

An account of an American Friends Service Committee project written by
Fred W. Ross. 1952

Get Out If You Can

The Saga of Sal si Puedes

An Account

by Fred W. Ross, of an American Friends Service Committee project among Mexican-Americans in a Northern California community, during the latter part of 1952.

The Story

of a forgotten people in a neglected neighborhood — if what happened when they joined together to jolt the memories and capture the attention of those who for so long had disregarded their existence and ignored their needs.

The “Saga”

would never have reached the printed page without the help of:

C. S. O. leaders of *Sal si Puedes* — who lived it, Mrs. Josephine Duvencck — who inspired it, Mrs. Ruth Kaiser and William R. Watson — who edited it,

Kay O’Connor Watson — whose superb illustrations put the text to shame.

Names On The Land

Two roads run north from the Mexican Border. One is U.S. 99, the other El Camino Real. They roll up the state through a score of counties with names like San Diego, San Bernardino, and Santa Barbara, past a hundred towns and cities known by such names as San Juan Capistrano, San Fernando, and Santa Monica. At intervals along the way, their massive shoulders support innumerable “Points of Interest” erected to the everlasting honor and glory of men and events with similar sounding names.

Huddled away on the “other side of the tracks”, on the outskirts of most of California’s cities, live a people from whose lips these names fall with a liquid, rhythmic grace. They are California’s Juans, Josés, Diégos, and Fernandos of 1953. The forebears of some of them were here when the Pilgrims landed. Many of them came from Mexico in the early 1900’s. The majority are the children and grandchildren of the early immigrants, born and raised in California. There are 800,000 of them in the state—California’s largest minority. The 1950 Bureau of Census lists them simply as “Whites of Spanish Surname.”

Unlike their illustrious forebears, there have been few moments erected in their honor; and they are scarcely considered “Points of Interest” by the people in the rest of the community. One looks in vain for their names among the application blanks in the site offices of private housing developments, the skilled worker categories of the factories, or on the glass doors of City Halls and Courthouses. Their needs are hardly in evidence in the “Action Files” of the State’s Municipal bodies. They lack the “dramatic appeal” required by most of California’s philanthropic institutions.

But one need not look far to find them. Their stooped forms are in all the fields along U.S. 99; they hold the common labor jobs in most of the factories along El Camino Real. You will see their bruised and bleeding faces pictured in the files of various Police Commissions under the heading "Alleged police brutality: Case closed for lack of evidence."

Just north of Salinas, El Camino Real swerves sharply eastward and falls into a fertile valley of prunes and packinghouses. At the head of this valley, on the edge of a busy city, the Highway joins another arterial running eastward. We turn right here for three miles to a clump of eucalyptus trees, and then sharp right again for about a mile. We stop and get out and look around. It is with this area, the people who live here, their way of life, and what they are doing to change that way of life, that we will be concerned in the following story.

"Some Of My Best Friends"

Out in the flooded road in front of his house he waited patiently . . . , up to his knees in the muddy water. He was a small Mexican-American boy who was having his picture taken. The camera clicked and the PTA photographer waved him off.

He went back into the house to help his mother bail out the water that was coming in through the floor.

Next day the picture appeared in the local papers under the caption, "No School for Marooned Eastside Children." There were a few "Letters to the Editor" from the Westside of town expressing concern and hoping something would be done about the flooded area.

School authorities approached the proper public officials who were properly sympathetic.

Gradually the waters receded. The narrow mud road hardened. The men came out of their dilapidated, three-row deep-to-the-fence houses, and brought their cars back from the high ground where they had left them when the rains came. They worked around the houses, repaired the damage, cleaned up the mess. In the debris they found a number of drowned rats.

The children went back to school. In the afternoons they played in the neighborhood again. They went down to the creek that had gradually dried up and had nothing in it but packing plant refuse, which caused sores on their feet.

When they got to the horse pasture, where they usually played, they found it had been fenced off; someone had been caught riding a horse. So they played the old "Box Car Game" down by the railroad tracks. Whenever a train went by it made a moving shadow in front of the kids with bright rectangles where the sun shone through between the cars. The game was to jump over all the bright patches as the train rolled by.

It was the four-month long slack season. The Relief Worker was a frequent visitor in the area. A worker of Public Assistance families had been ordered by the authorities to install sewers; the expense was covered by Relief Funds.

