

Arizona Fast 1972

I insert here an article by Jack Rice, published on June 7, 1972 in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. It captures, I think, some of the nitty-gritty flavor of the Arizona Fast and the bone-tiring activity that is required to pull it off - and it features Jim Drake and yes, yours truly.

Article from St. Louis Post Dispatch—June 7, 1972

“Ardent Apostles of Cesar Chavez” by Jack Rice

Dateline: Phoenix, Arizona

When Cesar Chavez settles down to a lengthy fast, and each of them has been one more than is good for him, there is publicity value in it for his United Farm Workers. Two men most appreciative of that, and most revering of the purity of their leader’s purpose, and most wishful that he would choose another way to express it, are Leroy [sic] Chatfield and Jim Drake.

Chatfield and Drake are identified, on the infrequent occasions they come in public view, as administrative assistants to Chavez. Apostles are more like it. Preferably they are anonymous apostles, providers and framers of The Union Word for others to spread, in the farm fields of California, Florida, Arizona, Texas, Washington, Oregon, Michigan, among the migrant workers. Drake says they save reporters a lot of time.

“If you had to get the story from the field organizers,” he said, “you’d have a hell of a time; only about 12 percent of them speak English. That’s why it takes our union so long to organize and have meetings. We have to say everything twice, once in Spanish and once in English.”

Chatfield, 36 years old, is clean-shaven, blond, thin. He moves with the haste of a priest late getting to the confessional. He is pleasant without smiling much. He was in the Christian Brothers, a Catholic order of teachers, for 15 years, and when he asked for release from his religious vows in order to follow Chavez, in 1965, he was assistant principal of a high school in Bakersfield, Calif. He uses hell and damn a lot in conversation, with an almost Christian touch, for respectful emphasis.

Drake, 32, is bearded, swarthy, 6 feet and strong. He smiles often. He received a bachelor’s degree in philosophy at Occidental College, and then went to Union Theological Seminary in New York. He received a bachelor’s degree in divinity in 1962 and went home to the San Joaquin Valley in California.

The California Migrant Ministry, an affiliate of the California Council of Churches, assigned him to the Chavez movement, where he was an oddity because he was being paid for his work, \$6000 a year. He long since has given up the salary.

Chatfield and Drake came here to administrate while Chavez fasted for 24 days. That is not a record for him, but the 44-year old Mexican-American labor leader is, as always, terribly weakened. Chatfield and Drake go on administering. Nominally, their enterprise now is to obtain signatures on a petition for the recall of Jack Williams, Governor of Arizona.

Actually, they are trying to get farm workers to register as voters, and stacking up signatures on a recall petition is being done as a show of union strength. They need 103,000 signatures, or 25 per cent of the total votes cast when Williams was re-elected in 1970.

“We will get the signatures,” said Drake, “but we are not naive. We know we haven’t got a chance at the recall. THEY can stall us off easily in the courts and Williams will stay in office until the ’74 elections, but THEY will know we’ve got strength too, by then.”

Williams became Chavez’s opposite symbol. Establishment villain versus Worker hero, last month when the Governor signed a new Arizona farm labor bill. The bill forbids secondary boycotts and strikes at harvest time. Secondary boycotts occur, for example, when people show up at supermarkets carrying “Don’t Buy Grapes” signs.

The law does not become effective until Aug. 13, but the cantaloupe crop in the Yuma area started to approach the pickable stage about the time Williams signed the measure.

Chavez and his assistants came to Phoenix and set up headquarters in the barrio, at the Santa Rita Community Center Building. Chavez took to a bed in a small room, about the size of one a monk would call home. The message intended was: Don’t pick melons.

Chatfield and Drake set up an office in a house trailer parked next to the Community Center. The trailer is air-conditioned but, parked on the unpaved and littered and dusty lot, it really lacks what they have come to consider the comforts of home.

Home for them, their wives and their children, is La Paz, the national headquarters of the United Farm Workers. Chatfield described La Paz:

It formerly was a 144-bed tuberculosis sanatorium and is near the town of Keene, about 30 houses on a bend in the Santa Fe railroad tracks. About 200 people live there, 125 of them adults on the staff of the United Farm Workers. Chatfield’s wife is secretary to Chavez.

