

COMMUNITY AND VIOLENCE
IN SOUTH TEXAS: 1930-1979

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My Story

My parents were both born in South Texas to a long line of devout Catholic families. My father was born in 1927 in Edinburg, Texas. My mother was born in 1932 in Edcouch, Texas. In 1949, as many WWII soldiers came back from war to South Texas, my parents moved to Illinois. Ten of my siblings and I were born in Illinois, while 3 older step siblings were born in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. My family relocated to South Texas in 1962 in order to care for my elderly and ill grandparents. Consequently, I grew up in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas during the 1960s and 1970s. I always wondered why my grandparents were left behind in South Texas while both my parents' siblings migrated to Illinois. I wasn't aware of the repressive South Texas community my parents fled as targets of discrimination for their Catholic faith, their traditional Hispanic large family size, and for being of Mexican descent. I also didn't know that the economic climate of South Texas played a role in their decision to move to Illinois. Except for farm labor, work was scarce. Ramos stated that the three things South Texas Anglos hated most about Mexican Americans were their Catholic faith, their large family sizes, and their ethnicity.¹ This idea never dawned on me as I grew up in South Texas. In Illinois, whenever my mother would take us with her on public outings, people always stopped her and commented on "what a blessing" she had in so many children. I grew up with a desire to have a large family like my mother because I also wanted that blessing.

There were no equitable jobs for uneducated minorities when my parents returned to South Texas in the early 1960s. My father only had a 4th grade education. My mother had a 3rd grade education. Any acquired education there-after, was self-taught. After

¹ Ramos, Henry A.J. *The American GI Forum: In Pursuit of the Dream, 1948-1983*. xix

relocating to South Texas to care for his ailing parents, my father, a master mechanic for the Ford Motor Company in Illinois, was forced into the trucking industry. Farming labor was not enough for his family of ten to survive on. While my mother took care of our family and my father's parents, my father drove a truck locally, carrying abundant "caliche" around the Rio Grande Valley to industrial building sites. Later he would travel regionally and then nationally. As a consequence, our home went fatherless for the most part, as my father appeared periodically after prolonged absences, from 1962 until I became an adult.

As a child growing up, I knew my family was poor because we had to migrate to the Northern United States with my mother to work in the agricultural fields. Field labor allowed us to pay our home mortgage, and have clothes and supplies for the school term. There was little work and extremely low pay for the Mexican Americans of South Texas in the 1960's. When we traveled to the northern states as migrant laborers, by law, everyone under sixteen years old had to finish the spring school term and begin the fall school term on time. School was released by 3 pm with plenty of daylight to join the family in the fields. During the summer, the whole family worked in the fields. When we went to school in the northern states, we went to desegregated schools with White children. The schools were clean, and we were given the opportunity to be creative and vocal. In our view, all students were treated equally. Although some states enforced the school attendance law, some did not; so that we did not always take advantage of educational opportunities in the northern states. Zaragoza Vargas relates examples in his book, "Labor Rights are Civil Rights."²

² Zaragoza Vargas. *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America*. Princeton: University Press. 2007. Web. April 2015. Page 30-31

In Hispanic majority South Texas, no semblance of equality was evident. Edcouch, Texas, school authorities forced my siblings and I to go to the all Hispanic “Migrant School” in which children were tagged “Burros” by teachers, families, and other children. The Spanish word for “donkey” is “burro.” This implied that the students at this school were hard headed and ignorant because we missed too much school. As migrants, we left to the northern states around April or May for the early crops and did not return until late September or October after the late harvests.

One example of how my research emphasizes the way different generations took up collective tactics to challenge their exploitation as workers, students, and community members (and in the process, changed the political life of South Texas) was through the 1968 Edcouch Elsa High School Walkout. In 1968, when I was eleven years old, my mother kept my siblings and I home when it became known the Hispanic student body at Edcouch Elsa High School were planning a school walk-out. My mother feared, as did many families in the Edcouch Elsa School District, that violence would erupt and we would be caught in the middle. Seeking equality, desegregation, and civil rights, the students fought against a system that classified them as second class citizens. Later, as a young adult, my female Hispanic classmates and I were encouraged to take home economics, because according to school officials, Hispanic girls were destined to be homemakers and never go to college. Hispanic boys were assigned to the vocational buildings to learn mechanics and carpentry. As a result of the Edcouch-Elsa High School Walkout, the Edcouch-Elsa School District went on to become one of the leading high school districts in South Texas to send students to Ivey League schools all across America. Even through my child eyes, school policies and practices exerting attitude

differences towards migrant children in the southern states left an indelible impression of how geographical locations presented differential treatment to individuals based on status, economy, or race and made geography a racial destiny.

Context

As an older adult I became involved in family genealogical research. Seized with a desire to know South Texas history and how it related to my life, I sought out the historical written record through which I hoped to be able to begin piecing together my life experience. To my surprise, my history was not included in any of the history books involved in any of my academic classes. It was only through independent study programs offered through the Honors College at Texas State University that I was able to take advantage of other historical resources. Through these, I learned about a South Texas history I had never heard before. I began by investigating violence tactics perpetrated against Hispanics, following the path of civil rights groups and labor movements to investigate Hispanic lifestyle changes and what perpetuated those changes. I found that historically, many Anglos, especially from the Deep South, actively practiced racial discrimination, segregation, and oppression towards Mexican Americans in society, economics, and politics. Attitudes embedded from “Jim Crow” traditions dominating people of color were automatically transferred to all persons of color. Since the population of South Texas was either White or Hispanic, Hispanics became the colored people. These attitudes were prevalent in South Texas before and after 1930-1979, which are the years of my study.

The lack of any relevant Mexican American history in Texas academic textbooks, as a student growing up in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, was a defining reason for investigating this work on my own. For me, it was extremely important to know my ethnic and cultural history and roots. It is my desire to bring awareness to the Mexican American struggle and history. I believe it is a historical heritage every child deserves. I believe that Mexican American children, adolescents, and adults should have access to scholastic textbooks that uncover history from the viewpoint of their own ancestral roots. I also strongly believe that it is extremely important for every graduating student from a Texas institution to know the history of Mexicans in the making of Texas and the United States as a whole. My goal was to expand my historical contribution with interviews and personal narrative.

Research Questions

My research investigation focuses on “Community and Violence in South Texas, 1930-1979.” It seeks to answer the question: How did South Texas communities organize to bring about positive social, economic, and political change to Hispanics involved in agricultural labor after decades of segregation, discrimination, labor oppression, and poverty? What was the climate of South Texas at the time and what factors precipitated change?

Research Methods

The Portraiture Methodology of social science research used in this qualitative research project seeks to bridge art and science. Through the Portraiture Methodology, I am

seeking to apply qualitative research methods by weaving interviews, observational site visits, library data, and personal narrative. For the purpose of this study I interviewed twelve subjects involved in agricultural labor and emerging labor unions in South Texas. I participated in two observational site visits to the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. I also applied literary research and web research materials. Finally, I included my personal familial story which is germane to the time and topic of my research. In utilizing my personal history and that of my interviewees, this research project will expose primary information not found in the historical record.

The themes wove an intricate pattern as I investigated social, economic, and political factors that led to multiple South Texas strikes with a focus on the 1938 San Antonio, Texas Pecan Sheller's strike, the 1966-1967 Rio Grande City, Starr County, Texas Melon strike, and the 1979 Raymondville, Texas Onion Strike. Concluding with my personal reflections, my goal is to present a historical narrative of the events, voices, and resolutions of the laboring people of South Texas of Hispanic heritage.

Historiography

Chapter 1 explains the broad history that led a culture of farmers, cowboys, and ranchers to become one of migrant farm workers with little claim to the land they had once owned and now worked. Chapter 2 examines the possibilities in the New Deal and the possibility that agricultural labor unions might be recognized by the National Labor Standards established under President Roosevelt. The chapter transitions into the 1938 San Antonio Pecan Sheller's Strike within the general context of Mexican American labor organizing and political exclusion in the New Deal. Chapter 3 examines the impact

of the Bracero Program on farms and individual braceros. Using Antonio Orendain's interview, chapter three argues that people who became braceros capitalized on their contacts, labor, and wide ranging mobility to become independent of border controls, American federal authorities, and Mexican state officials. Chapter 4 looks at the way ex-braceros became labor organizers in South Texas, using the Chicano Movement as a backdrop to their organizing communities in Texas and California. Chapter 5 examines the civil rights impact on the 1966 Starr County Melon Strike, pointing out how the strike created a cadre of activists far outside the students and young people normally associated with the Chicano Civil Rights Movement. The final case study, the 1979 Raymondville Onion Strike, looks at the end of the Carter presidency, the eve of the Reagan Era, to point out the ways activists learned to use civil rights tactics to challenge farmers and create substantial political reforms to the Texas Rangers and the political structure of South Texas. The structure of exploitation in the onion industry seems to have emerged unscathed.

My reflections focus on the ways my family experience seems to mirror previous attempts migrant families undertook to escape the hard life of South Texas. The research, however, emphasizes the way different generations, over time, took up collective tactics to challenge their exploitation as workers and, in the process, changed the political life of South Texas. Having knowledge of previous campaigns to cut the edge of exploitation, my thesis - *Community and Violence in South Texas* – has highlighted the different ways working class families sought to blunt their dispossession and exploitation by creating communities willing to name and challenge their exploitation.

Throughout my research, key authors have aided my work and provided keys to understanding the labor dimension of South Texas history. Cristina Salinas, Zaragoza Vargas, Kathleen Mapes and many others have brought out the importance of agricultural modernization. These authors and key interview subjects such as Texas Farm Workers Union founder Antonio Orendain have highlighted the myriad strategies of individual workers and have placed my family's struggle in a transnational class context.

