



LOS ANGELES TIMES: FIVE PART SERIES ON CESAR CHAVEZ

Part 1: 'Meet Cesar Chavez'

By Gloria D. Miklowitz
Special to the Times

The fruits and vegetables we eat do not arrive by magic in our supermarkets. The tomatoes, corn, apples, lettuce and grapes are planted on large farms by workers. When the crop is ripe, it is picked by men, women and children who move from farm to farm as needed. These "pickers" are called "migrant" workers. Many come from Mexico and speak only Spanish. Cesar Chavez was a migrant worker who knew firsthand how hard life was for his people. As an adult, he brought people together into the United Farm Workers Union to fight for better working and living conditions.

After he was born in 1927 in Yuma, Ariz., Chavez's early years were easy. His father farmed land inherited from his father. The family grew corn and beans, melons and other fruits and vegetables. They sold what they didn't eat to pay for other needs. As Chavez and his five sisters and brothers grew, they helped in the fields.

When Chavez was 10 years old, the United States was in deep trouble because of the Great Depression. There were few jobs. People could not find work to feed their families. There was little rain so the crops did poorly. With little money coming in, Chavez's father could not pay the taxes on his land. The state took over his farm. How would the family live?

Many other farmers faced the same problem: They would do anything to earn enough to feed their families. Men, called "labor contractors," came from California. They told poor farmers that in California they could earn good money going from one farm to another picking produce. Chavez's parents and many others decided to leave Arizona. They rolled up their mattresses, roped their belongings together and loaded everything on the roofs of their old cars. They hoped that in California they would earn enough so their children would not have to work and could go to school.

Tuesday: Would life in California be better for the Chavez family?

This is a Kids' Reading Room classic that first ran on Oct. 2, 2000.

Part 2: 'Meet Cesar Chavez'

By Gloria D. Miklowitz
Special to the Times

The story so far: The Chavez family lived well on their farm in Arizona until they lost it for nonpayment of taxes. They moved to California to find work

California looked wonderful to the Chavez family. There were lush fields of growing things. Life would be good here, they thought.

Cesar Chavez's father drove to the large farm where he was told they could find jobs. Old, one-room shacks made of sheet metal would be their home. There was no running water, no bathroom, only one gas burner to cook on, and unbearable heat. They unpacked, brought water in buckets from a faucet in the yard, ate a cold meal and slept on the floor that first night.

The next day the Chavez family went to work in the fields. Often the only drinking water was what they brought along. Pickers had to bend over all day. Many crops had been dusted with poisons to kill insects. The poison made some workers sick. They worked long hours and were not always paid what they had been promised. Since most workers could not speak English, they could not argue.

For years this was the life Chavez and his family lived. They moved from farm to farm, wherever the labor contractors sent them. When not in school, Chavez worked in the fields with his parents. By the time he finished the eighth grade, he had attended more than 30 schools. Since migrant students did not stay long in one place and couldn't speak much English, they had a hard time in school.

As Chavez learned English, he could speak with non-Latino workers. From them he found out which farms paid best, where housing was better, and where the owners did not cheat the workers. He told other Mexican American families what he learned so they would not suffer as he and his family had. He tried to persuade them to go together to the farm owners and ask for more pay and better housing. Most workers turned him down, afraid they would lose their jobs. But he wouldn't give up. Thus began Cesar Chavez's crusade to improve the lives of farm workers.

Wednesday: What does Chavez do next?

This is a Kids' Reading Room classic that first ran on Oct. 3, 2000.

Part 3: 'Meet Cesar Chavez'

The story so far: Cesar Chavez begins to think how he might help organize people to get better pay and living conditions.

By Gloria D. Miklowitz
Special to the Times

As Cesar Chavez grew older, he found work in the vineyards, which required year-round tending.

When he was 15, he met Helen Fabela, who also worked in the fields. They fell in love and shared the same goals, but it was wartime, and they were too young to marry. In 1944, at 17, Cesar enlisted in the Navy and served in the western Pacific. When he returned to California, after the war, he found that migrant workers' lives had not changed.

Helen and Cesar married in 1948 and moved to San Jose. Cesar worked in apricot orchards and a lumberyard. They lived in a barrio, called "Sal Si Puedes" in Spanish. In English, this means "get out if you can."

Two men became important to Cesar: Father Donald McDonnell, who, with his church, helped people with daily problems; and Fred Ross, who started the Community Service Organization to help residents solve their own problems.

Cesar first volunteered, then worked for, the CSO. He organized teams to register voters. He battled racial and economic discrimination and built new CSO chapters across California and Arizona. During this time, he read a lot about politics and about leaders who believed in nonviolence as a way to accomplish change.

