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THE AMERICAS

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"A Smoldering Land"

August 23, 2000
BELÉM, Pará, Brazil

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Dear Peter,

Dona Nega offered to walk us to the charcoal fields. It was 7:30 a.m. on a Saturday in Paragominas, Pará State. A heavy morning fog clung to the ground allowing only glimpses of our surroundings. We would hear the sounds first, then figures would appear from the gray mist; a woman walking, a man on a bike, an 18-wheeler loaded with charcoal straining through the deeply rutted mud roads. Wood scraps and charcoal bits were everywhere. Each time a truck passed we had to shield ourselves from raining debris.

Though they were still out of sight, Dona Nega didn't need to announce when we were nearing the charcoal ovens. I could taste the burning. The acrid smoke permeated the gray haze steaming under the equatorial sun. By the time we topped the first hill, the smoke-fog had dissipated enough to see the enormity of the fields of charcoal ovens and the sad, charred landscape they had helped to create. A few skeletal trunks of trees stood like sentries guarding lush pastureland. One noble stump, cracked in the middle and scorched black but still nearly 30 feet in height, loomed out of the fog like a haunted soul reminding me of the forest that once covered the hills.

Dona Nega, a 48-year-old grandmother who looked ten years beyond that, was born to a farming family in the state of Paraíba. They migrated in search of work, first to the rice fields of Maranhão, then to Paragominas. Since arriving here, her life and the life of her four children has been charcoal. It has been a precarious existence, though she has moved up from tending fires to managing 40 ovens. She has upgraded her house from wood planking to brick. At the height of charcoal production she even bought a dump truck, which enabled her and her son to make money hauling wood scraps from lumberyards to the charcoal fields.

But charcoal production has fallen off, and today she owes over 9,000 *reais* (U.S.$5,100) for the maintenance of the truck, her home and other debts. Her daughter, Lourdes, is running for local municipal representative (about 150 candidates for 13 spaces) while struggling to graduate from the town's mediocre public high school. Each morning, Dona Nega tries to catch a ride with passing trucks to avoid doing what she was doing with us — hiking three kilometers through the dust and mud in her blue rubber flip flops.

She blames earlier ranchers for the situation today, "The ranchers should have taken down the trees that were big and left the smaller ones. But they

took everything down in order to make more money. Now, the forests are far away.

"I don't know...if the sawmills stop, the charcoal will stop, and I don't know what I will do then."

Over the course of my two-week stay in Paragominas, I learned to respect exhaustion. That first morning with Dona Nega, I didn't want to hop on a truck. I wanted to feel the distance that the workers experienced every morning. As the days went on, I despaired at the thought of the heat and the long walk to the charcoal fields from the little brick room behind the *Conselho Tutelar* (advisory council[1]) where my wife Susan and I had hung our hammocks. If we left at 6 a.m., while the sun was still soft and welcome, we would arrive drenched in sweat and sunburned by 7:30 a.m., with neither the energy to prowl around with our cameras nor the will to return to town.

I began accepting rides with the truck drivers, chatting with them about their work during noisy, bumpy rides. Early one morning we hopped a ride with a hauler we had met a few days before. As Susan climbed up into the cab she stopped abruptly and stared at the .38-caliber pistol facing her on the seat next to the driver. He smiled apologetically and tossed the gun onto the dashboard, "It's for the vagabonds that want to rob me."

Walking that first morning with Dona Nega, we passed men and women toiling in the seven-foot space between the road and the barbed-wire fence that demarcated private pastureland. They were tending to mounds of dirt shaped like the graves of giants, from which smoke rolled out in beautiful gray-white puffs. Covered in soot and sweat, the workers took breaks from jabbing at the mounds with hoes to say hello to Dona Nega and chuckle at my fascination with the smoke patterns as I photographed. "He likes the smoke?" laughed one incredulously.

The smoking mounds are called *caieiras* ("pit oven"), improvised charcoal ovens that are actually dirt trenches filled with methodically-stacked scrap wood then covered with dirt and sawdust.[2] After lighting the fire the workers would have to stay awake for 48 hours to control the burning rate with water and by shifting the dirt around to control the amount of oxygen reaching the wood. A fire that got too hot would turn the charcoal to ash.

At the top of the hill a group of *carvoeiros* (charcoal workers), ranging in age from 20 to 60, lounged in the shade of a shack at the entrance to an oven field. They were awaiting their weekly wages. As we approached they appraised us behind poker faces, waiting for us to speak first.

Dona Nega introduced us as U.S. students doing research for a project. I went with the flow since she had forewarned us that the *carvoeiros* were wary of outsiders, but would trust us after her introduction. After a round of hand-shaking we seemed to have been accepted without question. Sixty-year-old Antonio Barboso da Silva liked my snapping photos. His eyes twinkled behind a tobacco-yellowed beard and a toothless grin as he goaded me on, asking for "one more pose."

We passed through the gate and into a field of less-improvised ovens. The six-foot-high cookers were formed like neat little igloos of hand-made bricks. Six rows of 20 stretched into the mist. Some ovens were smeared with yellow clay to seal them tight and control the burning process. Others were empty, with two small arched doorways, one on each side of the oven, opened to empty the charcoal and receive the next load of dry wood. Heaps of wood and shiny piles of charcoal were scattered about in junkyard fashion, belying the orderliness of the process. Though more ovens were empty than full, grey smoke that seeped from the openings of those in operation was enough to fill the area and burn my eyes and lungs.