Chapter 1: Agriculture, Dispossession and Deportation in South Texas, 1848-1930

Background: Agricultural Intensification and Mexican American

Dispossession in Texas, 1848-1940

Mexican Americans are persons of Mexican descent who became American citizens after the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe or thereafter. Under the Treaty of Guadalupe, the U.S. agreed with the Mexican Government, that as part of the deal ending the Mexican-American War, Mexican citizens in the acquired territories would become full U.S. citizens with protected civil and property rights. Under the guise of "Manifest Destiny," U.S. settlers moving into the acquired Mexican territories considered all Hispanics foreigners and commenced to overtake property and rights belonging to these newly acquired American citizens. Many Spanish Mexican pioneering families traveling to what is now Texas were awarded land under the Spanish Crown.³ Thus, before the means of rapid transit, the Rio Grande Valley remained a haven of pastoral ease, urban success, Anglo/Mexican intermarriages, and crime free. Anglo settlers moving in during the 1920s from the Deep South and Midwest, anxious for wealth and fortune, broke the

³ Richard Griswold del Castillo . The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: War's End (1846-1848). 2015.

placid serenity which had been South Texas Culture until that time.⁴ The history of U.S. treaties once again proved the great inequality in the relationship within this treaty.⁵

Between 1848 and 1928, thousands of Mexicans were lynched across America; with 547 clearly documented cases of Mexican mob lynching's recorded not only on southwestern Border States, but in states as far north as Wyoming. The intensity of the violence is evident in the case of twenty year old Antonio Rodriguez, accused of killing a rancher's wife in Rock Springs, Texas. Pulled from his jail cell, he was doused in kerosene, bound to a tree and burned alive. While a mob of thousands witnessed the event, no one was ever arrested. In Porvenir, Presidio County, Texas, a band of Texas Rangers attacked a private ranch in January 1918, on suspicion that the residents were spies and informants for Mexican raiders from Mexico. Rounding up about two dozen men after searching their homes, fifteen of them were executed at a rock bluff near the village. The Porvenir massacre led to an investigation by the Texas Legislature.

In mid-1915, Mexican revolutionary raiders assaulted the economic infrastructure of the Rio Grande Valley in resistance to White dominance. The revolutionary uprising came to be known as El Plan de San Diego. In retaliation, fear, and extreme paranoia, Texas Rangers and law enforcement executed unknown thousands of Mexicans without due process of law between 1915 and 1918.⁶ Events were intensified by Pancho Villa's 1916 raid in New Mexico, during the Mexican Revolution. As the lynching continued into the 1920s, the Mexican government increased pressure on the U.S. regarding the matter. It is estimated that between 1914 and 1919, the Texas Rangers and their agents

⁴ Montejano, David. *Anglos and Mexicans in The Making of Texas: 1836-1986*. Austin. University of Texas Press. 1987. Pp. 98-99

⁵ David Bacon *Rio Grande Valley Onion Strike: The Hidden History of Mexico/U.S. Labor Solidarity*

⁶ William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb. *When Americans Lynched Mexicans*. The New York Times. 2015.

killed approximately 5000 Hispanics in the Rio Grande Valley, an era marked with increased violence and brutality. In January 1919, Representative Jose T. Canales called for an overhaul of the Texas Ranger force in order to restore public confidence.⁷ Until 1917, Mexicans and Canadians could cross the northern and southern borders at will. But in 1924 when the Immigration Act passed and the Border Patrol was established, the Texas Rangers, police, sheriffs, and other civil service units were employed to guard all coasts from Cuban and Chinese immigrants, to the exclusion of Canadians and Mexicans.⁸

I appreciate the work of Professor Christina Salinas which proved to be invaluable to my research since we both grew up in South Texas. Her Dissertation: *Contesting Mobility: Growers, Farm Workers, and U.S.-Mexico Border Enforcement*, speaks of early Rio Grande Valley history and is woven into my study:

During the Twentieth Century and the early years of the Great Depression of the 1930's, South Texas transitioned from a cattle ranching economic society to an agricultural gold mine as Mexican and Mexican American labor was used to clear the land for capital growth and profit. Termed "The Magic Valley," land developers, real estate magnets, and railroad companies, enticed Mid-Westerners to visit the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. The area was presented as a beautiful and luscious Hawaiian landscape, replete with palm trees and citrus orchards. Brochures portrayed a land transformed from a wilderness of cactus, mesquite, and "Jacal" inhabiting Mexicans. South Texas was promoted by fortune seeking developers and real estate agents as an undeveloped wilderness ready for cheap purchasing and a cheap native labor force. The

⁷ Ben H. Procter, "Texas Rangers," Handbook of Texas Online. 2010

⁸ Leon C. Metz, "United States Border Patrol," Handbook of Texas Online. 2010

“Magic Valley” was offered without the context of the accompanying violence as a result of a societal norm that allocated the bottom sector of South Texas society to Hispanics. Brochures therefore presented Hispanics as a natural and unquestionable commodity that went along with the land as submissive laborers instead of native landowners.⁹

According to Christina Salinas, Midwestern investors did well in South Texas. John Shary purchased 49,000 acres of Western Hidalgo County in the years 1913-1922 which he named Sharyland. He proposed to specialize in citrus produce which brought higher prices than cotton. He embarked in the sale and resale of those lands. He also purchased the Mission Canal Company, and renamed it the United Irrigation Company, to provide water to Valley customers. In 1931, at the dawn of the Great Depression, Shary sold 39.81 acres of Rio Grande Valley land at \$412.32 an acre with a profit of \$4,610.98. People were pulling up stakes in Kansas and Oklahoma and moving to South Texas.¹⁰ The movement of Midwestern Anglo farmers to South Texas resulted in the exclusion of Mexican American voters and the political machines that once dominated.¹¹

Christina Salinas’ work also showed that brochures catering to women soon produced an Anglo society moving into South Texas determined to weld a new, modern and progressive civilization through activism in women’s clubs, Rotary Clubs, Masonic Orders, and other organizations. By these means, Hispanic communities were soon claimed by segregated school systems, Women’s Clubs, and Main Street to the exclusion

⁹ Cristina Salinas. *Contesting Mobility: Growers, Farm Workers, and U.S.-Mexico Border Enforcement During the Twentieth Century*. Graduate School Dissertation. The University of Texas at Austin. 2011. Page 16.

¹⁰ Salinas, *Mobility*, page 28.

¹¹ Montejano, David. *Anglos and Mexicans in The Making of Texas*. Pp. 162-163.

of Spanish language community schools, Mexican Mutual Aid Societies, and the social space of the “ranchos” or Hispanic farms, and communities.¹²

Discrimination History

People have been crossing the Rio Grande River of South Texas for work, love, and leisure before Spain, Mexico, and the U.S. made claims to this river delta. However, after 1924, the Border Patrol became an important factor in controlling the movement and residence of ethnic Mexican workers. The presence of federal authorities devoted to identifying ‘foreign’ nationals’ and expelling them, provided a concrete reminder to everyone, of the foreign and vulnerable nature of the ethnic Mexican population in the United States. In South Texas, land owners, Texas Rangers, and the Border Patrol, used the “foreign status” of Mexicans to exercise control over the Mexican presence in the U.S.

For the Mexican citizen, transfer occurred, sometimes by choice or force by U.S. immigration officials, and more specifically, the U.S. Border Patrol, according to Christina Salinas. Often, “voluntary departure” was used as an inexpensive way to deport undocumented residents to Mexico. “Voluntary deportation” eluded the much more expensive “formal” deportation process which included extended imprisonment, judicial trial, and personal legal representation at a cost most Mexicans could not afford. It was formal deportation that undocumented Mexican immigrants most feared.¹³

Rampant discrimination during the Bracero Program era was so pervasive and widespread in every quarter of Hispanic American society for laborers. Often, Mexican

¹² Salinas, *Mobility*, page 26.

¹³ *Ibid.*, page 14.

undocumented workers were afraid to go near towns for fear of deportation by the Immigration Naturalization Service agency. Unmarried braceros men who traveled to U.S. farms, sometimes slept outdoors, under bushes, or make-up shacks, for lack of housing.¹⁴ The social conditions directed at Mexican laborers were a continual source of friction between Mexico, the U.S. government, and Texas farm-owners.¹⁵ According to Christina Salinas, these facts were not disclosed to prospective Valley landowners.¹⁶

Labor Discrimination

Making a profit from undocumented Mexican labor

Yet, according to Cristina Salinas, it was the relationships that formed between Anglo farming investors, the Border Patrol, the Texas Rangers, and both documented and undocumented Hispanic workers that helped create the conditions that led to low wages among farm workers in South Texas in the 1930's. Many South Texas growers formed close friendship ties with immigration officers, Texas Rangers, and judges for political reasons. On many occasions, the Border Patrol picked up undocumented laborers from farms known to hire illegal workers on Friday evening, knowing the workers would be back on the farm on Monday, repeating the pattern during the entire harvesting season, because they were friends with the farmer owners. The farmer was ensured cheap labor while the Border Patrolman had "sure entries" on his logbook, as a way to show he was doing actual work.¹⁷

¹⁴ Salinas, *Mobility*, page 51.

¹⁵ Fred L. Koestler, "Bracero Program," *Handbook of Texas Online*

¹⁶ Salinas, *Mobility*, page 33.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, page 37.

For the undocumented worker, Christina Salinas states, farmers also acted as paternalistic protectors against Border Patrol agents, Mexican American workers, and exploitative labor contractors. For this service, they offered low wages in return for protection. By encasing farm laborers in a debt-peonage relationship, laborers became indebted to the farmers for basic survival in the very necessities of life. Adult debts were often transferred to the children, also tying them to the land. Much like the slaveholding system in which slave-owners served as paternalistic figures to their childlike slaves, growers were often highly repressive, using social, cultural, and political power to quell worker resistance. Just as violence and coercion were used in the slave system, these were often transferred into the grower/farmworkers system of South Texas.

