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THE AMERICAS

Susan Sterner is a Fellow of the Institute writing and photographing the lives and status of Brazilian women.

“Assentamento Vitória: A Hollow Victory?”

April, 2000

Assentamento Vitória, Pernambuco, Brazil

Peter Bird Martin
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Dear Peter,

Out of habit and nervousness, I opened my backpack and pulled out the worn paper on which I'd written the following: "Bus from Salvador to Juazeiro, Bahia; combi to Curaçá; boat from Curaçá to 'Old Varig' fazenda; ask for Valdete's house." I looked up and scanned the banks of the Rio São Francisco. Behind us was the state of Bahia, before us, the state of Pernambuco where I would find Valdete.

Communication between us had been sparse since meeting at a December workshop for midwives. Valdete was one of five midwives who had traveled to the conference from settlements established by the *Movimento do Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra* (MST, Landless Rural Workers Movement) along the Rio São Francisco in Pernambuco. Visiting midwives in the land reform movement seemed like a good opportunity to get a different perspective on Brazilian society.

Early one morning as I perched on a rock, sipping coffee outside the



Valdete stops to rub her shoulders as her partner Grande, left, plants one of nearly 300 seedlings on their single-hectare piece of the collective guava fields of Assentament Vitória, Pernambuco.

workshop meeting house, Valdete wandered out and struck up a conversation. She teased that the life of a poor Brazilian farmer would be too hard for a city-girl from the United States. She challenged me with an open-ended invitation and sketchy directions should I ever have the gumption to visit. It was an invitation not to be refused.

I looked back in the boat at my husband, Tyrone. He seemed unconcerned. The only other passengers, two evangelical women on their way to visit friends in Pernambuco, smiled at me and offered advice each time they caught my eye. Most of their words were drowned out by the boat engine but the gist was that *gringos* like us shouldn't be traipsing around "Old Varig" alone: too many thieves. My worry was that we'd get to the other side and wander around in circles under an unforgiving midday sun. I let my hands drag in the water and rinsed my face. We had been traveling for nearly 24 hours. I just wanted to get there — wherever "there" was.

Elger, the boat pilot, guided us around a marshy island and cut the engine. Moving along the rapid current, we glided under overhanging trees and drifted into a tiny cove. A group of boys were thrashing rambunctiously in the water. Quite unexpectedly, first one hand and then a second slapped onto the edge of the boat. Grinning and dripping, a boy popped up and announced, "I am the son of Valdete!" A wave of relief washed over me.

Three other boys swam to the boat and clambered aboard in their underwear. Elger fired up the motor again and we headed back into the river. Our escorts huddled at the bow of the boat and stole shy glances at us between giggles.

Elger dropped us at the "banana port" — so named because of the field of bananas that runs along the footpath leading inland. Eager to help, the boys grabbed our bags from the boat. Of great amusement were the wheels on the bottom of my Samsonite carry-on bag, which were of no help in the powdery sand of the banana trail. We disappointed the boys by not whipping out huge wads

of U.S. dollars to pay Elger. The kids had been sure money would be falling out of our pockets.

As we walked, the boys introduced themselves. The tallest were Valdete's sons, Ezekiel and Jefferson. They looked about 10 and 9 years old respectively, but were actually 13 and 11. The other two, Peu and Eduardo, looked about 7 but were both 9. The smallness of the boys was my first hint at the toughness of life in the community where we would be living for nearly a month.

After 40 minutes of walking, all signs of the lush vegetation along the river disappeared. The flora turned scrubby and dry, the land cracked. We were surrounded by the infamous *sertão*, the semi-arid region that comprises the bulk of the Northeast. The path ended at a barbed-wire fence with a broken gate. We crossed a wide dirt road and through another gate. To the right of the gate was a round red sign with white lettering, "Assentamento Vitória: Movimento de Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST)" (Victory Settlement: Landless Rural Workers Movement).

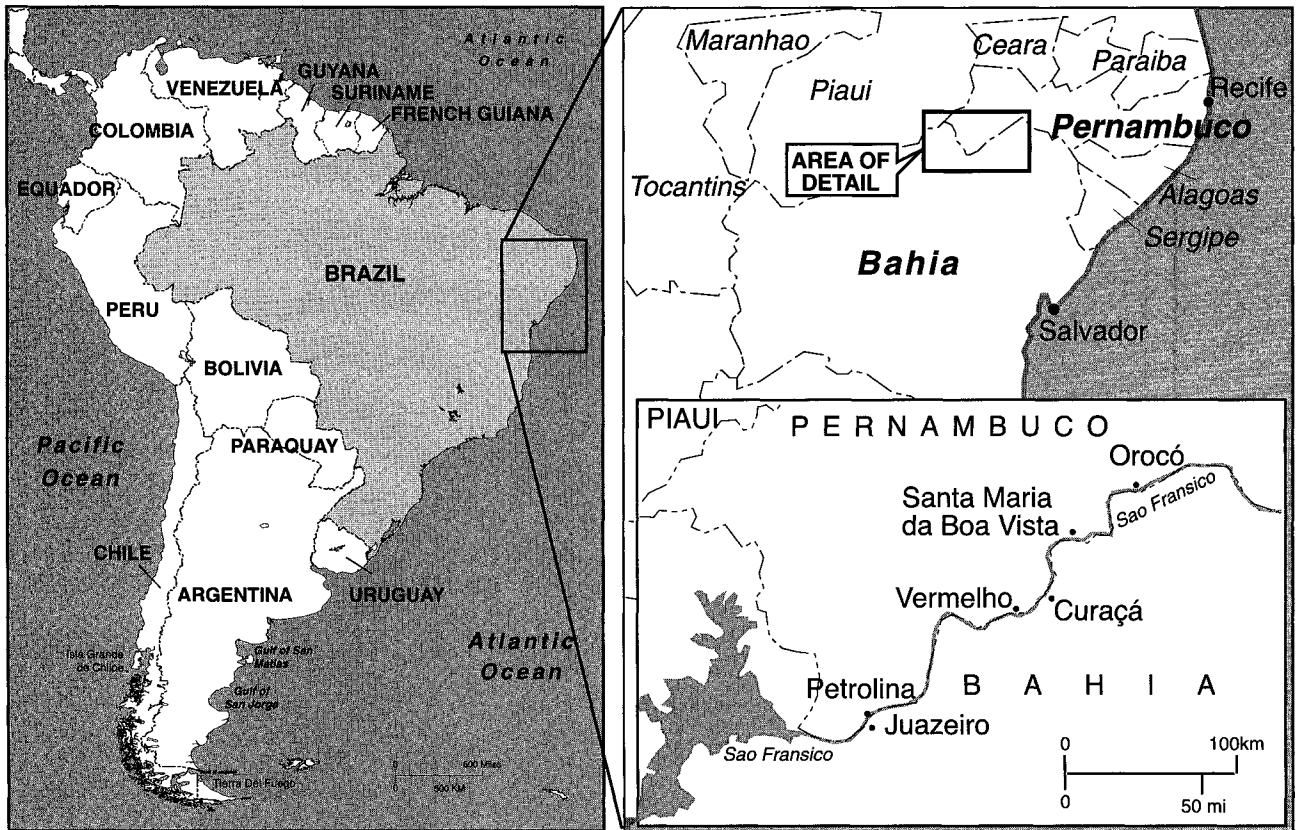
Directly before of us stood a giant, two-sided warehouse and an old grain silo. Both looked unused. To the left was a building that might have been a guard station. We turned left and walked parallel to the main road and barbed wire. The brush opened up to reveal a neat row of 13 cement bungalows with identical verandas. At one time all of the houses were painted bright white with royal-blue trim. It was clear that several had been abandoned. Windows and doors were broken. Garbage was piled in a few.