Our presence drew curious looks and a few people approached to chime in on Dona Nega's explanations of the charcoal making process. According to the keepers, using an oven instead of a *caieira* took longer, about three to four days, but rendered a charcoal of higher quality that brought a better price. The stable structure also meant the keeper didn't have to spend the night in the *carvoaria*, but could instead regulate the slow burn by placing or removing the bricks in the side of the oven. After three days, the fresh wood would have been completely carbonized. It was then shoveled out, loaded into trucks, and sold to smelting plants in Maranhão. The pig iron and steel made by furnaces fueled by this Amazonian forest charcoal girdered buildings in Brazil and around the world.

Once the initial introductions were made, I had little trouble taking pictures and talking with people in the charcoal fields. In fact, it seemed as if they were used to photographers, especially foreign ones who the locals said spoke "*tudo enrolado*" (all mixed up). The media were a part of their lives, especially in recent years because of

[1]The *Conselho Tutelar*, or advisory council, is a municipal elected body independent of the executive, judicial, or legislative bodies. The counselors are the first to be consulted in any matters involving youths (for example, if the youth commits a crime or is abused) and decides whether the youth goes before a judge, back home, to a shelter, etc... We met Etelvino Porto and the rest of the members of the *Conselho Tutelar* in Paragominas through our friend, Nara Costa. They have two rooms in the back of their office that are used as emergency shelters. Since no one was using them, they offered the lodging to Susan and me.

[2] The word *caieiras* originally referred to pits for making lime.

government crackdowns on illegal logging in the area and child labor in the *carvoarias*.

The initial ease with which I was accepted put me off guard when I met with resistance. On one occasion I had jumped on the back of the Honda dirt-bike of one of the oven managers to see a distant field. As we entered the field, I spotted a boy I guessed to be about 13 years old smearing clay on the top of an oven. Not wanting to startle him I said nothing initially, but slowly made my way toward him as I photographed.

By the time I neared his oven, he had disappeared. I busied myself talking to a young couple trying to build a new oven, explaining that I was not from the government, the police, or even the Brazilian media. The message spread. Finally, when the boy came back, and resumed his position on top of the oven, I approached. I said a few words to him, and then backed off to frame a picture. I had time to make a few pictures before four men, including the manager, ran up to me talking loudly and gesturing wildly. The boy got down from the oven.

Though none of the men said anything about not taking the kid's picture, I knew that was what they worried about. Knowing that further documentation would have to wait, I started to joke with them, laughing about how I would fall off if I did work like that "guy" was doing. The manager suggested that I try it, and that he would take my picture. I grabbed onto the slippery brick, hoisted myself to the top, raised my arms and screamed "I am the king of the world." They all laughed, though I wondered if they got the Titanic reference. But that was how I learned just how skittish and wary the community had become about child labor. They were sandwiched between needing to work and fearing fines for having minors in the fields. It would be slow going to gain their trust and get them to tell me their stories.

Work in the *carvoarias* was divided into specific tasks: building ovens, cutting wood, filling and emptying the ovens, tending the ovens, and loading the charcoal into trucks bound for the smelters. Perhaps the most brutal of all jobs was loading the charcoal into the tractor-trailers. Blackened by charcoal dust, teams of three worked bare-chested, shirts tied to their heads and draped over their shoulders as padding for the loaded baskets. The men grabbed pitchforks, and sank the iron teeth into the mounds of charcoal emptied from an oven. Six or seven scoops filled a basket to the brim, at which point they bent down to grab the edges of the container and got ready to lift it over their heads. In a timed choreography, the next

worker took his cue, dropping his pitchfork and stepping into place. He counted to three and helped lift and guide the load onto the shoulders of the other. The *carregador* (carrier) then trotted up the incline of a wooden ladder and unloaded his burden into the belly of the trailer.

The repetitive labor had honed their bodies into machines. Though some of the workers were muscular in the bulky style of workout gyms, most had a leaner look. Their bodies were accustomed to hard labor and bad nutrition — high caloric output with low input. One said that sometimes he worked ten hours a day, seven days a week." Our rest is only at night."

For payment of $11 per person, it usually took a three-man team five hours to fill a 110-cubic-meter trailer. That averages to about $2.20 an hour. The baskets that the men used were roughly one-third of a cubic meter, meaning that 330 baskets filled the trailer, and each man was responsible for 110 baskets. This broke down to one basket every 2.7 minutes, or 22 trips per hour up the rickety ladder, with each basket worth 18 cents. Though on a monthly average these men could potentially gain more than the standard minimum wage of $84 per month, it didn't seem that a body could handle that work for many years. I didn't see anyone that looked over 30.

> "As we got farther away from the charcoal fields we carried the smoke smell with us — it had permeated our hair, our clothing, our camera bags."