The District Attorney heard about it. Around election time he issued a scathing statement to the Press condemning the Welfare Agency and naming Spanish-speaking families involved.

Later on, one of the Assistant District Attorneys told the State Social Welfare Board that relief standards had been set too high for “field laborers,” especially certain types of field laborers. This is how the record reads:

ASSISTANT DISTRICT ATTORNEY (addressing the Chairman of the Board): “I know, Sir, it’s a difficult proposition, but here again I’m down to this business of giving money — for instance, we have certain Mexican families — I say this with all due respect to the Mexicans; I have a lot of friends that are Mexicans — but you have certain Mexican families down there; maybe they have four or five children; they live in filth and squalor ... Give those people, in my opinion, a thousand dollars and they would still live like that.”

BOARD MEMBER (a Priest): “I disagree . . . These people come up. I have seen them since 1932, and I have seen them raise their standard and become solid citizens of the community.”

ASSISTANT DISTRICT ATTORNEY: “I don’t argue with you there, Sir. Certain groups of them do, but I think in a community where you find a lot of Mexicans, especially farm laborers, you will find just the reverse.” (1)

Not long after this, the Eastside made the headlines once again.

This time it was overflowing cesspools neglected by absentee landlords. On one two-block long street 125 cases of amoebic dysentery were discovered. Twenty-five of them were carriers.

Again, a few Westsiders were disturbed about “conditions” on the Eastside, about the people living there, about the whole troubled area which is known as “Sal si Puedes,” and translated means “Get out if you can.”

The First Step

“Sure we want to get out,” he said. “Do you think we want our kids to grow up in this shack, in this neighborhood? But where’ll we go?” The young Lumber-handler shrugged and looked absently out through the narrow window of the room to the rutted road beyond, then he turned to the young Priest and his companions who were sitting across from him.

“We can’t rent any place else because we have what landlords won’t have...kids. We can’t buy any place else, because we are what the housing-tract people won’t have . . . Mexicans!”

(1) Transcript of Public Hearings of State Social Welfare Board: on Standards of Assistance in the Aid to Needy Children Program: San Francisco, California, 1952: pp 107-108.

The Priest nodded: “Why don’t you tell Mr. Ross, here, what you’ve done to make things better in the neighborhood? His organization in San Francisco heard about Sal si Puedes and sent him down to size things up. He came to see me, and I brought him out here so you could give him the whole story and tell him whether there’s anything you think he could do to help you folks help yourselves.”

The young Mexican-American glanced quickly toward the stranger and then fell to examining his hands where they rested on his frayed jeans: “I’ve tried to get the people to sign petitions for paved streets, gas, storm-drains, etc.; We’ve gotten a few things. But usually the people say to me; You’ve got a steady job; you just go back to work and forget about it. You’ll get yourself in trouble with those petitions.’ You see, I’m just me, and they have no confidence in just one man.

“I went to the Courthouse, too,” he continued. “The politicians down there just kinds grinned and said: “People out your way wouldn’t know what to do with paved streets if you had them, would they?”

He lowered his eyes: “I guess that’s the way most people on the Westside feel about us out her.”

The priest and his companion stood up to leave: “Some of them, but not all of them,” said the Priest. “Mr. Ross and I met with several of them over there in the last day or two — an attorney, two businessmen, and a labor-leader. They all recognized your problems and agreed you needed help.

“When we talked to some of the officers of the local Civic Unity Council, a leader in the Jewish Community, and a Protestant Welfare Worker, they all said there was no way to get together with you folks out here because there was no organization which they could work with.”

“Yean,” the Lumber-handler looked up eagerly, That’s what we need, an organization! Say . . . ,” he broke off and looked at Ross, “Do you think you could help us get organized out here?”

The three of them had moved out to the broken-down porch now. “I think I can,” said Ross. “If enough people out here want it. We’ll check around a little and drop back in a day or so.” The Lumber-handler watched them as they went on down the street and into another house.

That afternoon and the day following, the Priest and his friend, talked to a can-maker, a prune-picker, a packinghouse worker in Sal si Puedes, and four Mexican-American students in the Race Relations Class at the local college.

Wherever they went, it was the same thing; the people wanted to organize. The following week they set up an organizing committee, composed of the ones they’d sounded out, and headed by the Mexican-American Public Health Nurse in the area.

That was the first step.

