperatives the FSLN had built during the 1980s from the 3-80 Northern Front and others (Rocha 2001b). The FUAC was led by former Sandinista army soldiers frustrated with the lack of economic support for the transition to civilian life. They hoped to extract concessions from the government, especially the appropriation of land titles (Rocha 2001b).

Rufino Chow Saballo, the right-wing mayor of Siuna during the late 1990s, described to me in an interview his remote jungle meeting with the FUAC. The FUAC called Chow, along with the mayors of Rosita and Bonanza, to a meeting, but Chow said

he was the only one willing to attend. Two army captains accompanied him, but at the meeting point he was forced to proceed to the remote FUAC camp alone. When he reached the camp, Chow sat on the bed of a pick-up truck and transcribed a letter on a typewriter he had brought to the Nicaraguan President Alemán for the leader of the FUAC who went by the *nom de guerre* Camilo Turcios. The letter described the FUAC's frustration with the compensation Sandinista soldiers had received at the end of the Civil War. After most of the FUAC was disarmed on Christmas Day 1997, Chow said Camilo Turcios visited him in Siuna to ask for assistance finding employment for his former guerrillas. The government did little to deliver on its promises to provide increased economic opportunity for Sandinista army veterans in exchange for disarmament (Rocha 2001b).

In 1999, the remaining armed portions of the FUAC kidnapped a Canadian mining engineer Manley Guarducci and a Nicaraguan soldier, Orlando Rocha in Bonanza; the hostages were later released unharmed (BBC World Service 1999). The FUAC largely dissolved after its three leaders were killed in 2000. Turcios was led to a meeting with a comrade that turned out to be a trap, the second leader was gunned down in front of the Siuna cemetery, and a radio blew up in the face of the third leader. None of the murders of the FUAC leaders have been solved (Rocha 2001b).

At the same time Siuna was coping with these security troubles, American businessman Nelson Bunker Hunt founded the company Hemco in 1995 to operate the Bonanza mines (Bloomberg Businessweek 2014; Coffey 2013). Hunt also explored the possibility of reopening the La Luz mine in Siuna, but ultimately did not restart production there (Otis 1994). Yamana Gold purchased the concession for the La Luz Mine in the mid 2000s, and conducted further drill testing. The historic La Luz mine in downtown Siuna is now owned by Calibre Mining, a Canadian company. Calibre is currently conducting extensive explorations on concessions it owns throughout the Mining Triangle (Calibre Mining 2014).

In addition to mining exploration, the postwar period saw an increase in farming, cattle ranching, and logging in remote areas around Siuna that had been too dangerous to inhabit during the Contra War. As the security situation improved over time, Nicaraguans from farther west migrated to the Siuna countryside because of the availability of affordable land (Cuéllar and Kandel 2007:30). This eastward migration represented a continuation of the immigration that had occurred prior to the Sandinista revolution. The population growth in Siuna reflects this immigration; the municipality had 10,714 inhabitants in 1977, 36,000 in 1991, 53,000 in 1995, and 64,000 in 2005 (INEC 2005; Rocha 2001a). Development on the *frontera agrícola* [agricultural frontier] follows a typical pattern: the forest is cleared of valuable timber, burned, then used for production of rice, beans, and corn for a few years. As the soil becomes depleted, the land is transitioned to pasture for cattle ranching. This strategy has resulted in astounding deforestation; the area of land in Siuna used for agriculture increased from 246,000 manzanas in 1971 to 609,000 manzanas in 2001 (a manzana equals 1.7 acres) (Cuéllar and Kandel 2007:30). The agricultural frontier also expanded into the Bosawás natural reserve, the largest reserve in Nicaragua (Rocha 2001a). The loss of the forest has caused devastating erosion and threatens Siuna's water resources. In addition, the lumber boom was characterized by corruption with those in control of government regulatory ignoring illegal logging performed by political allies (Rocha 2001a).

Despite the deforestation and violence, the postwar period has also seen progress for Siuna in other realms. The town now boasts a campus of URACCAN (University of the Autonomous Regions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast), which hosted me in 2008-2009 while I studied Siuna's history. Landline telephone service arrived in 1998, and today internet access and mobile telephones are readily available in the town of Siuna. The electrical grid that powers urban Siuna is now connected to the national electrical grid, which has improved reliability. In addition, the security situation has improved markedly in both urban and rural Siuna in the last decade.

