

Aggie Rose Chavez 1972–1977, 1980

When I first heard there were Portuguese farmworkers at the Gallo Ranch in Livingston, California, I was surprised. I had grown up about 12 miles from those meticulously tended miles of grape rows. My early years were spent on a small farm with our only grapes those hanging from a four-posted arbor under which we sometimes sat on very hot late afternoons.

My family was also Portuguese, but unlike the Gallo workers, we owned a 30-acre farm, on which were grown variously sweet potatoes, black eye beans, alfalfa, and “cow corn.” During different harvests, my family would all labor on other farms. It was quite common in the agricultural area in which I grew up for kids, starting at 11 or 12 and going through high school, to work during summers and on Saturdays in fieldwork.

It was here one summer that I worked in a field where *braceros* were brought to do the bulk of the picking. By then, our farm had been sold and I was a “town kid” working picking berries. My mother, who also picked, often commented that these jobs were for kids, since all you can earn is just enough to buy school clothes. I distinctly remember thinking that all these men from Mexico were not “kids”; in fact, they appeared to be grown men who had to support whole families with their “kid” wages.

However, by the time I heard about Portuguese farmworkers, it was early 1972, and I had recently become radicalized through the student movement. The farmworker movement appealed to me because, one, it seemed to comprise actual workers and their supporters, and two, I knew how hard and underpaid field labor was from personal experience. So I drove over to Livingston, which was not far from my family’s backyard. I found there were indeed Portuguese and Mexican farmworker families living in just about the dingiest-looking rooms I had ever seen. Even though I had picked and cut fruit just a few miles away from these camps in my earlier years, I had never been aware of their existence. This might be in part because they were located at least eight miles from the nearest town and major highway and were hidden between acres of well-tended vineyards. Ironic it was that the vineyards received such care from the workers, but their housing received absolutely no care.

So I decided to join the UFW. Not so easy. Even though I was willing to work for the famous \$5 per week, drive my own car, sleep in the back of the field office, and despite the fact I could speak Spanish, Portuguese, and English and was college-educated—in fact I had been a bilingual teacher for the previous three years—it was still not easy to persuade whoever was doing the hiring that maybe I should be considered. It took weeks and months for the other volunteer who was in Livingston to get me put on staff, and then she left. Later I realized that probably there was no one whose permanent job it was to hire staff.

By then it was August of 1972. The harvest was about to happen. The harvest at Gallo employed hundreds and hundreds of workers and they all needed a paper called a “dispatch.” At that time the UFW had a collective bargaining agreement with Gallo, and the contract included a hiring hall from which workers were “dispatched” by seniority. I of course had no idea how this all worked. Hundreds of workers started showing up at the normally lonely field office. Even in my inexperienced state I knew that I could not physically write 500 dispatches. For one minute I thought someone was going to send me help, but my experience in getting “hired” told me otherwise. I *was* the “help.” So I found two workers, one Portuguese and one Mexican, who could read and write, and put them to work writing dispatches.

Next day, the workers were angry about the picking rates, and so they stopped working. Somehow my frantic calls to union headquarters resulted in Gilbert Padilla’s arrival to assist. I had never met Gilbert before, but he seemed cool, calm, and collected. Best of all, he had a sense of humor. We are negotiating with the bosses, and getting nowhere, so Gilbert quietly suggests to me that I take the women and children down to the Ernest and Julio Gallo residences in Modesto to make our wishes known to the Mrs. Gallos. So we get into a parade of old clunker cars, my VW Bug included, and we drive to Modesto, about 25 miles from Livingston. The Gallo residences are located inside the fields of grapes, but they were something to see. We all got down from the cars and began walking toward one of the mansions, when we came upon a tile piazza near a swimming pool. I saw peacocks walking around. Most of these women I still did not know because they were the migrant pickers and had just come in. I think to myself, I guess I’m in charge here. I suggested that we all sit down, so we did, right there on the piazza. There were probably around 100 of us, with lots of babies and small children. I had never done anything like this before, and I felt not a little apprehensive. But the other feeling I felt was a kind of safety, a safety in numbers, a safety in being with people who were doing something right. So I said, “Let’s sing some songs.” At that time I knew no union songs. *De Colores* was not part of my repertoire. I think the songs we sang were religious. *Oh, Maria, Madre Mia* comes to mind. After a while I was really getting into the songs when I noticed a drop in the voices. I turned around and saw that several police officers had arrived at the residence. One of the officers was surveying the scene with an expression that showed he was worried about how this would play in the press. Scenes of *Salt of the Earth*, a movie about striking miners whose wives and babies had gone to jail shouting “*Queremos la Formula*” occurred to me. We were quietly asked to leave the premises. For a while no one moved, but eventually we wandered back through the vineyards to our cars.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, the entire picking work force was physically seated on the lawn outside the Gallo office. Negotiations have gone on with the workers’ ranch committee, Gilbert Padilla, and the Gallo ranch managers. Apparently, nothing had been settled. Gilbert and I sat among a sea of workers. Gallo sends out a Spanish-speaking supervisor to translate what the manager is saying to the workers. The words were translated as “Whoever does not want to work at the rates offered can go into the office and pick up their check right now.” A very short member of the ranch committee,

appropriately dubbed "*El Shoree*," immediately stood up, pointed his arm at the nearby office and shouted "*a la oficina*." A crush of workers rushed for the office door, leaving Gilbert and me sitting on the grass laughing uncontrollably.