Undocumented workers, listed as criminals for their illegal status, were kept in check with the continuous threat of immigration officials and Texas Rangers. The U.S. farming system used and benefitted from Mexican labor while stripping them of all human rights as their immigration status remained temporary, insecure, and conditional.¹⁸ Farmers used county governments to establish vagrancy laws by which law enforcement rounded up workers leaving fields before harvest and returned them to their complaining farmers, much like runaway slaves were returned to their masters. Through the Farm Placement Service, an officially established program by the State Labor Commission and assisted by the Texas Employment Service (TES) and the Department of Agriculture, agents were assigned to survey farmer's needs before harvest and route workers from

¹⁸ Salinas, *Mobility*, page 44.

farm to farm until they reached their home area. This program continued until approximately 1935 when TES assumed full responsibility for the program.¹⁹

Mexican Repatriation substantially occurred before the 1930's and countless times in an effort to rid the U.S. of immigrants when they were no longer needed. The written record has been largely absent concerning historical events related to braceros and their treatment, and repatriation with its methods. During the nineteenth century, due to the severity of Anglo American harassment and persecution, Mexicans living in the U.S. were often forced to abandon their homes and travel to Mexico. Fueled by anti-Mexican and INS deportation campaigns, by 1931, few to no Mexicans remained in rural communities in Texas. The intense deportation campaigns involved the imprisonment and deportation of many Mexican Americans that were caught in the throng of Mexican deportees. Consequently, widespread civil and human rights violations were performed by INS agents. Among them were illegal imprisonment, deporting U.S. born children, refusal to allow laborers their property and paychecks, separating families, and deportation of infirm residents. Repatriates were deported to random Mexican cities. The severe hardships suffered by these dislocated colonists are stories yet to be told. Few newspapers published related stories. In 1932, a single repatriation article appeared in the Southwest Review. It was an article published by Edna E. Kelly titled; "The Mexicans Go Home."²⁰

The history of Repatriation is brutal and unheard of. It is a history that the U.S. government would rather not remember or address. But there are those who remember the 1930's INS tactics of Repatriation. Slogans such as: "Employ no Mexican while a

¹⁹ Emilio Zamora. *Claiming Rights and Righting Wrongs in Texas: Mexican Workers and Job Politics during World War II*: College Station: Texas A&M University Press. 2010. Page 44.

²⁰ Robert R. McKay, "Mexican Americans and Repatriation." *Handbook of Texas Online*. 2010.

White man is unemployed” could be seen all across the U.S. Ignacio Pina remembers his mother was making tortillas and his father was working in the field when INS came in with guns and told them to get out, not allowing them to retrieve their U.S. birth certificates proving their citizenship. Jailed for ten days, he spent sixteen years of pure hell in Mexico, in a country he did not know, and did not accept him. Pina’s family got typhoid fever in Mexico, and his father, a Utah coal miner died there in 1935 of black lung disease. After his father died, his family lived in the slums of Mexico City. His education ended in 6th grade. His four U.S. born sons all have advanced college degrees. Emilia Castaneda’s father was a stonemason and legal U.S. resident who owned property when she and her family were deported because they were told there was no work for Mexicans. Carlos de Anda Guerra remembers his family was in the U.S. legally when his mother and six siblings were deported. Guerra remembers that before they were sent to Mexico, his parents were often denied jobs. His father escaped repatriation by hiding. Guerra later served in the U.S. military, but states he is very resentful, and does not trust the U.S. government. Arthur Herrera’s father was a legal resident who was threatened with deportation if he did not join the U.S. Army. His father enlisted. Jose Lopez’ father came to the U.S. legally, but when he couldn’t find his papers, the whole family was sent to Mexico, where they often survived on one meal a day.

In 2006, Democratic Senator Joe Dunn from Minnesota said that out of the Mexican repatriates coerced or forced to leave to Mexico in the 1930’s, 60% were U.S. citizens. Because the history was not recorded, there is no exact number of 1930’s repatriates. But the U.S. Consulate General in Mexico City stated the number was approximately 345,839 from 1930-1935. According to Mae Ngai, immigration history

professor at the University of Chicago, the Repatriation Program was a racial removal program targeting Mexican ancestry individuals. Layla Razavi of the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund (MALDEF) says local level Hoover Administration officials made no distinction between Mexicans and Mexican Americans in deportation roundups. According to the Wickersham Commission under President Hoover, those roundups included random raids of public places and homes. Hispanics lived in fear and anxiety as thousands were literally scared out of the U.S.

According to Ngai, memos offered to pay for the trip to Mexico but meals sometimes consisted of a few ounces of milk daily. People were deceitfully told they could return to the U.S. later, nevertheless, these people would permanently be denied U.S. entry. Each person was given a card showing they were “county charity” denying even U.S. born Hispanics their return to the U.S.²¹ According to NPR’s “All Things Considered” with Melissa Block, the Apology Act for the 1930s Mexican repatriation program was submitted by state Sen. Joe Dunn, a Democrat from Santa Ana, California in January of 2006.²² Democratic Representative Hilda Solis also introduced a bill in the U.S. House to investigate the deportations and coerced immigration practices of the INS.²³

Federal relief programs provided another layer of exclusion to the conditions experienced by farmworkers in South Texas. It was the complex relationship between farmers and federal agents that led to so much community violence between the years 1930-1979 as all Hispanic farm laborers struggled to survive amidst social, economic and political discrimination. When the federal government established the National Recovery

²¹ Wendy Koch. U.S. Urged to Apologize for 1930s Deportations. USA TODAY. 2006.

²² MELISSA BLOCK. Remembering California's 'Repatriation Program. 2006.

²³ Wendy Koch.

Act in 1933 and the Social Security Act in 1935, Hispanic farmworkers were continually denied the benefits provided by these and other government programs. Mexican, Black, and Asian farm laborers were exclusively denied the protections of the NRA, by U.S. officials, which protected workers in other industrial segments of American society.²⁴

In the 1940's, Mexico banned Texas from the use of braceros due to the exploitive conditions under which Hispanics worked and lived. 1940 South Texas employers commonly cited the low educational level of Mexican Americans in order to deny them jobs other than farm labor. Mexican American workers were, therefore, forced to take low wages offered to undocumented workers in order to survive.

The 1930s revived the Midwest as a labor destination for many Texas Mexican families. According to Cristina Salinas, many documented farmworkers migrated to the northern United States seasonally to work in field labor as a family unit. Hispanics received better wages in the northern states than South Texas farmers had to offer.²⁵ Labor camps established by the Farm Security Administration from 1935 to 1944 were used by a minimal number of Hispanics. The majority of benefactors were Anglo's paying approximately \$7.00 a month for facilities that provided free medical, childcare, and schools during the Great Depression.²⁶ The few Hispanics on these camps reported four concerns. They resented public discrimination in restaurants, theatres and other businesses which posted signs "No Mexicans Allowed" on their windows. They complained that farmers didn't supply sanitary working and living facilities. Anglo's justified these practices by stating that all migratory workers were dirty and were health

²⁴ Vargas, American Workers, Page 8.

²⁵ Salinas, Mobility, pages 41-54.

²⁶ Dana Guthrie. How migrant children lived in Texas' Depression-era farm labor camps. Houston Chronicle. 2015.

hazards to the communities. Workers also complained of lying employers who promised but didn't deliver housing or wages. Finally, the workers resented being treated as "cattle." Because of the treatment they received, some found pleasure in forsaking the work un-harvested, in retaliation for bad services, benefits and treatment.²⁷ In this way, Hispanics sometimes assumed an identity as the ones in control and not the controlled.

Chapter 2: The 1938 Pecan Sheller's Strike

Peril and Possibility in the New Deal

San Antonio is the oldest city in Texas. In 1930, its population was 40% Hispanic and only 8 % Black. Nevertheless, because the affluent White population lived on the outlying suburbs, the powerful political city machine depended on minority votes for re-elections. Mayor Charles Kennon Quin was voted into the mayor's office by a majority of Hispanic votes manipulated through city or county services or from pressure applied through their employers who had ties with Quin. Quin was known to have associations with the Ku Klux Klan.²⁸

Even though Hispanics were numerically larger on the west part of town, it was the Blacks on the east end of the city that featured paved streets, sewage, parks, a library and an auditorium. The reason lay in the hands of Charles Bellinger, who both organized and delivered the Black vote. He also negotiated for services and improvements while turning a blind eye to east side corruption in return for the electoral vote.²⁹ Charles Bellinger, whose close ties with the San Antonio political elite was a known gambler-

²⁷ Vargas, Mexican Worker, Pages 186-187, 288.

²⁸ James A. Barnhart, "Quin, Charles Kennon," Handbook of Texas Online. 2010.

²⁹ Patricia E. Gower. Unintended Consequences: The San Antonio Pecan Sheller's Strike of 1938. 2004. Journal of South Texas. Vol. 17 Issue 2, p88-103. 16p. University of the Incarnate Word.

bootlegger and courted to proprietors of saloons, gambling houses, and houses of prostitution. When Bellinger was imprisoned in 1936 for income tax evasion, Mayor Charles Kennon Quin arranged for a presidential pardon for Bellinger. Such were the oiling's of the San Antonio political machine and the social political arena when the Pecan Sheller's Strike broke out in 1938.

Though women had come to the forefront of the civil rights movement at the urging and teaching of Left-wing leadership, the January 31, 1938 Pecan Sheller Strike proved to be a pivotal moment for the striking women. The Southern Pecan Shelling Company, founded in 1929 in San Antonio, Texas was in for a surprise. On that day, an army of mostly women composing 50% of the workforce walked off the job, led by articulate communist leader Emma Tenayuca Brooks. Tenayuca was well known in San Antonio politics and a dominant figure in the Workers Alliance, a communist national organization of the Great Depression.³⁰ Tenayuca's involvement in the strike would later weaken the Hispanic position when Police Chief Kilday accused the group of a communist "Red Plot."³¹ Hispanic employees not only confronted the company owner Julius Seligmann, and his management team, but they also came face to face with San Antonio political elites. Among them were the heads of elite political, economic, and religious city institutions.³² A three month strike was to follow under the International Pecan Shellers Union # 172 (IPS) , which was a chapter of the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA), belonging to the

³⁰ Richard Croxdale, "Pecan-Shellers' Strike," Handbook of Texas Online. 2010.

³¹ Laura Cannon Dixon. Police Brutality Makes Headlines: Retelling the story of the 1938 Pecan Shellers' Strike. Electronic Theses and Dissertations Sycamore Scholars at Indiana State University. 2010.

³² Patricia E. Gower.

Congress of industrial Organizations (CIO).³³ UCAPAWA sent Donald Henderson on February 7th to direct the strike.³⁴ Henderson soon removed himself from the position when the San Antonio power elite made a successful issue tying Henderson to communist activity.³⁵ Henderson, nevertheless, continued doing major work in the daily activities of the strike. The union then brought in CIO organizer J. Austin Beasley.³⁶ Unable to paint Beasley as a communist resulted in the local elite's failure in its primary anti-union tactic of red baiting the group.³⁷

Since the 1930's, Texas pecans provided 50% of the nation's pecan production, half of which grew within a two hundred fifty mile radius of San Antonio. Yet, San Antonio's 400 pecan shelling companies were the lowest paying industries in the country at 2-3 dollars a week, while controlling both the nut supply and the shelling prices. Seligmann produced one third of the national crop and thus, dominated the market. With non-existent toilets or washbowls, inadequate ventilation, and extremely poor illumination, workers were forced to work in abysmal conditions with fine brown dust permeating the air and workers lungs. 148 deaths per 100,000 related to tuberculosis could be attributed to the fine dust, compared to the national average of 54/100,000.³⁸ This never ending supply of cheap labor was further spurred by the Great Depression and its consequent rising unemployment.³⁹

In addition, the Southern Pecan Shelling Company relied on contractors who bought company pecans, cracked and cleaned them, and resold them back to the

³³ Richard Croxdale,

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Laura Cannon Dixon.

