

Farm Worker Documentation Project

Media/x Bob Hatton Oral History Archive: Delano Grape Strikers – 2005

Jesus Marin & Rico Barrera: Early Years with Cesar Chavez / 19 minutes recording

Jose Marin Barrera: We found out that the march was going to come. The one who organized us there in the march was Mr. Manuel Chavez (a relative of Cesar Chavez). Manuel Chavez is the one who went on ahead scouting for people in the towns with whom they (marchers) would stay so they would know where they were going to sleep the following day. When this happened in Ducor, we came to bring them coffee, pastries; but they were few people. We got there a little late, and the people had already left. But from the ones that were there outside sleeping at a house, we realized that they weren't that many.

When they arrived in Porterville, we were already organized in the way in which we were going to do it. So then we came a little late because Mr. (Cesar) Chavez was already there lying in the shade because it was real hot. But just the same, we arrived with these apparatus (accordion and guitar) that we have here in our hands to bring joy to the march that was making it's way along; and was suffering, and that would suffer still even more because, in truth, Sacramento was very far. We gave no thought on how it was going to be done, but it was done in a way that every person who met there at the park took a person or two people to their home to sleep; and in the morning we had to make lunch or two lunches, depending, in order to keep moving forward.

We left Porterville for Lindsay and Lindsay was already organized, too, as to where the people would stay; and it gave us so much joy in doing this because in those days, well, we didn't know about marches. We didn't know about organizations. We didn't know anything. But we found out that united we could work so much better than what we had been. It was something that gave us joy; and we even kept on doing it and kept on doing it and kept on doing it. We would go to work and at noon or in the afternoons we would go to meet up with them over there to give them strength, encouragement; and in spite of being extremely tired some young men would even dance there in the hot sun because we had no shade only the sun in those days that we left for Sacramento.

Our experience, I believe, could be used or it could be viewed that we, the organizers that are already in our golden years, the last one third of our lives, have...we will leave a great memory to the youth. Well, right now I feel proud with the two daughters that we still have here in the home. They came to visit us; and we told them if they wanted to come to this meeting, and they wholeheartedly came because they suffered the way we suffered in the marches because they, too, participated in walking in picket lines in the town where we live there in Porterville. We did (picketed) various stores and they, too, helped us advance our cause. So, I feel proud that they are here with us; and I want a wholeheartedly applause for my daughters-both who are here with us. She (Yolanda Barrera) was the interpreter, in case you don't know. She was the interpreter of some of the meetings of the union. Mr. Cesar Chavez would say, "Come up here, Yolanda." She was fourteen, fifteen years old, she, I think, during that time. (Yolanda speaks in the background giving her exact age at the time.) Thirteen and she would help hold the meetings in Spanish or English. If they spoke English, she would translate for them in Spanish.

When Mr. Cesar Chavez put me as organizer and (union) representative of (because there in my house they made it into an office) the people came to look for work with me...to me...with me. Schenley was the only one (union contract) we had won during that time. Then people would come. They would tell me, "How can I join? How can I work for Schenley?" Then I would give them a pass or a paper to present there at the ranch and they would begin to work. At the end of the week they would go and pay. Two dollars and fifty

cents was paid in those days to organize or, in other words, to work. So it was an honor for me to have done that for Mr. Chavez whom we so greatly admired.

And the things that he would tell us I can't comprehend. Just now as we were traveling down the road we were remembering that when he would say, "we will do this", he would do it with such confidence that everything was going to turn out well; and it did turn out well for us. Therefore, it is an extremely important thing to me that he is the one who organized us. We did it with the intention that we believed in our mind, we thought that bringing the people together, the more we brought them together the better. In all the towns they had tremendous organization in those days in that if something would happen just like *this* (the present filming) everyone would turn out from all the towns to the meetings. We in those days beli...all along we had believed that the people had to be organized, and what a large number got organized! But all of us did it. We would go to work, we would come (home) at two in the afternoon, we would bathe, and then we would go to the march or in other words, to catch up with the march.

At the time for us it wasn't a hardship. For the ones that it was a hardship was for the actual people who were marching every day with those blisters those things that would break out on their feet; it was a terrible sight. Then, the more we enjoyed ...or the more effort we put into organizing the people so that we could bring ourselves out from our present condition and from where we did lift ourselves. It may not appear so but a lot has been accomplished. A lot has improved. You who are aware of all the programs; many, many people have benefited from the sacrifices that we made in those days.

