

What's Happening

IN CALIFORNIA ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

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Delano is a small agricultural town in Kern County. Near there lies a place called Forty Acres. That is where César Chávez built his new union for farm workers in the 1960s. In 2008 the U.S. government made Forty Acres a National Historic Landmark. On February 21 the U.S. Interior Secretary dedicated its official plaque.

César Chávez began organizing farm workers full-time in 1962. In agricultural towns he talked to people about human dignity and improving working conditions. He wanted his new union, the National Farm Workers Association, to provide services that poor workers needed. In 1966 the union bought the forty acres of land that became its home.

Quickly Forty Acres became a service center for the Spanish-speaking, migrant workers. The union built a gas station and a hall. There workers got goods like groceries and gasoline at affordable prices. It also offered services. They included health care, banking, legal aid, child care and auto repairs. Hundreds of people went there every day. In the 1970s the union also built a new health clinic and housing for retired workers.

The union grew and joined another organization to form the United Farm Workers (UFW). At that point the union also was asking employers for better pay and working conditions. When the employers refused, the UFW started a grape boycott and went on strike.

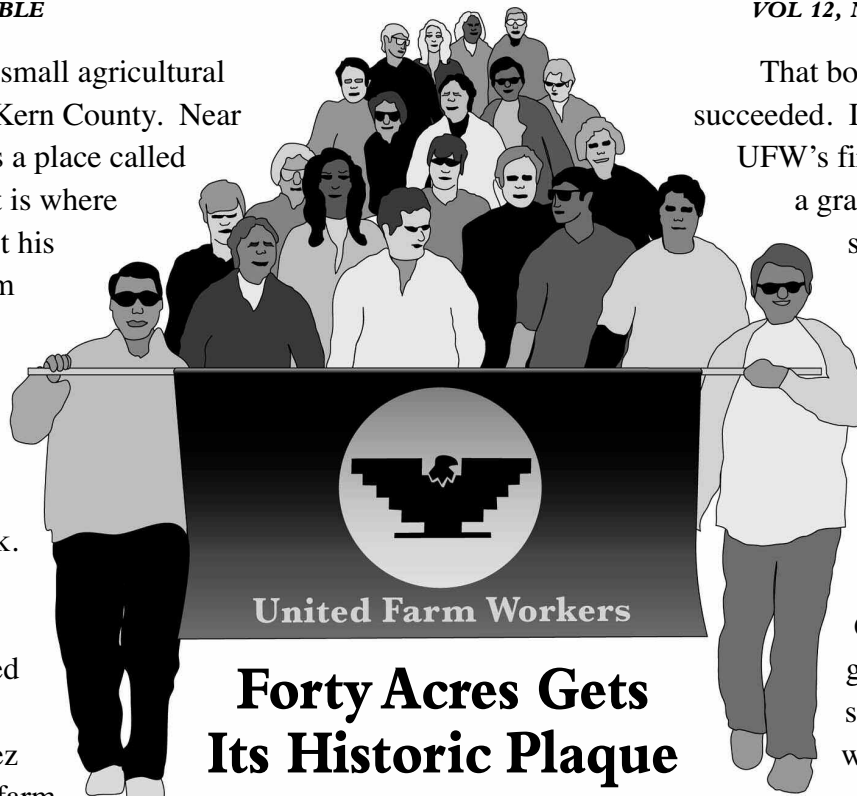
That boycott in 1966 succeeded. It led to the UFW's first contract with a grape grower. They signed the contract in the hall at Forty Acres. The boycott and strikes against other growers continued until 1970. By then most California table grape growers had signed contracts with the union.

Forty Acres

was also the site of two long, public fasts by César Chávez. The first one in 1968 lasted 25 days. His goal was to rededicate the movement to nonviolence. His fast in 1988 lasted 36 days. Mr. Chávez did it to protest the growers' use of pesticides, which were poisoning workers and their children.

Meetings and nonviolent marches took place at Forty Acres. The UFW's activities brought more and more attention to the unfair treatment of farm workers. The 1960s and 1970s were times of great change. The fight for farm workers' rights changed America, as did the movements for peace, women's rights and civil rights.

Today Forty Acres is the UFW's office for the Central Valley. As before, it still serves local farm workers. Now a new plaque identifies the old buildings as a National Historic Landmark. It recognizes Forty Acres for its role in winning respect for America's farm workers.



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BIOGRAPHY

SERGIO GUZMAN

SECRETARY-TREASURER, UNITED FARM WORKERS OF AMERICA

Sergio Guzman's parents divorced when he was small. At age ten he began working on weekends and in the summers. As a teenager he saw that workers needed better pay and working conditions. Now he is Secretary Treasurer of the United Farm Workers (UFW), and he works to get those things for farm workers.

