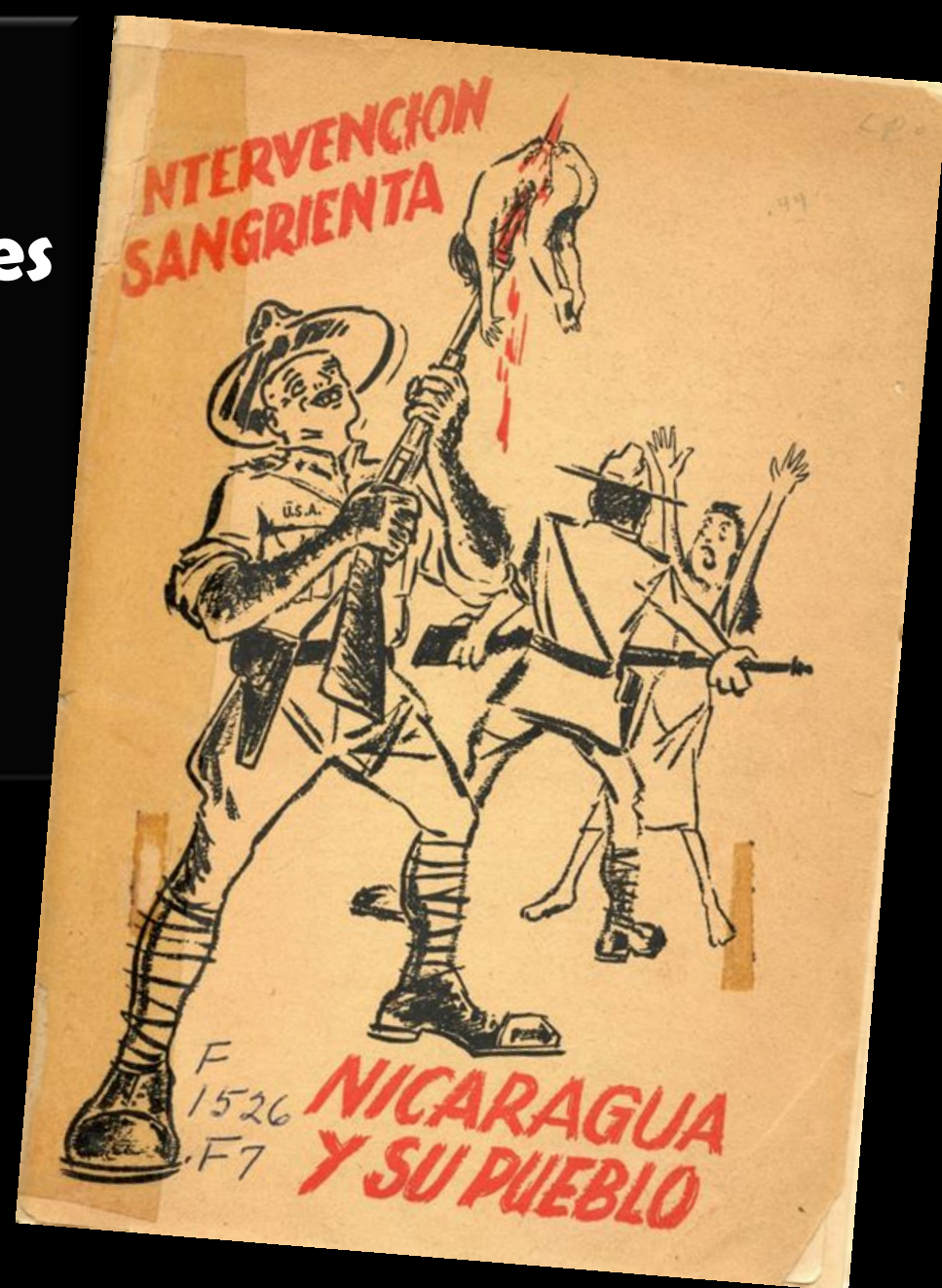


# The Black Legend of Marine Corps Atrocities in Nicaragua in the Love Letters of Emil Thomas of Cleveland, Ohio, 1925-1929

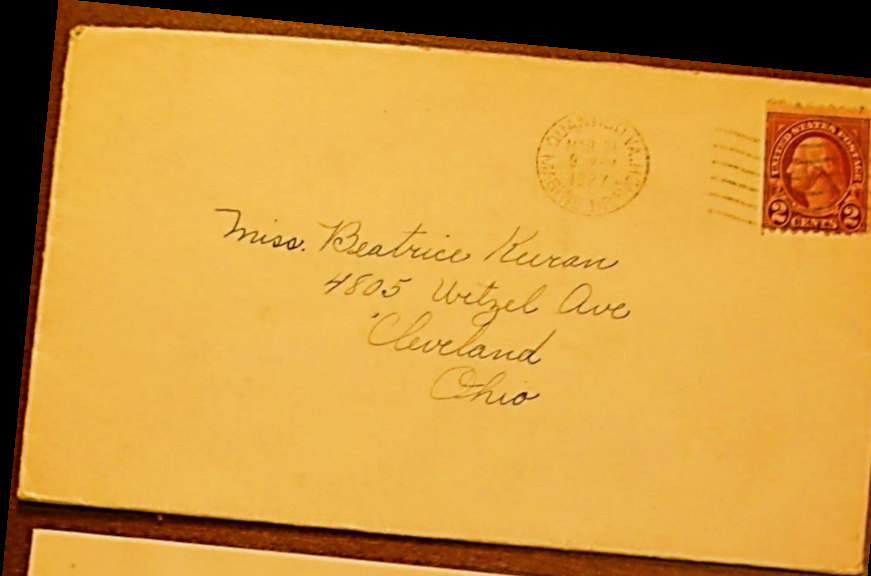
Michael J. Schroeder  
Associate Professor of History  
Lebanon Valley College  
MACLAS 2015



Portada del folleto, *Intervención sangrienta, Nicaragua y su pueblo* (Caracas, Venezuela, 1961).

## Roadmap:

1. Intro & Contexts:  
What Black Legend?  
Who's Emil Thomas?  
What love letters?
2. Before Nicaragua
3. In Nicaragua
4. After Nicaragua
5. Conclusion



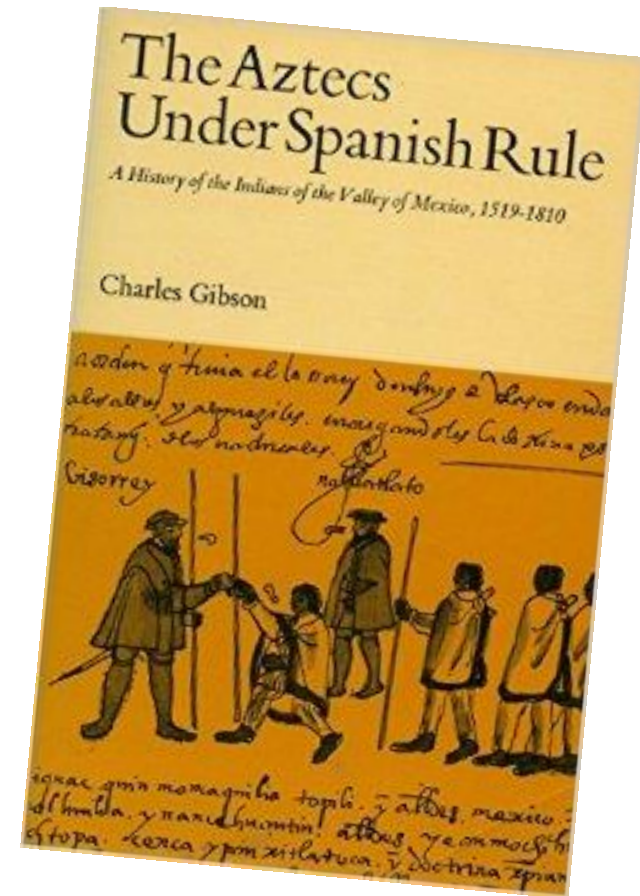
March 29, 1927  
Quantico Va.

