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The Life of Cesar Chavez



Written by Terry L. Scott

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Introduction

Cesar Chavez was one of the most famous labor leaders in the world. Today, more than a decade after his death, he continues to be one of the most revered and best-loved Hispanic figures in the history of the United States. He was a poor farm worker with little formal education, but against great odds he founded and successfully organized a **labor union** for farm workers. A union is a group of workers who gather their power together to fight against low wages and dangerous working conditions. Cesar was absolutely dedicated to **nonviolence** and used many creative tactics in his organizing, such as **boycotts, fasts, marches, and civil disobedience**. Although he worked tirelessly to improve wages and working conditions for farm workers, Cesar never earned more than \$6,000 per year. Through his example of fighting courageously for the dignity of all people, he inspired millions of Americans to work for social justice for poor people around the world. He was a humble and spiritual man who dedicated his life to helping others. He was a true American hero. This is his story.

A Humble Beginning

Cesar Estrada Chavez was born on March 31, 1927, near Yuma, Arizona. When Cesar was five years old, his family moved to a small farm that had belonged to his grandfather. Cesar's memories of the farm were filled with the love of his family and the security of being part of a stable community. He and his younger brother Richard were inseparable, and although they had to do chores around the farm, they also had time to play and explore the Arizona landscape.



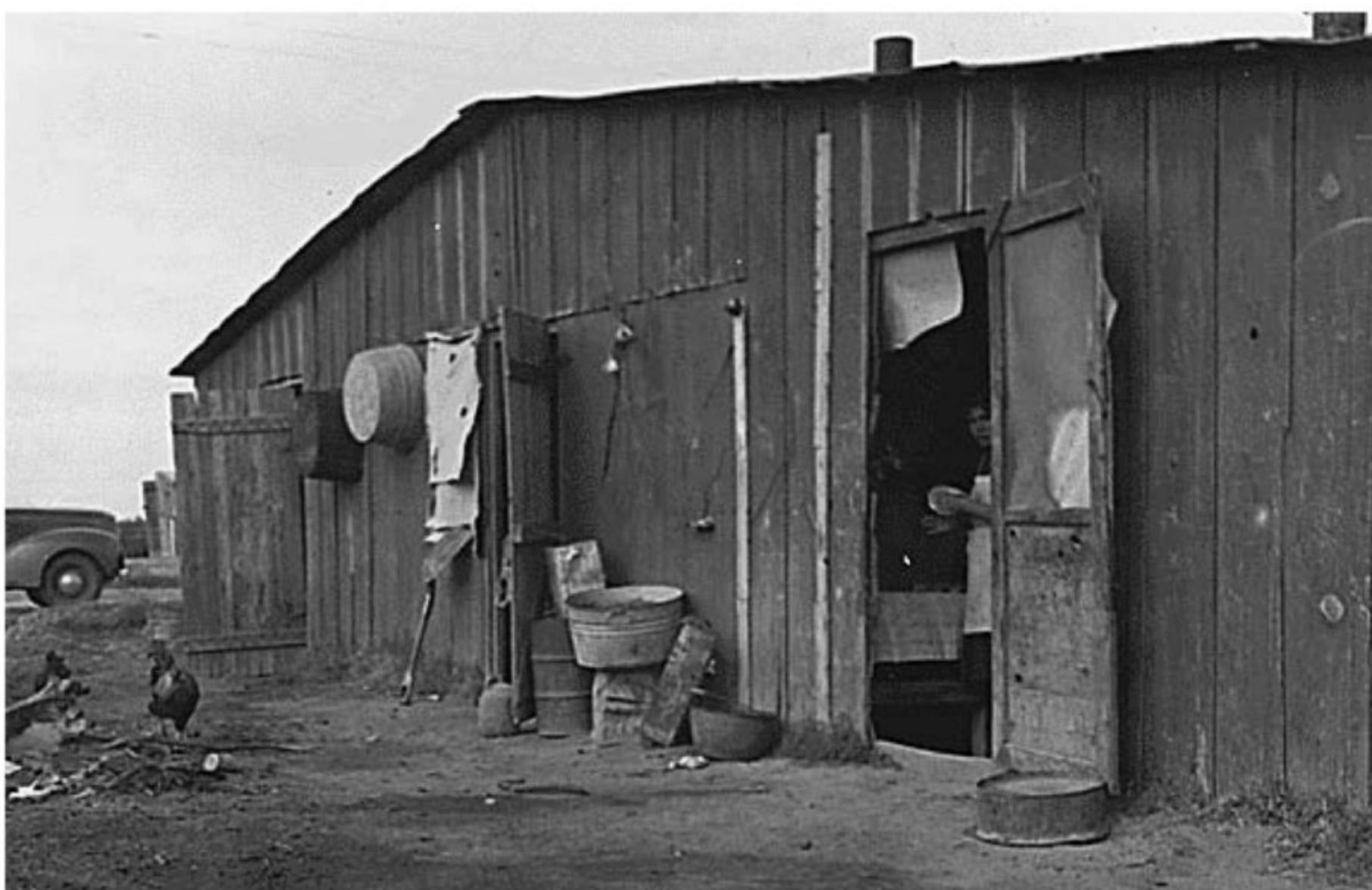
Cesar at age 3 with an unidentified friend