Needless to say, the next day we settled for a good price and the workers prevailed on that day.

I guess I have to admit that after that experience the struggle of the workers was in my blood. It was in my blood the next year when some Teamsters showed up at the Gallo ranch camps on an evening in about May of 1973. The workers were expecting them because the Teamsters had recently signed with the grape growers in the Coachella Valley and a strike had happened. One of the workers called me at the field office; I dashed out the eight miles to the camp, where I met a group of workers yelling at a carload of Teamsters and throwing dirt clods at the car. That was the last we ever saw of the Teamsters during that period. Next thing we heard was that Gallo had signed a union contract with the Teamsters, even though I personally know that none of the worker representatives were contacted about this at all.

So we had a strike at Gallo, as had happened in the Imperial Valley that year, and then coming up the San Joaquin Valley. The first day of the strike a group of workers was arrested. My first thought was, "I'm not a lawyer; I sure hope Cesar sends somebody down here to help with this." And shortly thereafter two lawyers were sent, Barbara Rhine and Peter Haberfeld, who handled the legal end rather handily, at least from my perspective.

What was so painful to see was the same group of pickers arriving back and having to tell them there was a strike and not to go pick. These were the folks who make their money during the harvest. And the vast majority respected the strike. There were scabs who went in and picked the grapes, but of the prior year's workforce, few if any of those members worked at the E&J Gallo Ranch.

One of the most memorable events that happened at Gallo during the strike in the summer of 1973 had to do with housing. Gallo wanted those striking farmworkers out of his labor camps. They wanted the housing for the scabs probably. A fleet of Gallo attorney tried their best to obtain expedited evictions. On a particular day when a court hearing was scheduled in superior court in Merced, the workers filled the courthouse. The UFW attorneys argued to the judge that the hearing should be moved to a larger venue because not all the families fit in this courtroom. Additionally, Cesar Chavez had arrived to support the workers. The judge refused to move the hearing, stating that Cesar Chavez was not being evicted.

A funny thing happened while all this was being said in the court hearing. One of the strikers got up and gave his seat to a small dark-skinned farmworker. The conversation about space and Mr. Chavez continued. The judge, of course, had no idea Cesar was that small farmworker sitting in the audience who had been given a seat, since he looked pretty much like everyone else.

Another strange argument was now being made by counsel for Gallo who declared they were not prepared to proceed on that morning. Instead Gallo's attorneys were requesting a continuance. The judge denied it, stating the workers were all in court ready to respond to Gallo's attempt to rapidly throw them out of their homes, and the matter WOULD PROCEED.

Again, the workers prevailed. They were not summarily evicted. Ultimately, a settlement was negotiated that permitted the striking workers to remain in the camps for many months, until most went off to the Gallo and grape boycott after the harvest. Eventually those camps would be plowed under, bringing to an end, at least at that Gallo ranch, so-called "housing."

Looking back on this very exciting period, I am aware of how much was accomplished. Looking at the fields of California today I am painfully aware of how much more needs to be accomplished. Farm labor is still the job one tries to get out of if one can. "*Sal si puedes*" still applies to the fields. Recently I heard through the media about a retired farm laborer, now in his 90s, who did not know he had acquired a retirement from work he had done for some grower while covered by a United Farmworkers contract. He is to receive over \$72,000 in back pension benefits. That money came from the grower's pocket in exchange for that man's hard work. Again, a worker prevailed.

It would be inaccurate to say that the farmworker movement has solved the very difficult problem of making field work a well-paid and respected job. Nonetheless, the farmworker movement succeeded in giving the word "farmworker" new meaning. At a farmworker rally I attended several years ago, I observed a female farmworker who was asked to speak from the back of a flatbed truck to an assembled group of workers and supporters. The woman, probably in her mid-30s, appeared uncomfortable and obviously was not used to public speaking. She started out by saying she was nobody, just a worker from some nearby ranch. As she continued to speak, I saw her attitude change from apologizing for being a farmworker to stating she was from a particular ranch, that they were organizing, that she was from the committee trying to obtain unionization, and that she was an organizer. In the course of her speech, her whole tone and body language changed to convey "I am somebody."

I am forever grateful to the farmworkers of the world for their hard work, and their incredible spirit.