Dearest Beatrice:

Your little book just arrived and I'm still wondering how you did it, eight pages sure is a lot for you to write all at one time. I'm not sure now just how many baseball games I will get to this year and right now I'm not at all so sure if I will be up on furlough when I said I would in fact I may go to China next month or maybe sooner. They just reorganized the old 6<sup>th</sup> Regt. and started sending them away now the first detail left about an hour ago the rest follow tonight they go by rail to the west coast and to China on board the U. S. S. Henderson. I wasn't lucky enough to get in to see him.

## Charles Gibson, *Aztecs Under Spanish Rule* (1964)

“The Black Legend provides a **gross but essentially accurate** interpretation of relations between Spaniards and Indians. The Legend builds upon the record of deliberate sadism. It flourishes in an atmosphere of indignation, which removes the issue from the category of objective understanding. It is insufficient in its awareness of the institutions of colonial history. **But the substantive content of the Black Legend asserts that Indians were exploited by Spaniards, and in empirical fact they were.**”



## The “second” US intervention in Nicaragua, 1927-1934

- Cornerstone of the Sandinista narrative: the “Black Legend” of Marine Corps atrocities
- Abundant empirical evidence
  - Sandino’s writings
  - Period press & propaganda
  - **IES oral testimonies (1980s)**
  - **Original Marine Corps & Guardia Nacional reports**

[www.SandinistaRebellion.com](http://www.SandinistaRebellion.com)



1. Contexts

2. Before

3. During

4. After

5. Conclusion

## **Question:**

**To what extent is the Sandinista Black Legend “true”?**

## **Thesis:**

**Essentially accurate: Marine Corps violence was the engine of revolution in Las Segovias**

## **Evidence:**

**Abundant, but with gaps**



## We know a lot about:

- **Context of the 1920s**
  - **Anti-black racism, Jim Crow, nativism, anti-immigrant sentiment, xenophobia, KKK's "100% Americanism"**
- **USMC official history**
- **Marine Corps actions in the field (PC-Docs esp.)**

## We don't know much about:

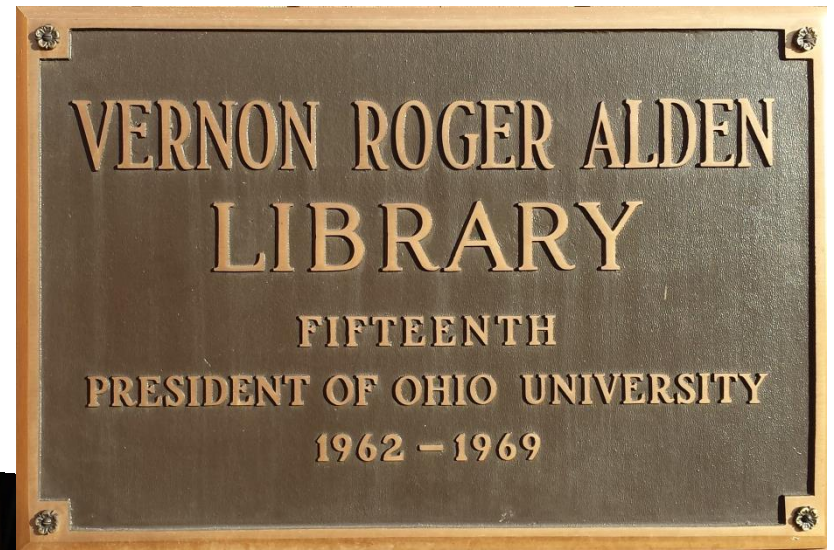
- **Interior mental & moral landscape of US Marines**
- **Moral legitimacy of violence against racialized Others in wartime – conceptions, understandings, boundaries**



US Marines fresh off the *USS Mississippi* marching north from León to supervise the Nov. 1928 elections

## **USMC P.F.C. Emil Thomas letters, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio**

- **Gracias Tom Walker!**
- **331 letters in 47 months:  
Sept 1925—July 1929**
- **186,000 words**
- **Love letters – for  
Beatrice's eyes only**
- **Raw, unfiltered,  
authentic**
- **Amazing window**
- **[4 Web Pages](#)**



# Who was Emil Thomas?

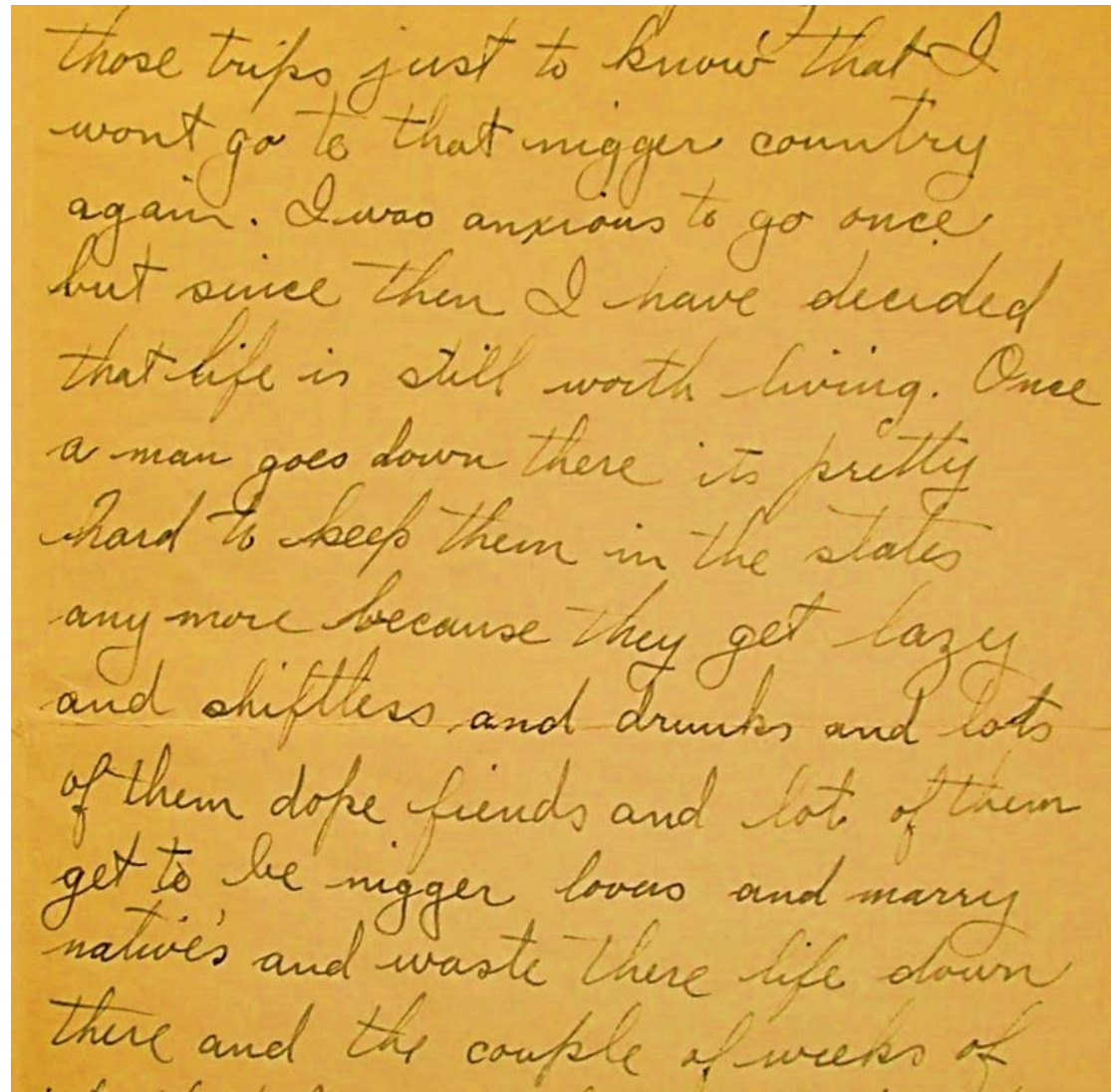
- **Son of Hungarian immigrants**
- **Boyhood in Cleveland**
- **Musician, mechanic, self-improver**
- **Met Beatrice @ West Tech High School**
- **USMC age 19 - July 1925**
- **Played clarinet in USMC band at Quantico (to March 1928)**
- **In Nicaragua 11 months: April 1928—March 1929**
- **Supervise Nov 1928 elections**
- **Letters chronicle a psychological journey: from generic racism → anger & rage → trauma & regret**
- **For historians: representations of the “tropics,” race, nation, empire, & the moral legitimacy of violence against racialized Others**