Cesar loved reading and learning, but his early experiences with school were not positive. Cesar's family spoke only Spanish at home, but at school Cesar was punished with a smack of a ruler across his knuckles if he used his native language. At school, he was discriminated against for being Mexican-American and was hurt and angry at being treated like a second-class citizen. Cesar's mother, Juana, a devout Catholic, was a firm believer in nonviolence. She insisted that Cesar never react violently to the injustice he witnessed and experienced.

Big Changes

Life for the Chavez family changed abruptly in 1937. Through a series of bad deals by one of their neighbors, the Chavez family lost their farm. They joined the many other poor families who traveled west during the **Great Depression**, looking for jobs as **migrant farm workers**.

Life on the road was very different from life on their farm in Arizona. Most farms in California were owned by corporations or wealthy growers who wanted cheap labor in order to keep profits high. They provided camps for the workers to live in. Many families crowded into tiny shacks, while others lived in tents along riverbanks or under bridges.



Growers often provided poor housing.

Besides being hard work for low pay, farm labor was also dangerous. Farm machine accidents and exposure to insect- and weed-killing chemicals resulted in injury, illness, and even death. Basic necessities, such as toilets and fresh water, often were not provided.



Harvesting crops was backbreaking labor.

With so many people looking for work, it was difficult to find jobs, and money was scarce. Even though the farm workers harvested tons of fruit and vegetables, many did not earn enough to buy food for themselves. Although the Chavez family was also struggling, Cesar's mother often shared their food with others who were less fortunate. Cesar didn't understand this—why would his mother give away the little food they had worked so hard to get? But Juana always insisted that service to others was more important than satisfying one's own needs.



