Fear and Tension Grip Salinas Valley in Farm Workers' Strike

By STEVEN V. ROBERTS
Special to The New York Times

SALINAS, Calif. — Red Lewis flicked his cigarette butt toward a field laden with ripe green cauliflower. "I'm harvesting my crops," he said grimly, "that's what I planted them for." His partner, Joe Violini, spat into the dust and said: "You're goddamn right, that's what we're doing."

Across the field, a group of Mexican-Americans formed a ragged picket line and waved the red banners of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee. "Huelga! Huelga!" they shouted. Strike! Strike!

"The growers thought we were kidding," said Tanis Reyna, a 21-year-old Mexican-American wearing sunglasses and a brown beret. "They think that because we're losing work time that we won't last, but we've got nothing to lose. We'll wait till we get what we want."

Red Lewis and Tanis Reyna symbolize two sides of a struggle that has engulfed the Salinas Valley in tension and terror.

One is a white farmer, determined to run his land and his life the way he always has without outside interference. The other is a Mexican-American field hand, feeling the first rush of anger and militancy, demanding more security and better working conditions in his backbreaking job.

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Several weeks ago, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters announced that it had signed contracts with 200 California growers covering field workers. Cesar Chavez, leader of the Farm Workers Organizing Committee, called the agreement a "stab in the back." Field workers, he said, were the province of his union, which recently won a five-year battle to organize workers in the California grape industry.

The teamsters at first agreed to transfer the contracts to the Chavez union, but then backed down. The growers also resisted the transfer, saying they preferred to deal with the teamsters.

The farm workers struck Aug. 24—a week before a riot erupted 300 miles away in the Mexican - American barrio of East Los Angeles in another indication of Chicano militancy. Most of the Salinas Valley's 6,000 field hands stayed out and farmers were forced to use schoolboys and families to harvest their crops. Shipments of lettuce, the area's chief crop, dropped to one-third normal. Other crops were virtually shut down.

Last week, Interharvest and Freshpict, two of the area's biggest growers, signed contracts with the farm workers, but the others were holding out. And as the strike lengthened, tempers rose. Reports of beatings were rampant. Threats and accusations filled the valley like a fog rolling in from Monterey Bay.

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This lush, narrow valley stretches for nearly 100 miles through central California. It was the birthplace of John Steinbeck and the scene of some of his most famous novels, including "East of Eden" and "The Long Valley."

In some ways the valley has not changed much since the nineteen-thirties, when Steinbeck was writing about it. The fields are still a marvelous mosaic of leafy tesserae: yellowish green beans, emerald green lettuce, blue green broccoli. The aroma of ripening strawberries and celery and garlic conveys the land's great richness.

Men still believe in simple virtues here — thrift, hard work, patriotism. The town band turned out to send the Salinas sons off to fight World War I, and today the newspaper carries letters urging Washington to "win" the war in Vietnam.

But in other ways Salinas has changed a great deal. It has grown from a town of 4,000 in Steinbeck's youth to 60,000, "spreading like crab grass toward the foothills," as he wrote in "Travels With Charley."

When prosperous farmers in "The Long Valley" came to town, they ate at the Hotel Cominos on Main Street. Today the hotel has a seedy look and a sign that says, "No Credit, No Checks Cashed." The well-to-do now eat at the Towne House or the Tee 'n Turf, all neon and plastic and red leather.

Steinbeck was born in 1902, the son of a miller. His old house is a confection of turrets and wrought iron railings and scalloped siding. Now the gentry live out from town in sleek ranch houses without a curved line in them.

Steinbeck's farmers were usually small, independent operators, rooted in their land like the huge eucalyptus trees they planted to break the fierce valley wind. But in recent years huge corporations—United Fruit, Purex, S. S. Pierce—have moved in.

In the thirties, the natives feared and loathed the thousands of Okies who fled the Dust Bowl for the Promised Land of California. Now the Okies own businesses and property, and loathe the current wave of newcomers, the Mexican-Americans.

This is not a new story. When white Americans moved in they "were an outrage to the Spanish-Mexicans and they in their turn on the Indians," Steinbeck wrote in "Travels."

"Could that be why the Sequoias make folks nervous? Those natives were grown trees when a political execution took place on Golgotha. To the Sequoias everyone is a stranger, a barbarian."