“Who Will Hear My Song?”

“You folks were invited here tonight because we wanted to get some advice from some of the real leaders in the neighborhood. Well, first of all, my name is Fred Ross; and

of course, you know our Public Health Nurse and the Father here.” The speaker gestured toward his two companions.

It was 6:00 P.M. on the fourth night of the organizing drive. The little “house meeting” arranged by the Nurse was getting under way in the home of the young Veteran. He and his family and a number of neighbors had just come in from the fields.

They were listening quietly, diffidently now to the speaker telling about his six years of work among the Spanish-speaking people in other parts of California.

“Wherever I’ve gone,” Ross said, “conditions among the Spanish-speaking are as bad as here or worse. And that’s strange, too, because with 800,000 people in California, the group has such terrific strength to make things better. There are only half a million Negroes in the state, and less than 100,000 Japanese-Americans, yet both those groups are moving steadily forward.

“Of course,” he said, “they’re organized.” He paused and looked questioningly around the room.

“You know,” he said, “there are places in California where the Spanish-speaking people are making a better life for themselves through their own organization.”

And he began to tell the tale he was to tell in so many other homes before the drive was through — the story of the Community Service Organization and what it had done to make the Eastside of Los Angeles a decent place to live in.

Toward the end of the story, the people were listening more attentively. When he finished several of them began to talk and the daily hurts and grievances of each spilled out.

Finally, the Nurse said, “That’s all true, but have we ever gotten together to do anything about it?”

“No,” said one of the old men present, “There must be something wrong with us. We’ve tried to organize, but somehow we can’t seem to work together.

“There is something wrong,” said Ross, “But not with you. Maybe you didn’t try it long enough or hard enough. Maybe you didn’t have a plan. Most likely it’s because you didn’t have a full-time worker who could lend a hand while you were learning the ropes. Well, you’ve got one now, if you want him.” He smiled.

A heavy-set, middle-aged man spoke up: “But what could we do if we did organize? We’ve had clubs out here before. They’ve come and gone, and no one ever paid any attention to them, especially the people in the Courthouse.”

“Well,” said Ross, “maybe that’s because those clubs, and Sal si Puedes in general . . . never had anything that anyone else wanted. You see, if you ever expect to get what you need from the Courthouse, you’ve first of all got to have something they need. They know they can’t get money out of this neighborhood; but maybe if they thought they could get some votes from out here, things would be different.”

“That’s right!” said the Veteran, “Around election time last year, some of us went to the Courthouse and reminded one of the candidates that unless he paved some streets out here like he promised, there might not be many Sal si Puedes votes for him on election day.

“You know what he said? He said, ‘Sure, I’d like to get those Sal si Puedes votes. Who wouldn’t? But I couldn’t get them, even if I did pave those streets! You know why? Because you folks out there don’t vote. You don’t even register to vote!’”

“When I heard that,” the Veteran continued, “I went down to the Courthouse to see for myself. I counted the Spanish names on the Registration list. I found out that only 1600 of us out of a possible 21,000 in this county are registered to vote.”

“But I still don’t get it,” said a young housewife, “When you vote you vote for some politicians, don’t you? You don’t vote for paved streets!”

“It’s like this,” Ross explained, “each time a person registers and votes, his name goes down a list at the Courthouse. People in the Courthouse watch those names—and remember, they’re the ones who have the say-so as to whether you get those paved streets or not. Right now, they only see a few names from this part of town on their lists, so they don’t bother with you no matter how often you pester them. That’s how they operate.

“But let’s suppose you got some help. . .from me for instance, and got a little group together and went out and registered 2,000 or 3,000 voters in Sal si Puedes, and got them out to vote election day.

“What do you think would happen? You’d get action, and quick! The Courthouse crowd would figure if they didn’t move, all the voters out here might vote against them at the next election.”

There were smiles and heads nodding in the room.

The young Veteran summed it up: “Boy, if we could do that, we’d really have it made! I never voted because I didn’t think it mattered.”

Then they were all talking, asking Ross how long he could work with them, when the first big meeting would be held at the school, etc.

Someone even wondered what the organization would do after it had improved all the neighborhoods!

Then the lady of the house brought in coffee and pan dulce.

Town Hall

The meeting at the school auditorium was well underway. Over 150 people were there.