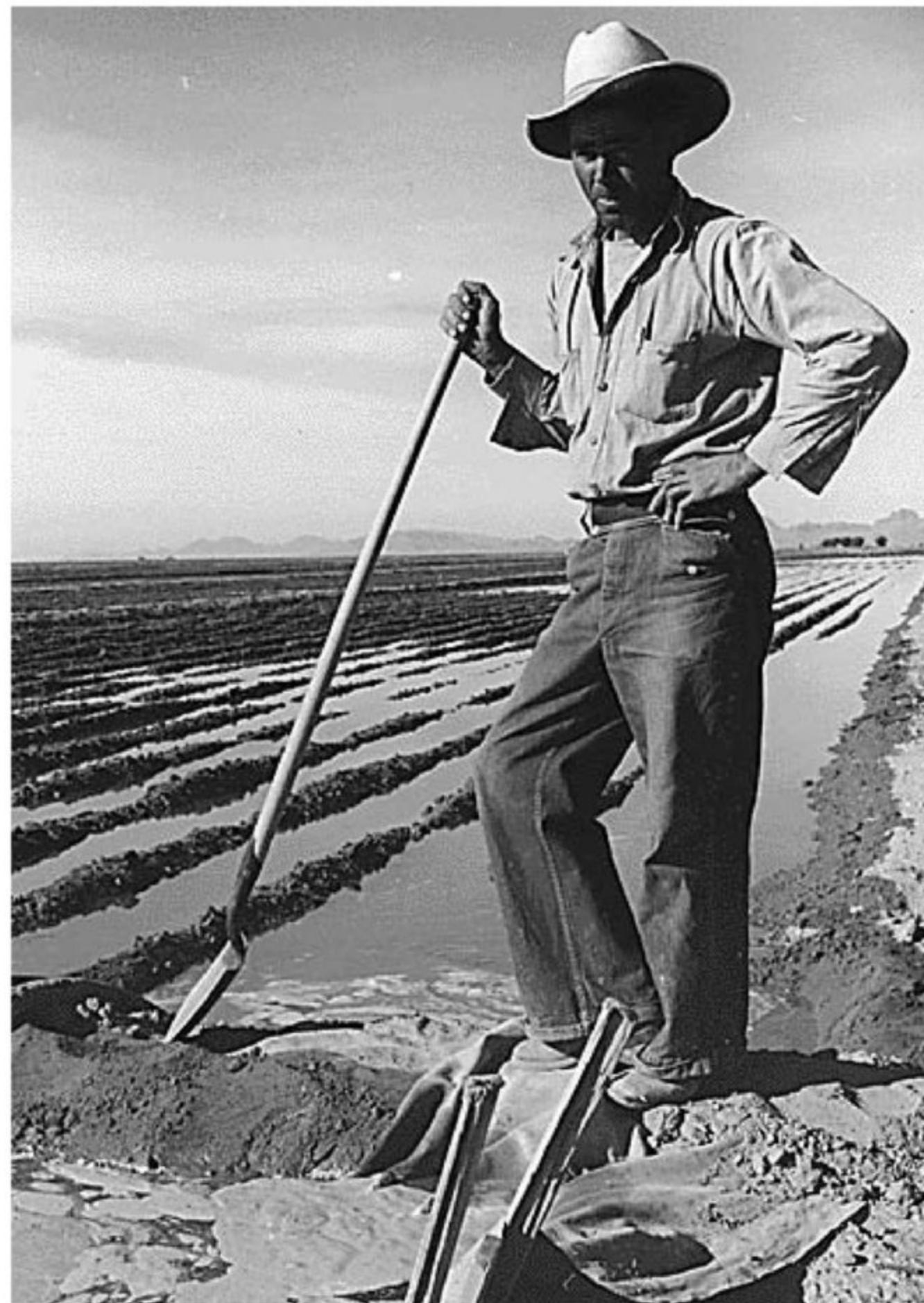
Cesar's graduation from the eighth grade in the early 1940s

Tough Times

For several years, the Chavez family moved around California, finding work wherever they could. By the time Cesar graduated from the eighth grade, he had gone to more than 30 schools. He was often teased because he didn't have decent clothes or shoes and because he spoke English with an accent. Cesar and his siblings did odd jobs after school and worked in the fields with their parents on weekends and during the summer. Working in the fields was **drudgery**. Cesar hated that his family had to work for someone else, rather than for themselves. He felt closed in by the crowded **barrios** and labor camps, and he painfully missed the freedom of the family farm.

But the worst part about being a migrant worker was the fact that workers were often cheated out of their already **meager** pay. **Labor contractors** promised work when there was none, or kept workers' wages until they completed a dangerous job. One time, the whole family worked at a vineyard for seven weeks, seven days a week. At the end of the harvest, they found that the contractor had left without paying them, and there was nothing they could do. Many times, the whole family walked away from jobs when they felt they were being treated unfairly. Dignity was more important than the money they would earn.

A farm worker irrigating a field by hand





Cesar in the Navy, 1946

At age 15, Cesar left school and worked in the fields full time to help support his family. Two years later, during World War II, he joined the U.S. Navy, hoping to get away from the life of a migrant worker.