³⁶ Richard Croxdale.

³⁷ Laura Cannon Dixon.

³⁸ Richard Croxdale.

³⁹ Patricia E. Gower.

company. West side residents, often women and children, or even entire families, worked from homes as contractors. 1930 wages ranged from 3-5 cents a pound for shelled pecan pieces and 1.5 cents for shelled pecan halves. 1930 wages for contractor workers were often a dollar a week for 50 hours of labor while contractors earned less than 2 dollars a week.

Five years before the strike, in 1933, the NRA became aware of the abysmal working conditions and low pay of pecan Sheller's in San Antonio. 90 % of the shelling companies in the U.S. belonged to the National Pecan Sheller's Association. They had agreed with the NRA on a wage scale of 7 dollars a week for women and 11 for men. When Julius Seligmann disagreed, he quickly removed himself from the association, and soon enticed other San Antonio Sheller's to join him as he founded the Southwestern Pecan Sheller's Association. Proposing their own code, they set their own minimum wage at 4-5 cents an hour for the South. During the seven months Seligmann's association existed, the U.S. government never sought to enforce the legal code.⁴⁰

In 1933, Magdaleno Rodriguez with the The Pecan Workers Alliance tried to unionize the San Antonio Pecan Shellers. By 1934, he stated he had about 12,000 paying and non-paying members involved. But when Rodriguez joined Seligmann in protesting the NRA code in return for Seligmann's financial support of his union, membership quickly fizzled. El Nogal, a small independent union appeared simultaneously. Without much success, these two unions joined Albert Gonsen with the Texas Pecan Shelling Workers Union. When, in 1937, the UCAPAWA offered them a charter with the CIO, they united. Meanwhile, Tenayuca and Manuela Solis Sager were forming the Texas Workers Alliance to promote communism in San Antonio. Tenayuca and Sager were

⁴⁰ Patricia E. Gower.

actively encouraging pecan shellers to strike for better working conditions and pay by 1938. Tenayuca was known as “La Pasionera” for her fiery speeches and loyal following; though a large part of the San Antonio community disliked her communist message.⁴¹

Both the Hispanic and Anglo community in San Antonio denounced the involvement of communist factions in relation to the strike. National Catholic Welfare councilman Juan Lopez desired to help, but felt communist influences allowed by the CIO would make negotiations impossible. He also feared the negative communist influence which might, possibly, be inflicted upon the morals of catholic workers. The Catholic Church of San Antonio’s Archbishop Doessaerts, the Mexican and American Chambers of Commerce, and LULAC (whose 1938 exiting president was Ramon Longoria and entering president was Filemon Martinez⁴²) were against what they perceived as radical activism. These parties not only opposed the strike, but urged workers to return to their mundane occupations. San Antonio Mayor C.K. Quin felt the strikers would receive no sympathy from the community at large as long as Tenayuca, the CIO, and other negative factions were involved.⁴³

The strike within the company was initiated due to a pay cut. Pecan shellers earning six cents per pound for pecan pieces and seven cents for pecan halves were reduced to five and six cents per pound, respectively. The wages of pecan nut crackers were reduced from fifty to forty cents per hundred pounds. The pecan employees went on strike. Chief of Police Owen Kilday sent police out under the premise that the strike was part of a “Red Plot” to gain control of western San Antonio. Denying the strikers right to protest, Kilday dispersed demonstrators and arrested picketers. In February, ninety

⁴¹ Patricia Gower.

⁴² League of United Latin American Citizens. LULAC Past Presidents. 2015.

⁴³ Patricia E. Gower.

demonstrators were arrested and placed with 200 other prisoners in a county jail designed for sixty prisoners. Over seven hundred arrests were made as picketing at the four hundred pecan shelling plants were underway.⁴⁴ Police Chief Owen Kilday's brother Paul Kilday was assistant district attorney.⁴⁵ When disturbances within the jail house arose, Chief Kilday hosed down prisoners to control the imprisoned crowds.⁴⁶ The mass arrests and violence drew national and international attention to the San Antonio Pecan Sheller's Strike. Governor James Allred requested an investigation of civil rights violations from the Texas Industrial Commission (TIC). The investigation found police violations of unjustified peaceful assembly interference.⁴⁷ When a case was filed before Judge S. C. Tayloe in the 45th District Court requesting an injunction to allow picketing, the judge stated that although it was the striker's right to picket, he would not recognize the right of San Antonio pecan sheller's to picket.⁴⁸ In 1942, San Antonio Mayor Charles Kennon Quin became judge over the Fifty-Seventh Judicial District.⁴⁹

The strike dynamics resembled other strikes which involved dominant White power elites and people who are culturally, ethnically, linguistically and religiously different. These were the same factors that created confusion between Mexican Americans and Anglos since Texas became part of U.S. territory. Perceiving Hispanics as inferior, the power elite worked to suppress and separate them. "It is my duty to interfere with revolution, and communism is revolution." stated Police Chief Owen Kilday.⁵⁰ Chief Kilday ordered the mobilization of police riot squads who used brutal force,

⁴⁴ Richard Croxdale,

⁴⁵ Paul Joseph Kilday. Arlington Cemetery Website. Webmaster: Michael Robert Patterson. 1999.

⁴⁶ Patricia E. Gower.

⁴⁷ Richard Croxdale,

⁴⁸ Patricia E. Gower.

⁴⁹ James A. Barnhart,

⁵⁰ Patricia E. Gower.

nightsticks, tear gas, riot guns and ax handles; but they were unsuccessful in suppressing Hispanic resistance.⁵¹ Though Tenayuca was arrested, she only served to draw national media attention to the strike.⁵²

When 63 Mexican Nationals were arrested and incarcerated, the Mexican Consul sent a letter of protest.⁵³ In addition to arrests during the strike, city soup kitchens designed to feed the strikers and all public help was denied to them. Tenayuca was forced to step away from the public eye. *The San Antonio Express* newspaper stated that wherever the CIO turned up, there were always labor problems and strikers should dismiss the CIO and deal directly with employers. Nevertheless, through political leverage, this excluded group was able to advance their collective interests during this strike. National leaders Donald Henderson and J. Austin Beasley, state official Texas Governor James V. Allred, and federal official U.S. Representative F. Maury Maverick helped make the San Antonio Strike the only successful CIO strike in South Texas.⁵⁴

Arbitration began on March 1968, as settlement was offered increasing pecan shellers wages to seven and eight cents respectively. The arbitration board consisted of Jack Horheimer, owner of the Alamo Pecan Company, Austin Mayor Tom Miller, and Austin Reverend Marcus Hogue representing the union. The UCAPAWA #172 was recognized as the only pecan sheller legal agent.⁵⁵ In 1938, Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act, establishing a minimum wage of 25 cents an hour. The Congress of Industrial Organizations and the employers association sought to exempt pecan workers from the Fair Labor Standards Act provisions, for fear that the minimum wage laws

⁵¹ Laura Cannon Dixon.

⁵² Patricia E. Gower.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Laura Cannon Dixon.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

would displace thousands of workers, should pecan sheller companies turn to mechanization. The Department of Labor denied the exemption and within three years over 10,000 shellers in San Antonio became displaced workers.⁵⁶ Although the price paid were displaced pecan shellers, the strike was a success in that workers won union collective bargaining recognition, working conditions improved, and wages were increased. Through the aid of outside government agents, the strike showed that even in 1938, minority agricultural workers could prevail against the local power elite when presenting a united front. The pecan shellers from San Antonio were the only major labor group to be displaced as a direct result of the minimum wage law.⁵⁷ As a consequence of elitist political and city government support for the repressive companies involved against the strikers, traditional political elements in city government weakened among Hispanic voters in San Antonio. By 1941, only 600 employees working at 25 cents an hour were employed by Seligmann as mechanization was fully underway.⁵⁸

Many Hispanics lacked organization and political clout due to their tradition of voting individually after purchasing their poll tax. As a consequence, the west side of San Antonio where the majority of Hispanics lived harbored some of the worst slums in the U.S. Their lot was unpaved roads, ramshackle houses with dirt floors, no electricity, running water, or plumbing, with alarmingly high disease rates. Tuberculosis and infant diarrhea took the lives of many Hispanics.⁵⁹ Father Carmelo Antonio Tranchese, an Italian born priest, pastored Our Lady of Guadalupe Church on the West side of San Antonio, where 82,000 Mexican Americans made their home. When the Fair Labor

⁵⁶ Richard Croxdale,

⁵⁷ Laura Cannon Dixon.

⁵⁸ Patricia E. Gower.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Standards Act left over 8,000 pecan shellers out of work, Tranchese organized the Catholic Relief Association, soliciting and distributing food, shelter, and clothing to displaced families. He also provided rations through a relief depot he established. One of his most notable accomplishments was bringing the federal housing project to San Antonio. As one of San Antonio's major public housing advocates, he participated in speeches and wrote articles and letters appealing to anyone who could help. He even appealed to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Opponents threatened and slandered him to no avail. Hostile landlords demanded exorbitant prices for their land, but Tranchese was on a mission. Tranchese was instrumental in the removal of some of San Antonio's worst west side slums and replaced them with the Alazan-Apache courts for Mexican Americans. He secured United States Housing Authority (USHA) loans and annual subsidies for building in other areas of the city for Anglo and Black citizens. Tranchese also succeeded in getting USHA to build additional projects throughout the city. His hope was for Hispanics to be involved in the building of the structures, but USHA used only organized labor. In 1944 and 1948 he was appointed vice chairman of the San Antonio Housing Authority.⁶⁰

In 1938, Maury Maverick, a member of an old political San Antonio family, lost his bid to the House of Representatives. Maverick won the mayor ship of San Antonio by catering to the Hispanic vote after the Pecan Sheller's Strike. Mayor Charles Kennon Quin accused Maverick of catering to Hispanics for the vote, but then also used Hispanics in his rallies. Maverick's successful election ended the political reign of those who had long controlled San Antonio politics.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Donald L. Zelman, "Tranchese, Carmelo Antonio," Handbook of Texas Online. 2010.