As the truck was nearly filled, the rhythm of the work slowed and the men readied to pull a large plastic tarp over the top to keep charcoal from flying out in transit. I asked if I could climb to the top of the trailer, to try the ascent and take a look from the top. Though I declined the offer to try my hand at hauling a basket of charcoal, I found it a challenge to balance the weight of my camera bag and negotiate the rickety ladder. Once on top I was unnerved by slipperiness of the shifting coals.

From the top of the truck, the *carvoaria* looked like an odd village of orderly Munchkin 'houses', with the rising smoke like signs of hearth fires. I could see five more fields cutting into the scrappy brush extending away from town. Off in the distance the mist had finally cleared and the center of town was visible six kilometers away. Between the center of town and the oven field stretched a gray village of weathered wooden houses crowded against each other and softened only by the constant haze of smoke, sawdust and orange clay. The surrounding hills were dotted with ragged foliage and second-growth trees. One stand of replanted white-wood *faveira* trees stood three stories high. They were only three years old, and would be harvested in a few years.

By 10 a.m. the mist had lifted and only the choking smoke remained. The sunlight burned harsh and glaring. Dona Nega started for home to check on the infant grandson she cared for so that her son could work. As we got farther away from the charcoal fields we carried the smoke smell with us — it had permeated our hair, our clothing, our camera bags. We headed straight for the center of town. Icy showers took most of the smoke from our skin but days later we learned there was really no escaping it in this town. We had given our clothing to a young woman who offered to wash it in her home. When she returned the clean clothes we pulled them on only to realize the pungent odor was impossible to erase since the clothing had dried in the smoky air.

It was my ongoing look at the state of Brazil's youth that had drawn me to Paragominas. The charcoal fields were known magnets of child labor. I had heard about the dangerous conditions and wanted to see them for myself. However, my visit almost didn't happen, first because of unusually heavy rains that flooded much of the state of Pará, making logging difficult, which decreased the activity of the sawmills and by extension, the charcoal fields. Second, the *Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e dos Recursos Naturais Renovavais* (Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Natural Removable Resources, IBAMA), the government environmental agency, had been cracking down on illegal logging and meting out hefty fines to law-breaking loggers and sawmills. From the outside it seemed that international pressures and Brazil's desire for a good public image had combined with a genuine national concern over the destruction of forest land and finally put some teeth into Brazilian environmental laws. I had no idea what I would find, but thought it was worth checking out first hand.

Nara Costa, a social worker and friend of ours who lives in Belém, Pará, cynically suggested that the increased vigilance was due to the backlash against recent allegations of corruption and bribery in the agency. That irregularities do happen is a certainty. On my third or fourth afternoon in Pargominas, I was exiting a bus-stop restaurant (the only kind open during the day) when a logger named Pedro approached me and asked if I bought lumber. I guess I fit the bill: I was white, like the wood buyers from the south of the Brazil, and I was eating in a restaurant, which meant that I had some money. Obviously, I declined on the timber. But in talking with Pedro I learned that bribes to IBAMA officials were commonplace. Pedro candidly admitted buying off officials in order to avoid heavy fines.

When Susan and I flew into Belém on July 14th, tension in the region was high. In May a Greenpeace ship

run by an international group of young volunteers and researchers — including a few Brazilians — had sailed up the Amazon River in an effort to raise awareness of the runaway logging and destruction in the region. Since a huge portion of Pará's economy is related to logging, many working-class people took the visit of Greenpeace as a threat to their livelihood. Those supporting the logging industry marched in Belém. The essence of the clashing points of view could be seen on fading billboards throughout the city.

One Greenpeace billboard said, "Conservation of the forests = conservation of jobs." The logging industry came up with its own equals-marks slogans, the most understated being, "Greenpeace = Misery" and "Greenpeace = Unemployment." Another showed a map of Brazilian Amazônia (the states of Pará, Amazônas, Amapá, Roraima, Acre, Rondônia, Tocantins) in multicolored stripes, and the rest of the country colored green. The text read, "Internationalization of the Amazon. Is that what you want?"

This view of outside interference and exploitation is justifiable. The history of Amazônia, its people and resources, has been one of outside encroachment from the beginning of European contact with the region. From the Portuguese, French and Dutch colonial powers, to Brazilian defense, cattle and rubber interests, to the national and international loggers and pharmaceutical companies, people have come to the Amazon in search of things to take, to extract.

"Since a huge portion of Pará's economy is related to logging, many working-class people took the visit of Greenpeace as a threat to their livelihood."

Brazilians often express a conflictive, paradoxical view of environmental destruction in the region. Politically left-leaning Nara echoed nationalistic slogans in our conversations, deflecting the charge of Brazil's destruction of the Amazon. She claimed that it wasn't Brazilians cutting down the trees, but foreign logging companies coming in and reaping huge profits at the expense of the forests and their inhabitants. She omitted the part about who was letting in these imperialists, and which Brazilians profited so handsomely.

Almiro Rodrigues Castro, who works with the union of building workers in Paragominas, summed up the Brazilians' cynical attitude toward outsiders preaching conservation: "It is dishonest that the United States has already cut down their forest and finished off the wood there. Now, they want Brazil to preserve our wood for them while Brazilians go hungry."

