



THE LIGHT HE LIT WILL SHINE FOREVER

# EL PAYASO

## Study Guide





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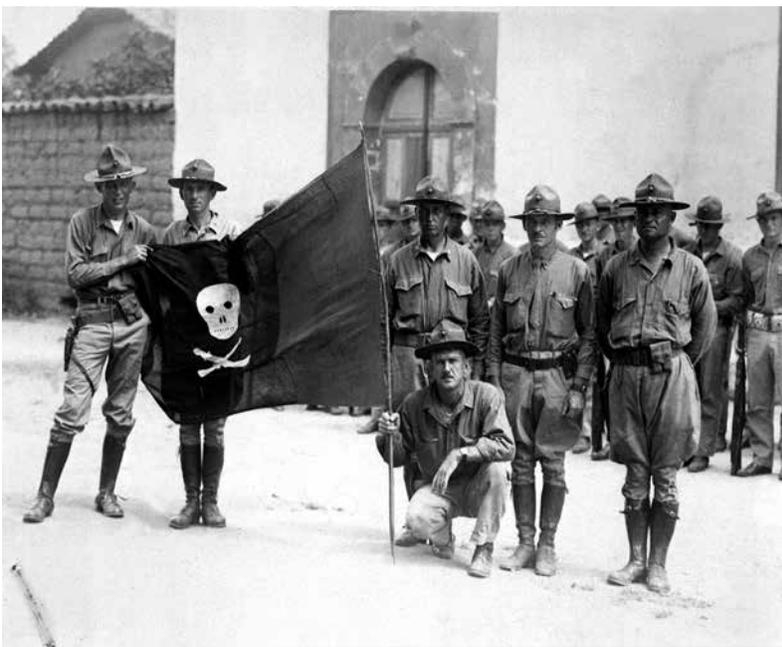
**“Whatever you can do needs to be done, so pick up the tool of your choice and get started.”**  
**—Ben Linder**

*El Payaso*, written by Emilio Rodríguez, follows the journey of a student as he retraces the steps of Ben Linder, an American engineer and clown. Linder helped provide electricity and potable water to rural communities in El Cuá-Bocay, Nicaragua, amidst the chaos of war.

In 1981, under the Reagan administration, the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) funded and co-orchestrated the Nicaraguan war between the Contras and the Sandinista movement. The history of U.S. intervention in Nicaragua goes back to 1910, when American military forces invaded the nation and installed Anastasio Somoza as dictator because he aligned with American political and economic expansionist interests. The American occupation continued on and off until the 1930s. In the years of occupation, the Nicaraguan popular army that resisted Somoza’s regime was defeated and their leader, Augusto César Sandino, was killed. Sandino’s name would live on as an emblem for the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional or FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front), as



Augusto César Sandino and his staff.



US marines showing captured Sandino flag.

they fought Somoza's tyrannical rule. The Somoza family and their friends owned most of the economic enterprises and land in Nicaragua. The constant and unbearable injustice aimed at the Nicaraguan people led to the assassination of Dictator Anastasio Somoza in 1956. Unfortunately, Nicaragua then saw the establishment of a modern dynasty, as Somoza's sons, Luis Somoza and Anastasio Somoza Debayle, respectively, held office as presidents of Nicaragua until 1979, when they were finally forced out of power by the FSLN.

After decades of an oppressive regime, the Nicaraguan people, led by the FSLN, began to establish an actual democracy, with equitable opportunities and institutions that cared for the welfare of all citizens. Their efforts were assailed once more, when under the direction of Ronald Reagan, the CIA partnered with former Nicaraguan military officials, Somoza's loyalists, to mobilize a right-wing armed opposition against the FSLN. They became known as the Contras. Armed altercations only came to an end in 1990, right before the 1991 Nicaraguan elections.

In 1983, American engineer, Ben Linder arrived in Nicaragua. Ben had grown up in a family that chose to engage in social justice movements. As a young adult, his family encouraged Ben to pursue his interest in humanitarian work. After Ben graduated from the University of Washington with a degree in mechanical engineering, he left his home in Oregon to work in Nicaragua. He, like many Americans, supported the Sandinista government and sought to help in the reconstruction of the country after the overthrow of the Somoza regime. He saw first-hand that the process of reconstruction was no easy task. Although the Somoza regime was over, the Contras still had partial control over certain rural areas.

Ben arrived in Managua, the capital of Nicaragua, where he spent his first two months looking for a job. He eventually found employment with a Nicaraguan circus, where he put to use his skills as a juggler, clown, and unicyclist. Along with the local community of artists, Ben attended many pro-Sandinista marches, where he met Diane Brooks. Brooks was a puppet artist whose family had been involved in all aspects of the revolution—fighting, organizing and reconstruction. Brooks introduced Ben to community organizing groups. He was often asked to use his clowning skills as part of community events and health campaigns to promote vaccinations for children. Ben and the other circus performers had the important task of sparking moments of joy in the war-torn country.