“I don’t know of any other labor union that started this way,” Chatfield said. “I don’t want to give the impression it’s a commune, it sure as hell isn’t. My wife and I and our four little girls have three rooms in one of the out buildings—that’s another thing, there are a lot of out buildings, we don’t have to live dormitory style in the old hospital—two bedrooms and a combination living room and kitchen. There are 200 acres on the place; for the kids, it’s really great.”

The Union has 22,000 members, and the dues are \$3.50 a month. The union’s money has an unusual respect for gravity. Most of it falls back to the membership, in benefits, leaving very little at the top, among the officers.

Each worker at La Paz is paid \$5 a week to squander at will, and a food allowance of \$10 for each adult in his family—\$5 for each child.

We were sitting in the Community Hall, talking about the hospitalized Chavez, which almost is the same thing as Chatfield talking about himself.

Chavez came off his fast last weekend. He had been taken to the hospital on the twentieth day and doctors there achieved what seems a wonder to Chatfield. They persuaded him to drink water that had been strained off boiling vegetables. That gave the water taste, and diminished his nausea. Chatfield said, unsmiling, "Well, it's better than at home when he isn't fasting—just one damn diet cola after another."

At the other end of the Community Center two of his daughters were having supper, from the center's kitchen, run by volunteers. A man volunteer was setting up chairs, for the daily evening Mass, at 7:30.

He was getting the maximum volume from the combination of metal chair legs and concrete floor, and not a decibel of it was getting through to a volunteer asleep on an air mattress. Someone came to Chatfield and handed him three telegrams, from hundreds received during the fast.

One was from Oscar Ehrardt, president of the St. Louis Labor Council. One was from Clarence Luetkenhaus, president of the St. Louis and the Missouri council of United Auto Workers. He pledged himself anew against nonunion lettuce.

He had the company, in the matter of sending a telegram and encouraging the fast, of bishops, the governor of Rhode Island, Bobby Seale, Angela Davis and union people in Japan, England, the Continent.

Chatfield smiled, faintly, an expression of glee running wild, for him. He touched the telegrams from St. Louis. He said, "These things don't just happen, you know. We have a bureau of volunteers in St. Louis."

He was tired and it showed. He was asked what kept him going. Food obviously does not play much part in his energy. He looked almost sad and stared at the floor so long that his silence seemed building to a no comment. It wasn't.

He said, "It has a religious element, partly. And Cesar. It's an unusual opportunity. I was a teacher for nine years, at Bakersfield and in San Francisco. In both schools the children I taught were from families that had economic stability. In San Francisco, especially, it was stability based on their fathers' union memberships.

"In 1963 I went to a National Catholic Social Action convention in Boston, and that is where I first heard of Cesar Chavez, living only 30 miles away from me, in California. When I came home, I went to meet him. And in '65, when the grape strike started, I told myself what this guy's doing makes a lot more sense, trying to improve the lives of poor families, poor children, than what I'm doing.

"I went to my superiors and asked them to be relieved of my vows of chastity and obedience. Usually you have to do that by way of Rome, and that is one long way around. But when I told them what I wanted to do, I was out of the order in 40 hours."

Drake had been cranking a mimeograph machine. The union gets its five bucks worth each week out of his right arm, at that machine.

He said, "I grew up in Thermal, near Palm Springs. My father taught there eight years, until he was fired in '55, when I was 15. He'd been going out in the fields, hauling kids to class, cutting their hair. I didn't know what was going on, what got the school board mad at him, but I sensed there was some screwy set of values at work against him.

"Well, when that '65 grape strike came along, from 1000 members and only \$80 in the treasury, suddenly we had a cause, and it was colorful, and we became a movement. That's when I gave up my salary from the Council of Churches. The growers weren't happy about the ministry helping the strikers."

There is talk, of course, sniping if not openly snide. A movement that is most of and for Mexican-American workers, many of them Mexican nationals in the States on work permits, depends heavily on such Anglo-intellectuals as Chatfield and Drake.

Drake laughed. He had a Cesar Says answer. They have a million of them. He said, "Cesar says he doesn't care what you are. It's only what you want to do for the cause."