The boys walked ahead — still dragging our bags through the sand. At the far end of the row a dozen people were lounging on a porch watching our slow approach. Tyrone and I straggled behind, absorbing first impressions and keenly aware of being observed. Valdete, who stands several inches shy of five feet, popped out of the crowd and embraced me with a howl of delight. She ushered us into her house next door.

Valdete's house was the most up-kept on the little

A group of women and girls from Assentamento Vitória ride patiently on a boat as the pilot cruises along the Pernambuco side of the river in search of more passengers before ferrying across to the Curaça, Bahia side. Assentamento Vitória is located between the towns of Santa Maria da Boa Vista and Lagoa Grande. However, bus service is so slow and riddled with assaults that many from the settlement prefer to walk to the river and cross by boat to Curaça.





avenue. A pink hammock and over a dozen plants in old paint cans and margarine tins decorated the veranda. She motioned us to sit on the neatly arranged white vinyl and metal furniture. In the corner a crude teacart displayed a decanter of homemade liquor and a dozen empty bottles of Montilla Rum. Valdete's companion of five years, Gil Demar (nicknamed "Grande" because of his unusual height of over six feet) entered and joked around for a while. Conversation turned awkward as the initial pleasantries were exhausted. Between shy smiles and incomprehensible jokes, Grande and Valdete expressed their worry that their poor life style and simple food would offend us. It was a preoccupation we would have to work hard to dispel over the next few weeks.

Valdete announced that she had set aside food for our lunch. While she rustled around the kitchen, Grande pointed us to the room off the living room. Normally the boys' bedroom, it would be ours during our stay. The walls were freshly painted the same chalky, aqua green of the health post two doors down. Posters of our Lady of Immaculate Conception and Saint George hung on one wall. On another was a mix of laminated posters of auto-racing star Ayrton Senna, children's program host Xuxa and several copies of a Gerber-baby-like photo — the kind that comes free with the frame. In the corner were the boys' toys: two plastic cars tied to worn strings and two tired stuffed animals.

The dining room was just as sparse. A plywood table

filled most of the space. Crammed into the corner was a Singer pedal sewing machine. Along one wall an old bookcase held an eclectic mix of primary-school grammar manuals, paperback novels, religious guides and books about the MST and traditional healing. Tucked between the tattered books were Valdete's precious items: miniature ceramic kitchen appliances, a pocket knife, a velour-covered piggy bank and a cracked oil lamp set next to an open Bible.

Valdete had set the table with her best plates of amber-colored glass. In the center she placed rice, beans, fried meat and manioc meal. Only two places were set. When I protested over the VIP treatment Valdete waved me off saying they had already eaten. Tyrone and I filled our plates and ate while shooing away the hundreds of swarming flies. The rest of the family sat on the front porch whispering and peeking in every now and again.

In subsequent days Tyrone and I worked our way into the daily rhythm of settlement life. The Assentamento Vitória is one of dozens of similar MST communities founded over the last five years along the São Francisco River between the town of Orocó and the city of Petrolina. Traditionally, the fertile river basin has been in the possession of wealthy families, investors and agro-conglomerates. Everything, up to and including where water flows, has been controlled by a small number of well-connected and self-preserving families, lobbyists and politicians. Today the region

is one of the MST's principal targets for land reform.

* * * *

Northeastern Brazil's¹ long-suffered history of slavery, unequal land distribution, cash-crop production for export and political cronyism have combined with the brutal climate and misfortunes of the Brazilian economy to create a culture of endemic poverty. Over 30 percent of Brazil's population lives in the Northeast, the majority of whom are rural peasants. Of Brazilians living at or below the poverty level, 50 percent reside in the Northeast.²



Poor investment in public infrastructure has compounded the misery of the *nordestino's* standard of living. As a result, access to basic public services such as clinics, hospitals and schools have rendered the Northeast the least healthy and most poorly educated area of the country. Northeastern infant mortality rates, at 57.9 per 1,000 births, are more than 50 percent above the national rate of 36.1 per 1000.³ Regional literacy rates are 20 percent below the national average.⁴

With over two million rural peasants without land, and 60 percent of all cultivable land under the control of a very few, the Northeast was a logical place for the MST to work for land reform.⁵ Initially, the MST targeted *latifundos* (huge land holdings) and unused, cultivable land. The general goal of the MST was to have underused land taken from (usually wealthy) landowners and redistributed to a greater part of the population. The object of this was two-fold: to even the distribution of wealth, and to alleviate urban and rural poverty by raising the rural standard of living.

Over the last few years MST actions have become increasingly radical. Productive lands were once left alone, now nearly any landholding can become part of the MST's vision. All *latifundos* and multi-national landholdings are potential targets. There have been incidents of

Seu Silvio stands at the edge of the field he is preparing for guava seedlings. Each of the 264 households of Vitória will plant one hectare of guava as part of the settlement's first long-term, cooperative planting project.

invasions into productive *fazendas* that were then sacked and burned. The MST is active in urban areas as well where it uses the tactic of occupying government buildings of agencies linked to land reform in order to call attention to demands.

The MST is well organized and informed. It moves into an area and prepares for invasions after thoroughly researching the land titles, and the tax and loan history of properties. An assessment of the potential for planting or grazing is made before the invasion. (In other words, the MST is not going after chunks of poor soil that would doom its members to failure.) There are also size limitations. The targeted land must total a minimum of 400 contiguous hectares (988 acres). This restraint was established by the *Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária* (Incra), the federal agency that deals with land distribution and reform. Incra will not appropriate any landholding that can not sustain a community of 40 families on ten hectares each.

The MST has been active in Brazil since the early 1980's. Its tactics are the following. On a given date participants gather at a designated point. They're asked to bring the very minimum needed to camp. They also carry

¹ The Brazilian Northeast is composed of nine states: Alagoas, Bahia, Ceará, Maranhão, Paraíba, Piauí, Pernambuco, Rio Grande do Norte, and Sergipe,

² Eakin, Marsahll C. *Brazil: The Once and Future Country*. New York: St. Martins Griffin, p.73. The "poverty level" is generally considered to be two minimum salaries per family of four. A proposal is before the Senate to raise the minimum wage from 136 to 151 *reais* (U.S.\$74 - \$83) per month.

³ "Violência mata 68,5% dos jovens" *Folha de São Paulo* Sabado, 29 de abril de 2000.

⁴ Eakin, p.73.

⁵ MST is not the only non-governmental organization working for land reform. It is just the most notorious. Other organizations, principally workers' unions and the church, are also involved.

agricultural tools, with the exception of knives. At a pre-ordained hour the MST invaders walk to the property line, cut the barbed wire, enter the *fazenda* and set-up a temporary camp. The invasions can turn into violent conflicts between the MST on one side and the police and landowners on the other.

The temporary camp is organized into a more permanent *acampamento* (encampment) of tents and wooden shacks. There the MST participants live until Incra appropriates the land from the current owner, registers MST families and issues collective title to the invaded land. The process can take years. Once given possession, the *acampamento* evolves into an *assentamento* (settlement). The registered members (one per household) are then issued an indemnity of 3,000 *reais* (U.S.\$1,649) to build homes. Of course, because it involves government funds, this part of the process can also be delayed for years.

The toehold of the MST presence in the Rio São Francisco Valley of Pernambuco was the *Safra* (Harvest) *fazenda* just a few kilometers from Vitória. *Safra*, considered the "mother" *assentamento*, was invaded in 1995 and established as an *acampamento* and the base from which other invasions were launched. Vitória grew from one such subsequent invasion. Once an investment property owned by the Brazilian airline, Varig, on which was cultivated mango, cotton and flax, Assentamento Vitória is now home to 264 families. Throughout the region on neighboring *acampamentos* and *assentamentos* live thousands of other families.