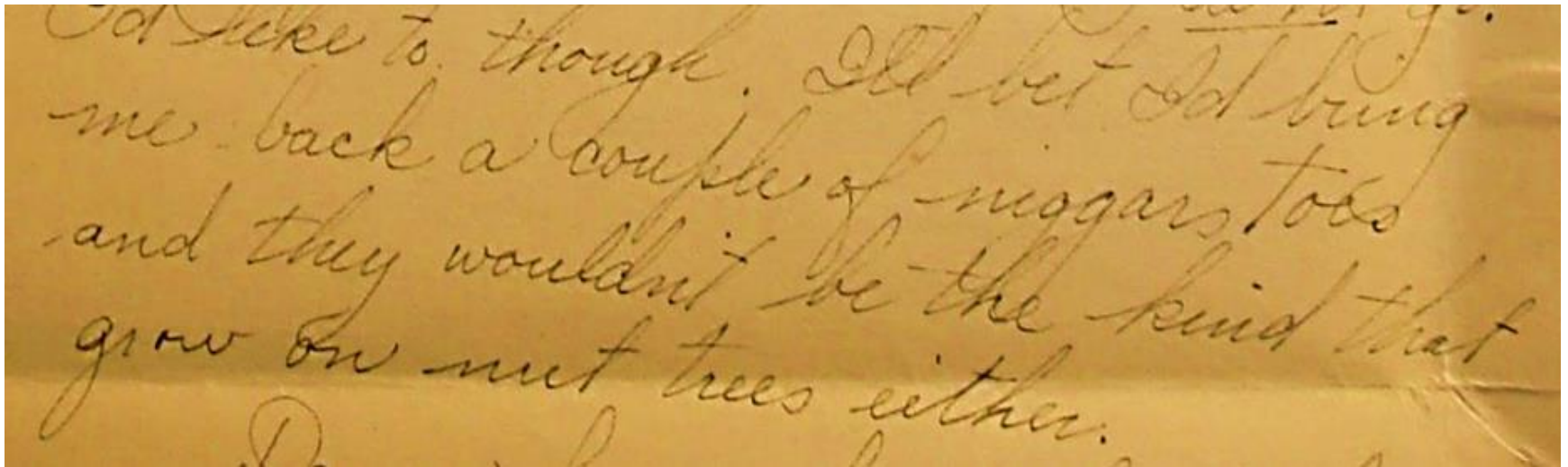


## Before Nicaragua

- **202 letters, 31 months (Oct 1925—March 1928)**
- **Purpose: marry Beatrice!**
- **Race & racism: integral to worldview**
- **Racist epithets: “niggers, spicks, chinks, gooks”**

A photograph of a handwritten letter on aged, yellowed paper. The text is written in a cursive script and discusses the author's decision not to return to a country referred to as 'nigger country'. The author expresses anxiety about going but has decided that life is still worth living. They describe the difficulty of keeping people in the states, noting they become lazy, shiftless, and drunk, and mentions 'dope fiends' and people who marry native women and waste their lives there. The snippet ends with 'there and the couple of weeks of'.

*Detail of letter of 25 October 1926*

**1. Contexts****2. Before****3. During****4. After****5. Conclusion**

I'd like to, though. I'll bet I'd bring  
me back a couple of niggers toes  
and they wouldn't be the kind that  
grow on nut trees either.

**“... I suppose you have been reading about the Nicaraguan noise for the last couple of days. Haven't you? Well there is a Battalion of men going on Friday and they take a twenty piece band along. I don't go. I'd like to though. I'll bet I'd bring me back a couple of niggers toes and they wouldn't be the kind that grow on nut trees either.” (4 January 1928)**

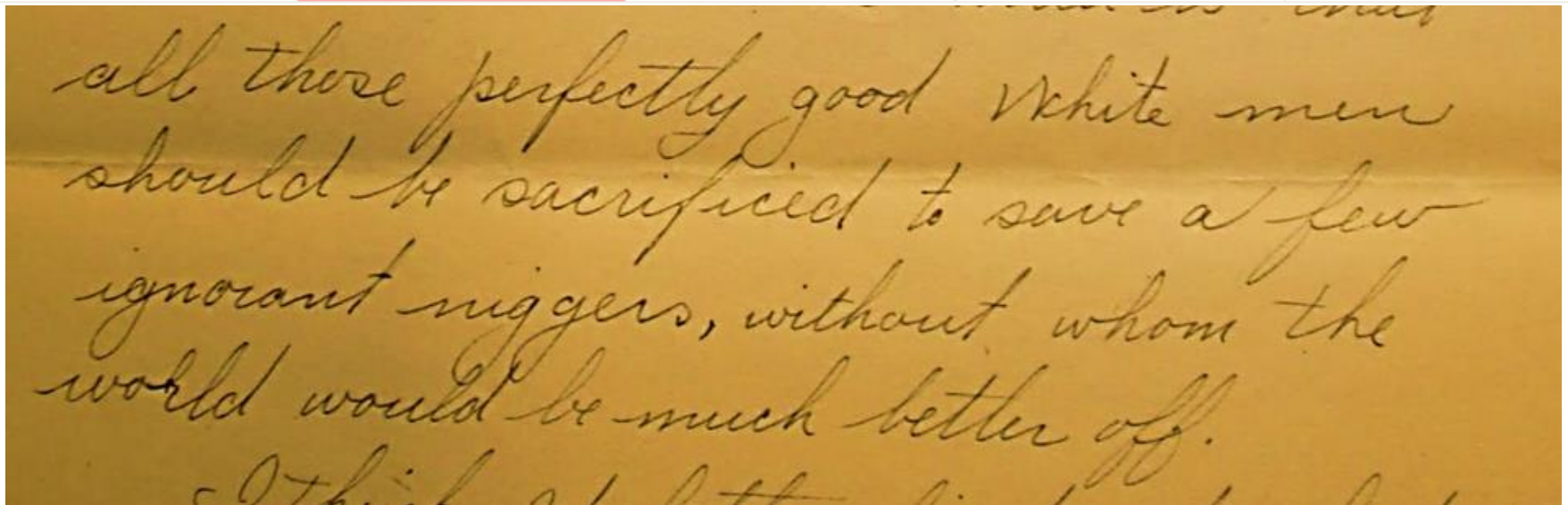
## 1. Contexts

## 2. Before

## 3. During

## 4. After

## 5. Conclusion



all those perfectly good white men  
should be sacrificed to save a few  
ignorant niggers, without whom the  
world would be much better off.