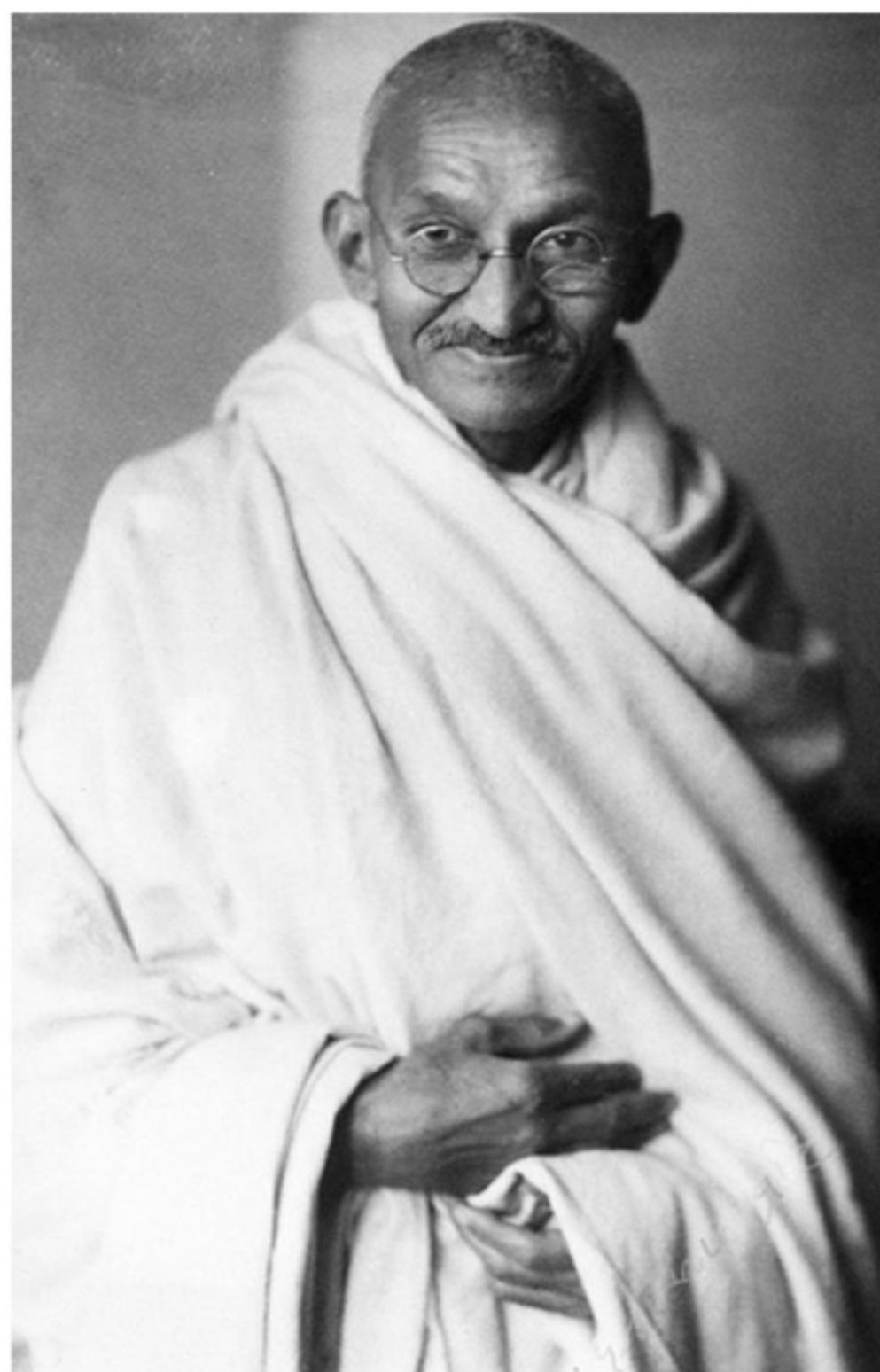
Even though he never fought in combat, he didn't enjoy the military, and he returned to California when his tour of duty ended. He married Helen Fabela, and they had eight children. They dreamed of sending their children to college so they might have an easier life than Cesar had. The family moved to San Jose, California, to be closer to Cesar's brother Richard, settling into a barrio known as *Sal Si Puedes*—"get out if you can."

The Beginning of Activism

In *Sal Si Puedes*, Cesar often drove Father Donald McDonnell, a Catholic priest, to and from the labor camps to say Mass for the workers. On their long drives, they would talk about farm workers. While Cesar knew a lot about the actual work, he knew very little about the economics behind labor, which Father McDonnell explained.

Father McDonnell also gave Cesar many books on social injustice, including a biography of Mohandas K. Gandhi. Gandhi led the nation of India to independence from British colonial rule entirely through nonviolent means. He organized millions of Indians into a peaceful yet powerful economic and political force. What stood out to Cesar was the fact that, rather than giving orders, Gandhi led by example, staging protests, hunger strikes, and civil disobedience.