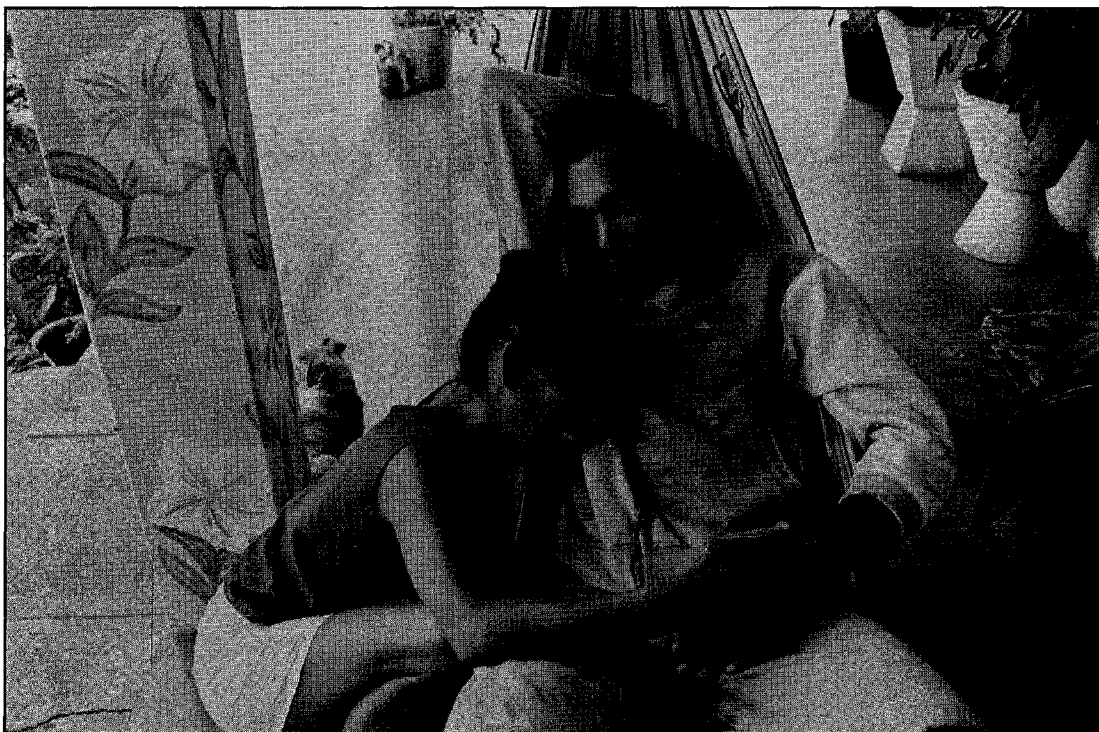
Valdete, her sons and Grande have lived in their little

bungalow for three years. They won the privilege of living in one of the existing Varig houses through a lottery system. Today, like the other families in Vitória, they have ten hectares of land and are planning to plant guava and bananas. But the fight has been a long one.

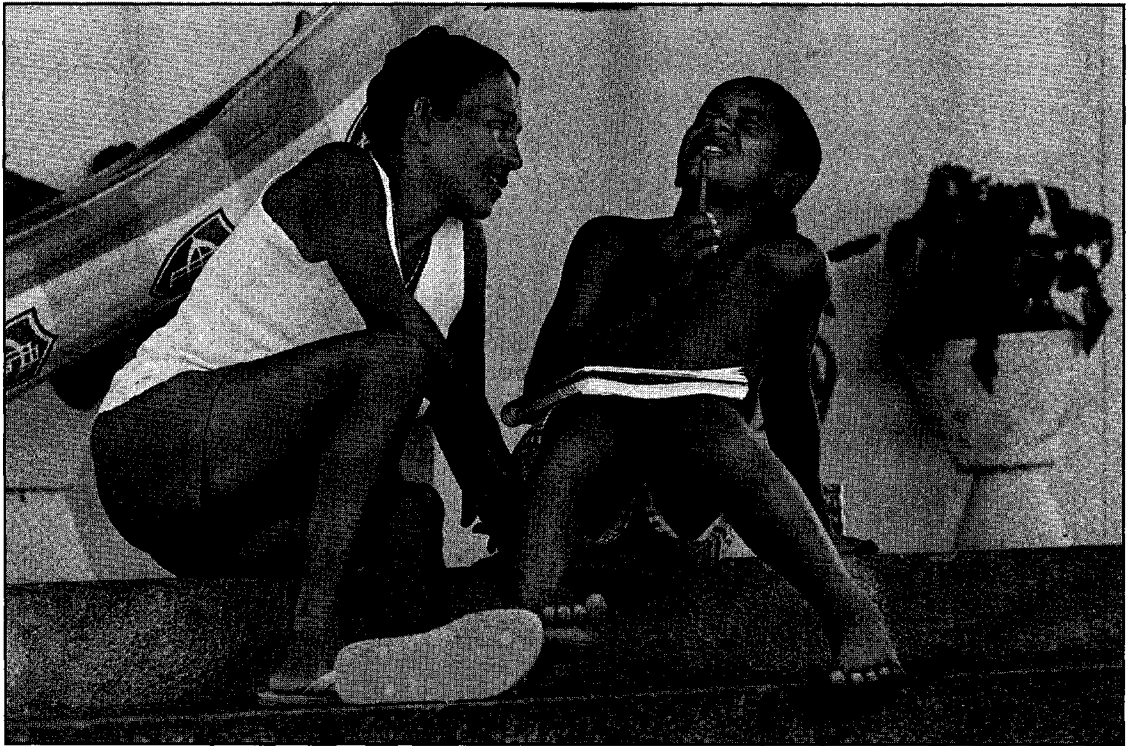
Valdete married at the age of 14. She was unable to conceive for seven years due to chronic severe anemia. At 21, she gave birth to Ezekiel. Shortly after Ezekiel was born Valdete's husband developed an addiction to gambling. Six months pregnant with her second child, Valdete loaded her husband's belongings into a wheelbarrow, plopped Ezekiel on top and walked through the streets of her home town of Santa Maria da Boa Vista until she found where her husband was drinking with his comrades. She announced the end of the marriage, unloaded the wheelbarrow and left with Ezekiel. In the subsequent custody battles Valdete kept the boys but lost everything else. Fortunately, because of the absence of children in the first six years of marriage, Valdete had been able to complete most of high school while working as a domestic.

Her education enabled her to work her way through a series of jobs at a local plant, rising from janitor to clerk within a few years. In 1995 MST organizers circulated through Santa Maria da Boa Vista looking for people of lower incomes and without property assets to participate in the movement. The idea caught Valdete's attention.

The MST announced *Safra* as the first *fazenda* to be targeted. Valdete knew she had a secure job at the plant but wanted something more for her sons. She imagined life on her own piece of land would be better than scrap-



Grande and Valdete avoid the brutal sun and heat, and relax on the front porch after the mid-day meal.



Valdete prompts her son Ezekiel as he works on math homework. For Valdete all of the suffering in the encampment and in building a settlement are worth it if the lives of her sons improve. Her priority is for them to have access to a solid education, which has proven hard in Vitória since classes are frequently cancelled due to lack of teachers and funds.