Parágominas is a dusty town of 50,000, five hours south of Belém along the Belém-Brasilia highway. Susan and I rolled into the main plaza of town at one a.m. on a Thursday. I looked out of the bus window to see a two-man band blaring electronic *forró* music to the empty white plastic chairs of a sidewalk bar. I felt sorry for the duo until Susan commented that she had seen dancers, but they had scattered when a man drew a pistol from the waist of his pants. Our first impression gave credence to the famous nickname of the town, *Parágo-balas*, or Parágo-bullets.

We were in the "Wild West," or at least it felt so. In the poorer neighborhoods, dusty streets were lined with wooden houses, small stores and bars with pool tables. As Susan and I walked past, men would pause with pool cues in hand, or between sips of a cold beer. Local military police would stop their conversations long enough to eye us. I felt like we were in a Clint Eastwood movie and we were the bad guys. I kept waiting for someone to tell us, "we are a peaceful people and your type isn't welcome in these parts." But most people turned out to be very friendly.

The pace was slow. Mangy dogs sat patiently in front of butcher shops waiting for spare bones. Families played dominos, or just watched the world (and us) pass by their front porches. There was no escape from their gaze or the suffocating dust and tropical heat.

Appearances, in this case, were not deceiving. This really was a frontier town. Since 1964, when the town was founded, the rule of the gun has prevailed over the rule of law. With vast fortunes to be gained from timber and lush pastureland, most disputes have been settled violence. Residents told me that in years past, bodies would frequently turn up in the streets. Often no one knew why someone had died.

Though fewer corpses litter the city today, conflicts in and around the area still happen. In 1996, the *Instituto Nacional de Colonizacão e Reforma Agrária* (National Institute of Settlement and Agrarian Reform, Incra) office in Paragominas was invaded by people clamoring for the government to live up to its promise of land re-distribution. In 1997 a landless movement invaded a 12,000-acre non-productive cattle ranch owned by Swift Foods, a U.S. cold-cuts business. Only after this drastic action did the government move on its promise of land redistribution. It appropriated the ranch and issued land titles to 900 families for the re-named area - *Parágonorte*.

Reinforcing the image of vigilante justice, an on-going case links police to the killing of a street child in Paragominas. Supposedly, a group of teens were robbing trucks coming through town. It is alleged that the police took it upon themselves to eliminate the group without a trial, and killed one boy. Five other youths are currently

under protective custody in Belém as the trial takes its course.[3]

The gap between rich and poor here is far and wide. A taxi driver and *ad-hoc* local historian, Milton, excitedly took us on the tour of Paragominas starting with the rich side of town. We rolled down *Rua dos Privilegiados*, or Privilege Street, in the neighborhood of *Promissao Um* (Great Promise One).[4] More than anything, the modesty of the homes of local cattle and lumber barons struck me. Milton explained that the families actually spend little time in the city, preferring their plush ranches dotting the highway to Belém.

The town stayed sleepy during the week, with pick-ups, motorbike taxis and buses curving around the central plaza on their way to somewhere else. Only late in the evening when the four bars and snack stops opened, did the middle and upper classes appear in town. Freshly bathed and overdressed, they sipped drinks and ate ice cream and sandwiches.

The big social evening was Sunday night after mass, when the whole town seemed to turn out, poor and wealthy alike. Families walked round and round the plaza. Teens flirted and giggled in church. Vendors hawked every type of food that could be sold from coolers or little push carts. On their way to evening revivals, Evangelicals, Bibles in hand, streamed stiffly past festive Catholics.

The high society of Parágominas descended on the Catholic Church in hordes. As the priest homilized about the evils of the gross inequality of wealth, the parking spots were filled with expensive vehicles: sparkling King Cab Fords, Hondas, Ford Tauruses, huge Dodge Ram trucks with license plates from other states like Maranhão, Espirito Santos and Paraná. The bars and restaurants dotting the plaza overflowed with cell-phone-toting clientele after the 7 p.m. mass let out.

The jewel of town was a beautiful café, *Arte Pães* (Bread Art) that served Italian espresso coffee and fancy breads made from imported French wheat. It contrasted greatly with the barren, cinder-block corner shops that stocked the plain "*pão francês*," the daily bread for Brazilians. The owner, a *carioca* (from Rio de Janeiro), had gambled that he would be successful if he offered-high-quality product and a dash of chic. It wasn't just my wife Susan and I who sat at the tables of *Arte Pães* every morning, knocking back espresso and eating baguettes stuffed with ham and cheese. The moneyed class of Paragominas streamed in to spend their *reais*, too.

When I asked one of the middle-class teens where he partied on the weekends, he said that he didn't because he lived and went to high school in Belém. His parents, who rented an apartment for him and his sister, said that no child with dreams of university stayed in the Paragominas schools. The problem was self-perpetuating: the middle class did not send their children to Paragominas' high school because they thought the quality lacking. And because they did not invest in the schools, the quality continued to be poor. Belém, five hours away by car, was not only the choice for education, but for health services as well. People told me that if they required anything more than an aspirin, they would hop in their cars for the big city.

Except for the very young, I met few people who were actually born in Paragominas. One middle-class woman explained that she left her beloved home state of Espirito Santo to come to this "ugly" place for one reason — it was easier to make money. "*Paraenses* [people from Pará] are descendants of Indians, and so are lazy. Everyone who came here to exploit, came from the outside." She said this as a point of pride, as if neither she nor anyone else would be caught dead here if not for the difficult economic situation in Brazil and the natural riches this area offered.

