

Cesar 1968

By LeRoy Chatfield
© 1993-2007

Introduction

May 22, 1993

I have no clear recollection of having kept a journal during 1968 and 1969, but I did. I found it because Cesar Chavez died and was buried last month.

After I returned to Sacramento from the funeral, I kept thinking about a farmworker poster that I had seen at La Paz, because it reminded me of a photograph that Cesar Chavez had taken of Sarah, my second daughter, when he was recuperating in the Tucson area after his Arizona Fast in 1972. I rummaged around in the den closet flipping through some of our family photo albums but then it occurred to me the picture was oversized, it wouldn't have fit in one these albums. Then I remembered having seen some old photos in one of the desk drawers a few months ago, or was it years? There, at the very bottom of the third drawer, I found a folder entitled, "Personal Memorabilia". There was no picture of Sarah, but I found my journal.

It isn't surprising to me that I kept a journal in 1968 because I kept one in my senior year of high school (Mont La Salle, 1952) and again when I taught at Sacred Heart High School (San Francisco, 1960), and again during my summer sojourn in Mexico City (1961). As a senior high school English teacher, I required my students to keep weekly journals, which I collected and graded, if you can believe that. I was such an advocate about the need for students to write journals, it is surprising – and disappointing, I might add - that over the years I did not practice more of what I had preached.

But there it was - written in long hand, and unread for 24 years. The file also contained some photos of Cesar Chavez that have never been published, a few newspaper clippings from my farmworker days, and my Open Letter (1965) to friends explaining my resignation from the Christian Brothers in order to work with Cesar Chavez and his farmworker movement. But the most important document, and the most personal, was a touching letter sent to me by my wife, Bonnie, in 1968, when I was away from home tending to Cesar's medical care and therapy for his lower back pain.

Cesar's sudden death, my week at La Paz to help with the funeral arrangements, and now these relics from my years with the farmworker movement - quite overwhelming!

I share them with you, not edited, except to try and catch the spelling and add names in parenthesis to better identify the players. This manuscript, which I call "Cesar 1968" is private and for non-commercial use only. I consider it to be in the same category of the handmade, carefully-crafted pine casket built by Richard Chavez to bury his brother, but because I possess no wood working skills, I have to construct my Cesar Chavez burial box with words. I know Richard's masterpiece cannot be reduplicated but every effort, including my own, should count for something.

Chapter I chronicles my resignation, after 15 years of service, from the Christian Brothers, a Catholic religious teaching order, in order to join Cesar Chavez and his National Farm Workers Association (NFWA). Even though my decision to resign was not made to protest the refusal of the Christian Brothers to recognize the farmworkers union as the representative of their vineyard workers, Father James Vizzard, S.J., Executive Director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, fed this story to a newspaper reporter in St. Louis. In his interview with Brother Jerome West, the director of the Christian Brothers California Province, Brother Jerome put a completely untruthful "spin" about my resignation.

I was reluctant to be interviewed. I did not have bitter feelings against the Christian Brothers, in fact, I was grateful for the training and opportunities I had been given, but when the reporter pressed me and repeated some of the untruthful comments Brother Jerome had made, I opened up a little and managed to generate a few negative remarks.

The issue of the Christian Brothers refusal to recognize the union wouldn't go away because some of the 60's emerging liberal Catholic activists, including some of the younger Christian Brothers, wouldn't let it go. After the March to Sacramento in Easter of 1966, and the farmworker union contract with Schenley Liquors, the Christian Brothers winery came under tremendous public pressure. At first they tried to play it cute and finesse the situation as if they were just a typical corporate agricultural employer, but they paid a horrible public relations price. They deserved it. I gasped aloud, even 26 years later, as I reread Brother Jerome's personal letter to the Christian Brothers in the California Province telling them, in effect, that the winery was standing up for integrity because Bishop Hugh Donohoe, Chairman of the California Bishops Committee on Social Justice, had written to ask him not to "sign an under-the-table contract".