A young Mexican-American Social Worker was hammering home the need for organization: “How do you think it makes our kids feel to have to play where they’re not wanted . . . , in the streets, someone else’s yard, the cow pasture?”

“This isn’t something new,” said the speaker. “It’s been this way in the Spanish-speaking neighborhoods since I was a little boy. What I want to know is: how long are we going to sit still and take it?”

The people in the audience were listening closely.

He took a few steps toward the middle of the room. He walked with a limp.

“I’ll tell you a story,” he said. “When I was little, the only place we had to play was by the railroad tracks. One Sunday I was on the way to church and the train came by. The kids were playing the ‘Box Car Game’ and I joined in.”

He paused. "I guess you noticed my limp. Well, that's how it happened. I fell under the wheels and got my leg cut off."

He lowered his eyes. "I hope that never happens to any of our kids!" He sat down.

The Lumber handler took the floor: "I'm no good at speeches," he said, "but all I know is that the main reason we're here tonight is to keep that and a lot of other things from happening to our kids . . ., to keep them from having to grow up. like we did.

"You know, even Mr. Ross doesn't know this, but when we first started out with him to call at all of your homes, I didn't really believe it would work. Every night I used to make a date with one of you and Mr. Ross would call me to make sure I'd done it. Then he'd come by and pick me up and the rest of the team workers and we went to see three or four of you before the night was over. But afterward, when I was home in bed, I still wondered whether it was going to work.

"Sometimes," he continued, "it was discouraging. The people we made dates with weren't at home, or they'd decided not to talk with us. Sometimes we tried to cover too much ground too fast, like one night we made the tail-end of a Rosary, then rushed over to a Pentecostal group, and I opened up by calling the Minister 'Father' . . . which nearly wrecked the meeting!

"But we kept going anyway . . . every night for six weeks. We talked to over 200 people," he paused and looked around the room. A big smile gradually spread across his face. "Almost all of those 200 are here tonight!" he said, "and I'm very, very happy that I helped a little in making it happen. It proves you really want to start something to make our neighborhood a better place." He sat down.

Then Ross had the floor: "Yes, that's exactly why we're here," he said, "to start something! It's going to mean a lot of work, but if each one of you is willing to give just a little bit, maybe an hour a week for the next few months, then on one person will have to do very much; but all those little bits will add up. to something really big when we get through.

"If you really want an organization we'll build one, and it'll produce for us. This isn't just a beautiful dream in my head. It's a plan that's met the final test. It works! I saw it. I helped it happen in the Eastside of Los Angeles.

"In 1947, I went all through that district, and I talked to the people. 'Maravilla' they call it, but it might just as well have been known as 'Sal si Puedes.'

"I helped a little group of Veterans and factory workers build the Community Service Organization. I helped them make a plan to do something in that area, and I helped them carry it out. This is what happened.

"I saw sixty members of that group sworn in as Deputy Registrars of voters. I saw them get 12,000 people registered to vote the first year. I saw them send committees to the Courthouse. I saw the County Engineers come out and go to work. I saw the organization grow from 20 to 3,000 members. I saw new branches organized in other districts. I saw the election of the first Spanish-speaking City Councilman in the history of Los Angeles. In four years' time, I saw them bring the voter registration up. to 40,000.

"And just before I left last March, I took another look around. There were paved streets where there had been chuck-holed roads. There were street-lights where it had

been dark before. There were traffic signs to save the lives of kids. What had been pastures were playgrounds; and there were medical buildings where there had been rundown, corrugated clinics. Police officers who had beaten Spanish-speaking youths, now showed respect for them.

“And when I left Los Angeles, there wasn’t a church, labor or civic organization of any consequence in the whole city which wasn’t getting together with the Spanish-speaking people and working with them through the Community Service Organization.

“If this is what you want in Sal si Puedes, then we’ll have it!” Ross said. “But remember, if you vote to organize tonight, get ready to go to work!”

They took the vote, and the people relaxed.

They had a Community Service Organization . . . a C. S. O.”

They looked around to see who else was there. It was the first meeting most of them had ever attended.

Then Ross began to ask for volunteers to register the voters. “This is the most important job we’ll ever do,” he warned. “If we don’t build that voting strength out here, we might as well walk out of here and forget it.”

“How many of you have ever seen a Deputy Registrar in Sal si Puedes?” he asked. They’ve never sent one out here, have they? All right, if they won’t send some out, we’ve got to get our own, don’t we?”