The extraction mentality was deeply entrenched in this boom town. Though outsiders flocked here to make their fortunes, they did not spend it in Parágominas. There was a consensus about the unattractiveness of the town, but no real momentum to make changes. The irony was that as I looked out from the second story of the Itaueira Hotel (Susan and I decided to take a break from the mosquitoes and hammocks) I could only imagine the beauty of the forest in this area before people arrived to make money.

The poor did not have the luxury of escaping to their ranches, nor sending their children to Belém for school. They lived in the clapboard-house neighborhoods bordering the sawmills nearer the charcoal fields, in ramshackle areas with luxurious names like "Atlantic Garden" and "Beautiful View Garden" (the old name for that

[3] In another part of this expansive state, conflict between Indians and small farmers flared recently. In a particularly dangerous event last month, Caiapo Indians in the southwestern part of Para took 19 sport fishermen hostage to protest the fact that their reservation had not been demarcated by INCRA. One third of their 4,446,000-acre reservation had been taken over by small farmers and ranchers, themselves migrating to the North in search of making a life for themselves. Though the hostages were realeased on August 4th, the farmers and ranchers absolutely refuse to give up land that they say they bought from INCRA. "If it means beginning my life all over again somewhere else, then I prefer to die here. And I am going to die fighting. If it means killing for my rights, I will kill," said rancher José Sebold in the *Jornal do Comercio* newspaper of Recife, August 8, 2000, p.5, in an article entitled, "PF [Federal Police] try to avoid war between the Caiapó and armed ranchers."

[4] Promissao Two, Three, and Four had steadily declined in economic levels from walled richness to established shanties.

area was "Dry Stretch" because of a lack of water for the homes). While we were there, the city was paving some of the main roads of the neighborhoods. The residents appreciated the public work, though the gesture came suspiciously close to October elections. As work proceeded, cars with giant speakers strapped to the top circulated and blasted campaign ads to the tune of the most popular and latest pop hits.

As Milton the taxi driver showed us more of the town, our rate of questioning about history and politics increased. Noticeably frustrated with his imperfect memory, he pulled onto the shoulder of the road and pulled a worn notebook from the glove compartment. In it he had list of the mayors since the town's founding (the first few were nominated and not elected), their terms and the public works they had completed. He flipped the page and there was the bus schedule back to Belém. A very organized taxi driver, indeed.

He told us that the town was founded just 36 years ago, a few years after the first Belém to Brasilia highway, inaugurated on January 23rd, 1960, had been cut through the forest. Made only of dirt, it was more of a trail than a highway, and it took ten days to make the journey (nowadays, on the new paved version, it takes only thirty hours). Milton even relayed the tidbit of information that for the inaugural journey, a tow vehicle was placed on every hill on the stretch near Paragominas to help the cars that couldn't climb the slippery slopes. As the story goes, three engineers who had been working on the highway named the stopping point town after their home states — one from **Pará**, one from **Goi**anas, and one from **Minas** Gerais. Hence Pará-go-minas.

After 1964, the military regime pushed to simultaneously develop and populate the Amazon with people other than its original indigenous inhabitants. This meant opening the area to more ranching, logging, mineral extraction and industrial and hydroelectric projects. On the more populist end, Etelvino Porto, a *petista*[5] member of the *Conselho Tutelar* in Paragominas, said that the military regime sought to "bring people-without-land to the land-without-people."

This echoed the centuries-old concern of the rulers of this continent-sized country, that of trying to populate the vast and tenuously controlled interior to protect against territorial incursions by other European powers, namely the Spanish, French and Dutch. For the military regime in the 1960's and 70's, the question of the Amazon was about national borders and security, not biodiversity and the environment. "*Integrar para não entregar*" (integrate or hand it over) was another popular saying.

The military government even passed an agrarian-reform law, which according to Graciete Kemper Companhara, the director of Incra in Parágominas, was a precursor to present laws used in the struggle for land reform. According to the statute, the area of land running along federal and state highways would be distributed to small farmers. Beyond this small strip, larger landholders could buy the property. According to Etelvino, the law was never meant to be implemented, "It was made one day, and shelved the next."

Small farmers did move in, but didn't receive official titles to the land. They were also unable to secure bank loans for equipment, seeds, manure, etc... Within a couple of years the small farmers failed and the bigger landholders easily bought them out, making their own ranches larger and more valuable. Etelvino hypothesized that instead of wanting to distribute the land more equally and encourage small-scale farming, the military regime had looked at the poor migrating to Pará as cheap labor for the ranchers.

"Rich land buyers with connections to the military government were making blatant land grabs and gobbling up acres of virgin forest."

Land speculation in the area, with its rich resources in wood, minerals and possible pastureland, took off. The area had no "owners" per se, no one with official registered titles. Rich land buyers with connections to the military government were making blatant land grabs and gobbling up acres of virgin forest. Etelvino told me that people would take helicopter flights over areas and simply claim land from horizon to horizon. They would never even set foot on the soil before going to a *cartório* (notary, registrar) and drawing up a false land deed thereby assuming title. This was called *grilagem* ("cricketing").

