

(Note from LeRoy Chatfield: of course my first inclination was to edit Claro Rundal's letter to make simple grammar, spelling and punctuation corrections, but I decided not to do so. As written, the letter is quite readable and understandable, and in my view, more authentic. I have given in to the temptation to title his essay, but I chose the exquisite words written by Brother Rundal to do so.)

“Soldiers of the Soil”

LETTER FROM CLARO RUNDAL TO FRED ABAD

December 16, 1981

Dear Fred,

We received the beautiful x'mas card you send us, with your short note requesting me to write down my life experiences from my boyhood back in our homeland way down here in US. Fred all things I remember - I may as well write down, and to begin with as follows:

I was born on August 12, 1905 in the province of La Union a little town of Caba. I was only 2 years old when my love mother died leaving me under the care of my grandmother, whom I thought was my mother when I began to understand things about life. My father remarried when I was 9 yrs. old. I have 2 step brothers twice older than me. My father sent me to a particular Ilocano teacher to learn how to read and write when I was 10 yrs old. My father sent me to study English language when I was 11 yrs old together with one of my step brothers in 9 barrio 3 km. away from ours. My first teacher was Mr. Anastacio Mamaril. Because of poverty, I haven't gone so far in English education. I only finished higher elementary grade in 1923.

From that time, I came to think about my future life, how may it start to bloom. That time I heard many good news about Manila, capital of the Phil. I have decided to see Manila, to my hope, I may learn and experience life progress for my future. That was in June 1923 when I first step in the beautiful city of Manila, but my disappointment, I can't pick a single word or understand the tagalog language, which is now the National language of the Phil.

During my first 3 months without job, I got worried because I was then running out of money, but luckily I found a job. I was employed to one of the largest Tobacco factory called La Flor dela Isabela, located at Isaac Peral, Manila. \$1.10 was our daily wage, we're working for 10 hrs. I didn't stay long to this job because I met two Ilocano good friends who had long been working to a sugar plantation in Calamba Sugar State the biggest sugar mill in Luzon located at Canlubang, Laguna. It was November 1923, 23 when I went with them to work in said sugar mill. In that sugar mill there were barracks for common laborers, unfortunately I got sick with typhoid fever, but I was never confined in the

company hospital, my friends treated me as one of their family member (I'll never forget them).

During my days in Canlubang, I had worked chopping woods, called kaingin, we are paid according of how heavy trees are being cut in a 25 sq. meter area. I also cut sugar cane during its season getting paid 80 cents a ton to \$1.10 per 2000 lbs, the wage is adjusted according of how heavy the crop is. I also engaged in railroad building down to Biniang, Laguna.

In July, 1924, I went to Bataan (Paisacan Sawmill) at a daily wage of \$1.20. Then a big storm wrecked all lumber railroad track to the mill so the mill was closed. Mind to tell you, I was attacked with malaria during my stay at the sawmill because our drinking water comes from the rain thru the mountains.

So I went back to Manila, luckily a middle aged woman gave money for our transportation to Gapan, Nueva Ecija with other boys of my age. Upon our arrival in Gapan I was employed with a couple who run a bakery and dry goods they gave me \$10.00 mo. free board and lodging. When I got my first pay, it was only \$8.00. I complained and the manager told me that the woman who brought me there charged \$2.00 for my fare. I came to understand I was sold for \$2.00 to the store owner. On that year I learned to bake all kinds of cakes and later on my salary was raised to \$15.00 mo free board and lodging. But some good friends of mine invited me to work to a blacksmith for they believe that what I am receiving as a baker is so low, so I accepted my work with the blacksmith in barrio Bantog, between Munoz and the Agricultural school. I work here from 1925 to 1926, making 20% to every peso we made from our customers. Bad time happened our shop was blazed down by fire and I was cut out of job again.

Same year another new came, the beginning of the colorums, that was the association of farmers against the Hacenderos (landowners) that was in April 1926. Then a man who owned trucks stationed in Solano, Nueva Vizcaya needed helper, I agreed to go with him to a \$20.00 mo. salary with free board and lodging. I was so happy to see different places, but what excited me on my first trip to Nueva Vizcaya was the road. Believe me, one traffic at a time, there was a telephone being used to be sure that there is only one traffic crossing the mountain ranges because road gong to Cagayan Valley was very risky during those years 1926, 1927 to 1928.