⁶¹ James A. Barnhart.

Maverick supported New Deal liberalism for which he was targeted as a communist. He worked to incorporate Hispanics into San Antonio politics and society, pushed for the classification of Mexican Americans to White on all San Antonio records, supported the restoration of La Villita, and thereby acknowledged Hispanic cultural influence. Working with the local medical society, Maverick supported a hiring process based on merit, opening the door for many Hispanics. In 1939 when Tenayuca asked for a city permit to hold a communist rally in the American Legion Auditorium, ferocious opposition ensued along with violence when an angry mob stormed the 150 member auditorium. Although Tenayuca and the speakers escaped, Maverick was rejected, thereafter, as a communist or communist sympathizer. Maverick was extended an invitation by Mexico to the 1940 Presidential inauguration of incoming President Manuel Avila Camacho. He retreated to private work when he lost re-election in 1941.⁶²

Maverick's administration served to change political and social relations for Hispanics in San Antonio. After the 1938 Pecan Sheller's Strike, citizens from all over the city came to recognize the neglect to Hispanic health problems, persistent discrimination and political manipulation, along with its wide ranging implications. The power elite came together as business, religious and political organizations sought ways to find and address problems within the city. It found that discrimination against Hispanics hurt everyone in the city and that Latino votes were necessary. They agreed that living conditions must be addressed for all citizens. The 1938 Pecan Sheller's Strike elevated the lives of a few working people; but it also improved the city as a whole for generations to come.⁶³

⁶² Patricia E. Gower.

⁶³ Ibid.

The Labor Backdrop

The period between the New Deal, and the post war years, were a turning point for Mexican American civil rights.⁶⁴ Since the early 19th century, mutualist societies had gathered to discuss and plan ways to improve Hispanic conditions. All over the country where Hispanics worked, the desire for upward mobility and the denial of it created tensions. On Memorial Day 1937, thousands of Hispanic workers and their families participated in a steel worker demonstration against the Republic Steel Mill in South Chicago, Illinois. It was the beginning of a strong force of activism. Among the strikers was Guadalupe Marshall, a Hull House volunteer social worker active in the expanding Chicago labor and civil rights movement. Racial discrimination in work assignments, wages, hours, and promotions had taken their toll on the workers. When police became involved, the demonstration turned violent, bloody, and deadly, as strikers were beaten, arrested, and murdered by police. The event became known as the “Memorial Day Massacre” and drew union drives by the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC), and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).⁶⁵

But it was the 1936-1937 Onion Strike in the Rio Grande Valley, Laredo, Texas area which birthed La Asociacion de Jornaleros (The Agricultural Workers Union (AWU)) that marked the beginning of trans-border organizing by Left-led unions in the U.S. and Mexico. The continuous fight against discrimination, police violence, and deportation threats were among the list of grievances. Workers also protested local authority tactics of dropping Mexicans from relief rolls during high employment time frames. Leading the group were the Congreso de Trabajo, the Railroad Union and the

⁶⁴ Vargas, Labor Rights Page 7.

⁶⁵ Ibid., Page 1.

Mexican Communist Party (MCP). Thereafter, Mexican Workers conventions were held in Dallas, Austin, and San Antonio. Vicente Toledano was a frequent speaker to the crowds.⁶⁶ WWII labor programs, like the Bracero Program, were aimed to control trans-border organizing due to its threat to farm owners on both sides of the border.

In the 1930's, it was the Hispanic community who initiated massive national strike waves from California fruit and vegetable farms. During WWI, Hispanic workers also struck in the Arizona Cooper Mines, initiated by the Western Federation of Miners (WFM). In Colorado, led by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), Hispanics struck in the Colorado Coal Mines. In California, the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) was formed along with the Congress of Spanish Speaking Peoples (People's Congress). The National Miners Union (NMU) led the Mexican coal miners of Gallup, New Mexico to strike. The NMU had communist ties, and southwest employers hated communists as much as they hated Hispanics. Declaring martial law, the governor led a reign of terror against NMU supporters while miners were blacklisted, denied relief, and subjected to deportation. Leaders of La Liga Obrera de Habla Espanol were targeted with NMU leaders and deported by INS on charges of communism. Patterns in which the INS and the Border Patrol broke up labor strikes, and conducted searches and arrests, became common. These events only strengthened worker belief that exploitation and oppression could be overcome through a united front.⁶⁷

Mexican American women took up the activist cause, not only picketing, but joining unemployed councils, neighborhood relief committees, and auxiliaries. They took

⁶⁶ David Bacon.

⁶⁷ Vargas, Labor Rights. Page 119-122.

part in relief demonstrations, resisted eviction efforts, dealt with demeaning relief workers, and fought for social insurance. Mexican American women worked for unionization and political action as field, cannery, garment shop, cigar factory, and packinghouse workers. Breaking themselves away from disloyal and untrustworthy Mexican Consuls in the early 1930's, Mexican American women saw beyond the face of these agents. Mexican Consuls were brokers between Hispanics and employers; they helped use immigrants as strikebreakers, were anti-union, and assisted in the federal gathering and deportation of Hispanic labor activists. Many of these women tended to follow Left-led labor movements involved with the communist party. Women admired the strong forces of self-organization and actualization in their ethnic communities. Their passion in favor of the jobless and working poor was admirable. Their opposition to racism was forceful and their legal battles on behalf of Hispanics yielded results. The communist party was significantly instrumental in Mexican organizing and action. In the ensuing years, communist sympathizers would lead key Mexican American unions and Left-wing organizations such as the Asociacion Nacional Mexico-Americana (ANMA).⁶⁸

Oddly enough, it was FDR's 1930s New Deal labor legislation regarding labor organizing and collective bargaining, and the National Recovery Administration (NRA), that provided Hispanic awareness of the positive and negative government roles in everyday life, and encouraged the first phase of labor insurgency. Seeking to protect themselves from growers after a subservient labor force, Hispanics began asking for better wages and working conditions. By using mass pressure, they hoped to pave the way for better conditions for Hispanics in hiring, promotion, and equal employment opportunities. But Southern Democrats lobbied to exempt agriculture and domestic work

⁶⁸ Vargas, Labor Rights. Page 78-79, 123.

from the NLR (the 1935 National Labor Relations Act by Congress that forbade employers interference with the formation and operation of labor unions), and the Social Security Act, with the final blow coming when farmworkers were excluded from the 1938 FLSA (the Fair Labor Standards Act established youth employment standards, minimum wage, overtime pay, and recordkeeping. It also affected those employed by private entities, federal, state, and local governments in full-time or part-time positions.) Thereafter, growers used the INS and the Texas Rangers to quench labor insurrections by discontented laborers.⁶⁹

Zaragoza Vargas agrees that during WWII, Mexican Americans were already forming a civil rights movement which preceded the postwar civil rights movement and were the foundation for the modern Chicano movement. Labor organizing logistics were different in South Texas from other U.S. states. According to Vargas, the Rio Grande Valley, together with other border states, was too poverty stricken, too geographically dispersed, and too oppressed to rise in a common struggle for their rights. As specialized farming regions demanding seasonal Mexican labor based on the family wage system abandoned in other sectors of society, basic survival kept Hispanic laborers from joining unions. Yet, in spite of the fact that the American Federation of Labor (AFL) blocked Hispanics from American unionization, Hispanics were moved to organize. In addition, South Texas Hispanics had to deal with the Texas Rangers' brutality tactics, spurred by the NIRA (The 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act congressional law authorized the President to regulate industry by raising prices after severe deflations to stimulate economic recovery). In the absence of significant political activism, the labor movement was still the organizing base out of which Mexican American protests became manifest.

⁶⁹ Vargas, Labor Rights. Page 8.

Eventually, union movements helped break the shackles of economic, political and racial subordination. Spanish-speaking labor crusades served to actualize political change as bitter anger and deep frustrations over long-lasting abuses, sought social justice through civil rights labor movements. To many Hispanics, labor struggles were civil rights and racial discrimination went together with unionism, foreseeing that unity in numbers had the potential to forge change.⁷⁰

Under the 1930's presidency of the repressive Mexican President Porfirio Diaz, the Flores Magon brothers fled to the U.S. after organizing the Cananea, Mexico bloody strike. The Magon brothers were radical socialists and anarchists involved in the Industrial Workers of the World Union (IWW). In the 1930's, under Mexican President Lazaro Cardenas, communists and socialists established the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), supporting labor unions in other countries under the leadership of Vicente Lomardo Toledano with the Confederation of Workers of Latin America (CTAL). After the 1930s FDR New Deal policies with its liberal agenda, U.S. and Mexican labor workers united in an interchange of political ideas and organization strategies, with industrial workers having the most success. In the 1930's and 1940's, Mexican labor unions viewed Borderland Hispanics as part of their own constituency, and sought to protect and defend U.S. Hispanic interests.⁷¹ Ricardo Magon eventually died at Leavenworth Federal Prison in the U. S.

The New Deals Presidential Committee on Fair Employment Practices hearing on discrimination, and the entry of Hispanics into the CIO unions during WWII, were turning points in the Mexican American cause for social and political advancement.

⁷⁰ Vargas, Labor Rights. Page 15, 289.

⁷¹ David Bacon Rio Grande Valley Onion Strike: The Hidden History of Mexico/U.S. Labor Solidarity. 2011.

Women were also mobilizing and supporting civil rights causes. White Americans were resisting any assistance awarded to racial minorities though any New Deal policies at this time. Mexican Americans were the last to be hired for defense jobs, suffered federal job training program discrimination, were assigned to unskilled labor employment, and continually dealt with racism. Fair housing and federal housing were denied to Mexican Americans whose children were subjected to segregated schools.⁷²

During WWII, many South Texas Mexican American workers sought employment in wartime industries and forsook agricultural labor altogether. Cotton production required extensive inoculation of fertilized legumes, barnyard manure, and commercial fertilizing chemicals. This job was left to the Mexican laborer and the uneducated Mexican American.⁷³ And it was “illegal” farm labor that land investors advertised in their enticing South Texas pamphlets. Mexican agricultural laborers were considered an unlimited supply of cheap labor. They suffered exploitation, poor wages, and lack of educational opportunities for their children, malnutrition due to their low pay status, and poor sanitation.