Sergio's first job was in construction in Mexico City. In his teens he got a job in a factory. When workers talked with the owner about better working conditions, Sergio spoke for the group. The owner was afraid that they would form a union, so he fired all of them.

At 19 Sergio moved to California. He got a job at a nursery in Pescadero. After three years he began picking mushrooms for a mushroom grower. He did that for eight years. Although the company no longer exists, he still has friends from those days. There he also had his first contact with the UFW, since he and his co-workers were members of the union.

Those years were important ones for Mr. Guzman. He improved his English by reading and practicing as much as he could. He also was on the team that negotiated the contracts for workers. The UFW sent a regional director to lead their negotiations. That is when he decided that he wanted to do that someday too.

In 1996 Sergio Guzman became an organizer for the UFW. His job was to talk with workers in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties. He talked with them during their lunch hours.



I met César Chávez twice.

Often he also visited them at their homes, because the owners threatened workers if they talked with the union. Mr. Guzman also received threats, but he never felt scared.

After that he became the regional director in Santa Rosa. There he negotiated contracts for workers, the job that he had always hoped for. The negotiations with employers were in English, and Mr. Guzman's English skills had become good enough for that task. He missed the Central Coast, so in

2003 he got the same position in Watsonville.

In 2007 the UFW made him its membership director. He is responsible for all contracts that the union's members work under. He assists the regional directors at offices in Washington, Oregon and California. There is one office in Florida, so Mr. Guzman has traveled there too.

Sergio Guzman divides his time between an office in Salinas and one near Bakersfield. He could not attend the ceremony at Forty Acres because he was helping with negotiations. Although he no longer goes to the fields, he still gets his greatest satisfaction from working directly with workers. He is proud to carry on the work that César Chávez started nearly fifty years ago.

Background Information

Delano is 30 miles north of Bakersfield. Forty Acres lies three miles west of Delano. The César Chávez Foundation manages the site and has its operations there.

In 1966 Mr. Chávez led a 340-mile march to Sacramento.

The César Chávez National Holiday Coalition is collecting signatures on petitions asking Congress to designate March 31, César's birthday and the day the UFW was founded, as César Chávez Day. Currently California and ten other states (Arizona, Colorado, Illinois, Michigan, Nevada, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Texas, Utah and Wisconsin) celebrate it as a holiday.

It was standing room only at the dedication of Forty Acres as a National Historical Landmark. Paul Chávez spoke to the crowd. He is César's son and president of the César Chávez Foundation. He said that Forty Acres is "important to Latinos everywhere, and to all people who care about other human beings."

The U.S. Interior Secretary is Ken Salazar. He spoke in Spanish after he unveiled the plaque, and said that the work of César Chávez is not finished.

In 1966 Mr. Chávez's National Farm Workers Association merged with the Filipino American Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee. The UFW was the first permanent agricultural labor union in the United States.

When César Chávez ended his fast in 1968, he did so by accepting bread from Senator Robert Kennedy. There is a school in Delano named for Mr. Chávez, and one named for Senator Kennedy.

The Folklorico dance group from Robert F. Kennedy HS in Delano performed at the plaque dedication ceremony.

César Chávez died on April 23, 1993 in San Luis, Arizona. Approximately 40,000 mourners marched behind his casket during the funeral services in Delano. The UFW's national headquarters are now in Keene, where César Chávez is buried.

In 1994 President Clinton posthumously awarded the Medal of Freedom to César Chávez. It is America's highest civilian honor.

The first law in the U.S. that recognized the collective bargaining rights of farm workers was the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act of 1975.

According to a nationwide poll in 1975, 17 million Americans were boycotting grapes.

Topics for Discussion and Writing

Pre-reading:

- Tell what you know about César Chávez.

Comprehension:

- Explain the importance of Forty Acres.

Beyond the Text:

- Do you believe that nonviolent protest can succeed?
- If you owned a business, how would you treat your employees?
- Discuss why workers form unions, and tell what unions do for their members.

Vocabulary

Article-specific: acre; plaque; landmark; dignity; goods; retired; employer; boycott; strike; fast; pesticide

High-use: agricultural; union; to dedicate; migrant; legal; clinic; to refuse; contract; to identify

Sources

Sacramento Bee February 21, 2011

Bakersfield Californian February 18, 2011

www.delanobakersfieldnow.com February 16, 2011

National Park Service **www.nps.gov/nhl/designations**

United Farm Workers **www.ufw.org**

CA Curricular Standards (4–12)

English - Language Arts

Reading 1.0 Vocabulary Development

2.0 Comprehension (Informational Materials)

Writing 1.0 Writing Strategies

2.0 Writing Applications

ELD—Intermediate and Advanced

Reading Vocabulary Development / Comprehension

Writing Strategies and Applications

Listening and Speaking

History-Social Science

4.1; 4.4; 5.8; 8.6; 10.10; 11.3; 11.6; 11.10