As you will read for yourself, what Bishop Donohoe really told him was the Christian Brothers were on the verge of becoming a national scandal for the Church, and he ordered Brother Jerome to come to his office in Stockton for a meeting to put an end to this unfortunate, and very public, controversy. Poor bastard, Brother Jerome didn't even know what hit him. Religious words are not religious deeds.

Chapter II and III is the journal itself, 1968 and 1969. It will be easier to understand some of my comments and concerns of that time and place, if you keep in mind that a major war, i.e., the grape boycott, was being waged in the major cities of the United States and

Canada. Farmworker board members, leaders and organizers had been out of Delano for many months, or more, taking the fight for union recognition to the supermarkets and wholesalers. Such union players as Gilbert Padilla, Fred Ross, Eliseo Medina, Marshall Ganz, Marcos Munoz, Richard Chavez, Chris Hartmire (California Migrant Ministry), Joe Serda, Dolores Huerta, Marion Moses, Julio Hernandez, Jessica Govea, etc., were all out on the grape boycott leaving behind a skeleton crew back home to carry on the strike, raise the money, provide the legal defense, and run the union bureaucracy.

The journal records that in the month of August (1968) alone, I received 1,350 newspaper clippings having to do with the union and the boycott. I am confident in remembering that farmworker movement had a major, full-time boycott presence in 25 cities.

You should also have in mind that Cesar had completed his first fast, 25 days in length, which he called his "Fast For Non-Violence". Senator Robert Kennedy had come to Delano (with many thousands of farmworkers and supporters) to be with Cesar Chavez when he broke his fast, all but announced his candidacy for presidency from the top of a car in Delano's Memorial Park after the event, and then a few months later was assassinated at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles while many of us who had worked on his East Los Angeles campaign were waiting for him to make a victory speech from the ballroom stage. Martin Luther King had been assassinated earlier that same year.

And during this time, the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee had farmworker union contracts with the DiGiorgio Corporation and some of California's largest wineries: Christian Brothers, Paul Masson, Almaden, Gallo, Perelli-Minetti, Franzia and Schenley Industries.

It is fair to say that by 1968, Cesar Chavez was already a national/international news celebrity. The grape boycott was constantly in the newspapers, on radio and TV, and the press, especially AP and UPI, were in close touch, sometimes daily, with the union in Delano asking for comment and background information as the controversy developed and boiled over between the growers and the union.

Chapter II also includes some tedious material about the National Farm Workers Service Center. It is interesting to me because my Chavez-assigned mission when I came to Delano to work fulltime was to develop the Co-Op movement to provide consumer services for farmworkers and their families. A credit union had already been established - operated with meticulous care by Helen Chavez - and I proceeded to organize and build a Co-Op gas station, open a farmworkers one-stop social services center, raise and administer funds for staff and legal support, purchase and develop the first union headquarters in Delano (FORTY ACRES), followed several years later by the purchase of La Paz in the Tehachapi mountains for the location of the United Farm Workers national center. I also administered the on-again/off-again farmworker union medical clinic in Delano.

Also included in Chapter II is an account of my development of the Farm Workers Health Plan which we later named: The Robert F. Kennedy Farm Workers Medical Plan. This is one of the very few tangible - and hopefully lasting - contributions I might have made to the farmworker movement. As it turns out, 25 years ago, we were on the cutting edge of medical care reform by putting our meager ten cents-an-hour employer health and welfare contribution called for under the union contract into a self-insured preventative health care plan stressing out-patient care, full maternity care, medicine, short-term hospitalization, and term insurance. This happened because Cesar Chavez was determined that we would not give the money over to insurance companies to provide the usual union-type health plans with all their emphasis on long-term hospitalization and medical benefits available primarily through in-patient care.