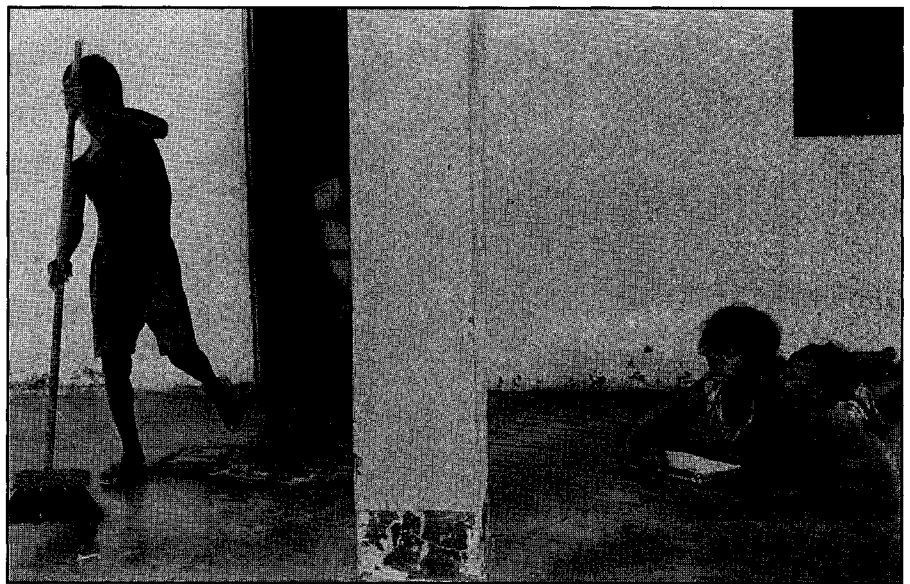
ing by on a minimum-wage salary. Sure her mother would disapprove, Valdete said nothing to her family, quit her job and moved her sons to Curaçá, Bahia, then a sleepy little colonial village across the Rio São Francisco from Safra.

In Curaçá, Valdete rented a tiny row house for 90 *reais* (U.S.\$49.45) per month. By night she embroidered sheets and tea towels to sell for rent and food money. By day, she left the boys in the care of her goddaughter and took a canoe across the river to help in the invasion preparations.

Grande's story is similar. He, his parents Seu Paulo ("Saint Paul") and Dona Zefa, along with nine brothers and sisters, were working as contract or day-laborers on the various *fazendas* in the area. At 42, Seu Paulo saw life working for the agro-industries in the area as a dead-end for his family. None of his children had been able to attend school regularly. Seu Paulo figured he had nothing to lose and everything to gain. He in-

stalled Dona Zefa and their youngest children in the town of Rio Vermelho and took Grande and another son, Negão into the MST with him.

After midnight one morning in August 1995 the MST loaded buses on the outskirts of Santa Maria da Boa Vista. At



Cida and her daughter Andreza watch the antics of Seu, Cida's younger brother, as he plays with a broom on the porch of Cida's bungalow. With school frequently canceled or shortened, kids like Seu have a lot of time to play and explore. The principal entertainments are each other, the river and killing things with slingshots.



Settlement children make a game out of tires discarded in a trash pile.

3 a.m. the slow ride down the dirt road west to Safra began. The MST descended from the buses a short distance from Safra and, field tools raised in the air, walked *en masse* to the fence surrounding the *fazenda*. Several groups cut the barbed wire and the multitude entered and quickly staked out a campsite. Within hours military police encircled the MST and remained in place for days in an effort to stop any food or reinforcements from reaching the invaders. Eventually the police were called off.

Grande and Valdete met in the Safra *acampamento*. After a few months at Safra, Valdete, Grande, Seu Paulo

and Negão joined the next action: the invasion of the Varig *fazenda*. For nearly two years they camped by the river on Varig property and endured police raids and the harsh climate.

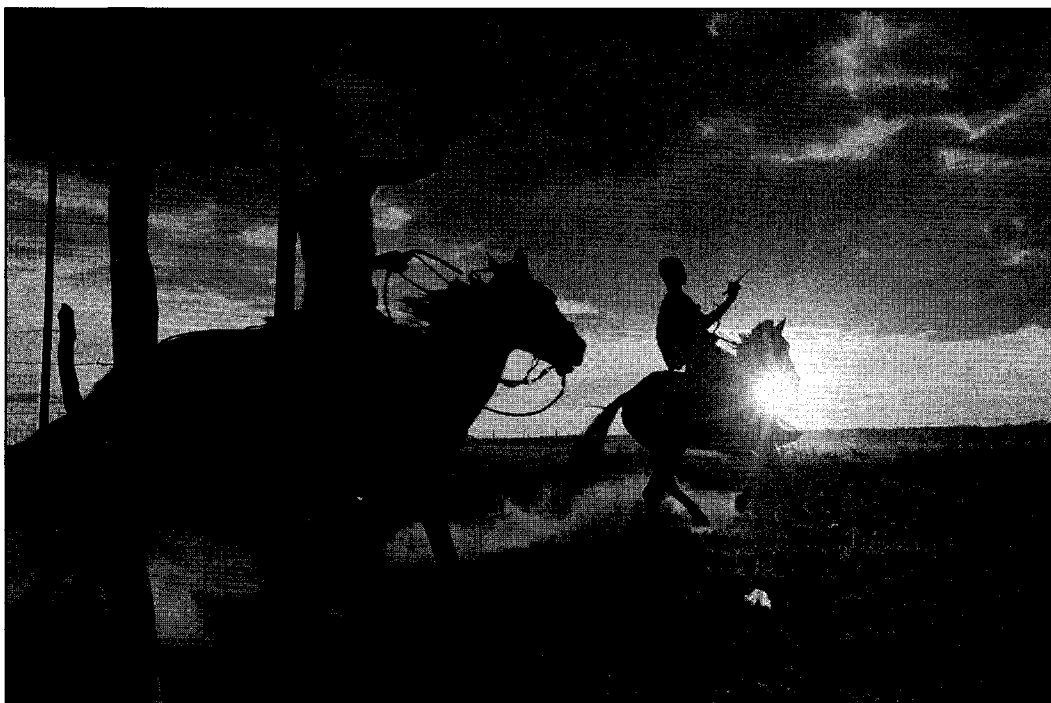
In the *acampamento*, Valdete spearheaded the effort to start a school for children and illiterate adults. She organized holiday events and begged used books from the library and schools of Curaçá. She also became an MST militant for health issues and received extensive training from the MST in first-aid and community health.

Perseverance paid off. In March 1997 Incra registered 264 individuals who met the requirements of being landless, without guaranteed income or savings, with dependents, over the age of 18 and younger than 60 years of age. Incra then listed the 264 individuals as part of the collective claimants to the nearly 3,000 hectares (7,413 acres) of the *fazenda*. The new owners, called *colonos* (colonists), voted to rename the *fazenda* "Assentamento Vitória" (Victory Settlement).

A team of ten MST agricultural experts made a detailed survey of the area, set up a planting and maintenance schedule and advised the *colonos* on the placement of housing, drainage, schools, warehouses, churches, etc. Today Assentamento Vitória is divided into two *agro-vilas* surrounded by fields, each with a school that offers classes



Baby Vinicius, the four-month-old nephew of Valdete, snoozes in the hammock as Valdete's brother, Diogenes, and the rest of the family joke around on the porch of Valdete and Grande's bungalow.



Vila horsemen practice running the argolinha, a contest in which the rider must ride at full speed down a chute at the end of which he must thread a pointed stick through a small leather loop. The riders were practicing for a contest the following weekend.

from 7am until 8pm for children and adults who have not completed primary school.

The *agro-vilas* (referred to as Vila I and Vila II) are impressive communities of brick homes on dirt streets laid out in grid patterns. In general, the houses are simple variations on a two-bedroom, living-room, dining-room, kitchen theme. As the community has matured, the houses have begun to take on individual personalities with gardens, outdoor sitting areas and beautiful fences and flowering vines. Vila I, the larger of the two, has a huge clay plaza that features a four-room schoolhouse, soccer field and space for a common area and church to be built in the future. As yet, neither Vila has running water. Each household collects water daily from the river or leaks in the irrigation pipes. The community also lacks phone and mail service.