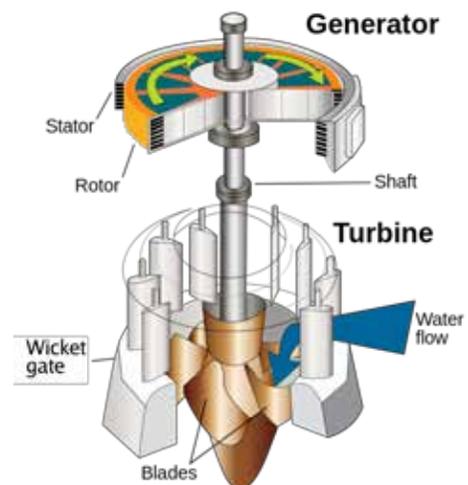
Ben Linder joins a Sandinista parade with his unicycle.

After two months, Ben was hired by the Instituto Nicaragüense de Energía or INE (Nicaraguan Institute of Energy), but he found the bureaucratic nature of his job to be tedious and unproductive. One day, Ben tagged along with a group of his coworkers for a field visit to a rural area called El Cuá. In Ben's words, El Cuá really felt like a "war zone". The town had no running water and no electricity, which was ironic, given that the team was visiting to check in on a hydroplant project. The plant was still not functioning after four years of work. Many engineers had abandoned the project and only two out of three machines had been installed. The third was still back in the INE's office in Managua. Ben started to work on the hydroplant in El Cuá whenever possible. He was determined to succeed where preceding engineers had failed.

Unfortunately, he was stuck spending most of his time creating piping diagrams for the INE, even though he wanted to be working in the hydroplant in El Cuá. The on-site workers in El Cuá— Rigo, Oscar and Federico - all worked for different agencies and had been the only constant workers in the project throughout the years. However, without constant engineers or resources, their hard work would not bring any benefits for their community.

Upon returning to El Cuá, Ben found out that one of them, Federico, had quit because his sister who had been kidnapped by the Contras had discovered that the workers of the hydroplant were on the Contras' death list. The Contras were determined to halt any progress made by the Sandinistas. As the days passed, Ben realized they needed a mechanics expert to move the project forward. So Ben convinced Don Macleay, a Canadian machinist millwright, to join him. With a team of foreign and local workers assembled, El Cuá finally got electricity on November 22, 1985.

With the hydroplant working, the local City Hall put together a brigade to move on to the next phase: rural electrification, which required the construction of a small-scale grid. Locally, in El Cuá, the group led by Don and made of Ben, Mira, Gilda, and Oscar ran and maintained the plant. Gilda also joined the brigade; she was the only woman among eleven men. She tested highest in the classes and thus became a leader in the wiring of the school and other important buildings in the town. Eventually, they brought electricity to every family's house. The people in town whose houses were wired,