Chapter IV, May 1991, marks the first time since August of 1973 that I wrote or spoke publicly about Cesar and the farm workers movement. I had been asked many times to speak about the United Farm Workers - especially in the late 70's and early 80's but I never felt it was my place to do so. But this time it seemed different. I was asked to speak about Cesar, not the union, and it was part of an art exhibition in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and I love art, so why not?

I wrote everything from memory - I wish I had known about my journal - and I let you be the judge of whether - or how much - the two relate.

I end Chapter IV with Cesar's eulogy. I had come full circle in just 30 years. Here I was working with Polly, Cesar's oldest son, helping him to decide what to say, how to say it and what to watch out for. I was so proud of him when he did so well at the funeral service speaking from the stage above Cesar's casket looking out over thousands and thousands of mourners. He is a much better public speaker than was his dad.

During Cesar's wake, in the tent set up on the 40 ACRES which held 10,000 seats, a reporter from the Riverside paper (or was it San Bernadino?) asked me why I had left the union in 1973? There were four reasons, I said: 1) My oldest daughter (of four at that time, now of five) was just getting ready to start 1st grade and that meant we needed to decide where to anchor ourselves. 2) My father had died in 1970 and my mother was by herself in Sacramento. And I had been away from "home" since I was 15 years old. 3) My wife was from San Francisco and she missed Northern California. And 4) I had been asked by Gilbert Padilla of the Union Board if I would stand for the position of Secretary Treasurer at the first convention of this newly approved AFL-CIO International Union. This request while tempting (and should I admit, flattering) helped me to realize that it was time to leave because I had come to Delano, at Cesar's request, only to help out, not to spend the rest of my life there. If I now decided to become a union officer that meant I was making a long-term commitment.

I could tell the reporter was disappointed because he was working on an angle. "Well", he said, "what did you learn from Cesar?" I answered, "How to organize". He was blank. I tried to spruce it up for him. "Cesar taught me how to make something out of nothing. He taught me how to take something that does not exist and make it exist." He wrote it down.

What I did not tell this young reporter was that to this day, May 23, 1993, I remember a conversation that Cesar and I had in my LA office in November 1972, the evening before the voters of California were to decide the fate of the farm workers union through a ballot proposition, Proposition 22. California agribusiness had paid more than \$500,000 to qualify this proposition for the November ballot, which, in effect, would have made farm worker unions in California illegal. It was a blunt dagger aimed directly at the heart of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, AFL-CIO. Cesar had put me in charge of the union's statewide campaign to defeat Proposition 22.

As you can imagine Cesar - and all of us - were very uptight as Election Day approached. I had developed a campaign tactic, which we called "human billboards". Hundreds of union campaign volunteers were organized into squads of 50 or so, each carrying a placard approximately 2' x 3' in dimension and all were identical - white block lettering on black - except for the message. These stark looking "billboards" carried such messages as: "LA Times Says No On 22", "AFL-CIO Says NO on 22", "Council of Churches Says No on 22" and on and on.

We started the human billboards in the last two weeks of the campaign. Our squads were deployed in the early morning (6:30 AM - 8:30 AM) to the major feeder freeway entrances in San Fernando Valley, Santa Monica, San Gabriel Valley, etc. and by placing each human billboard ten yards apart we were able to cover 3 or 4 city blocks on both sides of the street which led to the major freeway entrances. And then in the afternoon (3:30 PM - 5:30 PM) we reversed the process by deploying our forces at major entrances from Central Los Angeles to catch the commuters leaving work at the end of the day to drive back to the suburbs. The goal of each human billboard was to make friendly eye and hand contact with the driver of the car and point to his/her billboard.

The effect was sensational! Commuters were honking their horns and waving their approval. The radio and TV traffic helicopters and planes picked it up and rolled it on the air during the morning and evening drive times, updating the commuters where the farm worker human billboards were located and why they were out there on the streets waving and "talking" to the commuters. Those of you who are not familiar with California campaigns have to appreciate that the LA Media market reaches 54% of the state vote. This meant that the farm worker human billboards were reaching an audience from Santa Barbara on the north to San Bernardino and Riverside on the south. Millions of dollars of free - and sympathetic - advertising.