Cesar believed strongly that farm workers needed an organization that would help them. He tried to persuade the CSO to fill that need, but failed. Using \$1,200 of his and Helen's savings, and loans and gifts from friends and relatives, he resigned from his paid job and formed the National Farm Workers Assn.

In 11 months, he visited 87 communities and held many gatherings to get workers to join the union. When 300 members were signed up, he called a meeting. If each family paid a small amount, he said, the union could open grocery stores, drugstores and gas stations where workers could buy things cheap. It could hire lawyers to represent them; it could even lend money. He wanted all activities to be nonviolent, and he took no pay while working long hours. Food and clothing for his family of eight children came from donations. Even his children helped by handing out leaflets.

Thursday: Does Cesar's National Farm Workers Assn. make any difference in workers' lives?

This is a Kids' Reading Room classic that first ran on Oct. 4, 2000.

Part 4: 'Meet Cesar Chavez'

The story so far: Cesar Chavez, mostly with his own money, started the National Farm Workers Assn., to improve conditions for migrant workers.

By Gloria D. Miklowitz
Special to the Times

Farm workers had no laws to protect them. Unscrupulous growers could pay them as little as they liked; they could make them work long hours without rest breaks, with no water to drink, or toilets, among poison-sprayed plants. They did not have to give them clean places to live. With membership growing and money coming in, Chavez did as he had promised, but then planned more. As soon as the National Farm Workers grew big enough, he urged members to demand the pay and conditions that other workers in America enjoyed.

In 1965, grape pickers who were not association members got angry. They needed more money during harvest season because in winter there would be no work. They demanded \$1.40 an hour and 25 cents for each box of grapes picked.

"We will stop working," they threatened. "Your grapes will rot on the vines!" The pickers lined up at the edge of the fields and shouted "Huelga!" which means "strike" in Spanish.

At first Chavez did not want his union to join the strike. His members would need food and the union had very little money to help. Still, his followers urged him to join and soon union members lined the fields shouting "Huelga!" too. For weeks, owners and strikers argued. Finally two vineyards agreed to raise wages and the strikers there went back to work.

But other growers brought in workers from Mexico to pick the grape crop. These workers accepted the bad pay and poor conditions. The strike went on for many months. Money and help came from people who read about the strike and believed in what Chavez was doing. But the grape growers would not give in.

Then, one day, Chavez had an idea. He would hit them where it really hurt--in the pocketbook.

Friday: What was Chavez's idea?

This is a Kids' Reading Room classic that first ran on Oct. 5, 2000.

Part 5: 'Meet Cesar Chavez'

A strike against growers didn't work. The vineyard owners brought in temporary pickers from Mexico. Those laborers went home when the harvest ended, feeling rich with the few dollars they made.

"What if," Cesar Chavez reasoned, "the whole country got behind the strikers and refused to buy table grapes or wine?" That would be a boycott--similar to what Mahatma Gandhi did with salt in India.

"Don't Buy California Grapes!" became a slogan carried on signs, posted in stores and written about in newspapers. Truck drivers refused to take grapes from vineyards to stores or to load them on ships to send to other countries. Chavez fasted (went without food) for 25 days, only drinking water. It was the first of other fasts to bring attention to the migrant workers' cause. The grape boycott involved groups and people from all over the country. It hurt growers, as Chavez predicted, in their "pocketbooks." Without violence, it forced them to agree to some of the workers' demands.

In 1972, Chavez's union became the United Farm Workers of America, part of the AFL-CIO, a powerful group of many labor unions. As UFW president, Chavez earned very little and worked 14-hour days. Joining with the new union brought about benefits such as a medical plan, an education fund, pension money for retirement, better working conditions and a way for workers to voice complaints.

But not all has been won. Though the short-handled hoe has been outlawed because of the back problems it can cause, it is still in use. The program of importing foreign workers from Mexico ended, but the problem continues. Union membership has dropped off though the UFW still negotiates farm worker contracts.

Chavez died in 1993 at age 66. More than 50,000 mourners came to honor him. At a White House ceremony on Aug. 8, 1994, President Clinton presented the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Helen Chavez, in honor of her husband. Clinton said that Chavez "faced formidable, often violent opposition with dignity and nonviolence."

This year, a bill was passed declaring March 31 a day to honor Chavez. State workers will enjoy a paid holiday. Public schools and courts are not included. Neither are farm workers. Nevertheless, many California schoolchildren will spend the day learning about Chavez's life and doing community service. It will be the first American holiday honoring a Latino leader.

This is a Kids' Reading Room classic that first ran on Oct. 6, 2000.