“... There was a detail of men sent back from Nicaragua last night . . . These men tell some awful tales of bad food no place to sleep living in mud up to the waist drunkenness, sickness, filth and also blood thirstiness. One of them shows us a shirt taken from a gook. This fellow had put a whole clip through the gook into a space almost as small as a silver dollar. Then he took the shirt for a souvenir. . . . They could put a shot over the Island from any one of their, “Men O War,” and blow the place completely off the map without losing a single Marine. All those fine white American boys being killed just so a few less niggers will be killed. This may all sound kind of radical to you honey but it isn’t. . . . what makes me mad is that all those perfectly good White men should be sacrificed to save a few ignorant niggers, without whom the world would be much better off.” (11 March 1928)

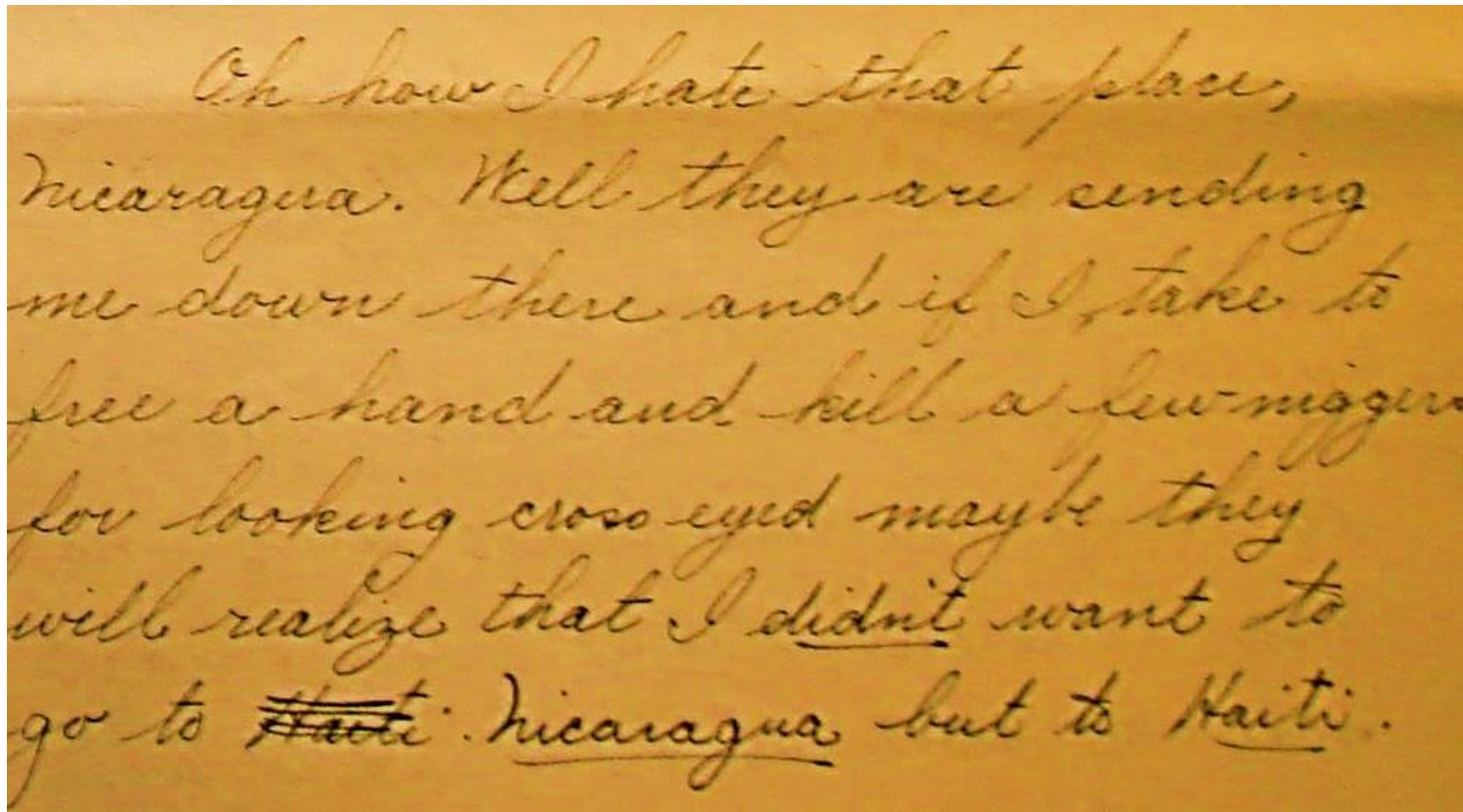
1. Contexts

2. Before

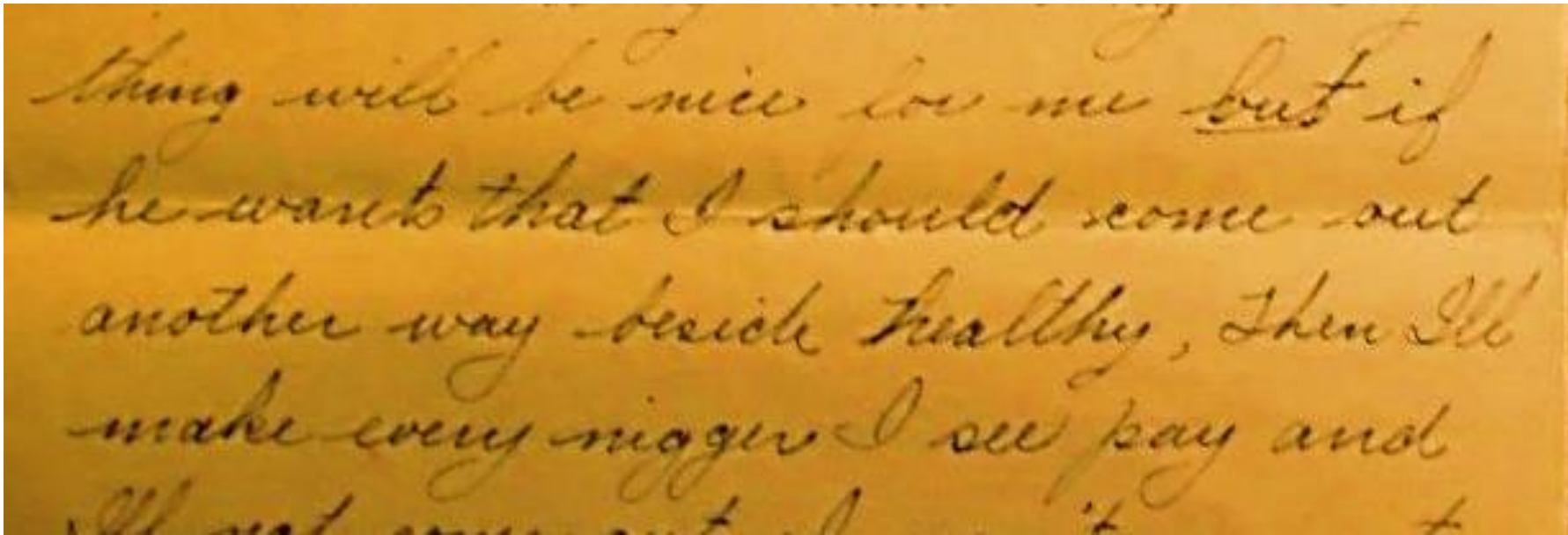
3. During

4. After

5. Conclusion

A photograph of a handwritten manuscript on aged, yellowish paper. The text is written in a cursive script and reads: "Oh how I hate that place, Nicaragua. Well they are sending me down there and if I take to free a hand and kill a few niggers for looking cross eyed maybe they will realize that I didn't want to go to ~~Haiti~~ Nicaragua but to Haiti."