One Sunday right before the election we brought all the billboard squads together and completely surrounded (10 yards apart) the Memorial Coliseum up to three hours before

the LA Rams football game, which probably drew 80,000 spectators. By this time almost all of the football fans in LA knew what these human billboards were and why they were there. This time, however, our human billboards were to remain silent. It had a powerful and sobering effect on the thousands of people who had to pass through these billboard lines. Once again, the media picked it up and rolled it out.

So there we were, just Cesar and I, sitting in the big open room of our "No on 22" campaign headquarters looking out onto Olympic Boulevard five stories below. It was very late in the evening, every one had gone home or back to our farm worker encampment at Lincoln Park to get some rest for another early morning of billboarding and our "Get Out The Vote" drive. Cesar was tired and very nervous about the upcoming election. I was very uptight myself and was wondering if there was any last minute campaigning that we could do. Just a few days before with some of our Hollywood media contacts I had been able to arrange for a 30 second "Cesar 'No on 22' spot" to be aired on the Archie Bunker show. It was very expensive (I forget how much) but all the experts said it was worth it and a "coup" to even break into the show. I remember being afraid to blink for fear I would miss it.

Cesar spoke very softly and with a friendly but nervous edge to his voice. He simply explained to me that if we lost the election tomorrow, I would have to take the blame. I couldn't answer. I was totally silenced by the harsh reality of what he had said. I was completely helpless. My closest friend, almost nine years now, had just explained the political facts of life to me. I had worked on this "life and death" campaign full time since July, barely had any time to even see Bonnie and my daughters, unless she was in the office working. I worked late into the nights on the telephone plotting strategy with my staff directors in other California cities and then worrying half-to-death about everything because of the stakes involved for Cesar and the union. And now, to top it all off, I had been reduced to a fall guy. I didn't answer Cesar. I just nodded and gave sort of a shrug of the shoulders.

The union won! Proposition 22 was defeated 58% to 42%. (Nixon beat McGovern 54% to 40%). I did not feel like coming to the Victory Celebration because I am very uncomfortable at those kinds of events, but I did make an appearance at the tail end of the party but everyone was pretty drunk by that time and thank God all of the speeches were over! I didn't have to stay long.

Cesar tried to make it up to me. The union had a big "Welcome Home/ Thank You" dinner party in my honor for all the staff and their families at La Paz. There was a banner in the dining room that called me a "Giant Killer" and Cesar made a big to-do about my work in the campaign and how I saved the union from the power of the growers.

If the truth be known it was really Bonnie Burns Chatfield who was responsible for the defeat of Proposition 22 because it was she who discovered the thousands of fraudulent signatures used to qualify the proposition when she was examining the original documents

in the Los Angeles County Voter Registrar's Office. It was she who tracked down some of these "signers" who said, under oath, that they had never signed such a petition and would not have signed it if had been presented to them and that this was not their signature. It was she who found other "legitimate" signers who swore that they signed the petition only because they were told it would lower food prices and that there was sign over the text of the initiative that read "Lower Food Prices".

It was Bonnie's information that led me to call then Secretary of State, Jerry Brown, the only statewide elected Democrat at the time, to ask him to officially investigate this voter fraud. We met and developed this scenario: The union would call on him through the Los Angeles media to investigate this fraudulent voter activity. He, in turn, would accept our evidence and announce through the media his intention to open up an investigation. Then he would announce, through the media again, that he was calling on the District Attorney of Los Angeles, Joe Busch, (a Republican up for reelection in a tight race) to investigate this voter fraud in LA County and issue indictments if his investigation warranted them.