As is standard with MST-Incra settlements, upon formation of an *assentamento* each registered person becomes entitled to 27,000 *reais* (U.S.\$14,843) in government loan money over the subsequent ten years. The initial 3,000-*reais* payment is an indemnity to help the *colonos* build brick homes. The money is also intended to be compensation for the time spent in the *acampamento*. Additionally, families are required to contribute to the *fomento*, or seeding, of an initial community project. In Vitória the *colonos* planted beans, which they could then sell or consume.

The remaining 24,000 *reais* (U.S.\$13,194) per registered settler will be doled out in a series of interest-free project loans at the rate of one per year over ten years. The goal is to develop Vitória as a productive agricultural community linked to other MST-founded communities in the valley. One of the conditions that the bank and Incra stipu-

lated when setting families on the repossessed land was that the land be used not only for subsistence farming, but also high-yield crops as a means of generating financial stability for the community.

In Vitória each family has possession of, and is responsible for, roughly ten hectares of land. The land is divided into pieces in order to provide equal access to each type of land in the settlement. Each family has a half-hectare (1.26 acre) near the river for feed grass and subsistence crops, one hectare for a house and garden, one hectare of irrigated land for guava, and seven hectares for bananas.

MST technicians presented Vitória residents with options for the first planting project: banana, coconut, guava, papaya or tomato. Tomato was rejected because it needs to be replanted every three months and uses expensive fertilizers and pesticides. Banana was seen as too fragile for the first project because one harsh windstorm could wipe out a crop and set back the entire community. Coconut takes too long to produce. The choice came down to papaya or guava. Guava was chosen because it would bear market-quality fruit within eight months.

It was also decided that each registered family would buy a German-Swiss cow that would arrive either pregnant or with a young calf. The price of 800 *reais* (U.S.\$439.80) included the expertise and personal visit of a veterinarian (allegedly also German-Swiss), who will accompany the cows through their adjustment period to the land and climate. This particular breed was selected because of its average yield of 15 liters of milk per day. (It remains to be seen how lucrative these cows prove to be. As it is, the high price and requisite technical accompaniment had

Vitória residents scratching their heads in doubt.)

The planting of guava trees in the irrigated land was the first of the projects that drew on loan monies. In the future the MST settlements in the São Francisco River Valley will be united through a series of industries producing guava and banana sweets of export quality and dairy products for local-market consumption. The MST regional coordination has submitted a 2-million-*reais* (U.S.\$1,099,505) proposal to the federal government. Aldalberto da Silva, one of the MST volunteers involved in development planning, claims the project for the sweets and dairy production is simple and feasible. The MST plans to build the needed warehouses, packing plants and processing areas on land that is currently the *Agroisa acampamento* ten kilometers outside Vitória. The proposal has made its way through the various bureaucratic channels to Brasília where, says Aldalberto, it has been buried in "dirty politics" of anti-agrarian-reform politicians pressured by agro-industries and huge *latifundiários*.

Beginning in mid-March, each registered Vitória *colono* received 305 guava seedlings and instruction in planting and fertilizing the crop. The initial investment for the guava and cow projects was 4,750 *reais* (U.S.\$2,611). Repayment of loan money must begin within three years of project initiation and conclude within ten years of the first payment date. In the case of the guava project the interest-free loan must be paid off in 2013.

From a distance, the MST inspires idealistic images of comrades pulling each other up by the collective bootstraps of brotherly solidarity. Images of revolutionary Che Guevara, the MST flag and the colors red and black are everywhere. In the countryside and small towns, the MST captures the hearts of those with nothing.

Most participants latch onto the MST as if it were the pathway to El Dorado, a slice of land and hunger-free days. Dreams are tapped and they learn about the other popular land reform efforts in Latin American and the world. The sense of destitute isolation is broken. Polemics mix with the religiosity of the people and they see themselves as the meek inheriting the Earth. They were without land and now they are with land. By definition they are more than before.

For others, the whole business of joining the MST, getting registered and allocated a piece of land is just that: business. They are a breed of prospectors who, incredibly enough, go through the entire

miserable drama of *acampamento-até-assentamento* only to get their hands on the land and indemnity money, "sell" their lot and move on. Still others, like the settlement "presidents," find ways to make a decent living from the money of others.

In general, the residents of Vitória view their local leadership with a cynical eye. Already two presidents have been thrown off their land and out of the MST for embezzlement. The first was brazen enough to ride around in a new car in an area where the two major forms of transport are the human foot and the donkey. The second pinched 8,000 *reais* (U.S.\$4,398) over time, and then disappeared.

Nothing was reported to the local police because of the settlement's collective embarrassment—a fact that allows the scenario to repeat itself. (It would also be bad publicity for the MST nationally). The current president is suspected of skimming interest from the community's bank accounts. Solid proof has not come to light, only the observation by residents that despite the fact that the position he holds is voluntary, his wealth has increased dramatically since taking office.

Just a year ago the president's wife gave birth to a baby with a closed throat. The baby died at home because the family lacked the four-*reais* passage to the hospital in Petrolina. Since taking office, their house has filled with new furniture. The president is often seen drinking in the bars of local towns and dining out at modest restaurants. His wife recently gave birth to their sixth child — by caesarean surgery in a private hospital in Santa Maria da Boa Vista.

Vitória residents recently convinced themselves that



Startled by my presence in usually isolated area surrounding her family's mud hut, a little girl clutches her doll as she stares at me. The mud and stick house are typical of the temporary homes built during the encampamento phase of an invasion though many, many homes in the sertão are of this style and endure for years.

when negotiating on behalf of the community for wholesale purchases the president and other leaders passed on inflated prices to residents and pocketed the difference. For example, barbed wire cost the families 40 *reais* (U.S.\$21.99) per roll instead of the going retail price of 32 *reais* (U.S.\$17.59): a difference of only 8 *reais* (U.S.\$4.40) but when multiplied by 264 families the sum quickly mounted into something significant. As it turned out, the cost of barbed wire was indeed high. However, in this case, rather than lining the pockets of settlement leadership, the surplus was applied to the cost of maintenance fees for the irrigation system. By the time all of this was sorted out, residents had whipped themselves into a state of indignant anger. Whether allegations of fraud ever prove true or not, tensions and accusations highlight the pervasive mistrust and cynicism running through the settlement.