**“Oh how I hate that place, Nicaragua. Well they are sending me down there and if I take to free a hand and kill a few niggers for looking cross eyed maybe they will realize that I didn't want to go to ~~Haiti~~ Nicaragua but to Haiti.” (March 17, 1928)**

**1. Contexts****2. Before****3. During****4. After****5. Conclusion**A photograph of a handwritten note on aged, yellowish paper. The text is written in a cursive script and is partially obscured by a yellow box at the bottom. The visible text reads: "thing will be nice for me but if he wants that I should come out another way beside healthy, Then I'll make every nigger I see pay and I'll not come out..."

**“... If God Almighty,” wants me to come out of it all a sound and healthy man why everything will be nice for me but if he wants that I should come out another way beside healthy, Then I’ll make every nigger I see pay and I’ll not come out. . . .” (March 17, 1928)**

1. Contexts

2. Before

3. During

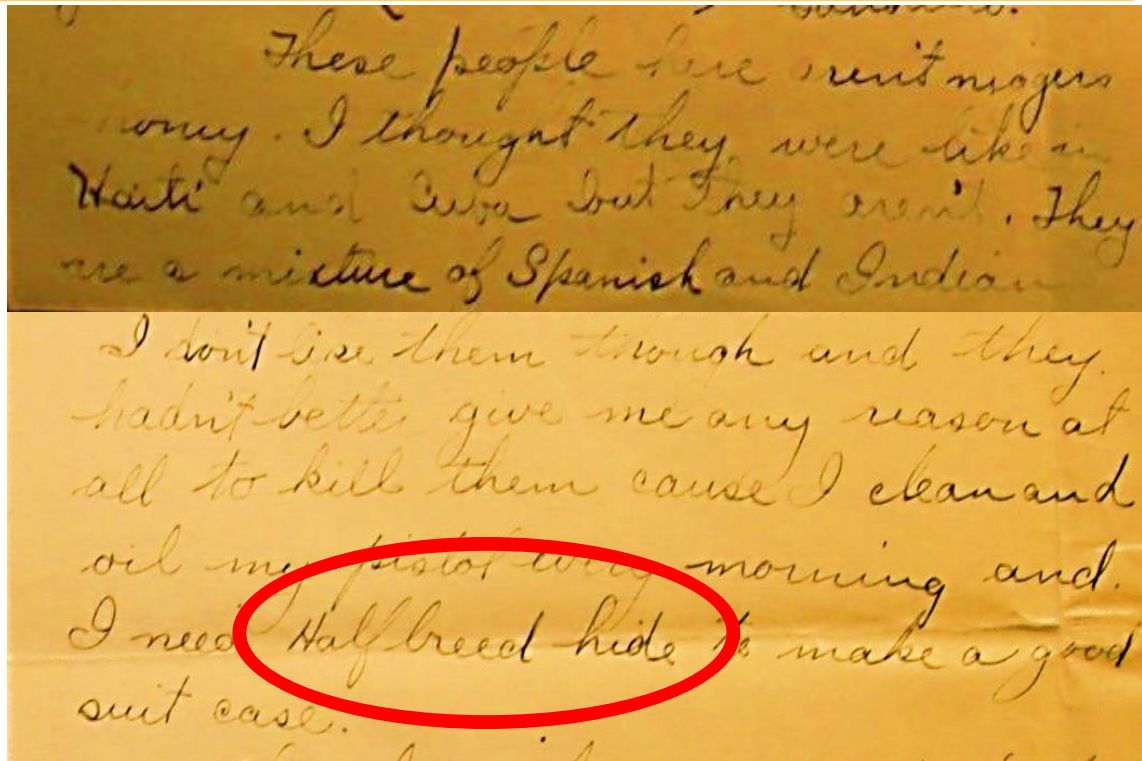
4. After

5. Conclusion

## First day in Nicaragua (1 April 1928)

“ . . . These people here aren't niggers honey. I thought they were like in Haiti and Cuba but they aren't. They are a mixture of Spanish and Indian. I don't like them though and they hadn't better give me any reason at all to kill them cause I clean and oil my pistol every morning and I need Halfbreed hide to make a good suit case. . . . This is all Sandino's fault so he better not let me see him cause I'll put so much lead into his hide they will need a derrick to move his body. . . .

There is nothing in this country that I want except Sandino's scalp . . . . We got instructions about Sandino yesterday. They told us to bring him in but not as a prisoner.”

A photograph of a handwritten manuscript on aged, yellowed paper. The text is written in cursive and matches the typed text in the image above. A red circle is drawn around the phrase "Halfbreed hide" in the second paragraph of the handwritten text.

These people here aren't niggers honey. I thought they were like in Haiti and Cuba but they aren't. They are a mixture of Spanish and Indian. I don't like them though and they hadn't better give me any reason at all to kill them cause I clean and oil my pistol every morning and I need Halfbreed hide to make a good suit case.

1. Contexts

2. Before

3. During

4. After

5. Conclusion

- **Key psychological dynamic: roiling anger at the “gooks” for forcing him to leave the USA (& Beatrice) and suffer in Nicaragua**



“Don’t worry honey girl. I’m used to all this excitement alright and like it but I only like it because it gives me a chance to work out my grudge against these Gooks” (25 May 1928)

Don't worry honey girl. I'm used to all this excitement alright and like it but I only like it because it gives me a chance to work out my grudge against these Gooks

1. Contexts

2. Before

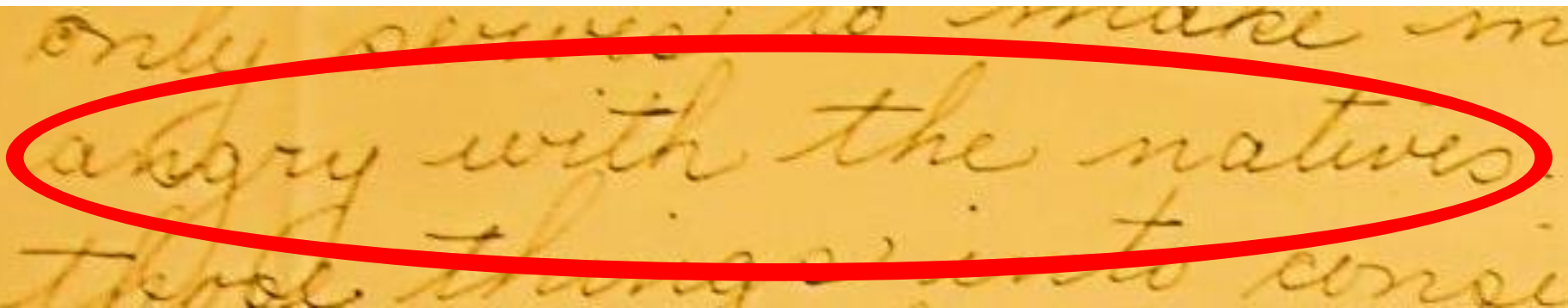
3. During

4. After

5. Conclusion

## A handful of examples:

**“I may only be mad enough to fight anyone who lives in this darn country, cause its partly on their account that we were brought down here. I’d sure like to find the man who is the reason for it all. I’m so darn lonesome since I last saw you that I just don’t know what to do with myself and believe me honey, I’ve tried everything. I just love you so much that all this only serves to make me even more angry with the natives.” (27 May 1928)**