(Answering another question) Okay, to start we would need... first of all, the one who organized us in Porterville was Jim Drake (Migrant Ministry). Jim Drake was involved; he too, was from the union. He helped the union a lot during that time. He organized us to buy homes or to put down payments on houses; but at the end it was not possible because many of us had homes in Texas or many did not have the right permits-in other words, that they were United States citizens.

So then he told us, "Wouldn't you like to join Cesar Chavez' union?"

"Who is this Cesar Chavez?"

"He is a person in Delano," he said, "that has...who has his group, and I would like for you to become organized."

We were organized in the sense that we had an office in Porterville. We sold gas to the members. We sold tires to the members. The one young lady there, Yolanda, uh, she is the one who worked during that time, one hour, to...to run that office by regulations, right; because she is a person who truly helped us a lot to organize, also. They (Yolanda and her sister) would go out to pump gas. They would come and pay her.

Then, when they told us about Cesar- "Well then, let's see him, let's meet him."

Then he came to our office and he explained that he...his objective and the plans he had in mind and we liked it. Then, all the members that we had there all of us came here to this area (Delano); not to these houses (Casa Hernandez) because these houses weren't (here). And here we had a meeting, and we got organized with him.

Yolanda Barrera interprets for Bill Hatton: Besides El Teatro (Campesino) if there were any persons who played music?

Jesus Marin Barrera: In some towns like Modesto or Sacramento; no, not Sacramento, Fresno. When they were arriving (into towns) mariachis would come out; some people, some mariachis to meet them.

Yolanda Barrera: But for the march?

Jesus Marin Barrera: For the march just us-me and my brother and uh...

Yolanda Barrera (interprets for Bill Hatton): ...that I ask you that if by any chance it would have been possible to have reached Sacramento without you. (Yolanda and the audience break into laughter at the question).

Yolanda Barrera (continues to interpret): ...that if by chance you do not understand the significance? He says he is not joking; that if you know the importance of the music? He then says that without music it (the march) would have been more difficult.

Jesus Marin Barrera: That is one of the beautiful things that we leave, right, that we plan to leave-a memory. And that memory-*this* is the memory (Bill Hutton's film) for our families and for people who come after us of what we did and what we are willing to do as long as we have life. Like this meeting that was convened here, uh, it is very important to see those people who struggled together with all of us. It pleases me to have been here.

Rico Barrera: Well, at the beginning we really were afraid because during that time it was very difficult to organize, well, for the organizers to organize the people. It was very difficult to...a lot of people were afraid. One would say to them, "Come over here; join in the march. It is important, you know, because Cesar Chavez is here"-as well all those who were coming marching along, too. Then, well, we would get scared in those days. But with time we started getting more...we began losing a bit more of our fear. We were getting rid of our fear, and from then on out we went with confidence every afternoon. We would leave work, we would get dressed; and we would meet up with the march. Every day, every day, we would go meet up with them until they arrived at Sacramento. So then, for us it is an extremely great experience and very important to share with the present generation of this day. It is important that they learn what happened in that time which was the year 1966,-the great and important march of Cesar Chavez.

(Question is nor audible)

Rico Barrera: Well, with the guitar you get a callous here. So much so that now that I have stopped playing the guitar, then if I pick it up to play now my fingertips hurt a lot. It hurts quit a bit. Then, in those days, well, since every day we would go the fingers begin adjusting. They become accustomed to the guitar. To continue playing, understand. It was a huge sacrifice because we had to walk holding the guitar, and play, play constantly. Every day we would go to meet up with the march. But then eventually, as I said, the fingers become accustomed playing the guitar.

(Background: Yolanda says, "And walking".)

Rico Barrera: Walking, playing and at times singing with people that came up to us there. We would march singing De Colores, and things like that. Various songs that the people liked; and we, well, we would continue playing. Me and my brother playing-him with the

accordion and me with the guitar. And it was, like I say, it was a very important experience for both of us.

Jesus Marin Barrera: With the, with the...the accordion is a curious thing that...I am not a musician, but in my way of thinking, I believe that we did the best that was possible because we had a strong desire to play; and to reach the people that were marching along. And the accordion is heavy when one is walking. Now sometimes I think to myself, "How did we do it to go every day? To go walking, playing being that I am not a musician? If I was a musician it would be fine, but I am not a musician." (Laughter)

Jesus Marin Barrera: She (Yolanda), too, plays the accordion because she is...