Grilagem was so-named because of the way the ranchers would falsify the documents. A fake title would be penned in an older style and language. Since the newness of the paper would detract from its "authenticity," it was then placed in a drawer with crickets (*grilhos*). The crickets would eat and defecate on the paper, causing it to yellow and look hundreds of years old. If a land dispute went before a judge, for example because of complaints of an indigenous tribe or of a poor farming family that had had its home taken away, the rich man with the "authentic" title would win.

Etelvino's father had come to this area because he "heard there was lots of land." However, when he got to

[5] *Petista* refers to members of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores*, Workers Party, one of the strongest leftist parties in Brazil.

Parágominas in 1965 he learned that there was indeed a lot of land, "but it already had owners. The rich had gotten there first." He turned to construction and subsistence farming to support his family.

Another interesting land-grab scam was to use the name of Carlos Medeiros. According to Campanharo of Incra, Medeiros was supposed to be the largest landowner in Amazônia, with title to almost all of the land in the states of Pará and Amazônas. The catch was that the man never existed. Since the 1950's, speculators in the two states used the name of Carlos Medeiros to claim the land. They would go to the local *cartório* claiming to represent Carlos Medeiros, supposedly the inheritor of the properties. The person would claim power of Medeiros' attorney, with all rights to the land. After gaining title, they would sell it and make a killing. Campanharo said that a Parlamentary Commission of Inquiry (*Commissão Parlementar de Inquerito*, CPI), is being launched to investigate which titles were falsely drafted using the name of Carlos Madeiros. If found, the land could be taken away by the government and redistributed.

The first boom industry in Parágominas was ranching. It was the *boi-gordo* (fat steer, similar to the white Brahma cows that we have in the US) capital of Brazil, and even today the biggest farming and ranching fair in the region is held every August in Paragominas, complete with professional rodeo and prize-bull auctions. Ranchers cut and burned the virgin forests to make pasture. There was little interest in the value of the wood destroyed — it was just inconvenient. Ranching money dominated the economy until the 1980's when the price of meat fell sharply. To recoup losses, these same landowners turned to the resource that they had been sending up in smoke until then — the trees.

Thus began "wood fever." Ranchers who had migrated from the south of Brazil, where much of the virgin forest had already been cut, knew the wood industry. They built sawmills to process and sell the wood that was being cleared. The area was a prime location for this, with its vast hardwood forests and easy access to ports in Belém. The timber industry easily eclipsed ranching in the 80's and 90's. Parágominas became the logging center of Brazil, and some say, of all the Americas.

Thousands of poor migrants flooded in to take jobs cutting trees, manning the sawmills or tending charcoal ovens. With little city planning, wooden shantytowns were thrown up overnight without water, electricity or sewerage. The horror of cramped living areas was compounded by the fact that the houses were built without surrounding garden space. Migrants, many from the countryside, didn't have the luxury of planting a garden or raising small animals like chickens or pigs. All food had to be bought, and all money came from wages in the town's industries.

The hundreds of sawmills and thousands of charcoal ovens turned Parágominas into a living hell. Campanharo said that the town gained the dubious nickname of "mini Cubatão," an allusion to the allegedly most polluted city in Brazil (located in the state of São Paulo). The rivers ran thick with toxic runoff, and the air was choked with smoke and dust.

The inhuman scenario was worsened by the presence of children laboring alongside their parents, helping to augment the pittance that the family earned. Since laborers were paid according to how much they produced, any extra hands were welcomed, no matter how small.

In the last few years, the situation in Parágominas has changed drastically, less because of altruism than constant media attention. About five years ago, IBAMA started cracking down on polluting sawmills. Last year both illegal logging and child labor, the norm in the past, came under fire by both IBAMA and the Ministry of Labor (MT)[6]. As a result, large signs are posted in front of the charcoal fields saying that minors are not allowed. And on the distant horizon can be seen the orderly rows of replanted trees, evidence of an effort at "sustainability." Words of fear about heavy fines sprinkled the conversations of everyone, from owners to workers.

However, bringing this area in line with national and international ecological and labor norms, a long-term "good," has had brutal consequences for the lives of the working families. The crackdown on unscrupulous cutting diminished the supply of wood for sawmills. Over half of the roughly 150 sawmills have closed. The diminished amount of scrap leaving the sawmill means less fuel for charcoal ovens. Less fuel means less work. In the five charcoal fields I visited, only a fifth of the ovens were active. The families that still tend to the ovens can't use the help of anyone under 18, thereby diminishing what little money they can earn.

Unfortunately, legal logging and child labor were not just aberrations but integral parts of the Parágominas economy. They functioned like a subsidy for the wealthy in the area, keeping the production high and the costs low to maximize profits. Once those "supports" were pulled out and the laws were enforced businesses started to go under or were sold. As one wood buyer told us, for the logger there was no good side of the regulation of

[6] In 1998, the federal governement passed the *Lei de Crimes Ambientais* (Environmental Crimes Law), which, among other measures against transportation of hazardous materials and commercial hunting of endangered species, strengthened laws against the illegal cutting and burning of forests. It took a year, however, to codify the fines that could be levied against perpetrators (from the newspaper, *O Liberal*, Belém, 22 September, 1999).