We’ve got to get some volunteers right here tonight. We haven’t much time left. We need a lot of them. Who’s going to be the first? Let’s see some hands.

“Come on now, this is the heart of the whole thing! Hands up, now. And it’s so easy a kid could do it!”

A little man with white hair suddenly stood up. “This organization is all new to me,” he said, “but it’s a wonderful thing! I want to join in the right way. I volunteer.”

The hands started waving. “I’m only eighteen,” said a girl, “but I want to volunteer for my mother. I know she’ll do it.”

And another, and another stood up. Twenty-five had volunteered when the meeting adjourned.

Ruckus At The Registrar’s

“The Registrar of Voters was talking to the delegation from the CSO. “No,” he said, “I can’t give you folks any deputy registrars. If I give them to you, I’d have to give ‘em to every group in town.”

“Well,” said the young Spanish-speaking college student, “we wouldn’t object to that. It would be kind of democratic, wouldn’t it? But I think you’ve already done it. You have deputies from every other part of the population including Negroes.”

“We didn’t know she was a Negro when we took here,” said the Registrar.

“Would it have made any difference?” asked the young Veteran.

The Registrar cleared his throat. “What I mean is, we didn’t put her on because she was a Negro.”

“I’m sure you didn’t, said the Veteran, “but in any case, the only group that has no deputy registrars is the Spanish-speaking people.”

“Any body wants to get registered to vote can register with the deputies we already have,” said the Registrar.

“You know,” said the student, “you folks here in the Courthouse and the police station and a lot of the rest of the Westsiders are always worrying about delinquency, crime and apathy on the Eastside. And now here, the first time they try to do something constructive, they’re stopped cold. The relief agencies are condemned for helping them because it’s said they ought to be helping themselves. Then, the moment they try to do just that, up goes the road block!”

At the end of the first hour, one grudging concession was wrung from the Registrar. He agreed to assign a single Spanish-speaking deputy registrar who was expected to sign up 20,000 unregistered people in two month’s time! By the end of another hour, he said he’d “think about” putting on some more deputies from the group at a later date.

The long, tantalizing wait began. The precious days and weeks slipped by; and the end of the official registration period drew closer. The Registrar was still “thinking about it.”

Then word of the delay reached the Los Angeles CSO leaders. They flashed it to the AF of L Central Labor Council Secretary down there, who in turn notified the Labor Council nearest Sal si Puedes. The Council’s Secretary had a long talk with the Registrar.

The following day, a well-known San Jose educator and one of the city’s leading attorneys called at the courthouse. Then representatives of the CSO and the local Priest went in for the final answer.

Five new deputies were sworn in.

As they were filing out the door, the Registrar called after them; “Remember now,” he said, “Don’t try to tell any of them what Party to register with. We put on a Mexican-American Deputy a few years back, and when she brought in her affidavits, they were all registered Democratic!”

So Little Time

One of the CSO Deputy Registrars and Ross were sitting at a table in front of the school when the ten block-workers arrived. It was 7:00 P.M. From a radio in one of their cars, the voice of the Spanish-language radio-announcer could be heard reminding the people that CSO block-worker would be coming to their doors tonight.

Then the night’s work began. Two of the block-workers across from the school were knocking on doors, talking to people, and pointing across to the Deputy Registrar.

Ross took the others down the road and let off a team of two at points where the other Deputies were spaced at two-block intervals along the road. Each of the teams worked toward their own Deputy, flushing the potential voters before them.

When Ross got back to the school, he noticed some prune-pickers who had stopped to see what was going on.

“You’ll find out,” said one, “They’ll come to your house; those guys aren’t missing any of us. It’s a new organization out here; and it’s got some real element in it.

“They came to my house the other night,” he went on, “the night of the Walcott fight . . . a man and his wife. He was talking, while I was trying to listen to the fight. He

said if we want democracy, we have to open the door and let it in, beginning with the door at the polling place because that would help open doors everywhere else.

“I told him, ‘Yeah, Yeah, I’ll get registered,’ just to get rid of him so I could settle back and hear the fight. So when he started to leave, I shoved my hand out toward him, like a gentleman, and his hand came out at the same time only it missed mine. Then I noticed what was wrong. The guy was blind! And he’d been talking to me about how we could get street lights out here.”