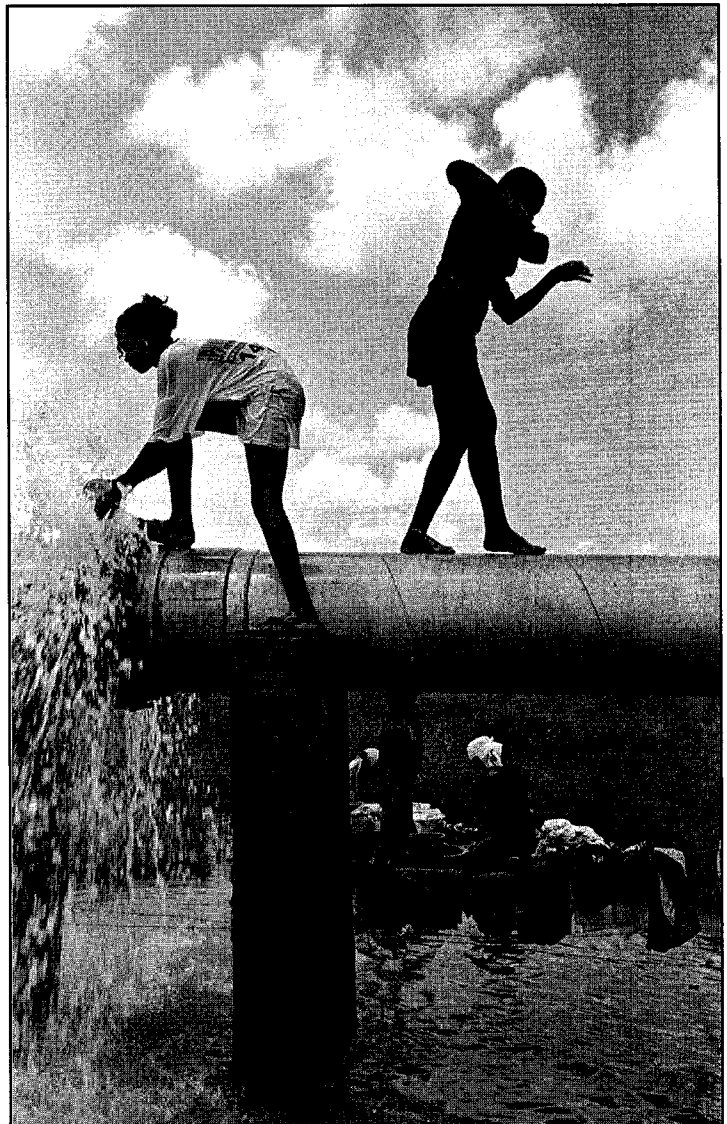
Perhaps most surprising is the overall lack of organization and solidarity. In theory, there are monthly assembly meetings called to inform members and give air to issues. In reality, most meetings are either poorly attended or canceled altogether. The tone of the community is one of a small town lacking infrastructure but ripe with gossip, confusion and crime.

Life in the countryside is not idyllic. This is not a place where doors are left unlocked. On the contrary, houses are buttoned tight at night despite the sweltering heat. Many sleep with loaded rifles within reach.

Valdete and Grande rarely leave their house unattended for fear of burglaries. As it is, simple things like laundry soap and buckets are taken with regularity from the back porch. The population of their chicken coop has been reduced by one-half in the last six months. With a simple tile roof capping the bungalow, locked doors and shuttered windows do little to thwart would-be intruders who simply shimmy up the outside wall, pull off a few tiles and jump in.

To avoid the brutal sun, Grande frequently works by moonlight, leaving Valdete and the boys alone. One such evening Valdete heard a "crunch" and realized that someone had entered the house. Although she and Grande keep a loaded rifle on hand, she figured it was better to stay still and quiet. On that particular visit the burglars were merely hungry and raided the refrigerator for boiled *macaxeira* and juice. Valdete found three used cups and plates on the back porch after the intruders had left.

Unfortunately, the next invasion was not so benign. The men entered through a window. Valdete heard them and tried to remain as still as possible. A man entered the bedroom, covered her mouth with a pillow and menaced

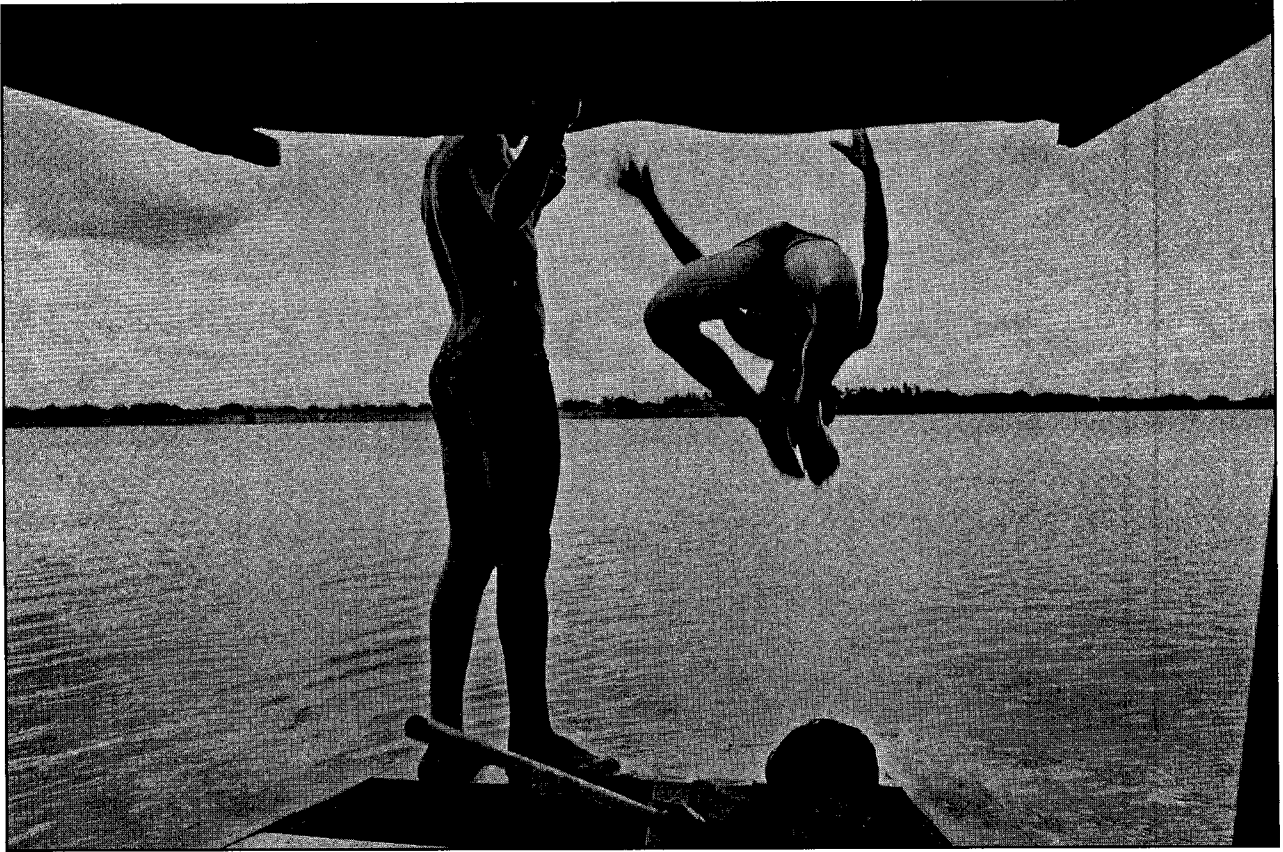


Two of Grande's sisters balance on top of the leaking irrigation pipe to wash their mid-day dishes while Valdete and her son Nenê wash clothing below.

her further with threatening words. Valdete recognized the voice of the man. A few minutes later she also recognized the profile of another of the intruders. All three lived in Vitória Settlement. Days later, one of the men even had the nerve to ride by on his bicycle and offer sympathy over the burglary about which he had heard.

Most recently, control cables of one of the automated irrigation machines (which the residents inherited from Varig) were stolen and sold as aluminum scrap for about 40 *reais* (\$21.99). The replacement value of the cables was several thousand *reais*. Though no one has been formally charged with the theft, all of the suspects are residents of MST settlements in the area, including Vitória.

The MST *assentamentos* and *acampamentos* rarely call on the local *policia militar* (PM). In part this is to maintain autonomy from the influence of local politicians who con-



Valdete's son, Nenê, left, and his friends cool off while waiting for the boat to take them across the Rio São Francisco to Assentamento Vitória after a morning of shopping and working for small change at the Curaça, Bahia market.