In 1942, 500 Mexican American mine mill workers and 10,000 Mexican workers went on strike and marched into Ciudad Juarez. Toledano was there to speak to the crowd on July 4th. Surprisingly, the Cananea Mill employees sent aid to the Mine Mill strikers in reciprocation for the aid received from El Paso resident, Maclovio Barrajas. In California, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 26 used Mexican organizers. Among them were Jess Armenta, Leftist Mexican born Bert Corona, and Humberto Camacho; Mexican organizer for the United Electrical Workers (UEW) Local

⁷² Vargas, Labor Rights. Page 282-283.

⁷³ Karen Gerhardt Britton, Fred C. Elliott, and E. A. Miller, “Cotton Culture,” Handbook of Texas Online. 2010.

1421. Corona and Camacho became influential national leaders of the militant program for immigrant rights movement through solidarity activity in the 1970's. INS officials continually used deportation methods to quench union activist activities by deporting its leaders. Mexican movie star Rosaura Revueltas was deported to Mexico after she starred in the documentary about the Mine Mill at the Empire Zinc mine and the role of women in the strike. The film, "Salt of the Earth" was written by blacklisted Hollywood screenwriters. These deportations were fought by the Los Angeles based Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born. By the 1950's, Left-wing labor activists were being crushed, imprisoned, and Left-wing unions were being purged of communists on both sides of the border. Funded by the Central Intelligence Agency, agents at The American Institute for Free Labor Development in Mexico City helped suppress, imprison, and murder militant unionists throughout Latin America. It is a history still feared by solidarity seekers in both countries. Due to the repressed student movement in Tlatelolco Mexico in 1968, and before the Mexican Communist Party (PCM) became the United Socialist Party of Mexico (PSUM), and then The Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), Bert Corona helped build the Centro de Accion Social Autonoma (CASA) in Los Angles. CASA fought for union worker defense and organization in the face of unresponsive labor. This history of labor unions on both sides of the Mexico/U.S border shows that the movement for worker and union solidarity has been both integral and indispensable.⁷⁴

According to David Bacon in his article: The Hidden History of Mexico/U.S. Labor Solidarity,

⁷⁴ David Bacon.

Solidarity has always been a project of the left in each country. A strong left produced a base for developing common action. It popularized political ideas that helped workers understand that internationalism was necessary to confront transnational corporations and the governments and policies that supported them. Conversely, the cold war, nationalism, and anti-immigrant hysteria in the U.S., and repression on both sides of the border, were the tools used to break those bonds and proscribe those ideas. Today those threats are growing again. Ties between workers and unions in the U.S. and Mexico must grow stronger to defeat them.⁷⁵

Hispanic women such as Texans Maria Solis Sager and Emma Tenayuca, New Mexican Luz Salazar, and Chicagoan Guadalupe Marshall, became communist party leaders. Emma Tenayuca would play a key role in San Antonio as she organized and led strikes contesting job discrimination and wage issues. She was a principal initiator in the 1938 San Antonio Pecan Sheller's strike. Her message was that their "struggle was the struggle of all Mexican workers for civil rights." In the communist party, Tenayuca was one of the party's most able spokesperson.⁷⁶

Chapter 3: Braceros Re-Work the South Texas Farming Landscape

The Bracero (Arm in Arm manual labor) Program of 1942 labeled Public Law 78 was a Mexican Farm Labor Program Agreement between the U.S. and Mexico which sought to import Mexican Nationals as temporary agricultural laborers on a seasonal basis due to WWII and Korean War labor shortages. It was the first of many accords

⁷⁵ David Bacon.

⁷⁶ Vargas, Labor Rights. Page 126-143.

designed to legalize and control farmworkers along U.S. southern borders. As a result of the Bracero Program, from 1942 to 1964, 4.5 million braceros came to the U.S. By 1954, Operation Wetback was instituted by the U.S. to repatriate Mexican laborers back to Mexico when they were no longer needed. By 1955, 3.8 million Mexican laborers had been returned to Mexico.¹ The Bracero Program guaranteed workers transportation to and from their homes in Mexico to U.S. recruitment centers, minimum wages, adequate housing, board, and medical services.

In his narrative, Orendain tells his story of coming to the U.S. in 1950 and the cleansing practices used against braceros by Immigration officials. He also shares about his willingness to stand up against a Japanese American farmer who in the not so distant past, had himself been the subject of discrimination in Mexico and the U.S. during WWII.

In the evening as I approached a farm in Escondido, California, after I had inquired about work, the Japanese farmer showed me his hands. I resented the treatment of Mexican persons by some employers. When I was in Mexicali, I had seen some men rubbing their hands with stones. I asked them why they did this. They responded that in El Centro, California they had a corral called Camp Elliott, and in Escondido they called the corral, "El Coralon." In these places, U.S. officials kept a large corral filled with about 5-10 thousand bracero men seeking labor in the U. S. Growers would come and pick out men as if they were cattle by signaling that they wanted the tall guy, or the short guy, or the stocky guy, much like in the days of slavery when the buyers selected black slaves. They would also check their hands to see if they were worn, as a symbol of experienced

work hands. They would also spray the men with chemicals or DDT (at that time they didn't know the harmful effects of DDT) to kill any potential lice some might carry, but all got the treatment. I hated this treatment of Mexicans by these individuals. I wondered why they didn't let us prove our experience instead of demeaning us. That was the whole reason why I suffered from June to November being beaten and thrown back to Mexico, because I refused to be treated like an animal if I came in as a bracero. So when the Japanese asked me to show him my hands, those images came flooding to my mind. I told him "I would rather show you my behind than my hands." And I walked off.⁷⁷

Barring Texas from the Bracero Program, due to the expansive Texas history of discrimination and exploitation against Mexican laborers, and a number of civil rights violations which included discrimination, violence, and perfunctory arrests for petty causes, the Texas governor sought to find loopholes to obtain cheap labor from Mexico.⁷⁸

In 1943, Texas governor Coke Stevenson set up the Good Neighbor Commission inspired by FDR's Good Neighbor Policy. The Commission was designed to promote good relations and cultural exchanges between Texas and Mexico, as well as investigate discrimination issues within the state. Stevenson also established the Caucasian Race Resolution designed to prohibit discrimination against any Caucasian, intending to include Mexicans as Caucasians. In the spring of 1947, Texas was able to begin participation in the Bracero Program, although discrimination against Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and Braceros continued.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Antonio Orendain Interview.

⁷⁸ Fred L. Koestler, "Operation Wetback," Handbook of Texas Online. 2010.

⁷⁹ Salinas, Mobility, page 95.

During the Great Depression, under economic and political pressure, the U.S. government began to enforce strict laws of expulsion and exclusion by inhibiting U.S. entry to Mexican Nationals. Through deportations and repatriations, approximately 500,000 Mexican and Mexican Americans left to Mexico during the 1930's. Yet, incidents of INS personnel who worked the system to deport undocumented workers when the harvest season was over, only to turn their heads when it began, made numbers irrelevant, as in the case of INS Supervisor Albert Quillin. Quillin made deals with area farmers in San Benito. Some were monetary, and Quillin often worked in their favor. Hired in 1940, Quillin was dismissed in 1954 when an investigative committee found him liable of misconduct and inappropriate behavior. INS officials on the ground carried immense self-proclaimed discretionary powers in relation to the migration process of South Texas borderlands. Under the Wickersham Commission, INS investigator Reuben Oppenheimer declared that the INS agency operated in an environment so free from oversight that oftentimes, one office or person conducted deportation functions of police, judge, and jury. Thus, they conducted elements of illegal procedure, safeguard absence, and despotic power. Yet, it was this relationship between INS and Valley farmers that ultimately formed immigration law and enforcement.⁸⁰

In Kathleen Mapes review of Emilio Zamora's book: *Claiming Rights and Righting Wrongs in Texas: Mexican Workers and Job Politics during World War II*, she states that Mexican's ability to share in wartime benefits depended on the relationships between laborers, the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), the United States Employment Service (USES), the U.S. State Department, Mexican officials in Mexico and in U.S. Consular positions in Texas, and civil rights organizations. She does not

⁸⁰ Salinas, *Mobility*, Page 64.

mention agricultural farmers and growers who had great political influence, as well. According to Mapes, the LULAC civil rights organizations tied its fate to Mexican Nationals in an effort to address labor issues and racial discrimination on humanitarian grounds for all Hispanics. The U.S. government had a record of reinforcing discrimination against Hispanics by limiting rights and opportunities, yet worked simultaneously in programs within the FEPC to combat racist practices and discrimination in hiring, training, payment and promotion. USES was used to ensure laboring workers remained in the agricultural fields during the war, and not out seeking higher paid jobs in wartime industries. Carlos Castaneda was an FEPC agent who routinely exposed social discrimination against Hispanics in pay and promotions within the system. The Texas FEPC dealt with segregationists who sought White privilege protection at all costs. According to Zamora, LULAC, Mexican state officials and U.S. Consular officers routinely challenged continued discrimination.⁸¹ Growers grew frustrated with their loss of control over Mexican labor.

A South Texas conference between the INS, Mexican officials and South Texas growers in 1947 sought to limit the mobility of Mexican American laborers. By seeking to restrict migrant seasonal mobility to other areas of the state and country, growers labeled labor agents and crew leaders as chaotic, inefficient, or exploitative. Growers tried to bring them under Mexican or Texas state control and under their own influence. Crew leaders were often subject to lawsuits in which South Texas judges ruled against them and in favor of the Commissioner of the Bureau of Labor Statistics Maureen Moore and her deputy, Thad Hoot. This Commission was in charge of laborer's mobility in South Texas to ensure cheap South Texas labor for Valley farmers. It was these practices,

⁸¹ Kathleen Mapes, Promises.

according to Cristina Salinas, that formulated mid-century South Texas immigration politics.⁸² Mexican officials often profited from their own ignorance of the actual conditions of the Bracero program.