(Another question)

Jesus Marin Barrera: Well no, no we don't call it suffering because in reality when a family is together, well, it is a tremendous strength that it gives one. Back then, they (daughters) would go do picketing with us. They were involved all the time. So then, it would give us such strength that my wife and I felt pride because they would help us.

One time when we were conducting a march from Woodville to Porterville; well, they told us, "If you are going to pass through Main with that march we are going to arrest everyone." So then, many people were afraid.

But other people would say, "Well, let them arrest us at least there are a lot of us-we are going to pass anyway."

And we were going to pass. With the youngster, my son; there was a car wanting to pass the march because the people had formed a line, right, (around two hundred, three hundred people) and the car wanted to get by. And my son got in front (of the car) with tremendous risk of danger that he would get hit, right? But they (the children), all the time, were involved with us.

When they were going to take us to jail there at Smith, a store, my wife told them, "Why are you taking him?"

"Because he is the leader."

"Well, I lead, too."

"Well, then, you go to the can (jail), too" -although, they didn't take us to the can. (Laughter)

But you do feel something strong. Yes, to repeat, the family that is united is so much stronger.

Yolanda Barrera: Tell them about people who bought grapes in the stores and what they did. How they came out of the stores eating grapes.)

Jesus Marin Barrera: When they came out with grapes they would eat them, just like the one who was president, Reagan, at that time. He would place the grapes (the bunch near his mouth) and he would pretend he was eating grapes.

And to calm the people, we would say, “Look at Smith, it is a grocery store there (in Porterville); it has a lot of beans on display at the entrance because he says they are sole for the Mexicans.”

And the people would get real angry and would leave instead. (Laughter)

Okay, when the march that reached Sacramento ended, uh, some people from San Jose came to talk with us asking for us to go play music at a dance; and I said to myself, “Well, how am I going to go play at a dance if I don’t know how to play?” (Laughter)

“Well, no, he said, “over there the ones from San Jose,” he said, “said that you are helping the union a lot”, he said, “ and they want to see you and that for you to come play at a dance.”

“Hey, well then, let’s go over there, too.”

And so it was there where, he with his guitar, and me with my accordion and my brother-in-law, (I have a brother-in-law who plays drums and we took him along, too,) we left in two vans to...to, San Jose.

No, and then they break out with “these are the men? Wow! They gave us a round of applause.” (Laughter)

“Are they the ones??” (Laughter)

They would touch us because some would ask, “These are the ones?”

“Yes, yes, these are the ones.” (Laughter)

But a lot of them said, most likely said; and we, also, in our own way of perceiving things said, “Since they don’t even know how to play; how come they came to play here (dance)?” (Laughter)

But that is the, that is...that is why...(Continuous laughter). Well, anyway, he (his brother) felt encouraged in that he already knew how to play a little and me, too. But just there at home or for a small fiesta there with our own; but nor for the public. (Laughter)

Well, and here we are still.

Rico Barrera: No, well, like my brother said, we were not professional musicians except that, well, I played a little guitar because I am...I am a drummer. I played with the Carlos Casa group that was called The Vagabonds. Well, like I say, I played the guitar; but I didn’t play it very well because I only know the keys-straight keys of the guitar. Then, well, I accompanied my brother, you know, on guitar; and I liked it just the same. Only I wanted him to play a little better still, you see; but, well, it wasn’t possible (laughter) because we didn’t have much experience and he wasn’t a musician either. I am a musician. Well, I was a musician because I played the drums; and like I say, well, it gave me great satisfaction in those days to play like that. When the march happened, it was with even greater satisfaction. It was there that we began to pick up a little more...me the guitar. I started playing it a little, and like I say, I still play a little; still the same with my brother. Well, I get in there with him and play at a lower register. We sometimes get together by chance there at his house or what have you; and we practice. Just to play like that just a little because, like I say, he knows how

to play the accordion a little. But it gives us great pleasure to have played during that time (march).

Jesus Marin Barrera: The one who, the one who...the accordion is a good thing. The one who knows how to play can play it, right? (Laughter)

Rico Barrera: (Laughing) I agree, yes.

Jesus Marin Barrera: But, I don't know how to play. I just do it as though I know how to play.

Rico Barrera: The accordion is a good thing but what it lacks is fingers (of someone who can play.)

Jesus Marin Barrera: It's been about forty-three years and playing only the one way.

From someone in the audience: Knock yourself out and play one!

Jesus Marin Barrera: Well, just one. It's the one and only one I know. (Peals of laughter)

The End

Translated 9/09
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