I had been in Solano for 3 yrs. Going almost where roads are good for truck transportation. The farthest place that I traveled to the North is Bacarra, Ilocos Norte; Cauayan, Isabels, farthest to the East, Sual, Lingayen farthest to the West. Again during my stay at Solano, Nueva Vizcaya I was then attacked by malaria, happily I overcame my illness.

Then in 1929, this is one of the worst part of my life, I was still in Solano, as a driver of trucks, I spit blood. Fortunately, Dr. Geronimo Ortega from Laoag, Ilocos Norte, gave me

medicine for my illness. In a couple of weeks, I get well, but my boss sent me home for good. So I went back home, while in my hometown I went to apply as driver in a transportation co. stationed in Demortis, La Union, I was accepted with a mo. salary of \$40.00 free board and lodging. My line was from south to north (La Union).

On June 20, 1930 we came to America with my brother 7 yrs, younger than me. We landed in San Francisco on July 14, 1930. The first job that we encountered was picking cucumber, oh what a surprise, it really hurts my back I could hardly walk the following day.

It was our dream with my brother to pursue our education here in America but unfortunately 1930 was the beginning of depression, 30¢ per hr. for general farm labor. Every year that follows, wages gone down and down until 12 1/2¢ per hr. Those were terrible years to make a living. In 1932, July I went to Alaska, Salmon Cannery Industry. It was a kind of tough to join canneries those days because all Alaska canneries were under contract system, this means you have to spend your money to bribe contractors before you are accepted. I was employed under P. Harris Co. in Uganik Bay cannery for 2 1/2 mo. for \$60.00 a mo.

From 1931 to 1952 I was engaged in asparagus in San Joaquin Valley, a seasonal job, from March to July 3rd each year. Mind to tell you during those years, some labor camps were poorly made, during night times you could count stars thru the holes in the roof. From the 30th to the 50th, we have to go early in all labor camps to split woods for bathroom and for cooking. All asparagus contracts were all crops must be harvested everyday, rain or shine, and employers may pay crops uncut each day according to market price. One more bad thing during those days, every payday \$25.00 is being held by the co. as your deposit from your wages. If you quit before the end of the season, you can't collect your deposit. Also, we are paid by 100 lbs. No. 1 is higher, No. 2 is lower according to the contract.

1938 the Phil. Government send commissioner Francisco Varona to Hawaii and to California to study the situation of all farm workers, specially we Filipinos, because of so many reports to our Phil. Gov't. that we Filipino farm workers were so badly treated by many growers. Francisco Varona learned that asparagus contract during those days were not human contract but he said they were dog contracts. So, he started to organize we Filipinos to have a labor Union, called, Filipino Agricultural Labor Union (FALU) Mr. Varona picked Dr. Bautista of Stockton and Elias Cabradilla to be his organizer assistants. Unfortunately Francisco died here in State early, so our Union was discontinued.

1948 – C.I.O. of Seattle, Wash. again came to San Joaquin Valley to organize a Labor Union. I was again involved, mind to tell you, that was one of the most tough labor movement. Some growers rise to mount machine guns in their private properties entrance. After two weeks of heavy picketing, I have learned that our movement was a failure. It was my first time to be evicted from our camp, I didn't feel sorry but rather being happy because we have shown to many farm workers who don't understand the value of a Labor

Union, which is the only way we, poor farm workers will and must have power to demand for a better living condition, and above all is to get together for one goal, justice and fair labor contracts to everyone.

1968 – came, I was employed in El Rancho Ranch in Arvin. We already have our UFW which was very young at that time. One early morning of August of that year when the sun hasn't gain yet sufficient light to break the soft petals of the morning flowers, more than hundred strikers picketed the drive way out from our labor camp waving their flags hollering, "brothers we are on strike, please don't cross our picket line," all the crew under the leadership of our crew foreman Paul Rebol crossed the picket line except me. The son of the ranch owner asked me why I didn't follow the crew, I said "Sir, I respect and patronize the picket line. He said, "you are fired," but then I said, "I am sorry to say sir that none can't fire me until I can collect every single penny I earned from this co." He said, "you will get your check this afternoon." In the afternoon I got my check, so I rolled my blanket and fly away without wings.