only serves to make me  
angry with the natives  
these things are to consi



## 1. Contexts

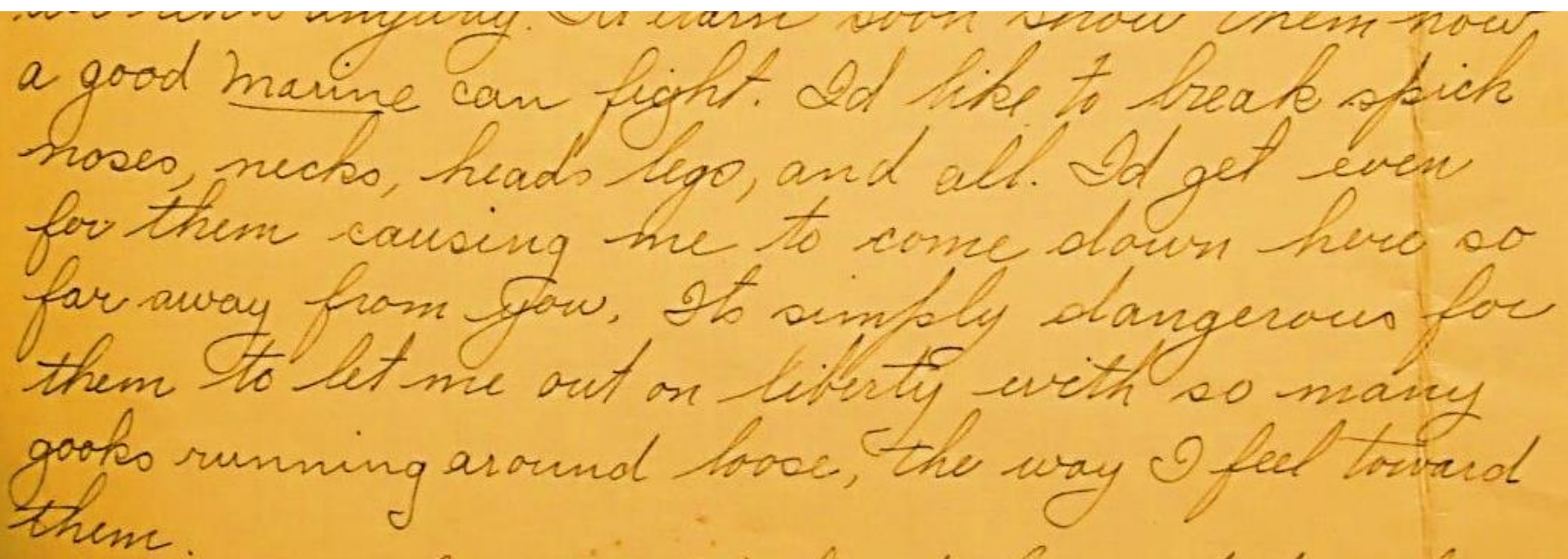
## 2. Before

## 3. During

## 4. After

## 5. Conclusion

**“I just wish they would turn us loose on some of these darn spicks, they’re all rebels anyway. I’d darn soon show them how a good Marine can fight. I’d like to break spick noses, necks, heads, legs, and all. I’d get even for them causing me to come down here so far away from you. It’s simply dangerous for them to let me out on liberty with so many gooks running around loose, the way I feel toward them.” (4 June 1928)**



*I just wish they would turn us loose on some of these darn spicks, they're all rebels anyway. I'd darn soon show them how a good marine can fight. I'd like to break spick noses, necks, heads, legs, and all. I'd get even for them causing me to come down here so far away from you. It's simply dangerous for them to let me out on liberty with so many gooks running around loose, the way I feel toward them.*

1. Contexts

2. Before

3. During

4. After

5. Conclusion

## One more example:

**“When the news of the bandit got out we had lots of fun watching the gooks clear the streets. They know better than to stay out cause in a time like that we don’t stop at anything and most of us are only to glad to have an excuse to bump off a few gooks.” (Telpaneca, 3 Sept. 1928)**

thing like that? When the news of the bandit  
got out we had lots of fun watching the gooks  
clear the streets, They know better than to stay  
out cause in a time like that we don't stop at  
anything and most of us are only to glad to  
have an excuse to bump off a few gooks.  
write

# Jan. 1929: Emil Thomas joins *Voluntario* forces to “exterminate banditry”

(subject of last year’s **MACLAS** paper – now a book project)

THE SANDINO REBELLION NICARAGUA 1927-1934

## LOS VOLUNTARIOS • 1929 • PG 1

A FAILED COUNTERINSURGENCY EXPERIMENT OF THE US MARINES & LA GUARDIA NACIONAL

a documentary history

Michael J. Schroeder, Ph.D.

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TOP 100	USMC-DOCS

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> 31 MARCH 1929



1-24 APRIL 1929



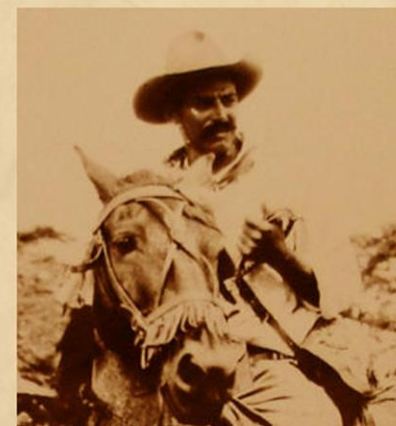
25 APR-JULY 1929



PHOTOS

**THIS IS THE FIRST OF FOUR MAIN PAGES** housing materials relating to the fascinating case of the *Voluntarios*, a counterinsurgency experiment that the US Marines undertook from January to June 1929 to augment the native Guardia's limited military capabilities in the fight against Sandino & the EDSN. (Photo: Liberal & Voluntario General Juan Escamilla in Jinotega, 1929)

The *Voluntarios* experiment failed utterly. How do we interpret that failure? The documents presented in these pages suggest a number of broader questions, themes, and conclusions. By my reading, the scheme not only failed but backfired, in multiple ways. Senior US military leaders (Gen. Feland, Col. Dunlap) created the *Voluntarios* at a particular moment (early 1929), mainly for political reasons. The goal was to put Nicaraguans "in the field"



## 1. Contexts

## 2. Before

## 3. During

## 4. After

## 5. Conclusion

took a bunch of prisoners. We caught one spy, He died a soldiers death, before a firing squad. I don't know just how many days we were gone but they were enough to drive a man crazy, after a contact a man has to get drunk or he's bound

to lose his good sense by thinking of it, cause you see some awfull sights during that kind of action. I'm glad its over for me. The details of the patrol can wait till I get home cause they are better when not written on paper. I also violated an international law. while we were camped on the Honduras border. Armed forces

### **ONE MORE example: Feb. 13, 1929:**

“The gook patrol was a big success . . . Had one contact with “Salgado” and took a bunch of prisoners. We caught one spy, He died a soldiers death, before a firing squad. I don't know just how many days we were gone but they were enough to drive a man crazy. After a contact a man has to get drunk or he's bound to lose his good sense by thinking of it, cause you see some awful sights during that kind of action. I'm glad its over for me. The details of the patrol can wait till I get home cause they are better when not written on paper. I also violated an international law while we were camped on the Honduras border. . . .”

