

# The master organizer behind César Chávez

Fred Ross believed a good union organizer should fade into the crowd while others step forward.

By Marcus Widenor

Fred Ross is not a familiar name to most, because he stood in the shadow of the immensely charismatic César Chávez, who built the United Farm Workers (UFW). But Ross was a master organizing strategist, and he preferred playing a secondary role. As Chávez' field lieutenant, he thrust forward the community activists he had groomed as spokespersons for the farmworkers movement, rather than lead himself.

As Gabriel Thompson's *America's Social Arsonist: Fred Ross and Grassroots Organizing in the Twentieth Century* (University of California Press, 2016) tells us, Ross was born in 1910 into a well educated, upper-middle-class family. He grew up in Depression-era Los Angeles as it was becoming a multi-ethnic caldron of American life.

Ross first rubbed shoulders with other social activists while a student at USC in the early 1930s. Unlike many of them, Ross did not turn to the Communist or Socialist parties as a platform for his activism. In fact, a stubborn ideological agnosticism characterized his entire career as an organizer. Ross approached organizing more as a craft than as an ideology.

By the early 1940s, Ross had worked for state and federal agencies in the impoverished communities of California's Mexican-American farmworkers. He became convinced that, whatever the liberal intentions of the state, change would only come through popular action by citizens. He became an acolyte to Saul Alinsky, a one-time aide to the CIO's John L. Lewis. Alinsky was now focusing on community-based, rather than workplace-based organizing.

Ross mentored hundreds of young organizers who cycled through the ranks of the UFW, beginning with the young César

Chávez, who he met in 1952. The two shared workaholic personalities, an attention to the details of building grassroots movements, and a skepticism of reform organizations led by middle-class activists who were beholden to the power structure.

Ross brought an almost fanatical focus to his work. Whether it was registering voters, challenging substandard housing, or organizing a labor union, his campaigns were an endless series of house meetings and organizer re-assessments, plotted out on huge sheets of butcher paper. Ross insisted on empirical metrics for measuring organizing success. Or, as he put it in one of his quotable "axioms for organizers" (a corollary to Alinsky's "Rules for Radicals")—"If you can't count it, it didn't happen."

A demanding taskmaster, Ross insisted that organizers show absolute loyalty, work around the clock, and continually critique the progress of their campaigns. The toll on his family life was brutal.

Many of Ross' techniques are now standard fare for organizers who practice what might be called "social unionism," such as rank-and-file leadership development, one-on-one organizing, and quantifiable organizing objectives. But there is another legacy that is more problematic.

As numerous recent histories have noted, the UFW took a bizarre organizational turn after the successful lettuce and grape strike/boycott campaigns of the early 1970s. It became increasingly insular and autocratic, utilizing extreme, some would say "cult-like," psychological techniques to enforce loyalty to Chávez. This involved the red-baiting of radicals, and even anti-Semitism in the end.

According to Thompson, Ross was largely silent on the degeneration of the UFW during the 1980s. Neither his children nor his contemporaries seem able to explain why he did not oppose Chávez' purging of many of the union's most dedi-

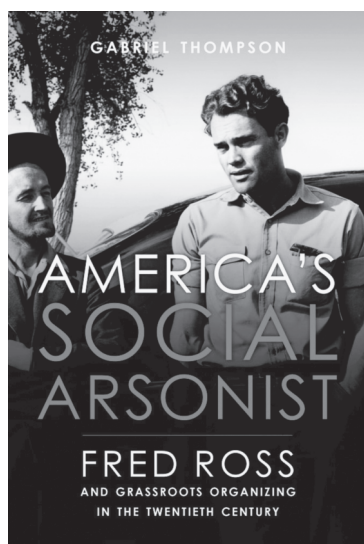
cated organizers. The fact that Ross' long-anticipated autobiography never appeared before his 1992 death from Alzheimer's

leaves the reader to wonder how complicit he was in the tragedy. If César Chávez would have listened to anyone, it would have

been Fred Ross.

There are other loose ends as

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