Concluding Remarks

When I arrived in Siuna for the first time in 2005, I stepped off the single-propeller airplane onto a dirt airstrip and into a town that seemed worlds away from New York City, Washington D.C., or even Managua. I bought a Coca-Cola on the only paved street in town and watched cowboys on horseback ride down the street. The shopkeeper poured the soda from a valuable glass bottle into a plastic bag with a straw so I could carry it with me as I wandered the streets. I looked at what was for sale: herbicides, veterinary medicines, machetes, rubber boots, and, of course, gold. The isolation and wildness had an immediate appeal to me, but, over the years, studying Siuna's history revised my initial perception of it as an outpost on the edge. Instead, I learned how Siuna had been at the center of the economy and politics of Nicaragua and my own country since its very beginning. The discovery of gold first reported in the *New York Times*; the Fletcher family working its influence in Washington to secure its investment; the Nicaraguan national hero destroying the mineworks as a symbol of colonialism; the battle for Siuna at a critical point in the Nicaraguan Civil War—Siuna has always been in the center, not the periphery of history. Speaking with the eldest *Siuneños* and reading yellowing newspaper reports gave my walks through Siuna new meaning. Rather than a rotting building behind a dilapidated fence I saw the busy electrical nerve center of the largest gold mine in Latin America. As I climbed the tallest hill in town, I imagined the radar facility that once occupied the spot, shot to pieces during the Contra attack of 1987. I gazed into the grimy water of the mineshaft, imagining the drowned *Canta Gallo* somewhere below.

The history of Siuna is ambiguous—it cannot be rarefied into a story of capitalist exploitation or leftist revolution. The narratives from the eldest *Siuneños* I heard were too intricate to fit neatly into my expectations. I thought I would hear stories of foreign companies exploiting the people and environment, and indeed, this was a major aspect of the history. Yet I also heard of close friendships between the foreign workers and *Siuneños*, and the devastating violence and poverty Siuna suffered following the end of company time. Given those horrors, it is no surprise that many of the old-time *Siuneños* reflect on the mining era with nostalgia.

What will the future hold? Perhaps Siuna will see its cattle and dairy industry become more sustainable and profitable. Or maybe new agricultural opportunities will emerge. At a former Sandinista collective in Rosa Grande I visited, farmers were optimistic about their new efforts to cultivate cacao for chocolate. They sold their cacao for a handsome profit to international distributors and to local markets in Siuna. As an added benefit, the cacao trees provide a desperately needed forest canopy in a heavily deforested area.

As the price of gold continues to skyrocket, a gold mine may reopen. A new era of company time may begin, with all of its associated benefits and downsides. My hope would be that in a new era of mining, *Siuneños* might receive more of the profit from the resource that is rightfully theirs. Between 1938 and 1968, the La Luz Mine netted 1,852,696 troy ounces of gold (La Luz Mines Limited 1968). The gold would be worth approximately US \$22 billion in 2010. In comparison, Nicaragua's GDP in 2009 was estimated as US \$6.372 billion and its national budget was estimated as US \$1.324 billion (CIA World Factbook 2010). If a mere fraction of the profits had been safeguarded on behalf of the children of Siuna, what educational and economic opportunities might they enjoy today? My hope is that Siuna's history will inspire today's *Siuneños* to advocate for the future of their incredible town.

Notes

¹ Scorey (1920:6) calls Aramburó, the first Siuna mine owner, Spanish, and Garcia Izaguirre (1998:7) calls him Basque. The Aramburó name is indeed of Basque origin.

² Original Spanish text is the following: “Las minas La Luz y Bonanza eran solamente dos de las numerosas minas que, desde 1890 en un breve período, habían surgido en la parte alta de los ríos Prinzapolka, Bamban y Waspuk” (Wünderich 1989:49).

³ One elderly Siuna resident suggested that Aramburó first met “Seuna” in the village of Wani.

⁴ An alternative story suggests that the name Siuna originated from the Spanish word *suampo*, swamp (Garcia Izaguirre 1998:6).

⁵ Sister Maria del Rey (1968:18-19) provides a similar account, however the prospector is identified as a German Heizmann rather than José Aramburó. Given the extensive use of pseudonyms in Sister Maria del Rey’s book, it is possible Heizmann is a pseudonym for Gusta Schultz, the prospector identified in the 1891 *New York Times* article.

⁶ A 1915 “Report on the Potosi, Atlas, New America, Minerva, and La Libertad Mining Properties, Nicaragua” by mining engineer H.P Henderson of New York states: “All of the gold discoveries of eastern Nicaragua are said to have been made by Indians. About 26 years ago a man named Schultz was taken to Siuna creek by an Indian, as the source of a nugget in the latter’s possession, and placer operations were immediately started on ground that is now included in the Potosi property” (Thayer Lindsley Records 1915:10).