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Red Lewis was one of those Okies. He came West in 1935 with a new bride and large ambitions. "I was one of the better class of Okies," he quipped the other day, "I had two mattresses."

He found work in the packing sheds and was made idle for 61 days during the bitter lettuce strike of 1936. But he saved some money and made friends with the right people. Today he is the packer and shipper for 1,600 acres of cauliflower.

Mr. Lewis is a tall, square man but these days he drives around with a German shepherd in his station wagon, which has an American flag tied to the aerial.

"I have nothing against unions," he said, "I still have my union book from the strike of '36. But my workers don't want to belong to Chavez's union, this is being forced on them."

Why then were they all on strike? "Many families refused to picket, but they've been threatened and intimidated so much they went out," he said. "Agitators from outside are getting the people out on strike."

Joe Violini was born in this valley 58 years ago, the son of a Swiss immigrant dairy farmer, and has lived in the same house, on the same land, since 1922. "For a fella who was born and raised here," he said, "it's damn hard to eat this stuff. People who aren't even citizens are telling you what to do. That's what it amounts to."

The farm workers union is only the latest thing that is troubling Joe Violini. He complains about taxes and welfare. And a few years ago the state put a new road right through his property, cutting off his view of the Salinas River.

"You don't have any control anymore," he said, his blue eyes burning under the felt brim of his cowboy hat. "You act like you own the land, but you don't."

"Goddam," he went on, "years ago if you worked and paid your bills you were all right. Now you have problems other people create for you. I can't quite put my finger on them but they're there."

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Several hundred yards away, the striking field hands could put their fingers on their problem — Red Lewis and Joe Violini. "Those growers still think they're living in the thirties," said Ray Huerta, the leader of the pickets. "They think they can just ship us back to Mexico."

Were they being intimidated to join the farm workers union? "We've been waiting for Chavez for some time now," said Mr. Huerta, who wore a black, Zapata-style mustache. "We don't want the teamsters shoved down our throat."

"The union would give us security in our jobs," added Carmen Reyna, one of six brothers and sisters marching on the line. "The way it is now we have no one to defend us if something goes wrong. There's nobody to back us up."

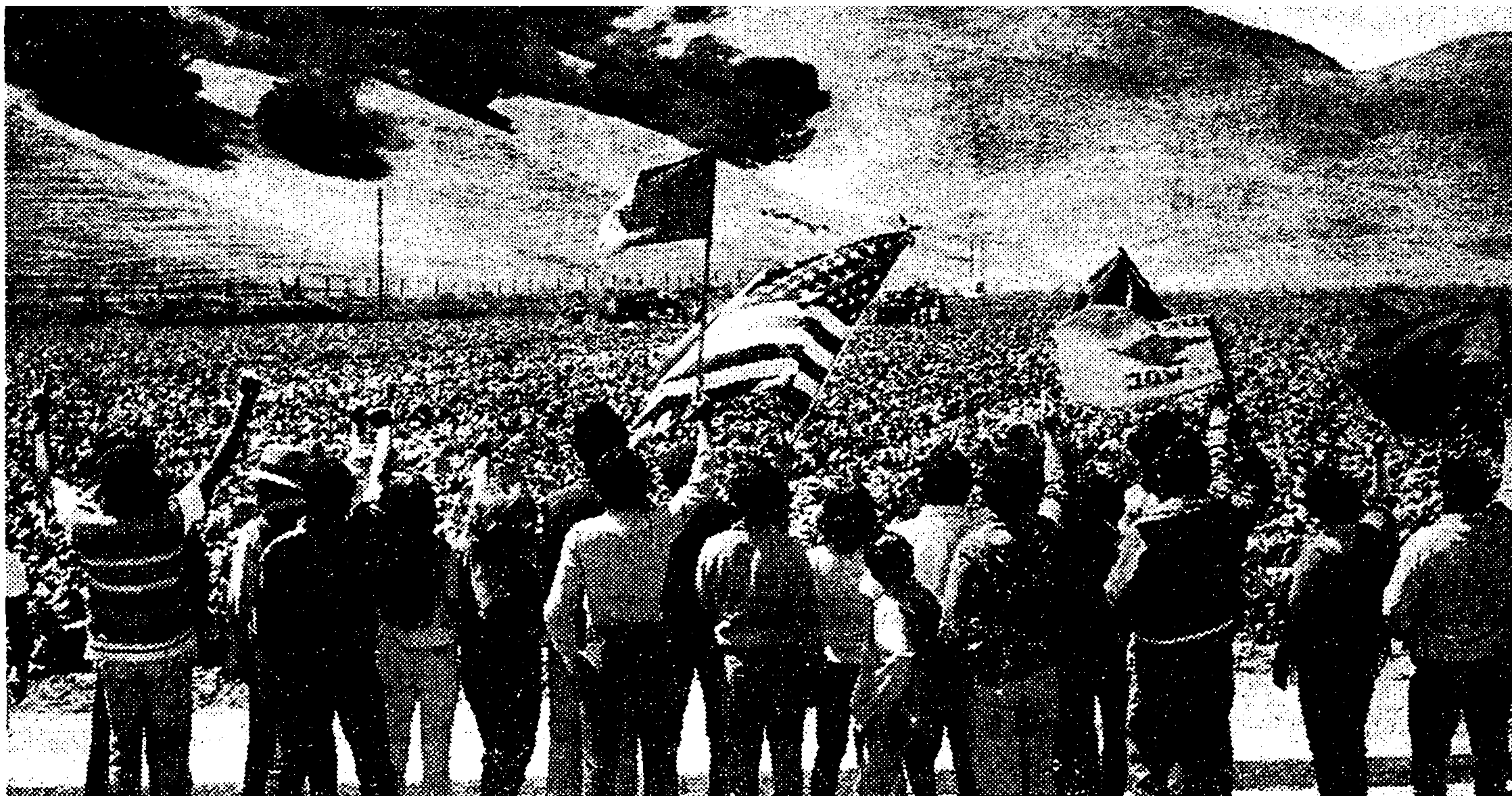
"The foreman is always on top of you when you're working," said Miss Reyna's brother Tanis. "We don't have any guaranteed hours, No travel time, no health plan, no paid vacations, no holidays. And they make us use the short-handed hoe. Now that they have to work in the fields they'll find out it's no picnic."