For his part, Joe Busch told the media that he would open up such an investigation and take whatever action was necessary. A few days before the election, the headlines of the Los Angeles Times screamed out that the DA had issued 7 indictments in the Prop. 22 case. The sub-headline referred to voter fraud used to qualify the proposition. Proposition 22 was defeated because it was smeared in the media. (I learned much later in life that political propositions in California rarely ever pass because all the opponents have to do is "smear it" or raise confusing and doomsday-type questions about its results for citizens. A "no" vote is the safest course for the voter.)

I can't pretend that my Proposition 22 experience was my reason for leaving the union in August of 1973 but I can tell you it imbued me with a new sense of reality about my relationship with Cesar and the union. And ten months later I left Cesar to start all over again.

You ask how much was my life influenced by Cesar Chavez? Let me give you some practical examples. It was because of Cesar that I left religious life. Because of him I met Bonnie and got married. (June 1966). We had 4 daughters born in the farm worker movement - Clare and Sarah in a Bakersfield hospital, Kate at the UCLA Medical Center and Amy at the Community Hospital in Tehachapi.

It was because of Cesar that after we were married we lived in a trailer park in Torrance, in a mobile home in an open field next to a farm labor camp in Delano, in a custom farm house next to the rose fields between McFarland and Delano, in a Delano tract home across from the high school ball field (2 separate times), in a one-room apartment in Silver Lake (LA), in a custom built home in the Hollywood Hills, in a two-story Berkeley-type house in a black ghetto of Central Los Angeles that had been closed up for up for more than ten years, in a parsonage under the LAX flight pattern, in a two-room house in

Guadalupe (Arizona) and in a three-room, 500 square foot duplex at La Paz with four small children. That's only 11 moves in 7 years, so I might have missed a few.

Because of Cesar Chavez I met Jerry Brown. But that's another story.

Chapter V contains my prophecy about the future of Cesar Chavez and his farmworker movement.

Appendix I contains Cesar's manifesto on non-violence in his "Open Letter" to E.L. Barr, President of the California Grape and Tree Fruit League. I include it for several reasons. First, because I wrote it. It was one of the very few times in my life when I felt inspired to write. The ideas, of course, were Cesar's but not in the sense that he dictated them because he didn't have to. His ideas about non-violence and its use as a strategic weapon developed gradually throughout the course of his career as an organizer. He read Gandhi's works, thought carefully about his ideas and talked about them. He admired Dr. King and his commitment to non-violence. But most of all, I think, he felt that the practice of the Gospel required it. He and I - and many others - often talked about non-violence.

I remember reading aloud to him a dozen times or more drafts of the "Open Letter" as I worked on it. He offered suggestions here and there but I could tell he really liked it. I hoped it would come off worthy enough to be compared to Martin Luther King's Letter From Birmingham Jail and would have a life of its own. It didn't. We put it out, primarily through our church network, and in a few weeks it vanished, forever.

But the grower's "Response to an Open Letter on the Grape Boycott " is precious. If you read nothing else you must read that. It contains all the elements of the grower's public relations theme-strategy to defeat the farm workers movement:

Cesar is a hypocrite because he can read and write. His union receives big money from big labor. Dolores Huerta knows how to dress up for fund raising parties. Cesar only wants to build a union to collect the dues. Cesar is a hypocrite!

Cesar is destroying the family farmer.

Cesar is supported by the ACLU, SNNC, CRLA and many other "new left" groups. You know what that means.

Table grape workers are the highest paid farm workers in California. Farm workers in California are the highest paid in the nation. Go pick on some other state and help some really poor farm workers.

The secondary boycott of grapes intimidates housewives and store clerks.

Cesar Chavez does not have the support of my workers.

The growers support national collective bargaining legislation for farm workers, as long as there are no strikes at harvest time or boycotts later on. Cesar does not.

Cesar does not want a union, he wants social revolution.

Saul Alinsky was a mentor of Cesar's and you know what that means.

