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On Making *Huelga!*

I was an earnest but fledgling documentary filmmaker when I stumbled on the Delano grape strike in March 1966. Just a few years out of Harvard, I had little real experience of the world. Most of what I knew came from books or movies. Not surprisingly, I first learned about the National Farm Workers Association from reading the *New York Review of Books*.

In an essay entitled “Another America,” sociologist Edgar Z. Friedenberg predicted that the impact of the grape workers’ strike “on the evolution of labor relations in this country, and on the quality of American democracy, is likely to be out of all proportion to the number of people, strategic important of the industry, or bread-and-butter issues involved.”

At the time, I was working at KGW-TV, the local NBC affiliate in Portland, Oregon, and researching a documentary about the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the radical labor organization founded by “Big Bill” Haywood and others at the turn of the century. I had discovered that a number of Wobblies were still alive and vividly remembered that turbulent era of strikes and labor violence in the mines, lumberyards, and fields of the Northwest. I was tracking them down and interviewing them in their rooming houses or shabby single-room apartments on Portland’s or Seattle’s skid rows. But their struggle was largely in the past, and the Delano grape strike was happening in the present. This was a story you could capture right now, in all its immediacy, at the very moment it was occurring. As a new convert to *cinéma vérité*, or direct cinema as it was also called in the U.S., I found the prospect of filming history as it was unfolding far more compelling than exploring the past. So I convinced the head of our small documentary division at KGW-TV to let me fly to California to explore the subject.

I flew into Bakersfield, rented a car, and drove straight to the Albany Street offices of the NFWA. It was only a few minutes before I was shaking hands with Cesar Chavez. “I want to make a documentary about the strike,” I told him. As I remember, he agreed at once, although we did discuss the matter more over dinner that night at a Chinese restaurant in Delano. At that point I had little experience as a filmmaker—only a few documentaries about local issues in Portland—but Cesar didn’t hesitate to open the doors of his new union to me. At the time, I wanted to believe it was my youthful idealism that persuaded him to trust me; but looking back, I’m sure it was more his own faith in the justice of his cause. He was confident that if any reasonable person hung around the NFWA with a camera long enough, he couldn’t fail to record the truth about the farmworkers’ struggle and the union’s battle for recognition.

It took another six weeks before I could convince the management of KGW to send me back to Delano with a crew. By then members of the NFWA had marched 300 miles to Sacramento; Schenley Industries had recognized the union as the farmworkers' collective bargaining agent; and stories about *la causa* had appeared on all three network news shows. When I returned to Delano with cameraman John Haney, sound man Dick Gilbert, and director Skeets McGrew, it was no longer possible to walk into the NFWA offices and see Cesar Chavez without an appointment.

Nevertheless, the union welcomed us into their midst. We went out to the fields with the picketers in the morning, ate meals with them at the strike kitchen, filmed organizing meetings at night, and hung around the NFWA offices for hours at a time waiting to grab an interview with Cesar. After three weeks of non-stop shooting, we were all convinced that we had the footage for a powerful film that would convey the importance of *la huelga* and its dramatic impact on the lives of the strikers. We returned to Portland and spent the next several months editing the documentary.

When we finally finished our cut, we began to screen the film for audiences. Their response was both unexpected and devastating. A majority of the people who saw the film didn't sympathize with the strikers or their cause. "Why are they so angry? So strident?" they asked. "They can't be that poor. They're riding to the picket line in cars." "Maybe the growers can't really afford to pay them more," some argued. "A long strike during harvest could ruin a grower." To my dismay, I discovered that many people simply didn't identify with the strikers or root for them. They felt the film was propaganda for the union and unfair to the growers.

It took us all a while to accept that the film was a failure, but screening after screening produced the same results. The film clearly didn't accomplish what we'd intended. It didn't speak to anyone who didn't already support the strike. It had failed to do justice to *la causa* and to its importance. And it had failed to justify Cesar's confidence in me and my own belief in myself. I was crushed.

What had we done wrong? Why had others failed to see what was so obvious? Hadn't they read Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* or Carey McWilliams' *Factories in the Field*? Hadn't they seen *Harvest of Shame* on CBS a few years back and heard Edward R. Murrow ask, How can the men and women who harvest the food in the richest agricultural nation in the world go to bed hungry at night?

In fact, many viewers at our test screenings did know that migrant farmworkers were among the poorest of the poor in America and lived in deplorable conditions, but they didn't know it in their gut. I had forgotten to remind them emotionally what they vaguely understood intellectually, that farmworkers were the most exploited and deprived labor force in America and that they had been excluded from nearly all legislation protecting workers and establishing the right to collective bargaining. I had assumed that people

would come to the film with this knowledge and be as indignant as I was about the fact. In making that mistake, I had neglected to lay the groundwork to justify the strike.

Several months passed while we were figuring all this out. Meanwhile, our small documentary unit moved from Portland, Oregon, to Seattle, Washington, to expand the company and make films for a national audience. *Huelga!* was intended to be one of those films, even though it wasn't yet good enough for any television network to broadcast it.

Fortunately, around that time Luis Valdez brought *El Teatro Campesino* to Seattle to perform at the University of Washington. A few weeks prior to his visit, we had sent the film to Delano for everyone in the union to see what we had recorded. Luis had watched the film and understood our problem. He and other members of the troupe came to the house for dinner, and we discussed what was missing in the film and how to fix it. Luis agreed to help.

Inside our company, there was an intense internal debate. Some argued that there was no point wasting more money on a failed film, but Roger Hagan, who had just taken over as president, believed in the importance of the strike and our ability to salvage the documentary. He agreed to send us back for a week of reshooting in Delano, this time with a new cameraman, Dick Pearce, who had recently joined the company from New York.

We returned to Delano toward the end of a gray November. The determination and perseverance of the union had not only kept the strike alive but provided us fresh material to film. Working with Luis and with a clear idea about what we needed to persuade audiences of the need for a union, we shot several new sequences: the winter picket lines, the bleak conditions in the camps, the accidental but fortuitous interview with the camp director. We returned to Seattle and quickly added the new material to the film. The recut version was promptly accepted by international film festivals in Europe, Canada, and the U.S. and was eventually shown on National Educational Television (the precursor to PBS).

For some, the film still did not provide enough perspective or analysis. *Time* magazine compared it unfavorably to Murrow's *Harvest of Shame*, a documentary that had provoked similar criticism when it first aired in 1960, but which was now cited as a model of objectivity. But the *Village Voice* hailed our documentary as "a movingly candid picture of the material poverty and spiritual pride and persistence of the Mexican American farm workers who, in the second half of the 20th century, are still living the kind of miserable migratory existence John Steinbeck wrote about 30 years ago."

For me, writing and producing *Huelga!* was an incredible privilege. I saw firsthand both how difficult it is to bring about social change and, at the same time, how powerful it can be when people join together collectively to transform their lives. Meeting men and women like Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and Luis Valdez also changed me as a person, deepened my sense of how it is possible to live your life. Their compassion, humility, and dedication to social justice continue to serve as models and inspiration for me.

As a filmmaker, I also learned how difficult it is to challenge entrenched beliefs and perceptions and how carefully you must build your case to change anyone's mind. I will always be grateful for the opportunity to remake the documentary and to turn a failure into a success. The film launched my career as a filmmaker and gave me an opportunity to participate in and contribute to a critical event in labor history whose impact was indeed as monumental as Edgar Friedenberg predicted.

(Kathleen Lawrence was the copy editor for this essay)