Then the “hedge-hopping” operation began. The Nurse and the Lumber-handler had alerted all the voters in their two-block section. They now picked up the other teams who had finished and moved them eight blocks further down to the next work area.

Ross watched the lines of registrants thin out in front of each of the Deputies. Suddenly he jumped in his car and drove to the Deputy nearest the school who had finished with her last “customer.” He picked her up and took her down to where her block-workers had already scared up a cluster of voters in the new work area. Then he came back and got the next Deputy and so on, until they were all deposited in the second location.

At one corner, the people, alerted by the block-workers, got tired of waiting for the Deputy and started to wander off. So Ross and the Lumber-handler loaded them in cars and took them back to the Deputy in front of the school.

The prune-pickers were still there looking on. They noticed the two fellows who had worked the street next to the school going back to some of the same houses again.

“Wonder what they’re up to now,” one of them said, “they’ve already been there once.”

“Sure,” said his friend, “but they’re going back to get the ones who said they’d register and didn’t. You know how it is, you plan to do something, but you’re tired so you drop off to sleep or start listening to the radio or something. Sometimes they have to go back three or four times before the people come down.”

It was about 9:00 P.M. now; but there was still a big crowd waiting to be registered in front of the school. The ladies chatted and some of the men called each other “big shot politicians” and bragged about delivering the “Mexican vote.” They had to turn on the car lights so the Deputy could see to register the last person in line.

“Monkey-wrenching The Whole Community”

A hand reached into a toolbox for a monkey wrench. The man was flat on his back under his car. While he worked, he talked to a CSO Get-out-the-vote-worker squatting next to the running board.

“Me vote?” he asked, “Not on your life. The first time you catch me wasting my time that way, call the doctor.”

“I know how you feel,” said the block-worker, “but if you don’t want to vote for any of the politicians because they might sell you down the river, you don’t have to.

“But don’t let that keep you away from the polls tomorrow. Just go to the polling place, sign your name, walk into the voting booth, unfold your ballot, fold it up again, and turn around and walk out. That way you don’t vote for any one person, but you keep your name on the list; and that’s the same as voting.

“You see,” he added, “the C.S.O. spent 2½ months and 3,000 man-hours registering 4,000 folks out here in Sal si Puedes. All those names went down on a list at the Courthouse. But, everyone who fails to vote tomorrow gets his name scratched off that list, and that tears down everything we built.

“So, if you think by staying home on election day you’re not voting, you’re kidding yourself. You really are voting . . . against yourself and your kids. You’re monkey-wrenching the whole community.”

The man stopped working. He stared up into the engine for a moment. Then he laid down the monkey wrench. “I never looked at it just like that before.

“Say,” he continued, “there is something there is the mailbox, a sample ballot or something. While you’re here, maybe you could help me . . .”

At another house the lady laughed when she learned her caller was from the C.S.O.

“Well, if I don’t vote it won’t be because you folks let me forget about it. Last Wednesday I was at the C.S.O. meeting at the elementary school when you showed us what happened inside the polling place on election day, and explained the state propositions.

“Sunday I was at the big get-out-the-vote rally at the High School when the Mexican-American city Councilman from Los Angeles spoke, and you put on the skit about voting.

“Yesterday I got your postcard and a telephone call from a very nice lady reminding me about voting.”

“When I went to the Well Baby Clinic at the Costa Rican Hall, some C.S.O. people were explaining the election to the ladies.

“As I was leaving the Clinic, your P.A. system was blaring away; and when I got home, the Spanish-language radio-announcer was telling us the same thing. And now you’re here with pamphlets.

They laughed. “Most of the people are very glad we’re doing it,” he said.

“I was talking to a man in Padrone the other night. When I got through, he put his hands on my shoulders and said, ‘I’m old, and I won’t live to see what your work will bring our people. And I’m poor, but I want to give you this for the work.’

“He tried to make me take a dollar bill.”

The Pay Off

On election day, the CSO Get-Out-The-Vote Captain came upon four or five very excited ladies about half a block from the precinct polling place.

“They wouldn’t let me vote,” said one of them. “I made a little mistake in writing my address. When I tried to erase it, they stopped me and said I had to read a hundred words out of the Constitution before I could vote.

“I got mad. I said, ‘Why should I read it? You don’t make others read it, only the Spanish-speaking.’ So I walked out and they tore up my ballot.”