IBAMA. Having to play by the rules was all expense.

Tough times for the wealthy meant devastation for the workers. Families just getting by under the old non-regulated system lost the most during the shift. They were living on the margins to begin with, and were now even more marginalized.

The one compensation is that the government started PETI (Program for the Erradication of Child Labor) *bolsa escolas* (or school stipends), that offered 25 reais per month per child to families in exchange for getting them out of the charcoal fields and into school. However, the fact that the one available school has a capacity of only 250 children makes it a joke. One parent admitted that the money helped, although as I talked with her at her *caieira*, her seven-year-old granddaughter, for whom she cares, peeked out from the bushes. Though the child's presence was forbidden, the woman had nowhere to leave the child during work hours. She brought her when she didn't have to be in school, and instructed her to hide in the bushes if a stranger approached.

Etelvino said that since the government offered nothing for the parents in terms of training and assistance in finding better work, he feared that the PETI would become just a short-term band-aid. He knew of cases where the temporary *bolsa* had become the sole income for the household. Added to this was the fact that since the prohibition of children working in the charcoal fields, the number of kids shining shoes in the streets of Paragominas has jumped from a few to almost 60. The regulations and fines, instead of ending child labor, were just shifting it to a different sector. "The MT isn't worried about children, just its own image."

Chiming in with her two cents, Nara Costa said, "the Ministry of Labor acts without providing alternatives. They end up penalizing the victims of the informal system and throw all of the blame on the parents."

In reality, IBAMA and the MT had become the town's bogey-men. Everywhere we encountered split-personality conversations about the good and evil of the changes. Everyone knew what was "right," but this didn't correspond to immediate desperate needs.

As Susan and I stood at the entrance of a charcoal field, one of the field managers, João, approached on his bicycle, shirtless with a barrel-chest bronzed by the smoke-filtered sunlight. In his string of criticisms of the changes, I could hear the cry of someone who knew he was on a sinking boat.

"IBAMA wants to manage the forests because they say that if you protect the forests, they will last longer and give more work in the long term. But what do people do in the meantime, the people who are dependent on this work? It is good to be for the environment and for health, but I would rather die of an illness than of hunger."

Another charcoal worker, Robson, voiced the two sides of the debate about removing the children from the charcoal work. "It was good to get the children out of the smoke. But adults weren't allowing the children to do the dangerous work... to work with fire. The kids would not have been working if they didn't have to help put their own food on the table. So now you have families with eight children... [They are] old enough to help out and not allowed to help their parents. But they all still have to eat."

Deusimar and Alcirio Carlos dos Santos and their ten children have suffered through this transition. Susan and I visited them in their wooden-slat home in the Jardim Atlantico neighborhood, the last of the poorer neighborhoods before you reach the sawmills and the charcoal fields. Hammock hooks lined the walls of the sparsely furnished front room, which doubled as a bedroom at night. As we talked, Deusimar would sweep her hand over her broad face, as if she were brushing away fatigue.

"In his string of criticisms of the changes, I could hear the cry of someone who knew he was on a sinking boat."

In fact, she had just returned from her night job at the sawmill where she glues sheets of wood together to make *"lamina"* (plywood or veneer) for R$240/month. Each week the 12-hour job switched from the night shift, starting at six p.m., to the day shift, which began at six in the morning. She said that if the managers caught someone napping on the job, they could be fired instantly. Also, if she made a mistake with the glue and a manager witnessed it, "they humiliate the worker and want to take the price [R$10/sheet] from their paychecks."

Though tremendously taxing, she considers this work a step up from when she helped her husband in the charcoal fields. " I, myself, decided to leave... [Charcoal making] is very tiring for a woman... I said to myself, 'Let me see if I can land another job.' And I did." She went to the sawmill every day and stayed there for 12 hours asking for work. Proudly, she said that they finally realized how badly she wanted the work, and gave her a job.

However, before all of the change, Deusimar said that life was easier financially. "Before, the whole family helped, from eight years old on up. Everyone worked together in the hard work in the charcoal fields." The kids younger than eight stayed at home with one of the older girls in charge. The family would be out the door at 5:30

a.m. The daughter that stayed home made food for the rest and sent it to the family. Sometimes they would even cook on small fires at the *carvoaria*.

She reminisced about the money that they would make. "When we worked together, we'd make 350 *reais* every two weeks...that was our profit for filling the ovens. When we did a large *caieira*, one that would fill a whole *gaiola*... [the money] was divided, half to the owner half to us."

"[Before] it was better. All of the kids would work, making 10-20 *reais*, helping the family... They themselves could buy their own food. Now, they have to wait to work... We have to buy the food that they eat. Because of this it is harder now."

I thought about the fact that many families are forced to live on a minimum salary, a scant 151 *reais* a month, about a fifth of what this family would pull in if they were all working. And still, Deusimar said, the money was not sufficient. Susan asked her how much money did she needed to live. Without much hesitation, Deusimar answered, "a thousand *reais* [per month] in order to not lack. To better our lives, we would need to make about two thousand *reais*.