Mohandas K. Gandhi

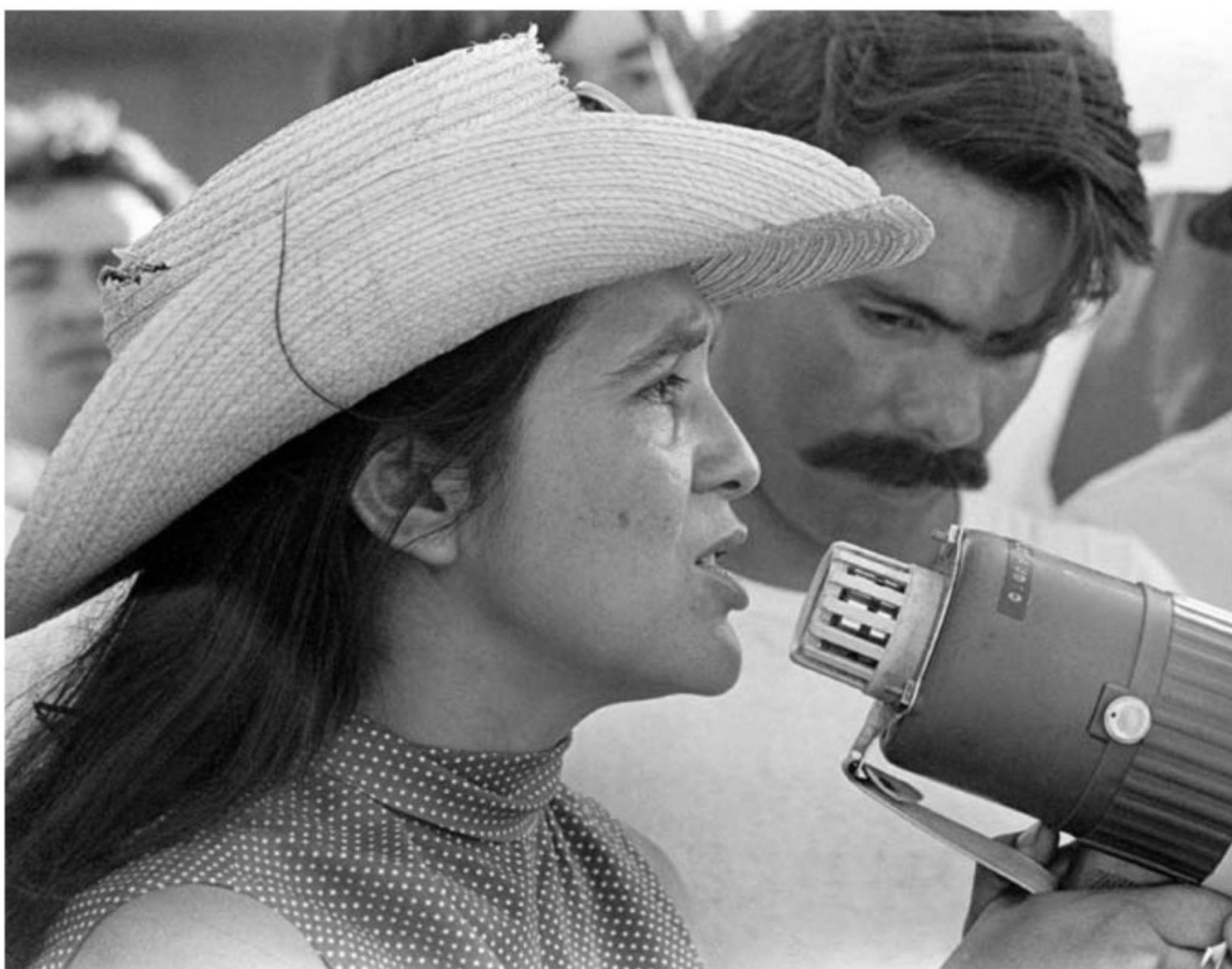




Cesar and Fred Ross march as part of a boycott in 1982.

Eventually, Cesar heard of a group called the Community Service Organization (CSO). The CSO worked in urban areas in California, helping poor people register to vote, get access to health care, and fight police brutality and racial discrimination. Cesar met a man named Fred Ross and accompanied him to CSO meetings. He watched the way Fred helped people through **grass-roots** organizing. Fred was a great motivator who inspired people to stand up for themselves. Before long, Cesar was working for the CSO full time, and after ten years he rose to become its national director.

But Cesar wanted to do more. He proposed that the CSO organize a labor union for farm workers. The idea was supported by Dolores Huerta, another young activist. The CSO was opposed to the idea; they thought unions were controversial and dangerous. When the proposal came up for a vote, it was defeated. After the vote, Cesar stood up and announced that he was resigning as national director. Two weeks later, on his 35th birthday, Cesar left the CSO in order to start a union for farm workers.



Dolores Huerta speaks to a United Farm Workers gathering in 1969.

