

Women's Group Promotes Solar Cooking

By Sam Jacoby

Nica Times Staff

As much of the country struggles with daily power outages, an enterprising group of women in Totogalpa, a rural community near the Honduran border, is promoting a more reliable energy source – at least when it's sunny outside.

Last Thursday, a group known as the "Solar Women of Totogalpa," in partnership with a local university initiative and the Canadian International Development Agency, among other international players, delivered 22 solar ovens to the municipal government of Estelí. The boxy, mirror-coated stoves, winners of a design competition sponsored by Managua's National University of Engineering (UNI), were constructed in the group's rural workshop.

Valued at \$150 apiece, the large cookers can be used to prepare meals, purify water, pasteurize milk or even roast coffee.

"Coffee roasted in the ovens is really delicious," said Nimia López, president of the Solar Women grassroots collective, though she was quick to note that the ovens were primarily used to address matters far more pressing than the quest for good java.

"The ovens preserve the environment," she said. "And they improve the quality of our life, our health, as well. There's no smoke, we don't have to cut wood – and the food even tastes better."

The 20 families that use the solar ovens in Totogalpa no longer need to hover over hazardous cook-fires or cut wood for fuel.



Courtesy of Grupo Fenix

"Around half of all the energy consumed in Nicaragua is still in firewood for cooking," according to Professor Susan Kinne, director of the Program for Alternative Energy Sources (PFAE) at UNI. "Besides the serious detrimental effects of the smoke to the health of women and children near the fires, damage to the environment from cutting trees is causing drought and the destruction of soil."

That opinion is seconded by Neal Dekking, who works with the Canadian International Development Agency, the group that provided a large chunk of the workshop's initial funding. Dekking said that the Solar Women's project may be small-scale, but is part of a much larger effort to

protect the environment.

"With the eventual collapse of the petroleum industry, be it 25 or 125 years away, and the potentially dangerous effects of global warming, NGOs that are promoting renewable energy options are helping to lead the way towards a more sustainable future," he wrote in an e-mail.

Grupo Fénix, an initiative started by university students at UNI, has been forging a trail towards that sustainable future since 1996. Grupo Fénix has been working with the Solar Women for the better part of a decade in an effort to transfer the expertise of academia from the cloistered laboratory to the real-world setting.

The ovens are a result of that collaboration.

Solar Cooking:
Solar ovens are trying to save the trees and the health of women who have long cooked over smoky wood fires.

Research at UNI and a continuous flow of volunteers from abroad have helped to modify and improve the design of the stoves.

"The international students have been a tremendous help," López said. "With a few changes, we managed to increase the temperature of the ovens. We're working on testing some of the other design suggestions now."

Tim Bond, a member of the Cornell University team from the United States that analyzed the performance of the Solar Women's ovens last year, said, "I think that sophisticated analysis of the cookers can lead to better understanding of their workings and allow for more appropriate redesign."

John Erickson, another member of the Cornell team, stressed that the active relationship between the university and the field is an essential part of the project.

"The interesting part about this research is that it combines the practical knowledge of the women who use the cookers with the more technical research that can be done at a place like Cornell. Without input from the users of the cookers, it is very hard to improve the design," he wrote in an e-mail.

Bond seconded Lopez's enthusiasm for the flavor of the food that the ovens produce, fondly recalling a "tender, moist combination of chicken and vegetables that is subtle and succulent."

Grupo Fénix sends groups of students and professionals to work with the Solar Women of Totogalpa. To find out more about their partnership project, visit their Web site www.grupofenix.org. ■

Multiple Dates Mark Country's Independence

By Sam Jacoby

Nica Times Staff

Nicaragua's Independence Day is celebrated Sept. 14-15, although neither of those dates corresponds with the country's true moment of independence, in April 1838.

On Sept. 14, the country will mark the 151st anniversary of the defeat of William Walker – the U.S. filibuster who declared himself President of Nicaragua in 1856 before being ousted forcibly. A day later, Sept. 15, the celebration continues with the 186th anniversary of Nicaragua's liberation from Spanish rule in 1821.

The fact that neither of those dates relates to the actual birth of a fully sovereign Nicaragua, doesn't seem to bother anyone, least of all the thousands who will celebrate in the marching bands, parades and festivals of Sept. 14-15.

The double dates do, however, create a bit of calendar confusion, says renowned historian Joaquín Cuadra.

"The two are not related," he conceded, peering through thick bifocals. "The Battle of San Jacinto [when Walker was defeated] happened in one year, the Declaration of Independence was quite a bit earlier.

"Independence from the king [of Spain] came first, that was before everything," he said.

The independence from Spain in 1821 is a date shared with the rest of the former colonies of Central America: Honduras, Guatemala, Costa Rica and El Salvador. Mexico was involved in its own protracted dispute.

In the 19th century, Spain, the aging



Tim Rogers | Nica Times

Historic Toss: A print of the Battle of San Jacinto hangs in every government office in the country in commemoration of William Walker's defeat in 1856.

imperial power, had found itself overextended and unable to maintain control over its increasingly assertive colonies. When the Captancy General of Guatemala, which at that time administered all of Central America, declared independence on Sept. 15, 1821, Spain left without a fight.

"There was no war, it was a bloodless transition," Cuadra noted, observing that for the most part, the group in power – wealthy landowners of Spanish descent – remained the same after independence.

"They wanted the power for themselves and so they stayed here," he said. "It was the same group before and after independence, just without the king."

Cuadra thinks that power model set the tone for the future of Nicaragua's stormy politics, which has been defined by strongmen Presidents and a 40-year Somoza family dictatorship that ruled the country brutally.

Shortly after declaring independence from Spain, there were several attempts to unite Central America.

But, Cuadra noted, "there was a war" and the first unity effort with Mexico "didn't last long."

After three years of infighting, the alliance with Mexico dissolved. Out of its ashes rose the United Provinces of Central America, a confederation consisting of Nicaragua, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. That union, too, proved untenable.

Pressure from Mexico, economic instability, and impractical leadership doomed the United Provinces experiment, and Nicaragua withdrew in 1838, establishing itself as an independent republic in April of that year.

That date, however, goes uncelebrated in favor of the more bombastic September victories.

In 1855, Nicaragua was still a young country when William Walker arrived at the head of his mercenary army. Walker established himself as President, a stepping stone on the way to a planned Central American empire.

His Sept. 14 repulsion a year later is, despite leaving a burnt Granada in his wake, one of the country's most triumphant victories, a stand-in perhaps, for a war of independence that was never fought.

Today, almost two centuries after the initial failures of the first attempts at forming a united Central America, President Daniel Ortega has become the latest champion of a united isthmus, speaking wistfully of his desire to erase the borders of Central America and form one united province.

Ortega has often asked, "If the United States can do it, and if Europe can do it despite its history of war, why not us?"

That question, history shows, is one for the ages. ■