The Captain pulled out a copy of the California Voters Handbook. He turned to the section on the Constitution. "Can you read that?" he asked.

"Sure, I can read it. I was born here and went through high school."

She read the section and continued, "But I was so mad and upset I couldn't have read it in the polling place. While we were there, they made nine people read it, all Spanish-speaking. Five read it and they voted. The other four blew-up like I did, and walked out."

A half-hour later there were five men in the car with the Captain. "I'm going to drop one of you guys off at each polling place. You're Poll-watchers from the CSO, see? You're there to help in any way you can, but mostly to see if Spanish-speaking people are the only ones that have to take that reading test. Tell them that when you go inside.

"I don't think there'll be any more of this when they find out we know what they're up to. I'll check with you every once in a while."

On the first check-back, there was trouble at one of the polls.

The "watcher" was sitting on the curb. "They wouldn't let me in. They said they didn't want me there."

The Captain went in and showed the Chief Inspector the election code. The Poll-watcher went to work.

As the Captain was leaving, a young lady got out of a fancy car and came up to him. "Don't the people know they're committing perjury by voting if they can't read or write?"

The CSO leader looked at her for a moment before he answered.

"Which is it that's worrying you . . . whether we can read and write . . . , or how we're going to vote?"

"You know," he said, "If you folks had tried half as hard in the past to help us know and use our rights, as you're trying now to hinder us, maybe we'd all be registered Republican out here instead of Democrat!"

"Well, anyway," she sputtered, "Republican headquarters has challengers at all the polls on the Eastside, and we're going to challenge right and left out here. You folks registered your people, we'll see how many of them are going to vote!"

"Our challengers are standing right next to yours," said the Captain. "So there may be some challenges challenged!"

There was no further trouble at any of the polling places or anywhere else until the final Sports Edition of the local newspaper hit the streets at four o'clock that afternoon. Right in the middle of the front page was a three-column spread under the caption "Voters Questioned at Eastside Polls."

It began, "Four voters of Mexican extraction were challenged at an Eastside precinct today by poll-watchers alerted by Republican headquarters."

The story went on to explain that "special Spanish-speaking registrars were used to register citizens of Mexican descent and, according to Republican sources, all they were required to do was sign their names, whether they could read English or not."

The Spanish language radio announcer had just read the article over the air. It was six o'clock in the evening. "I guess all of you voters that are listening are going to stay away from the polls now," he said.

“Well, that will be just fine, that’s exactly why they put that story in the paper, to scare you out of voting. You know,” he concluded, “in the South they burn fiery crosses the night before elections!”

It was almost seven P.M. The Get-Out-The-Vote Captain was keeping an eye on the large polling place in the heart of the Eastside. A man walked up. and started up. the stairs.

Someone called out, “Hey, the end of the line is back by the sidewalk, man.” Then he turned to the man behind him. “I’ll bet he never voted before in his life!”

“Yeah,” said the other, and I’ll bet you wouldn’t be voting now, if you hadn’t heard the radio tonight.”

“Yeah,” said his companion, “at first I got really mad when I heard that. Then I got to thinking if they go to all that trouble to keep us from voting, it means they’re starting to pay attention to us. Now I feel kind of good about it.”

“They’re paying attention, all right,” said the other. “Did you notice awhile back when the Courthouse sent those ditch-diggers out here, and they dug out the Creek and built those dikes along Johnson Street so we won’t be flooded out next year?”

“They made the packing house stop dumping in the creek, and they fixed up all those cesspools where they had that dysentery epidemic.

“Now they’re starting to pave the roads. But do you know when all that work began? About two weeks after that C.S.O. outfit finished registering 4,000 of us to vote out here.”

“That’s some outfit,” said his friend. “My kids were telling me the C.S.O. got some students at the College to lead recreation and craft classes at the School every afternoon and all day on Saturday.”

“And they got over 150 of the old folks taking classes now in English and Citizenship,” said his companion. “The School Board had to set up five new classes to take care of them all.

“Every Saturday there’s a long line of people getting their Citizenship papers fixed up by some expert on Naturalization the CSO brings down from San Francisco”

“You know,” he mused, “the way things are going, there’ll be so many new voters next year, this line’ll be so long we’ll have to bring our lunch!”

“Hey!” his friend interrupted him. “We’re holding up the parade. Go on in and save the World for Democracy!”