Like the growers, the farm workers feel that the current dispute is only a manifestation of a deeper problem. Carmen and Tanis Reyna are both high school graduates, but they were unable to find work in Salinas and were forced back to the fields.

"The only place there's no discrimination," said Mr. Huerta, "is when they take you into the Army."

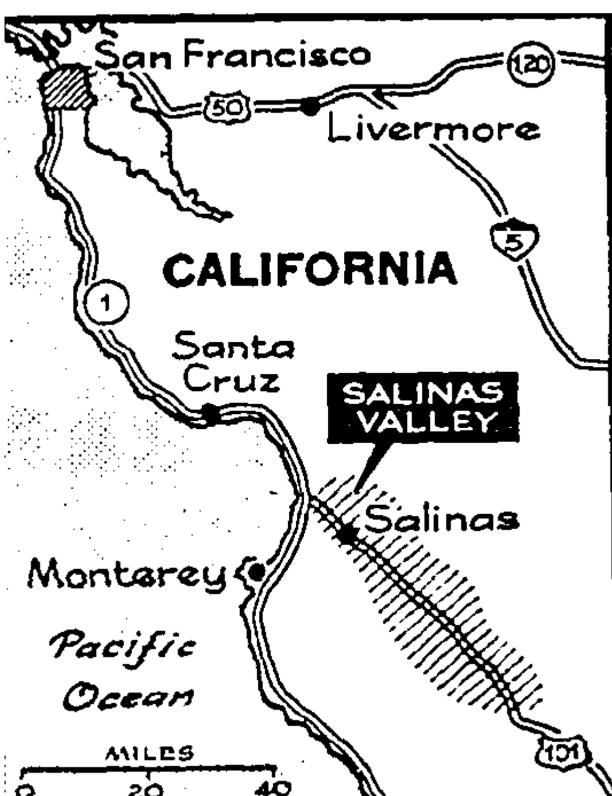
The picket lines here are mainly manned by the young, those who will not accept the conditions under which their parents have lived for so long. They drive around town with red flags waving, honking their horns to one another and flashing "V" signs out the window. The strike has almost a festive air.

"This picket line really means something to us," Mr. Reyna said, "We've got to win. We've got to. It means we're taking pride in our race. We want to be called something—La Raza [The Race] or Chicanos. We just don't want to be nothing."