Sent to the leaking irrigation pipe to wash the day's dishes, Valdete's neices Suely, left, and Wesleane, right, goof off in the cool, muddy water before returning home. None of the homes in Assentamento Vitória have running water. Residents draw water from the river, a kilometer away, or from big leaks in irrigation pipe that run from sun-up to sun-down.



Even horses cool off in the São Francisco river. At the end of long, hard days many owners bring their horses, donkeys and mules to the river to wash them off and cool them down.



Cida, Valdete's neighbor, stands with her daughter Andreza under the spilling waters of an irrigation pipe. Cida was trying to break Andreza's fever.

trol the police. It is also, as mentioned above, to control the MST reputation in Brazilian society at large. But mostly it is because the average PM is not regarded as "Officer Friendly." When invasions and subsequent *acampamentos* are set up, it is the PM who are called in to confront the MST and often destroy the *acampamentos*. The PM also set up "identity ambushes" in which they wait in a recessed area along the road and then check identity papers of those passing — a subtle form of harassment. The PM is also given to random raids in which they burst into households, frequently at night, and turn them upside down in search of arms and drugs.

In January 1999 an enterprising former president bought a used bus and initiated service between Safra and Santa Maria da Boa Vista. In a short time the profits he made were enough to buy a second bus. Others followed suit and today there are six buses running up and down the dirt road cutting through the settlements. According to Valdete, the nearest municipalities have all grown by at least a third in the five years since the MST populations settled in the area. The towns' respective market days have become major hubs of commerce and traffic has increased.

Today the road between Santa Maria da Boa Vista and Petrolina is an alternately swampy and dusty trek through mostly isolated areas. The isolation, in combination with market days and fixed dates for release of loan money, has created the perfect atmosphere for assaults. On such days pockets are flush with bank withdrawals and proceeds from market sales. Without fail, there is at least one armed-assault per month of a bus running on the dirt road between Petrolina and Santa Maria. Typically, a group of six or more armed, masked men board the bus and force them to be driven into the surrounding brush where every bag and body are searched for cash. Because the assaults happen on "money days" it is widely believed that the perpetrators are from within the MST communities and thus have prior knowledge of when cash will be released.

* * * *

When talking with the movement militants who plan invasions and work in community development, the excitement and rush of being at the center of a revolution is palpable. Young volunteers like Adalberto and his wife Erlanea (a paid MST education coordinator and trainer) are fluent in local and national politics. They are adept at viewing the world, rightly or wrongly, from the movement's perspective of the landless poor versus the Brazilian power-establishment. They spin issues like seasoned politicians and have mastered the manipulation of revolutionary rhetoric and historical figures and events ranging from Guarani Indian Sepé Tiaraju, an 18th-century revolt leader, to the ruthless 1930's Brazilian-backland bandit, Lampião; to Carl Marx; to Ho Chi Minh. Their ability to place the struggle for land reform in Brazil into the history of great revolutionary movements fu-

els their passion and motivation on a daily basis. Their eyes shine with sharp understanding of the enemy, the battle and the impending victory.

But on the muddy, polluted banks of the river, in the hot shadows of living rooms and at night on the breezy porches of Assentamento Vitória homes it is hard to find eyes bright with dreams and struggle rewarded. Eyes, voices and bodies are tired. As Grande is inclined to say, "A person doesn't age, his body just get used." This is a community of bodies used before their time. The hard lives they gave up for the MST dream, the brutal years under plastic tents in the *sertão* sun, and the constant precariousness of building a new community have taken their toll.

Of the original 264 families who camped together on the edge of the river, fewer than 100 are still part of the settlement. A few have swapped their plots with members of other settlements in order to be closer to family members. Many received their initial indemnity and "sold" their right to be on the collective land title. By selling their lots, those who left were permanently barred from ever being registered in another MST *assentamento*.

Others simply gave up and walked away from Vitória leaving everything behind. If they walked off after receiving indemnity and loan money, they earned a "dirty" record with Incra and the national banking system and will never qualify for a loan or be able to open a bank account. They condemned themselves to a potentially worse life than what they had before joining the movement. (Few of those who participated and abandoned their lots ever had the means to use the banking system to begin with).

If the Vitória *colonos* hold on and keep plugging away, they're likely to scrape out a decent life on the land with the money earned by selling goods they produce. There's always the future promise that the proposed sweets and dairy production will become reality and, given time, pull the settlement families up the ladder to the lower working class. They will never be kicked off the land or have their homes repossessed — this aspect is the great safety net of collective ownership and community. In the event that a *colono* fails to pay off one of the loan segments, the deadline can be renegotiated *ad infinitum* as long as he (or she) continues to make good-faith efforts toward payment and does not abandon the land.

Even given this safety net, many have tired of settlement life. The main frustration is the perceived corruption and confusion in administering the projects, compounded by the paternalistic practices of MST organization. Rosalina da Souza, a resident of Assentamento Catalunha, the largest *assentamento* in the area, is angry about how her life has evolved with the MST. Over an afternoon of cooking and visiting together she said, "The life of a small farmer is sacrifice. You have nothing. It makes you want to give up on life." She believes the lo-

cal leadership of the *assentamento* has “destroyed the lives of people. They act in our name, putting us in debt. In the end we end up without money and without anything to plant.” And toward the national and state leadership she is even less forgiving, “They don’t treat us like children. They treat us like slaves. We live and work as if under a *fazendeiro*. We’ve just changed masters. Now we’re slaves of the government.”

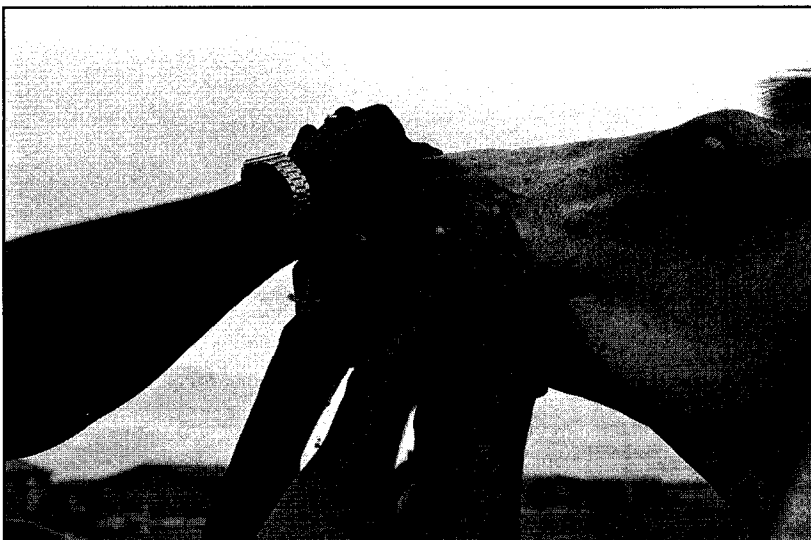
MST organizers argue that collective titles and community administration are the only option. Individual control would result in wasted resources and the destruction of long-term, sustainable production. Collective bargaining power is the strength of the MST. For this reason, loan money is used to cover all anticipated expenses before passing the small amounts of “leftover” cash to the *colonos* themselves. This keeps the squeeze on the settlers but also, theoretically at least, thwarts the urge to give in to frustration, to “sell” or abandon the land and resort to the life of destitute day laborers.

In the evenings, Grande liked to stretch his legs in the hammock hung across the veranda and Valdete would drag worn floor pillows out to the lounge on the cool, waxed cement.

Talk would grow from tired sighs and inevitably turn to the good old days of solidarity in the *acampamentos*. Then, no one faulted anyone for anything, “If so-and-so had a baby and needed cloth to make diapers, everyone would chip in what they could. No one went hungry. At night we would all gather and talk. We’d have meetings to decide what to do — anyone could talk about their worries. We had groups to do everything. We didn’t have a president then. There wasn’t corruption or fear. At night we walked around at all hours,” said Valdete.

