

Labor history catches future leader's eye

Note: This is the third of a five-part series on Cesar Chavez and the National Farm Workers Union.

During 1950, while working in the apricot and prune orchards around San Jose, Chavez had a fateful meeting with Father Donald McDonnell of the nearby mission church. When Father McDonnell knocked on the Chavez door that day, he was making a routine visit to poor people living in his neighborhood, but Chavez recalls that the priest "sat with me past midnight telling me about social justice and the church's stand on farm labor and reading from the encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII in which he upheld labor unions."

"I would do anything to get the Father to tell me more about labor history," Chavez said in a 1965 interview for the Farm Workers Press. "I began going to the bracero camps with him to help with mass, to the city jail with him to talk to prisoners, anything to be with him so that he could tell me more about the farm labor movement."

One night in 1952 Father McDonnell introduced Chavez to Fred Ross of the Community Service Organization, a new social service group of predominantly Spanish-speaking people which was trying to educate the needy to help

Within four years, however, Chavez decided to devote his full-time concern to the cause of farmworkers. He quit his directorship and returned to Delano with \$1,200 in savings to start the National Farm Workers Association.

Chavez in 1967 told writer John Dunne what he faced in those early days of organizing:

"By hand, I drew a map of all the towns between Arvin and Stockton — eighty-six of them, including farming camps — and decided to hit them all. For six months, I traveled around, planting an idea. We had a simple questionnaire, a little card with space for name, address, and how much the worker thought he ought to be paid. My wife mimeographed them and we took our kids for two or three day jaunts to these towns, distributing the cards door-to-door and to camps and groceries."

Interest blooms

"Some 80,000 cards were sent back from eight Valley counties. I got a lot of contacts that way, but I was shocked at the wages the people were asking. The growers were paying a dollar and \$1.15, and maybe ninety-five percent of the people thought

Helen said to me: 'Do you put all this in a bag, or just the cotton?' I thought she was kidding and told her to throw the whole boll in so that she had nothing but a sack of bolls at the weighing. The man said, 'Whose sack is this?' I said, 'Well, my wife's,' and he told us we were fired. 'Look at all that crap you brought in,' he said. Helen and I started laughing. We were going anyway. We took the four dollars we had earned and spent it at a grocery store where they were giving away a \$100 prize. Each time you shopped, they'd give you one of the letters of M-O-N-E-Y or a flag. You had to have M-O-N-E-Y plus the flag to win. Helen had already collected the letters and just needed the flag. Anyway, they gave her the ticket. She screamed, 'A flag? I don't believe it,' ran in and got the \$100. She said, 'Now we're going to eat steak.' But I said no, we're going to have to pay the gas bill. I don't know if she cried, but I think she did."

For three years, Chavez built his union by concentrating on solving the grievances of workers. "If I thought someone had been cheated, I'd raise hell," Chavez says. "You always knew a friendly priest who would pay a call, a friendly lawyer who would write a letter threatening suit."

By 1965, the NFWA had enrolled 1,700 families and

on their honor not to break the strike.

"Early on the first morning of the strike, we sent out ten cars to check the people's homes. We found lights in five or six homes and knocked on the doors. The men were getting up and we'd say, 'Where are you going?' They would dodge, 'OHH, UH... I was just getting up, you know.' We'd say, 'Well, you're not going to work, are you?' And they'd say no."

Strike successful

"That morning the company foreman was madder than hell and refused to talk to us. None of the grafters had shown up for work. At 10:30 we started to go to the company office, but it occurred to us that maybe a woman would have a better chance. So Delores Huerta (a NFWA vice-president) knocked on the office door, saying 'I'm Delores Huerta from the National Farm Workers Association.' 'Get out, you communist,' the man said. 'Get out.' I guess they were expecting us, because as Delores stood arguing with him, the cops came and told her to leave. She left."

Four days later the company agreed to a wage increase and the workers went back on the job. Later that year, the NFWA successfully negotiated another wage increase at a ranch outside Delano.

In the coming months of 1965, pressure was to build on Chavez and the NFWA to call the big strike — one that would pit the strength of the growers and California farm lobby against the pitiful thousands of farmworkers who had nothing to sustain them other than the faith of hope.

TOMORROW: The history of California farm labor leading up to the 1965 strike.

By **GEORGE BUDDY**
Of the Emerald

themselves. The founder of CSO was the late Saul Alinsky, a radical organizer.

Ross was impressed by Chavez and hired him at a salary of \$35 a week to help organize CSO chapters throughout the state.

Organizing begins

Chavez traveled the 500 mile length of California's central valley, setting up new chapters. "That was during the McCarthy era," Fred Ross remembers, "and there was a great deal of opposition. In every town, people were calling us Reds and pointing the finger at Alinsky, who they were convinced was a communist."

For six years, Chavez worked to set up a service program to deal with basic problems confronting Mexican-Americans. He got Mexicans out of jail, settled their immigration status, inquired about their welfare payments, and even helped them get driver's licenses.

In 1958, Chavez became general director of the entire national organization of CSO.

they should be getting only \$1.25 an hour. Some people scribbled messages on the cards: 'I hope to God we win,' or 'Do you think we can win?' or 'I'd like to know more.' So I separated the cards with penciled notes, got in my car, and went to those people. We didn't have any money for gas and hardly any for food. So I started asking for food. It turned out to be about the best thing I could have done, although at first it's hard on your pride. Some of our best members came in that way. If people give you their food, they'll give you their hearts."

Because of their shortage of money, Helen Chavez often worked in the fields, and Cesar dug ditches on Sundays in time of great financial problems.

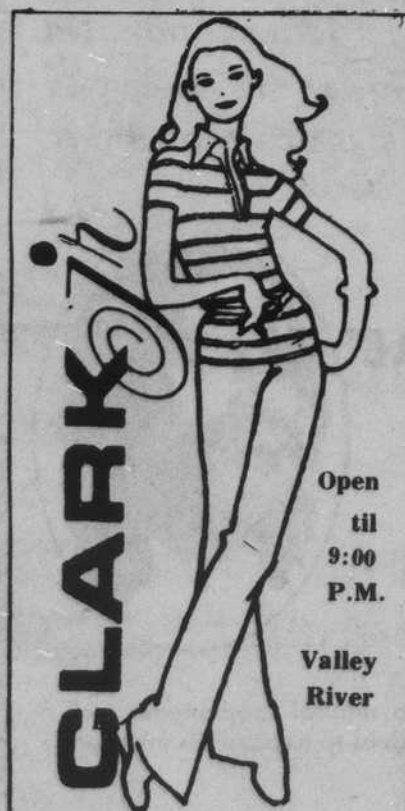
Money trouble

"Once we were facing a \$180 gas bill on a credit card I'd got a long time ago and was about to lose," Chavez told Dunne. "And we had to keep that credit card. One day my wife and I were picking cotton, pilling bolls to make a little money to live on."

Chavez twice used its strength to force pay raises from growers in the Delano area.

"Our first strike was in May of '65, a small one, but it prepared us for the big one," Chavez recalls. "A farm worker from McFarland came to see me. He said he was sick and tired of how people working the roses were being treated, and he was willing to 'go the limit.' The people wanted union recognition, but the real issue, as in most cases when you begin, was wages. They were promised nine dollars a thousand, but they were actually getting \$6.50 and seven dollars for grafting roses. Most of them signed cards and gave us the right to bargain for them. We chose the biggest company, with about eighty-five employees, not counting the irrigators and supervisors, and we held a series of meetings to prepare the strike and call the vote. There would be no picket line. Everyone pledged

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