"With IBAMA and the Ministry [of Labor], the children were taken out and the [amount of] wood was diminished. Because of this, our income has fallen to a *"mijaria"* [piss], to almost nothing. When Alcirio makes 100 *reais* a month, he is making a lot," explained Deusimar. His earnings don't even cover the 150-*reais* monthly water bill.

Describing the moment when the Ministry of Labor arrived at the charcoal fields, Deusimar said they asked, " 'Who here is a minor?' There was no way to hide. [The Ministry] said that the minors couldn't work here because it was bad for them, this difficult work... Only if you were eighteen. [The kids] can't even bring food." She tried to sign up for the *bolsa escola*, but was turned away because the program is at capacity.

Deusimar admitted that the work in the charcoal fields was "bad for the children... It gives you the flu, gives you bad sore throats, burns your eyes. And not all adults can stand the work with the charcoal, nor in the sawmills... I didn't feel well [working with charcoal]. I got the flu all of the time."

All of the children, except the very youngest, have worked with the family at the ovens. I looked at them, trying to see if I could detect physical effects of such exposure. At first glance, they looked healthy, especially the oldest three boys, 17, 18, and 19 years old, who have jobs filling ovens in a more distant *carvoaria*. However, when I started to ask about school, I encountered the true effects of a working childhood.

None of the children had really attended school. Deusimar sighed that there were no more spots in the public schools. They would have to wait for the new school year to begin in December. In fact, the children had never really been educated at all. Only the two teenage girls, Deuseni, 15, and Nazare, 14, knew how to scribble their names. They had been in a classroom for the longest period of time, about a year.

Antônio, 17, who fills ovens with his brothers at a distant charcoal field, lowered his head shyly as I took his picture. Home on his one day off, he had just emerged from a bath, shirtless and in a nice pair of jeans. His body was that of most adolescent boys — strong, but retaining the softness of childhood. In a quiet voice he said that he had been filling ovens since he was eleven, which allowed little time for studies — a total of two weeks, to be exact. He confessed that he missed school, and wished that he could get a better job someday, maybe something in the sawmills...something easier than filling charcoal ovens...something without so much dust and smoke.

"The date put his age at twenty, which is believable in spite of his skinny frame because of the premature hardness of his face."

Though Deusimar admitted the difficulty of losing the income of the children, she said that she would never put her kids into the street to work or beg. "None work in the street. The street is a very dishonest place... Kids trade punches with adults, get beaten up."

On my last day of shooting photos in the charcoal fields, I walked up to a young man resting on a tank of water that the workers use to clean the black dust from themselves. He saw me approach with cameras in hand and didn't flinch, didn't give me any signs of his being underage until I asked. He told me that he was thirteen years old, and that he gets away with working in the fields because of a mistake on his identity papers. The date put his age at twenty, which is believable in spite of his skinny frame because of the premature hardness of his face.

He told me that his father is dead and his mother cannot work, so he and his five brothers sustain the family. He started out as a helper to a chainsaw operator, cutting trees in the forests, but that ended when a branch fell on his chest. With his slim fingers, he opened his shirt to reveal a four-inch scar on his sternum, the result of two bouts of surgery in Belém. Now he works with a team that fills the ovens.

I asked the boy whether he was scared of getting

caught by the Ministry of Labor. He looked up at me and spoke without hesitation, "I am more scared of hunger than of being caught."

According to INCRA's Companhara, the region is in transition, moving away from logging and toward agro-industry. Currently, the farming of soy, corn, rice and beans is expanding. Others talked about trying grapes and coffee.

Renato, a *capixaba* (person from the state of Espirito Santo) and a buyer of high quality wood who introduced himself affably as the "destroyer of the Amazon," said that the shift, unfortunately, would not be able to absorb the labor of the closing sawmills and charcoal fields. A small sawmill employed at least 20 people, and a medium-sized plywood business contracted around 1,000 workers. The mechanized farms needed only about five.

On one of our last days in Paragominas, I stopped to talk to a man leveling mud in the front of his wooden shanty. He pulled his hoe along the ground, with broad muscles of his chest working effortlessly, and said that he recently quit his job as a chainsaw operator. He claimed that his only profession had been cutting down the Amazon forest. It was a job he had grown to hate. "I feel sorry for the animals. The monkeys, you see them with broken legs because they fall with the trees. I hear the parrots singing in the forest and my work mates tell me how beautiful it sounds, that it is a song of joy. No, it is a song of sadness... They are losing their trees."

After 12 days in Paragominas I left on the 11 a.m. bus. Though I was relieved to find that children were not in the charcoal fields any more, I departed with deep concern. It is common for Brazilians to speak of their country as "young," as if it can be excused for its sins. However, the unbelievable raping of the land and the exploitation of people cannot be overlooked. The interests of wealthy and powerful landowners built this area, and not much has changed except the image. Government efforts to get kids out of the charcoal fields are shallow and short-sighted. Rather than ending the need for children to work, it has pushed them into areas either commonly seen in Brazil, like shoe-shining in the town square, or areas not seen at all, like day-labor on the growing agro-industry farms. Nothing is being offered for families to face the employment vacuum.

In the end, this favors landowners, since the high unemployment forces people to accept low wages over no wages. It is the vicious cycle that keeps the haves and have-nots in their places.

Until next month,