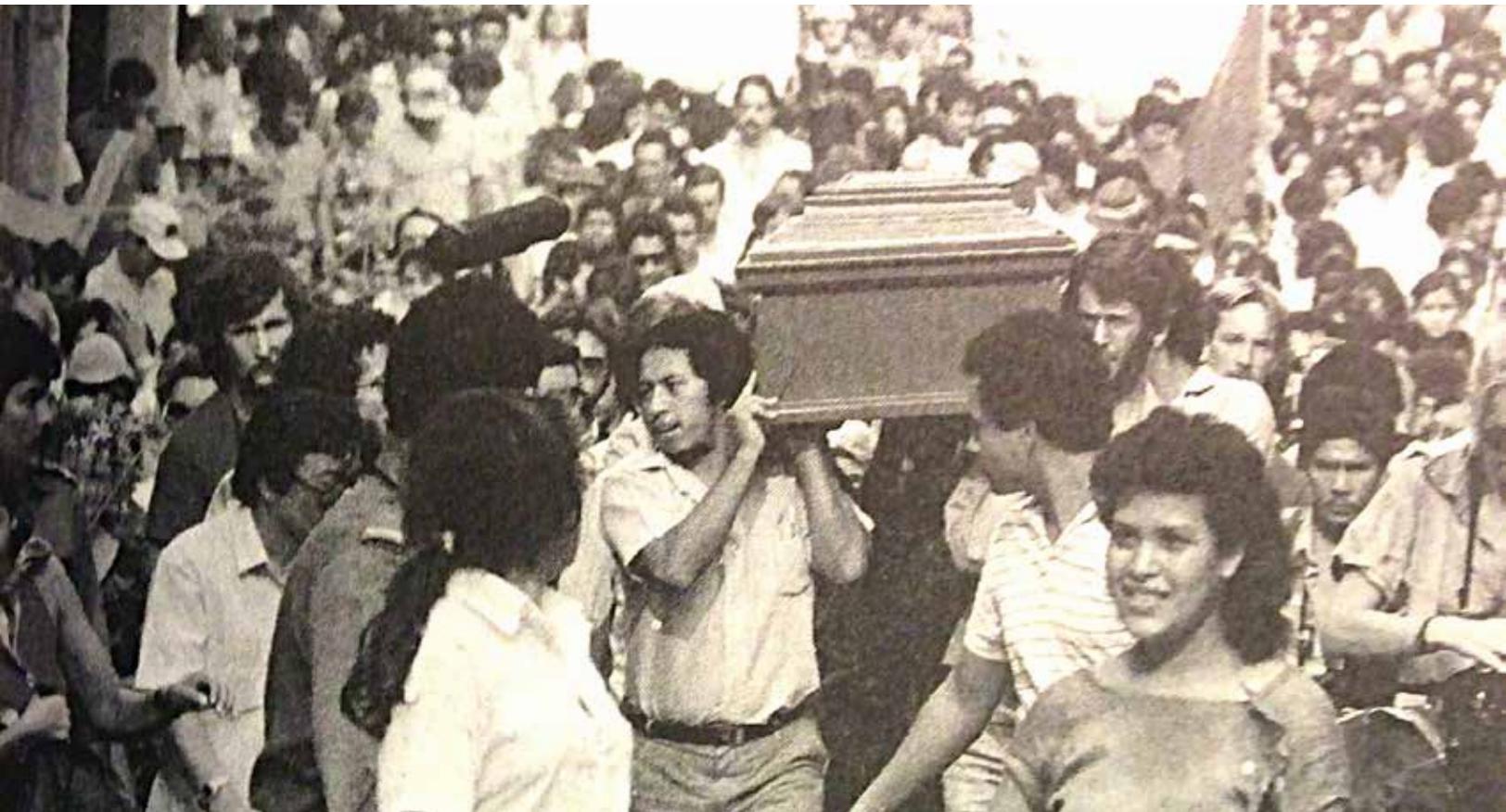
#### Parts of the hydroelectric plant

- 1. The turbine:** It spins when the water rushes through.
- 2. The generator:** The turbine drives the generator with belts and when it spins it generates electricity.
- 3. The regulator:** Opens and closes the turbine water valve and maintains a constant spinning speed.

paid a small fee for their electricity, making the hydroplant a self-sustaining project that also had enough revenue to pay its employees. The project model was truly a sustainable project, one that, after completion, did not fully depend on foreign assistance. It was run by and for the people of El Cuá. The work continued and Ben started coming up with ideas to get a second power plant in the neighboring small town of San José de Bocay. Contras attacked the project in El Cuá, leaving bullet holes in the walls of Gilda and Oscar's house. On April 28, 1987, Ben and two Nicaraguans were killed in a Contra ambush while they were scoping out new possible hydro projects in San José de Bocay. They joined the list of hundreds of valuable lives taken away by this war. Even after their deaths, the work continued.

Their team of skilled workers and volunteers became a Nicaraguan NGO called the Association of Rural Development Workers -Benjamin Linder (ATDER-BL). For over 30 years, they have built drinking water systems, small-scale hydroelectric plants, and transmissions lines for rural electrification. Their goal has been to build small local economies and to strengthen community projects by building capacity and skills. The association has trained Nicaraguans while they work for the NGO, and many of them later moved on to work for other organizations or for themselves. The list of trained individuals includes electricians, lines workers, surveyors, engineers, accountants, administrators, masons, pipe layers, plant operators, municipal advisors, environmentalists, welders, and machinists. The organization has championed over 30 projects in rural communities in northern Nicaragua, and their work continues today.

Ben Linder's funeral procession in Matagalpa. Among the pallbearers is Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega.



# Timeline

**1838**

Nicaragua becomes an independent republic.

**1856**

With American military trade support American mercenary William Walker assumes Nicaraguan presidency by fraud, and reinstates slavery.

**1860**

British government surrenders control of Nicaraguan coast on the Caribbean to Nicaragua.

**1893**

General Zelaya, a liberal progressive, assumes control of the Nicaraguan government by military force, planning to enact education reform, equal constitutional rights, and representation of minorities in political life.

**1909**

U.S. funds and supports Zelaya's opponents during a rebellion. General Zelaya is deposed and U.S. military bases are set up in Nicaraguan territory.

**1912-1930s**

U.S. maintains a military occupation in Nicaragua.

**1927-1933**

Augusto Cesar Sandino leads guerrilla fighters against U.S. occupation. General Anastasio "Tacho" Somoza García, commander of the National Guard, orders his assassination.

**1936:**

Anastasio Somoza García is installed as dictator, his family would rule over Nicaragua for the next 44 years.

**July 7, 1959:**

Ben Linder is born in San Francisco, California.

**1961**

Somoza opponents form the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN).

**1977**

Ben Linder graduates from Adams High School, in Portland, OR.

**1979**

The Sandinista revolution brings the Somoza dynasty to an end.

**1980**

Sandinista revolutionaries organize a massive literacy campaign to prepare Nicaragua for democratic elections.

**January 20, 1981**

Ronald Reagan assumes U.S. presidency.

**1982**

United States government begins supporting and financially sponsoring Contra terrorist groups in Central America, especially Nicaragua.

**June 11, 1983**

Ben Linder graduates from University of Washington in Seattle. Soon afterwards, Ben leaves the U.S. to take a job in Nicaragua.

**1984**

Popular elections are held, the first to occur since the overthrow of the Somoza dynasty. The FSLN conquers two-thirds of the popular vote.

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