1969 – followed, Dolores Huerta (first vice pres. Of UFW Union) and her husband Richard Chavez, with some officers and many volunteers moved in Coachella Valley where there were over 5,000 farm workers during the peak period of harvesting. The first target was our labor camp No. 2 of Richard Bagdasarian. They explained the importance of a union. It did not take us long to understand, so we signed authorization cards, meaning to say, we want a union to represent us farm workers to the growers.

We were 37 all in our crew headed by Elias Banikid, our crew boss. It did not take long, I have organize our crew with the help of one good brother, Barry Kelendren, he is now deceased. June 13 of that year 69, we decided to start a sit-down strike. Our first day sit-down, sheriffs, policemen, security guards, lawyers of the company came to our labor camp. We were guarded like ex-convicts in Alcatraz prisoners. On that day an NBC reporter from Palm Spring, Ca., also came, and he happened to interview me. His first question was: "Do you know Cesar Chavez?" I said, "Yes sir." He asked me if I am working for Cesar Chavez. Of which I answered, "Not exactly working for him sir, but I am working for the policy of our Union." Again he asked me "Do you know that Cesar Chavez has a colored boy friend?" "No." I said. "By the way what is their idea going together." I asked the NBC man and he relied that, "they are working together for the communist party." So I said, "I am glad I am under democratic (principles) form of government and I know so well that communist is not welcome in this country. From there he stopped asking me questions. During our sit-down strike under the leadership of Dolores Huerta, her husband, Richard Chavez, Pete Velasco and Willie Barrientos, very active and dedicated themselves to the union and many organizer supporters were with us. Mind to tell you here – out of 5,000 farm workers in Coachella Valley, none supported our camp, but we remained solid for a sit-down strike, until we were all evicted. One thing I can't forget was my best good lawyer (Union Lawyer) at that time, David Averbuck, the one and only who had encourage me to sign our union arbitration papers to all the growers in Coachella Valley.

1973 – when our union was already 3 yrs. Contract in Coachella Valley expired, another labor movement followed, I was again employed in Karahadian Co., headed by Mr. Cadiante, a Filipino crew boss in No. 1 camp, of more than 50 people in our crew. Many of our union organizers came to my place to help me organized our crew. April 15th was the deadline of our 3 yr. Union contract so on the 16th we decided to continue our strike. Karahadian told us to sign his contract to the Teamsters Union. The Coachella Valley growers called this Teamsters Union to replace our UFW Union or to destroy – to my idea I don't know 37 from our crew walkout on the 16th of the mo. of April. Again, I was asked by the son of our big boss, why Clare you don't go to work? I said, "I don't like your Teamster Union Boss. You will sign to my UFW Union and I will work under you until you need me." He fired me, but I waited and collect all my earnings from that co. before I get out. Things happened so fast but it is not so easy to decide, but once I decided, for good or for worst, I always follow my decision.

Brothers and sisters, if my life experiences in labor struggles may ever come to a written book, I wish and hope that all reader lover of different experience may remain to guide our off-springs for their success of life for a better tomorrow, since we have known that many, many years up to now, we poor people had long, long been exploited, blindfolded and enslaved by our capitalist. It is now our time to open our eyes to follow a brighter road of life for many days to come.

I may as well add to say, that regardless of my present age 76, this 1981 my spirit, hope and desire, is with you all brothers and sisters to help organize more and more farm workers to get together, join together to build a strong union and once we have a strong union we are building a worker power – and once we have this worker power – we can fight for our common social justice, for all peaceful loving people under the burning sun. And let us not forget brothers and sisters that we farm workers are born soldiers of the soil to help one another to move the crop which every one serves on the table.

Brother Fred, this ends my experience, I know you all know the rest. And rest assured that my spirit is always with all of you brothers and sisters to continue our struggle. Do send me some new labor news sometimes bro.

Your Brother,

Claro