1. Contexts

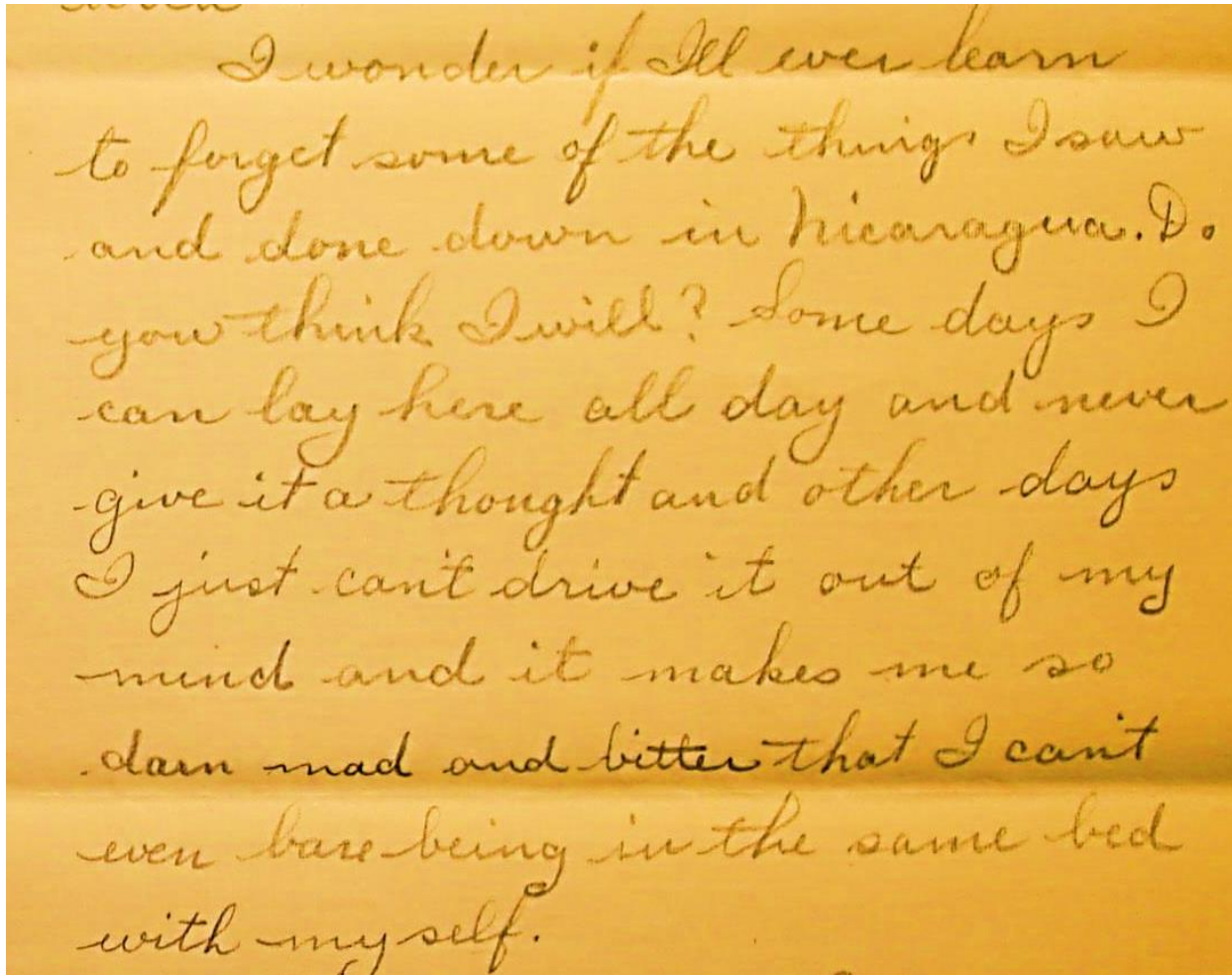
2. Before

3. During

4. After

5. Conclusion

## Soon after return to USA: Haunting memories, remorse, regret, bitterness

A photograph of a handwritten letter on aged, yellowed paper. The handwriting is in cursive and appears to be from the early 20th century. The text is a personal reflection on the author's experiences in Nicaragua, expressing a sense of haunting memories and emotional distress upon returning to the United States.

I wonder if I'll ever learn to forget some of the things I saw and done down in Nicaragua. Do you think I will? Some days I can lay here all day and never give it a thought and other days I just can't drive it out of my mind and it makes me so darn mad and bitter that I can't even bare being in the same bed with myself.

“April 12, 1929. . . . I wonder if I'll ever learn to forget some of the things I saw and done down in Nicaragua. Do you think I will? Some days I can lay here all day and never give it a thought and other days I just can't drive it out of my mind and it makes me so darn mad and bitter that I can't even bare being in the same bed with myself.”

## Blame shifts from the “gooks” to himself – yet the racist language remains

April 12, 1929: “. . . just last night a couple of other Marines that came up from Nicaragua with me, came over to my bunk and we compared notes. There was one man down there 3 days less than two years and I was in two more contacts than he was and in all he’s only got 3 notches in his rifle stock so you see 9 contacts and **over a dozen gooks in less than a year is quite a lot for my part it’s entirely too much and I’m willing to call it quits.**”

April 20, 1929: “. . . I guess you are right at that honey, when you say that I’ll never forget some of the things that have happened in the past, but when I get home and get settled down they might become a very dim memory. **Some things that have happened down there that I saw and done I’m sorry for but just the same there is the memory of them. There are some things that I’ll never speak about and the rest I’m going to try to speak about as little as possible . . .**”

## **Main Postwar Themes re Nicaragua:**

- **Haunting memories**
- **Accepting some responsibility**
- **Expressions of regret & remorse**
- **Hoping to forget – that memories will fade**
- **Creating spaces of silence – of the unspoken**

**June 11, 1929: “ . . . I just wonder if I’d ever be able to bring myself to tell any child of mine about those experiences. The thought of them doesn’t bother me as much as it used to though.”**