On Saturday, October 16, 1948, Consul Raul Michel, a high ranking official of the Mexican government stood witnessing the events unfolding before him in the Ciudad Juarez/El Paso border, the Bracero Program proved to crumble before him as he and Consul Adscrito Urrea saw how Mexican Braceros were loaded onto cattle cars. Approaching the braceros he was told after questioning that the Braceros had crossed the river illegally to get jobs in America. The drivers confirmed they were headed to diverse agricultural fields in U.S. locations. The INS superior M.R. Toole gave instructions that nobody intervene in the matters at hand. As a consequence, over four days, from 4-6 thousand Mexican workers crossed the U.S. Mexican border to work in the U.S. illegally with the consent of Mexican government officials, Mexican military troops, and U.S. INS authorities. Consul Raul Michel sent a report to the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores in Mexico City. The public embarrassment of poor judgement forced the U.S. government to render a formal apology to the Mexican government. In this way, both the U.S. and Mexican governments shaped present and future immigration policy.

The relationship between braceros, Mexican officials, American officials, and citrus growers proved extremely profitable. The Rio Grande Valley produced twenty four million boxes of grapefruit in 1948 and was second in production only to Florida State. The Valley also produced and shipped more than fifty percent of all vegetable crops in Texas, including tomatoes, cabbage, carrots, potatoes, beets, corn, green beans, and onions. From 1944 to 1950, only California and Iowa rendered more produce than Texas.

⁸² Salinas, *Mobility*, page 85.

Concurrently, in 1948, Hidalgo and Cameron Counties produced more cotton bales in the U.S. than any other place except Lubbock, Texas. It was the warm Rio Grande Valley weather, its long planting season, its irrigation infrastructure investments, but most importantly, its abundant cheap Hispanic labor that made it such an agricultural success. August of 1948 recorded approximately 135,000 laborers with 100,000 among them undocumented workers and 40,000 permanent residents, according to a Nelson and Meyer study in South Texas. During this time, when workers were earning sixty cents an hour in California and fifty cents an hour in New Mexico; South Texas laborers were still earning a miserly twenty five cents an hour.⁸³ In South Texas, while some documented workers were afforded a small cottage per family to live while employed seasonally, undocumented workers often slept on a tarp or work sac under the summer sky, away from the view of possible immigration agents driving by.⁸⁴

Subsection: Antonio Orendain

From Bracero to Migrant Farm Working Family Member

Antonio Orendain came to the United States as a bracero in 1950. Coming into the country through Tijuana, Mexico and laboring throughout California, he helped found the United Farm Workers Union in Delano, California. In 1966, he came to the Rio Grande Valley to organize the Starr County Melon Strike in Rio Grande City, Texas. There, he founded the Texas Farm Workers Union for Texas farmworkers. He shared his story with me, about how he was raised in Mexico, his early influences for justice, and

⁸³ Salinas, *Mobility*, page 39.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, page 47

his struggle to come into a country that wanted his labor but not his person. It is the story of many Mexican Nationals who came to the United States without permission to work.

Childhood Memories: Ontonio Orendain's childhood background prepared him for a life, not only as a bracero, but also as a farmworker. Through his inquisitive mind, he also became an organizer for farm working families in South Texas.

I was born in 1930 and grew up with my grandfather in Mexico. In 1934, the Mexican government began to give out land to the poor people of Mexico under President Lazaro Cardenas. As I played with other kids, I would go to their houses and see a rifle as tall as I was, sitting behind the door with cannonballs sitting beside it, and the rifle fully loaded. I asked my friends why that rifle was there. They told me that their father had joined the agrarian land reform program, and that the agrarians had given their father land.

I asked my grandfather why he did not join the agrarians so they can give him a rifle. He said to me, "No son. The rich, or the boss, does not give you seed, oxen, or plows to work the land. What the agrarians want is for the poor man to kill each other fighting for the land. But the poor man remains the same in his poor state." I asked my grandfather many questions and he would answer me and tell me many stories. On summer nights we used to sleep out in the fields as we protected the crops of bean or corn during harvest, from thieves. I would look up at the sky and ask my grandfather about the sun and the moon. I asked him if there was a possibility of ever reaching those places. So I grew up with my grandfather in Mexico sleeping in the fields and asking questions.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Antonio Orendain Interview.

Intermediate Years: It was during his youth, reading news about the United States, that Orendain first heard about union organizing.

When I was ten years old, I went to live with a man from San Pedro who was paralyzed, because he had fallen from a horse. The man had been a rural policeman before he fell. That man would have me read the newspaper for him. He also liked to read the “*Readers Digest*,” and the newspaper “*Excelsior*.” Often when I read the newspaper, I would read about the miners who went on strike in the U.S. during WWII. At the time John Lewis was the leader of the strikers in Michigan. I questioned why the U.S. was having strikes if they were fighting for the freedom of other nations. I felt that unions were wrong but after I came to the U.S in 1950 as an adult illegal immigrant, I saw how the system treated me. As a young adult in Mexico, I served for three years in the Mexican military as a radio operator.⁸⁶

Bracero Experiences: It is through Orendain’s bracero experiences that we see a first-hand eyewitness account to the life of an immigrant in his travels to his destination to find work in the United States. His suffering, his plight, the safe havens he found along the way; and his persistence to obtain a better livelihood for himself are explicitly presented in this narrative.

I came to Tijuana Mexico below San Diego, California, with the aid of some family members. I came to the border in June and I did not succeed in entering the U.S. until November of that year because every time I attempted entry, the police would catch me and throw me back to Mexico. One time they beat me up pretty bad. It was a time when they said we should not use our true name. Since I had

⁸⁶ Antonio Orendain Interview.

worked with about four hundred men as a mechanic, I would use their names and constantly changed my name. On a certain day, I told the official that my name was such and such, and he got upset. He said, "I just apprehended you a little while ago and you said you're name was different. Why did you change your name?" So he slapped me around, beat me up, and threw me back to Mexico. Another thing that was going on at the time, is that if the immigration officials caught you trying to come through three times, they would shave your head. Since I had never cut my hair before, I was afraid of being shorn. That is why I would change my name. I was more afraid of being shorn than to be beat up. So from June to November, every three or four days I would attempt to cross, and get thrown back again. But on November 4th, 1950, I finally got across. I was twenty years old. I had tried to get across in Tijuana, Tecate, Mexicali, and Rio Colorado. I was already well known by the officials in those places.⁸⁷ On that day, I met a man who was fifty five years old. He was traveling from Otonilco, Mexico and didn't know how to cross over to the U.S. It was his first time crossing. I told him I already had experience in being caught and being sent back. I told him that if I could cross, I knew the way to travel from San Isidro, to San Clemente, to San Marcos, to San Luis Rey, and to Santa Anna where we could take the bus to San Angeles in five days. In Los Angeles, there is less INS surveillance. I told him that if he wanted to, I could take him, even though I had not eaten in several days. So he said he had a little money and we could buy whatever I thought we might need for the trip.

⁸⁷ Antonio Orendain Interview.

On the twentieth day of November 1950, as the feast of petroleum was coming to an end, we bought a carton of milk and some water and headed out at night. I told him that there was a radio tower at a far distance, and that I was told that was the City of Enchantment. I told him that the red blinking light was from the tower's antennae. The plan was to walk all night towards the tower and at daybreak, rest there and the next day continue on our journey. Around eleven o'clock at night, the night sky turned overcast and there was a gentle wind blowing towards the ocean. I had been told that at nightfall, the mountain winds would blow towards the ocean. After twelve midnight, it blows from the ocean to the mountains. The man would tell me that in his land, the air that blew from the mountain range was a northern. I told him that we were between the mountains and the ocean and the ship horns we heard were coming from San Diego. There came a point when the clouds were thick and covered the moonlight and even I was confused as to our location. I confessed to him that I was disoriented, because I did not have the moon to guide me. I told the man that I was going to place a stake into the ground. When the moon came in temporarily, if the shadow was on the right, that meant it was moving west. I asked him if he understood me. He told me who the heck could understand me; that if the shadow goes this way, and the moon goes that way, and that north is that way. So I figured I needed to just show him. We started walking towards the sea and at dawn we reached the radio tower and stayed there. We drank a little milk and a little water and the next day we began walking again.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Antonio Orendain Interview.

He was confused but I told him we were walking towards El Cajon and were leaving San Diego on the left. Along the way there had been a grass fire and we got all full of soot. In the morning as we came down a hill, a woman called out to us in English, "Hey, boys." I learned a little English in school, but not much. She told us to walk and go past the INS agents and hide among some rocks. She gave us some blankets and food and said to be quiet because in a minute, INS was going to come asking about us. Sure enough, they came. After they left, she gave us milk, some fig cookies which I loved very much. Later she told us that she and her spouse were going to Escondido. She said for us to wait till nightfall and they were going to check if INS was checking cars at the checkpoint before Escondido. If they were not, they would return for us to cross us over. In the meantime, they left us in their own home with the instructions not to turn on the radio or TV so nobody would know someone was in the house. I told my friend that as long as I had a place to stay and food to eat, I was happy. We stayed there all day but by evening time, my friend started getting desperate and wanted to leave, fearing the couple would call INS on us. I told him if they wanted to, they would have already done so.⁸⁹

Eventually, I agreed, and we left everything in order and left. Finally we came to a fork in the road in which one lane went to Ramona and the other went straight. I had found a map, and I knew that with a map, I would have clear direction of where we were going. At the fork my friend wanted to go to Ramona but I told him we should continue northward. I told him I had heard that in Ramona there were turkey farms, but I didn't know if there was any agriculture there. After he

⁸⁹ Antonio Orendain Interview.

sore insisted, I went ahead and complied, but I was upset. I was twenty and he was fifty five. I wore him out, but at dawn we arrived at Ramona. He gave me thirty cents and told me to go look for something to eat. I asked him, “How can I look for something to eat if it is six o’clock in the morning and everything is closed?” I was tired, so I lay down and went to sleep.⁹⁰

When I woke up around eleven in the morning, he was gone. He had left me there. So I started walking down Highway 78 to Escondido, according to the map, because it was lemon harvesting season. I did not want to work in a turkey farm. Before I left Ramona, a woman came out of a farm and called out to me and invited me to have breakfast in their home. She told me they wanted to take me to Escondido, but they could not, because the INS would confiscate the vehicles of anyone found transporting illegal aliens. The couple had a turkey farm. The woman made me a sandwich and they gave me \$2.50 in American change. So I started walking down the highway to see what would happen. I figured if INS got me, they would just throw me back to Mexico. A highway patrolman went by a couple of times and waved at me. The couple had told me that before I entered Escondido, there was a Japanese farm at which I could inquire for work. As I walked on my way to Escondido at nightfall looking for work, I entered the city and came to an avocado grove. There was an empty water trough in the orchard, and since it was November, the weather was beginning to chill, and I was cold. I slid under some leaves in the trough. In a minute the leaves began to shake like a rattle snake. I was scared to death, but the neighboring dogs made such a ruckus that I dared not get up. That night I slept in the trough and in the morning,

⁹⁰ Antonio Orendain Interview.