Valdete admitted that reminiscing about the good old days in the *acampamento* tended to romanticize the memories. As much as she was full of warm stories of noble battle and neighborly love, she could also spin sad yarns of flooded shacks, babies dying of pneumonia and armed assaults between hungry acquaintances

This romanticized hindsight was rooted in solidarity of purpose and the fact that just by existing — building huts, putting in gardens, improvising schools, coordinating community functions — in short, by living daily life, they were fulfilling their obligations. They were “doing their job”. What grew out of three years of encampment for many was the insidious idea that the act of waiting brings justice (and money). Action was inactivity itself — waiting for time to pass, for Inca to put land into



Men grab the head of a horse permitted to eat too much green grass. The horse’s stomach swelled and she was constipated. The men poured a bottle of Coca Cola into the horse’s nose, forcing her to swallow it. That did not help much, and they later resorted to a soap enema. It was the drama of the Vila for an afternoon. The horse recovered.

MST possession. Just living and passing time, albeit in rough conditions, was enough.

In the current phase, after three years of possession, traces of the waiting behavior were still apparent. Many days Vitória was idle. There was always the coming and going to the river to fetch water, working a few rows in the garden, washing clothing or herding animals from grassy patch to grassy patch. But, there was not a great productive push to sculpt the settlement into a viable cooperative community.

Gone were the “*multidões*” (collective work efforts) of the river front *acampamentos*. The revolutionary zeal and enthusiasm for reform had been diluted. Nightly meetings and community discussions were replaced by home routines, television and improvised bars.

In the recent spate of guava planting, the disorganization and balkanization of the community was baldly apparent. The automatic irrigation systems pivot on a radius of one hectare, forming a circular field. Planters were required to clear their respective lots, measure the placement of the seedlings, prepare the land, fertilize and plant. They were also required to fence their piece of the circumference. Some settlers were more motivated than others and planted their seedlings quickly after delivery. Others delayed for various reasons. The result was that the seedlings were not fenced off and goats quickly munched through the future orchard. Arguments broke out and the community splintered further.

If each of the 264 households had sent one capable person one day per week to work on the fence, the five guava fields would have been enclosed within a month. Instead, attitudes and morale plummeted in proportion

to the rise in confusion and bitter feelings.

On afternoon walks with Valdete through the Vilas the most frequent sentiment I encountered was "*Eu vou me embora d'aqui*" (I'm getting myself out of here). The words flowed from Valdete as well. At 35 she looks a decade older. She is tired of the confusion and lack of organization in the Vitória. Valdete has stopped participating in invasions and marches around the state. She has given up walking through the community to drum up enthusiasm and support for projects like a day-care center, a sewing cooperative or a church. Cynicism has taken over her once tireless idealism, "Here it's every man for himself. When something needs to be done they just stare at each other waiting for someone to find a solution. This doesn't work anymore. I'm tired."

Still she gets caught up in the dream every now and again when she lets herself. "Everything is for my sons. I want to see them finish school and get good jobs. I would do it all again for them." But she doesn't want them to stay in the country, or even the MST. "I want them to live in a nearby town and visit me on weekends. Jefferson says his dream is to be truck driver, earn a lot of money and build a house. He'll live on top. I'll live on the bottom. He wants to drive by and see Grande in the hammock and me in a rocking chair! Ezekiel wants to be a soccer star. But first, he'll study."

Valdete shakes her head. No, it's not time to give up,

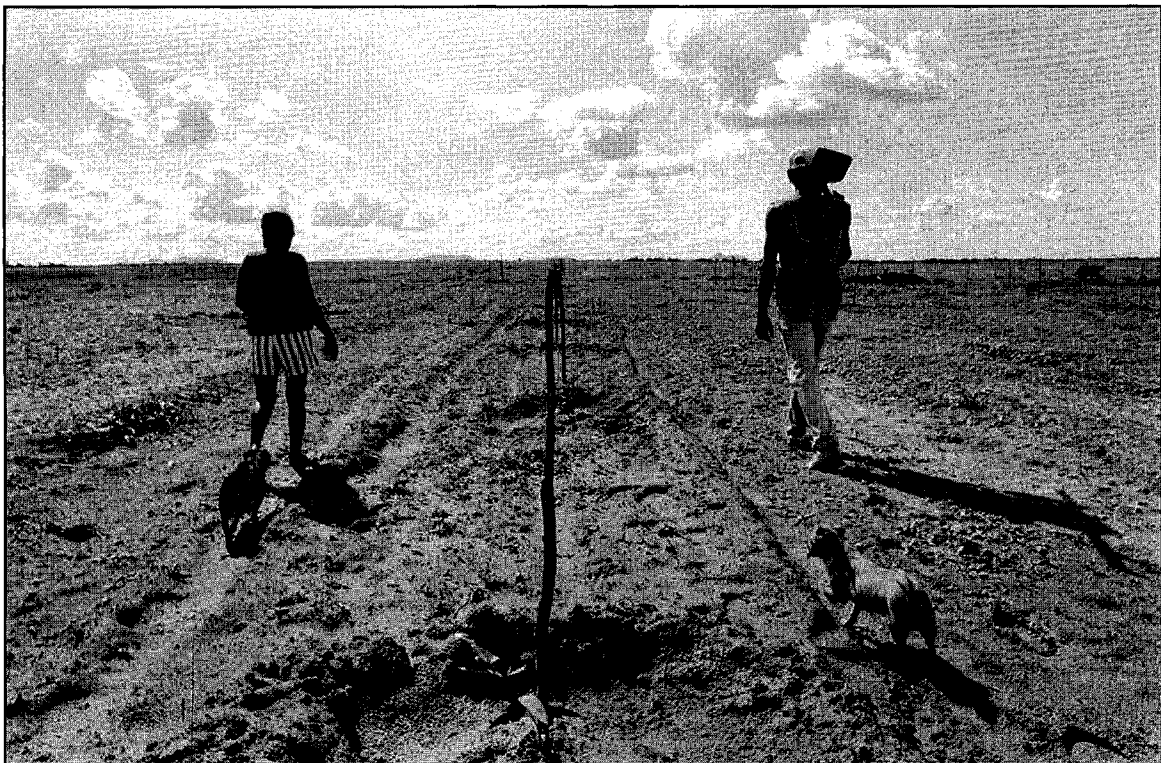
even though the presidents of the community are corrupt, no one remembers the long-term goals and the school is canceled every other day for lack of teachers. It's not time to leave, at least not yet.

The first harvest of guava will come in December. The whole community has its future pinned to the success of the harvest. "I can't sell now. If I sell now I'll only get 4,000 *reais* (U.S.\$2,199). That doesn't make up for the last five years of my life. I have to wait until the guava produce and the earth has value. Then I might sell, arrange myself a nice little house in Santa Maria or Curaçá. Put my boys in good schools. Go back to embroidering. I can't sell for less than 8,000 *reais* (U.S.\$4,398). I have to wait until the first guava. I'll sell my guava and others will want to buy my piece of the MST. Yes, I'm thinking I will leave here."

On April 1, 2000, the evening agricultural report announced that the price of guava in the Rio São Francisco Valley had plummeted. Large-scale producers were letting the fruit rot on the trees rather than waste resources on a harvest. Valdete lay on her bed staring at the television screen a little stunned. "But we're all planting guava!" she cried.

Until the next adventure,

Susan



Valdete, left, and Grande walk the length of a row of guava seedlings they had just planted. The settlement's economic stability is tied to the success of the guava crop, which should be harvested in December. The price of guava plummeted on the first week of April due to over-production.