The New York Times (by Steven V. Roberts)

Demonstrators picketing a field in Salinas, Calif., owned by Red Lewis. On the field, machines harvest cauliflower.



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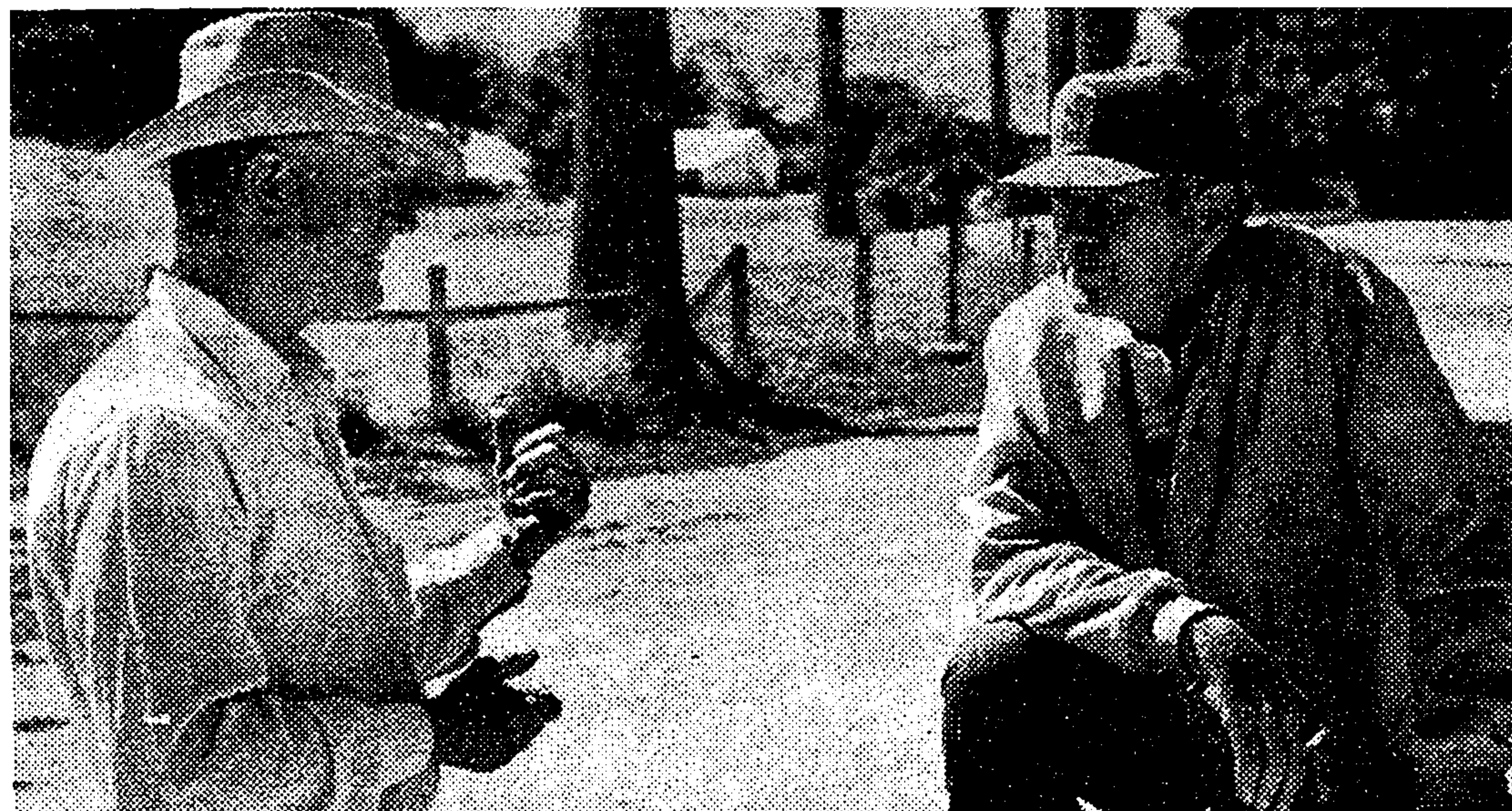

Mr. Lewis, right, and his partner, Joe Violini. "I'm harvesting my crops," said Mr. Lewis, "that's what I planted them for." He blames trouble on "agitators from outside."

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