⁷ Original Spanish text is the following: “Los sumos sufrieron continuas vejaciones por parte de los recién llegados y se encontraron, sin quererlo, en el escalón más bajo de una sociedad de clases que nunca habían conocido” (Wünderich 51:1989).

⁸ There is confusion about the exact date of purchase of the La Luz y Los Angeles mine by the Pittsburg group. Scorey (1920:6) writes that the mine was purchased in July 1905 by a Pittsburgh group lead by Thomas B. Riter. In contrast, citing the archives of Adolfo Díaz, Gismondi and Mouat (2002:859) indicate that James Deitrick of Pittsburgh purchased the mine in 1904.

⁹ There has been speculation that Knox himself was a shareholder in La Luz and Los Angeles (cf. Macaulay 1967:119). However, in their exhaustive research on this incident Gismondi and Mouat (2002) found no evidence that Knox was a shareholder.

¹⁰ Díaz’s papers archived at Tulane University confirm Juan Blanco’s memory that Díaz owned mines in Siuna. He purchased the Potosí mine in 1914 and other concessions in 1930 (MacLeod 1998).

¹¹ In 1941 and 1942, William MacDonald later performed explorations for La Luz Mines Limited on an option it held on the Topaz property, located 60 miles due west of Bluefields. The Company did not execute its option on the Topaz property (La Luz Mines Limited 1941:5, 1942:7).

¹² The Yy river is said to have been named by English speakers because there was a “y” fork in the river.

¹³ A smaller airstrip had previously been located in the Campo Viejo neighborhood of Siuna: “This field being limited to aircraft such as Ford trimotors and DC-3’s, it was later replaced with a much larger landing strip capable of accommodating aircraft such as the C-46. Up until the completion of the latter airfield, all heavy and bulky equipment was transported by river to Amparo, and thence overland to the property” (Plecash and

Hopper 1963:634). Elderly Siuna residents believed a number of planes crashed on the old airstrip, which also prompted the construction of the new airstrip. The new airstrip is still in use today.

¹⁴ An elderly, long-time resident of Alamikamba explained to me in May 2009 that Cuyamel and Standard Fruit Company had operated or purchased bananas in the La Cruz de Rio Grande de Matagalpa area. United Fruit Company purchased Cuyamel Fruit Company in 1929 (Kepner and Soothill 1935:131). United Fruit Company in Nicaragua was headquartered in Bluefields, and Standard Fruit Company in Nicaragua was headquartered in Puerto Cabezas (Pineda 2006:111,118).

¹⁵ A pseudonym.

¹⁶ Of note, this retired miner recalled the exact date the hydroelectric dam on the Yy river had collapsed, August 12, 1968.

¹⁷ Original Spanish text is the following:

Desde lejos se divisaba el pico de la torre del pozo de la mina, y se oía el pitazo fuerte que se perdía entre ecos hasta escucharse débil y lejano. El pitazo marcaba la hora y los cambios de turno de los mineros que salían del pozo apagando las lámparas adheridas a sus cascos amarillos, mientras otro centenar de hombres macilentos entraban al hoyo para continuar así con las agotadas y duras faenas que exigía [demanded] la minería, manteniendo activo el ritmo de explotación de la compañía minera.

Allá, abajo en los túneles, entre la sombra helada de la muerte que escoltaba a los miserable mineros, no había diferencia entre el día y la noche; no había diferencia entre vivir o morir. Los mineros tosigosos y mayates iban entre la oscuridad de los túneles, jadeantes, cansados y sudorosos trabajando sin descanso, convencidos de que, en aquellas tierras bendecidas con tanta riqueza, la vida del miserable no valía nada (Centeno 2006:7).

¹⁸ In her account, Maria del Rey uses the pseudonym “Charles Judson” for John Plecash.

¹⁹ Original Spanish text is the following: “Las compañías extranjeras no solo hicieron daño ecológico en nuestro territorio sino también un profundo daño humano que hereda una generación enferma, débil, y pobre que ya no se repondrá más porque su vida quedó bajo las minas y en los bolsillos de tres consorcios foráneos” (Barricada 1979).

²⁰ The three foreigners who stayed in Siuna following nationalization were reported to be Raymond Trudheau (Tribilin), Karl Lakesy, and John Clark. Clark and Trudheau are known to have had wives and children in Nicaragua.

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