

Verne Cooperrider 1977–1979

It's apparently a common feeling in later life to want to give back some services to others, and I was no exception. After taking early retirement from the Burke Co. in April of 1977 it seemed right to volunteer with the National Farm Worker Ministry. The NFWM mission was to assist the United Farm Workers in whatever way they wished. The NFWM then assigned us to work with the United Farm Workers in California. We had nearly 15 years' experience by then, working with the UFW boycotts in Seattle and Palo Alto, and Rosie worked nearly full time in both places.

Chris Hartmire, then director of the NFWM, had trouble getting our specific assignment out of Cesar Chavez—because of the impending closure of some health clinics, we later found out. We had rented our Palo Alto house on a year's lease to a visiting professor from Dartmouth University and his family, so we had to vacate in September. Chris thought we would eventually go to the Salinas health clinic, so we moved to a new rental apartment complex in Salinas that had a great swimming pool. We enjoyed exploring the surrounding Steinbeck countryside and Monterey Peninsula until November, when we got the word to move again to the La Paz headquarters of the union at Keene, between Bakersfield and Tehachapi.

The La Paz headquarters was the former Kern County tuberculosis sanitarium that had been vacant for 14 years before the UFW bought it. With the advent of antibiotics, treatment of TB was changed dramatically and the former long-term care was no longer necessary—making county sanitariums redundant. The county had trouble selling the 320-acre spread, which was at the 2500-foot elevation in the foothills of the Tehachapi Mountains. There had been no offers to buy at the two public auctions before the one where a friendly Hollywood producer made a bid for the tract without identifying the union. There was some hostility to the union on the part of the growers in the county, and they protested the sale after finding out the true recipient, but the deal was done by then.

There were several buildings on the compound, but 14 years of no maintenance, rust, weathering, and rodents did their job on them. It took several years after the 1970 sale to make the place useable. The water, sewer, electrical, and road systems all had to be repaired, as well as the structures. So moving there was not quite like going to a summer resort. We were assigned a room, about 12 by 15 feet, in the building that had been the former hospital unit. This became our bedroom, sitting room, etc., with a communal bathroom down the hall used by both sexes. The kitchen was one of three in the building. We shared it with anywhere from three to 20 others, mostly young Chicanos who also worked for the union at the rate of room and board and \$10 per week. We received the free room and \$10 a week but paid for our own food. Each person took care of his or her own breakfast and lunch, but we took turns buying food and preparing the dinner. It was interesting to see the variety of foods, ranging from special fish soup by one of the young male attorneys to the favorite lasagna dish I prepared with many other variations in our “veggie” kitchen. Everybody had a chance to get in on the act.

There were perhaps 200 people living at La Paz at the time, including many union organizers who had been working in various cities around the country on the grape boycott but had been brought back to La Paz. It was an exciting place to be, with lots of activity. Jerry Brown, then governor of California, had been able to get the Farm Labor Relations Act passed, which made organizing in the fields much easier, and contracts were coming in right and left. When we left, there were at least 120 contracts in effect.

My assignment was to head a new department called word management, which included the print shop, the post office, translations, and the contract preparation/printing and correspondence. One of the requirements of the Farm Labor Relations Act was that each member had the right to a copy of his particular contract in either English or Spanish. With the old hand system, it took nearly the full three-year duration of the contract to get the printed copies distributed. Cesar decided a word processor was the answer, so he commissioned me to investigate all the models then on the market and come up with a recommendation. This took a lot of study and trips to Los Angeles to talk to vendors and to learn what was available and what our needs were. Eventually, we decided on a vendor from Huntington Beach who had developed software that was head and shoulders above the commercially available ones. It nonetheless had its own share of bugs—we found out later. He supplied the hardware and later developed the bridge between the word processor and the Compugrafic typesetter without restroking. In the process it was necessary to train several young people to use the computer, which had up to eight terminals. I learned a lot about computers and people in the course of the two years we were there and had my share of personnel problems. Volunteers tend to have strong opinions, and the boss does not have the easy out of saying, “You’re fired!” But the end result was we were turning out printed copies of newly negotiated contracts within one to two months of their signing, a far cry from the previous elapsed time (up to three years).

Cesar believed in getting the full measure of devotion from all volunteers, so the work schedule was weekdays from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. and on Saturday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. He often decided on special work projects, which would take us well beyond those hours, but we all went along with it because it seemed to benefit the farmworkers. We did have some parties a few times during the year, usually on a Saturday night, commemorating some special event. The beer and wine flowed freely, and there was usually dancing. One memorable party was for the wedding of Larry and Annie Tramutola, which followed explicitly the Italian folk customs of Larry’s forebears. The bride walked under the outstretched arms of the welcoming group to enter the building, after walking down the path through the flowered meadow with her attendants. I assembled a group of singing waiters dressed in sailor uniforms with the typical towel draped over our arm, and we entered the room with serving plates while singing *Funiculi-Funicula* in harmony.

Our typical date was to drive the 10 miles up to Tehachapi in the evening for coffee and peanut butter pie served at our favorite restaurant. Major shopping expeditions took us into Bakersfield. In the summer the valley is so hot that we tried to time our trips to

evening or early morning hours. Another escape valve was to take our van and usually some young friends out to Red Rock Canyon State Park in the Mohave Desert. The desert is a fascinating place, especially in the early morning and evening times. We also explored the Kern River Canyon up to Lake Isabella. One weekend we went to Death Valley, another time up to the base of Mount Whitney, where I climbed with two others up to the 12,000-foot mark of the 14,500-foot peak before turning around. We had an occasional trip into the Los Angeles basin for special union events.

Cesar Chavez was an exceptionally brilliant self-taught man. He read prodigiously and kept up on trends and ideas. Unfortunately, he felt the need to control every aspect of “his” union and he was reluctant to delegate authority. He sometimes made hasty judgments about people, which later proved untrue, and in the process turned a lot of people away. We stayed for our full two-year commitment, but felt unwelcome after that. Cesar’s whole heart and mind was committed to the union and he took no personal gain whatever from his position of president. He lived very sparsely in a simple four-room house and traveled usually in a modest automobile except for extended trips where he flew to the Midwest or East Coast. Growers used to spread untruths about Cesar’s phantom “Lear jet” and his plush mansion. Completely untrue. He did have to concern himself with several attempts on his life; in one case we know of he was warned by the FBI that a \$10,000 contract had been put out on his life, supposedly by some grower in Arizona who was upset with something about the union.

One of Cesar’s lasting legacies is the empowerment of a whole generation of young Chicanos who were trained in organizing for their own and the union’s betterment. Some of them have stayed with the union and are now the new leaders in his place; others have gone on to leadership positions in other unions and activities. He inspired people with his humble yet profound ideas of how to join together to make a better life for farmworkers.