Si Se Puede: The Birth of a Union

A labor union is a group of workers who organize together, pooling their money and power. Unions are much stronger than individual workers, and as a group, unionized workers can demand certain rights and benefits. If a union is dissatisfied with a job, it can go on strike, refusing to work and shutting down an industry until its demands are met. Many factories, mills, mines, and docks had been unionized by the 1930s, resulting in higher wages, safer working conditions, and other benefits, such as medical insurance.

But many people considered organizing a labor union for farm workers to be impossible. Farm workers moved around following the crops, not staying in one place long enough to plan action. Also, they were often recent immigrants who did not speak English well and were afraid to make trouble for themselves. Finally, unlike industrial workers, farm workers had no laws protecting them from being fired if they tried to organize. For farm workers who lived in labor camps, being fired meant not only losing their jobs, but also losing their homes. Cesar knew a union could make big improvements in the lives of farm workers, and he believed that, even though others had failed, *Si Se Puede*—“it could be done.”



These photos show two situations the United Farm Workers fought against: child labor (left) and the short-handled hoe (below). The short-handled hoe forced farm workers to bend and stoop all day long. Working in this position often led to severe pain and lifelong back injuries. The short-handled hoe was banned from use in California in 1975.





Cesar, Helen, and six of their eight children in the late 1960s in Delano, California. Top row (left to right): Ana, Eloise, Sylvia, Helen, Cesar; bottom row (left to right): Paul, Elizabeth, Anthony. Not pictured: Fernando and Linda.

Cesar and Helen moved to Helen's hometown of Delano, California, where her family could help care for the children. Helen's support of Cesar's work and goals was crucial to Cesar, since he would not have an income.

Cesar began driving up and down the fertile San Joaquin Valley in an old beat-up station wagon. He met with farm workers in their homes and talked with them about their problems. His plan was to build the union slowly, one worker at a time. He felt very strongly that the union must belong to the workers, not to outside organizers.

Cesar was small and soft-spoken, but he was very persuasive. Soon others, like Dolores Huerta from the CSO, joined his efforts, although none of them, including Cesar, were paid. Many times, Cesar didn't know how they would buy gas or food, but somehow things worked out. Often, the farm workers fed Cesar and the other organizers when they came to their homes.



Cesar speaking to farm workers



Cesar stands with the National Farm Workers Association, carrying signs supporting the *huelga*, or strike.

Huelga! The Delano Grape Strike

In 1965, a group of Filipino farm workers went on strike against the Delano-area grape growers. They were asking for a pay raise to \$1.40 an hour.

Cesar had hoped for another two or three years of organizing before calling a big strike, but he knew he had to support the Filipino strikers. One week later, 1,200 member families of Cesar's National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) voted to join the strike. All of the laborers stopped working, even though there was only \$82 in the union treasury to support them.

Workers set up **picket lines** in the fields, proudly waving their homemade union flags, which were red with a black eagle in the center. Support for the strike was strong, but Cesar knew it would be a tense situation. Right from the start, he insisted that the union members never use violence.

Cesar also understood that in order for the strike to succeed, it was important to get support from outside the Delano area. Strikers and their families went to cities all across North America, telling people about the working conditions of the grape pickers and asking them not to buy grapes. The boycott would take business away from the growers until they were willing to sign a union contract.

Farm workers marching in 1966





Cesar worked extremely long hours during the strike. He is pictured here at one of the union offices in 1965.

During the long struggle, Cesar worked tirelessly, and like Gandhi, he led by example. His deep religious faith helped him through many tough times. Angry grape growers made threats on Cesar's life. He also faced challenges from within the union. At one point, some of the farm workers became discouraged and wanted to resort to violence. If the grape growers wouldn't listen and the police kept trying to break up the picket lines, why shouldn't the workers fight back?

Cesar had to make the workers stop and think about what they were suggesting. He went on a water-only fast that lasted 25 days. Those who still wanted to use violence would have to face the consequences of allowing Cesar to starve.

The fast had a tremendous impact. People worried that Cesar would damage his health, but when they saw him making such a huge sacrifice, it made them think about what they were doing. Cesar's fast re-energized the farm workers and put an end to the talk of violence.



Cesar with Robert F. Kennedy, presidential candidate and brother of U.S. President John F. Kennedy, in Delano, California, March 1968. The focus of this fast was to rededicate farm workers to nonviolence.



Cesar rests for a moment during the 1975 Gallo wine boycott.

