

CHICLEROS, CHICLE, AND COMMUNITY

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The farmers known as chicleros in Central America harvest chicle, a sap from the sapodilla tree that was used to make the original natural chewing gum. While the chicle industry was once a medium-size contributor to the Belizean economy with the United States as its largest consumer, the industry peaked in the early 1940s. The same factors that caused it to peak would also one day coincidentally be the cause of its eventual downfall (Redclift, 2004).

Chicle is a renewable resource, but the trees that are tapped must have time to rest. A mature sapodilla tree must go untapped for three to eight years, depending on the size of the tree, until it can be used again (Mexicolore, n.d.). In the 1940s, the demand for chicle heavily outweighed the forests' capacity to produce it. This prompted scientists to create a synthetic gum base, which acts as a chicle substitute (Wrigley Jr. Company, n.d.). This seemingly harmless advancement in technology helped destroy the chicle market in Belize and put many people out of work.

Harvesting chicle and being a chiclero was a family tradition passed down from generation to generation. Using only rope and metal spurs to climb the ten to fifteen meter high sapodilla tree, a chiclero's work was dangerous (Redclift, 2004). He would also carry a machete in hand to make V-shaped cuts into the bark of the tree so that the chicle sap would pour to a collection bag on the ground. Often, a chiclero would accidentally cut the rope that was tying him to the tree when he was climbing (Mexicolore, n.d.). During the industry's prime, the Belizean government was prospering greatly from chicle exports and encouraged parents to have their children work at harvesting the chicle. Education was sacrificed because the families needed the extra money to survive. A chiclero would work for a contractor who would give the chiclero the needed equipment and would pay him a cash advance for his services. At the end of the season, the contractor would subtract from the chicle profit the cash advance and the value of the borrowed equipment. Contractors at times abused this system, which left the chiclero in debt to the contractor and perpetuated a cycle from which escape was difficult.

After the decline of the chicle industry in the late 1940s and 1950s, the story of the chiclero starts to disappear. My project looked at what happened to this group of people who put their entire lives into a job that became obsolete. I wanted to know how they adapted and survived and what they

were doing now. I also wanted to record the stories of the chicleros before no chicleros remained to tell them.

GROUND WORK

I began interviewing chicleros on our first trip to San Carlos, a neighboring village just outside the preserve. I soon discovered that the disappearance of the chicleros was not as mysterious or complicated as I had originally thought. The chicleros, during the time of the chicle decline, simply moved on to the next highest paying job. For many, that meant they went into farming; for others, it meant fishing. As I grew to recognize that the history of the chiclero was one of struggle, I was for the first time able to distinguish a major difference in Belize's culture. The decline in the chicle industry for them was just another bump in the road that they either had to overcome to survive or die. The conflict was not monumental in the way I had originally envisioned because, having no choice in the matter, they accepted and dealt with the situation and moved on. As I continued talking with them, I noticed a pattern developing: At each challenge they faced, the Belizean people continued to put everything they had into earning a living.

My project evolved from focusing solely on the lives of chicleros to grappling with the dynamics of a community village like San Carlos. I started asking questions about their views of the community, how they thought they were doing, and where they thought the community was heading. Community is very important in a small village like San Carlos because any outside contact may be hours away. People depend on one another for daily living. The people that I spoke to had many concerns about the future of the next generation. If children are no longer learning basic skills such as sewing, fishing, or farming, what will they have to sustain themselves and their families if a catastrophe occurs? Without these learned skills, what would they have to fall back on? As Belize modernizes and as technology, better education, and exposure to outside influences permeate the small rural villages, the people there fear that the place they call home may no longer exist for future generations.

The former chicleros feel that the younger generation needs to know about their chiclero heritage. Slowly, with the passing of each generation, a part not only of history but also of culture silently slips away. The concern about loss of culture and traditional ways is a constant theme throughout my interactions with the people of Belize, which is why I have created an informational pamphlet on the chicleros discussing the history of culture, and why it all matters. This pamphlet will be sent down to Belize and given to the children at the different schools we visited on our journey. While I do

not expect to change the world just by producing a pamphlet, I do hope it will encourage conversation and questioning between the children and their parents and grandparents. I hope that this pamphlet will be the stimulus for children to learn all about the chiclero way of life and the chicle that was so important to their community's survival. Who better to teach the next generation about their cultural heritage than the people who actually lived it?



REFLECTION

My experience in Belize, a special place that one does not encounter every day, seems almost like a dream. I shall never forget the enthusiasm and kindness of the Belizean people. The unique experiences I had make me eager to get out in the field and do actual social work. Belize has opened my eyes to social work's greater possibilities for helping people. I am now better able to see the individual parts of a community that help to create the whole.

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