These snide, condescending and flag-waving smears were always the same. I heard them first in Berkeley in 1965 when I debated a public relations agent representing a grower's association and then like a drum beat that carried on incessantly until the grape strike was won in 1970. I have always been surprised that California agribusiness could not have purchased better propaganda. Sometimes it seemed to me like an unfair fight.

Appendix II is a "human interest" feature about Jim Drake and me written for the St. Louis Post Dispatch by Jack Rice. I suppose the reason why I kept it all these years is because I'm the one that is "featured". But aside from that, it provides some interesting insights about Cesar Chavez and his movement.

Cesar never wanted to have employees in the union, only volunteers. He had seen too many examples from other organizations (not only unions, either) how employees became interested only in the "job" and not the cause. His solution was to give every volunteer \$5 a week spending money, provide them with room and board and pay their necessary bills (car payment, college loan, house payment, utilities, etc.) Not only did this approach save a lot of precious money but it was a daily reminder to the staff person why he/she was part of the movement and it also insured that the less committed left sooner rather than too late. This approach also honed the survival skills of staff workers who were assigned to boycott cities. They were expected to "live off the land". Housing, food, automobiles, office space, medical care, etc. -- all had to be hustled.

There were exceptions made to this policy but as few as possible. I was one, Jerry Cohen, Fred Ross, the attorneys and some others. Some staff members were assigned to the union but were on other organizations' payrolls; Chris Hartmire is an example that comes to mind. In Cesar's mind this arrangement did not contravene his policy. (For some, Cesar used the rationale that they worked for the National Farm Workers Service Center and not the union.) Not, mind you, that any of the exceptions were paid more than a stipend, but we were given that lump sum of money once a month and had to make do. As you can imagine there were times when these exceptions caused internal friction but somehow Cesar was always able to finesse these situations. But he never wavered from the general rule. Wouldn't even consider it! The other side of the coin is that some volunteers convinced themselves that they were not really being paid and were not that productive. And it becomes difficult and messy to fire "volunteers".

Even as early as 1968 Cesar Chavez talked to me about finding a union headquarters outside of Delano. His ideal was to find a place that could also serve as a vacation area for farm worker families, especially those members of the union who were elected to Ranch Committees. I found a place in Santa Barbara - one of Cesar's favorite places in the world - and we went to look at. It was on a hill overlooking the city and the ocean but it was too fancy a neighborhood for our needs. Then there was a few hundred acres I found on the side of a hill overlooking the ocean but the terrain was quite steep and it was bare ground. I looked around in the area of Mission San Antonio because Cesar loved to come there for some of our retreat meetings - it was quiet and secluded. I could find nothing. I found La Paz in Keene, California a few miles down the mountain from Tehachapi and Cesar wanted it. Frank Denison, our Service Center attorney at that time, structured the deal with movie producer Edie Lewis who bought it at auction from Kern County on behalf of the National Farm Worker's Service Center.

It suited Cesar's purposes. There was a wide range of housing (duplexes, hospital rooms, single family homes, etc.), there were offices, there was a central kitchen and dining facility, it had acreage, it was in the mountains and was off the beaten track. I take whatever credit is appropriate for the purchase of this property for the headquarters of the union and I was a most loyal supporter but I still wonder if our relocation from Delano to Keene (renamed by Cesar: La Paz) was wise. I think a case could have been made that this headquarters isolated us from the farm workers dirt and changed our orientation. But now that it is Cesar's burial place it will serve a purpose in history that outstrips any second-guessing about what was best for the farm worker union movement. Cesar has the last word, again.

Finally, the article in the St. Louis Post Dispatch about Cesar's fast in Arizona gives you a glimpse of the power of his fasts. Delegations of workers and Native American tribes from all over Arizona came to St. Rita's Center to spend a few minutes visiting with Cesar in his "monastic" cell. Celebrities, politicians and media reporters from all over North American came to pay their respect. Cesar's fasting became an organizing tool par excellence. I say now that Cesar's farm workers movement would have long since died without his periodic and public fasts.