Just the Beginning

Support for the boycott continued, and after five long years, the Delano grape growers agreed to the union's demands. Against all odds, Cesar's efforts had succeeded. As sweet as it was, this was only the beginning. For Cesar, working to improve the lives of farm workers was a lifelong endeavor. As he often said, "The rich have money, but the poor have time."

For the rest of his life, Cesar continued to work on behalf of farm workers. In 1972, Cesar's union chose a new name: The United Farm Workers of America (UFW). Membership grew to 80,000, and the union expanded into other crops besides grapes. There were other strikes and boycotts, many of which received great

support from the American public. At one point, a **poll** showed that 17 million Americans supported the UFW. In 1975, California finally passed a law that protected farm workers from being fired when they tried to organize.

There were also tough times. Though the UFW remained nonviolent, strikers were often victims of violence. Between 1972 and 1983, four farm workers and one young supporter were killed. Cesar also undertook two more fasts. The last one, which ended after 36 days in August 1988, called attention to the harm that pesticides cause farm workers and their children.



Rev. Jesse Jackson holds Cesar's hand before Cesar breaks his last fast.

Cesar's Legacy

Cesar Chavez died peacefully in his sleep on April 23, 1993. He was 66 years old. Over 50,000 farm workers and UFW supporters came to his funeral in Delano to honor the courageous and humble man who worked so hard for dignity for all people. It was the largest funeral for any labor leader in the history of the United States.

In 1991, Cesar received the *Aguila Azteca* (Aztec Eagle), Mexico's highest award for people of Mexican heritage who have made contributions outside of Mexico.

On August 8, 1994, Cesar became the second Mexican-American to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the United States. President Bill Clinton presented this award to Cesar's widow, Helen.

On August 18, 2000, the state of California officially made March 31 "Cesar Chavez Day of Service and Learning." On this special day, school children across the state perform service for communities in California in honor of the life and work of Cesar Chavez.

Explore More

① On the Web

- A. In the address window, type: *www.google.com*.
- B. Then type: Cesar Chavez. Click on “Google Search.”
- C. Read the colored links. Click on one that looks interesting.
- D. When you want to explore other links, click the back arrow on the top left.
- E. Or try some different searches: *United Farm Workers, grape boycott, migrant farm workers, civil disobedience, or child labor*.

② A Look at the Labor Movement

Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers are just one part of the long history of the labor movement in the United States. Almost every industry, from truck drivers to movie actors, has a union to protect its workers. There is even a national holiday, Labor Day, to honor the workers who provide the goods and services we use every day. To learn more, try an internet search for *Labor Day*.

③ At the Library

Ask the librarian at your school or local public library for books on Cesar Chavez, farm workers, and the labor movement.

Glossary

barrios (n.)	neighborhoods populated by Spanish-speaking people (p. 8)
boycotts (n.)	protests in which people refuse to buy something (p. 4)
civil disobedience (n.)	the act of peacefully breaking laws because they are unjust (p. 4)
drudgery (n.)	hard, boring work (p. 8)
fasts (n.)	periods of time when a person voluntarily goes without food (p. 4)
grass-roots (n.)	describing a type of political movement beginning with people who lack political power (p. 12)
Great Depression	an economic crisis in the United States that started in 1929 and lasted through 1930s (p. 6)
labor contractors (n.)	farm bosses in charge of hiring and paying workers (p. 9)
labor union (n.)	a group of workers that act together to protect and expand their rights in the workplace (p. 4)
meager (adj.)	low; too little to be worth anything (p. 9)
migrant farm workers (n.)	workers who move to wherever crops are ready to plant or harvest (p. 6)
nonviolence (n.)	the refusal to use physical force, fighting, or violence as a matter of principle (p. 4)
picket lines (n.)	protests in which people march or stand in lines, often waving flags or signs (p. 19)
poll (n.)	a sampling or collection of opinions on a subject (p. 23)

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About the Author:

Terry L. Carruthers Vasquez Scott worked with the United Farm Workers for 14 years, from 1974 until 1988. She was a boycott director in several cities and also spent ten years working at La Paz, the UFW's administrative headquarters. During 1976, she was a member of Cesar's personal staff, meeting with him on a daily basis and helping ensure that projects were being completed according to his wishes. She was present in Delano for Cesar's last fast in 1988, and also for his funeral in 1993.

Cover photo: Cesar Chavez marches with farm workers in 1976.

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