1. Contexts

2. Before

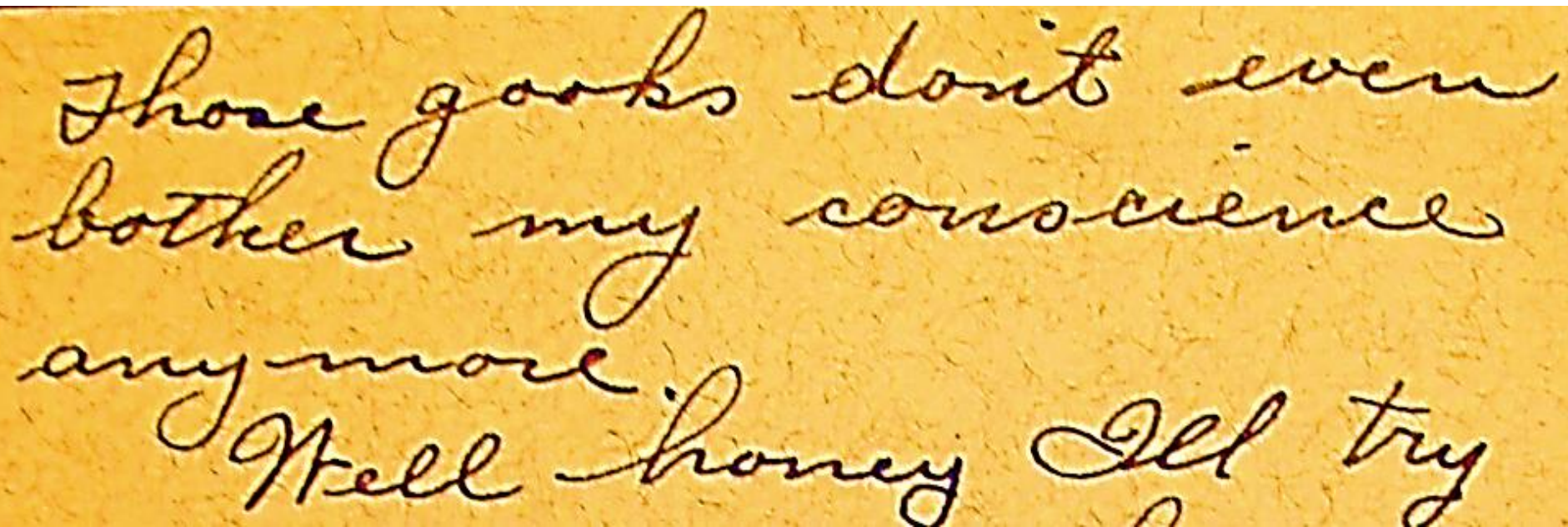
3. During

4. After

5. Conclusion

## Penultimate letter to Beatrice (26 July 1929)

“I find it’s much easier to talk about it now that there is no chance of going back there. Those gooks don’t even bother my conscience any more.”



Those gooks don't even  
bother my conscience  
any more.  
Well honey I'll try



- **IN SUM: Emil Thomas letters in full accord with the great bulk of evidence on USMC violence against civilians in Las Segovias**
- **Extraordinary window on the mental landscape of one US Marine Corps private**
- **Permits us to drill down below “official” USMC discourse**
- **Moral legitimacy of violence against racialized, inferior, “tropical” “Other”**



## 1. Contexts

## 2. Before

## 3. During

## 4. After

## 5. Conclusion

- **Anger & rage targeted at Nicaraguans in general**
- **“Gooks” got what they deserved**
- **Postwar remorse**
- **Frederick Douglass, Frantz Fanon: Slavery dehumanizes the master as much as the slave – torture also tortures the torturer**
- **Emil Thomas: a “typical” US Marine?**
- **Evidence: basically, Yes.**



## Conclusion

**Q: To what extent is the Sandinista Black Legend “true”?**

**A: (from the paper):** To borrow from Gibson, extant evidence clearly shows that this Black Legend provides a **overly simplistic but essentially accurate portrayal** of the relations between the US Marines and Segoviano civilians. It elides many instances of mutual collaboration and peaceful relations. It effaces differences between towns and rural areas, between wealthy and poor Segovianos, between zones of high and low rebel activity. It is insufficient in its awareness of the larger field of violence-making in Las Segovias and Nicaragua during these years. **But the substantive content of the Sandinista Black Legend asserts that the US Marines committed many horrific atrocities against the civilian population of Las Segovias, and in empirical fact they did.**

- **Letters suggest limitations & silences in the “official” documentary record:**
  - **Unauthorized patrols**
  - **Unreported violent encounters**
  - **Prisoners tortured & executed**
  - **Violations of international law**
  - **Military discipline broken down & regulations ignored**
  - **A “Jesse James,” “wild West,” anything-goes mentality**



1. Contexts

2. Before

3. During

4. After

5. Conclusion

## A Final Irony – or Cluster of Ironies:

Two – actually three – Black Legends (master narratives) in Nicaragua:

1. **Black Legend of US Marine Atrocities**
2. **Black Legend of Sandinista atrocities against Nicaraguans (e.g. Pedrón)**
3. **Black Legend of Guardia Nacional Impunity – (*Somocismo*)**



*EDSN Gen.  
Pedrón*

*Somoza's  
Guardia  
Nacional*



## 1. Contexts

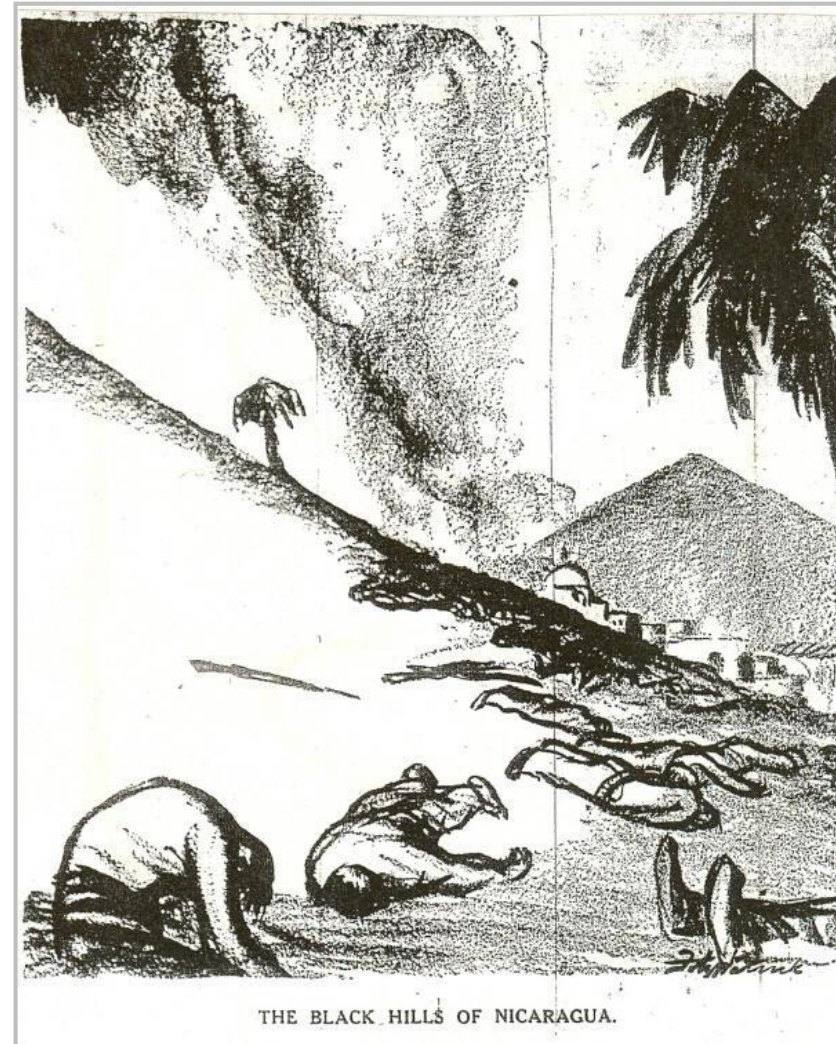
## 2. Before

## 3. During

## 4. After

## 5. Conclusion

- **Bigger Irony: Marine Corps violence was the engine of revolution & made the Sandino rebellion possible**
- **The “glue” holding the EDSN together – hated Yankee invaders**
- **Remains a pillar of the Sandinista Narrative today: Victimization of Nicaragua by US imperialism**
- **Comparative implications for Insurgencies & Counterinsurgencies today? Absolutely.**



*St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 24 July 1927,  
on the USMC bombing of Ocotal.*