I walked down Main Street around six in the morning. A police car went by and waved at me. I was unsure of what to do as far as work.⁹¹

Undocumented Farm Laborer: In this narrative, Orendain describes his daily diet, living conditions, treatment, and work experience as an undocumented worker living in the United States. Renowned historians have long recorded the miserly living conditions of farmworkers across America, but especially in the Border States.⁹²

Eventually a car went by with two individuals and the driver. The driver asked me, “Where are you going, wetback?” I told him I was looking for work. He told me to climb in. He said those two guys worked for him. He had no more work, but he would take me to an Italian who would possibly give me work in his avocado orchard.

Before he took me to the Italian he took me to his own ranch. I found out one guy was from Guanajuato and the other was from Jalisco. The farmer grabbed something in his two hands and asked if I knew what it was. I imagined that it was soy bean, even though I was not familiar with soy bean. I said it was bean. The other looked like lentils but larger. The only thing I recognized was the black part on the lentil bean. The farmer told me that, if I said I was a farmer, identify the seeds in his hand. I told him one was bean but the other I was unsure. One of the other guys touted me, saying he thought I was a farmworker. Then he told me it was a jicama seed. I told him the only way I knew jicama was with lemon and red chili. So I worked for that man for about two months placing chemicals in his avocado tree roots to kill the moles that infested them. The man gave me \$2.35 a

⁹¹ Antonio Orendain Interview.

⁹² Vargas, American Labor, Page 22.

day and I would buy a loaf of bread, a slice of bologna and a gallon of milk and that was my meal twice a day.⁹³

After a while, the man said he had no more work. By then, the weather was cold. I had been sleeping in a trailer under some carpets. The man told me he didn't have a place for me to stay anymore with the cold weather coming on. By that time my hair had grown excessively long. I told him to give me a haircut and let me shower and give me a ride to the highway. I would go from there. Before he dropped me off, he charged me day by day for the bread and bologna. I had twenty or thirty dollars left. I figured if INS got me, I would buy a ticket to Mexico and see how far I could go with that money.

Once, a car stopped and asked the famous question, "Where are you going, wetback?" I told him I was looking for work. He asked if I wanted a ride and I told him they would confiscate his car. I had nothing to lose but he did. He asked me if I knew how to read a map. I said yes, because in the military, we had to use maps. So he told me that the INS was always scouting the major highways, but never the small back roads. The key was to stay on the back county roads. So from Escondido, we went up the mountain to Ramona, then to Hammond, then to Chino. In Chino we stopped to eat, and the guy, Juan, asked what I wanted to eat. I told him I didn't know because I had been eating bread and bologna for about two months straight and didn't know what to order, so he ordered for me.⁹⁴

After that we went through Los Angeles on our way to Bakersfield. At night, as dusk approached, we slept in the mountains on Hwy. 99. By this time it was

⁹³ Antonio Orendain Interview.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

already December. My friend pulled out a 15 foot long sack and told me that these sacks were what people used to pick cotton in the U.S. Up till then, I didn't know that cotton could be grown on the ground, because in Mexico, we grow cotton on trees. Cotton bunches hang from the trees. I had a brother with yellow hair, and my grandfather would call him "cabello de clavellina." Clavellina was like white cotton. My friend said he was looking for some friends who lived in Bakersfield who owed him money. He proposed we go there looking for them, and at the same time, check to see if there was anyone there who would hire me to pick cotton. When we went to Bakersfield, his friends were still "in the north."⁹⁵ My friend said he was going to spend the Christmas holidays with his family in Jalisco, Xocotepec, Mexico. He said that if I wanted, he could leave me with some friends in Corcoran who may still be picking cotton in Bakersfield. By that time, it was bad for cotton picking, because there were some rainy days. I said ok. He left me with some friends that were staying in some cabins which were about 16 x 12. There was a space for a kitchen, and rooms for sleeping on the other side. There were no beds in the place, so the men used cotton sacks filled with cotton and slept on them on the floor. Others had cots. Still others slept on the bare floor. He left me there and went on. There were on average four men in each of these cabins, if the men were single. If it was a family, then they would give them one or two cabins, and if there were no cabins, they would give them a tent to stay in. I stayed with the men, but soon, they said they were going down to Santa Barbara to work in picking lemon, because it was the lemon season.

⁹⁵ Antonio Orendain Interview.

When we got to Santa Barbara, there was not much lemon crop left, because there were numerous illegals already working to pick them. After Christmas, my friend Juan Perez returned from his vacation and asked how things were. I told him I barely scraped by with enough work to eat, living with the other men, and sharing the cost of living there. He said we should go up to Stockton, California in the car. At the time, it was time to cut and “top” the sugar beet plants. He now had another friend so there were three of us. Before we got to Stockton, we were stopped by a highway patrolman. He said he couldn’t release the car or our friend Juan, because he was driving with no valid California license plates and no working brakes in the car. He told us he would have to impound the car and arrest Juan. He also directed us to a certain farm and told us to ask for a certain contractor named Blas Perez. He said Blas might hire us. Then he added, “Because you are wetbacks, aren’t you?” The other guy responded, “NO.” The Highway Patrolman answered, “What do you mean? You’re pants haven’t even dried yet!”⁹⁶

The Highway Patrolman gave us directions and let us go. He said Blas might have some work in the sugar beets with some elderly people. We figured we’d have it made “topping plants” with old people. At the time, I did not know how to “Top”, or that it was a Tex-Mex term that meant cutting off the tops of plants to make them fit in a box for packing. So Blas put us all in line, gave us rows, and then gave us all a shot of wine. I was surprised that in no time, those elderly people were leaving us behind in the rows. They had so much energy. Later, the contractor told me, “Look, you can be a good worker, but bend yourself down.

⁹⁶ Antonio Orendain Interview.

Don't get up, just keep going straight." In the mornings I had two eggs and toast for breakfast, but I never could catch up to them. Before the season was over, as we were loading a truck, the contractor told me, "You've never worked at topping beets before. You don't know how and you will never learn!"

When Juan Perez got out of jail, he asked a cousin for a loan to get his car back from being impounded. They were charging him \$350. But when we had the money for the car and went to get the car, the guy said he would buy the car from us because it was a nice car and he needed it for a family member. So he paid us the money and we bought a car for \$250, but that car was nothing but trouble. It was always breaking down.⁹⁷

Settlement into the U.S. Based Farm Labor Circuit: Orendain finally settled in central California. It is this area where he began his organizing activities with Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta.

Since they already knew us in Corcoran, we returned to that place where Roberto Bravo was the contractor and Zacharias was the Father. They had been working those farms for many years. Sometimes there would be some new people, but mostly the same ones returned year by year. Everywhere else we looked, employers didn't have any work. So Corcoran became our home base from which we went to work in one place or another. Sometimes, we would work in barley fields. The barley was long and wide and the rows were about a mile long. We would set each other about ten feet apart and each one worked the space in between the rows to cover the whole space, and thus finished clearing the field of the barley flowers that grew there. Working on the field at any given time were

⁹⁷ Antonio Orendain Interview.

about 10-20 men. Eventually, someone would begin to make the invitation to move on to another work location within the state. So it was that we packed our clothes and moved around in Oregon, Idaho, and other places, because we had a better car to travel.⁹⁸

Antonio Orendain's experience with field conditions across the United States gave him access to labor organizing circles in California. His interview highlights the long and complicated road from bracero and unauthorized migrant to labor organizer and U. S. based migrant worker. What stands out in his narrative is his ability to connect federal policies to its impact on the everyday life of farmworkers in the United States.

Chapter 4: Claiming the Right to Have a Union: American Labor Networks and South Texas

Union Origins: From Labor Experience to Labor Organizing in South Texas

As Mexican laborers have been pushed and pulled across the border, nothing compared with the September 1963 Salinas Valley, California tragedy which impacted Hispanic labor all across America, but especially in South Texas. After a ten hour workday, an enclosed bus carrying fifty seven braceros collided with a Southern Pacific Railroad freight train at an unmarked railroad track, killing three dozen workers. Newspaper headlines across the country blared in large print: "This Town is Full of Dead Mexicans!" This event affected the Bracero Program (1942-1964) across the United States. The violence catalyzed the upsurge of the California Chicano Movement in rural areas, a decision that would influence Hispanics nationwide. The Salinas Valley tragedy

⁹⁸ Antonio Orendain Interview.

became the last straw for the Bracero Program as the clearest example of the utter injustices against Hispanic farmworkers across the United States.⁹⁹

Mexican American activists and civil rights organizations had long opposed the Bracero Program and called for its end. The incident served to create collaboration between formerly distant relations among such agencies as the League of Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the American G.I. Forum of California (AGIF), the Community Service Organization (CSO), the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA), the Latin American Civic Association (LACA), the Council for Mexican American Affairs (CMAA), the National Farm Labor Union (NFLU), the Salinas Central Labor Council (SCLC), the National Agricultural Workers Union (NAWU) and the Mexican American Unity Council (MAUC). Thus, by the time Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta took up farmworkers issues in California and later in South Texas through the United Farmworkers Union (UFWU), others were already working on labor, human and civil rights and the end of the Bracero Program. Hysterical California growers worked hard to find loopholes in Public Law 414's Immigration and Nationalities Act. Through this law, U.S. Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz certified the importation of Mexican laborers under the stipulation that "if an insufficient number of U.S. citizens are unavailable at fair rates of pay and adequate working conditions" growers could send for Mexican labor. Labor Secretary Wirtz ceded requests for tens of thousands of laborers from 1965-1967, refusing to totally close down the Bracero Program. This move increased the hardships of

⁹⁹ Flores, Lori A. A Town Full of Dead Mexicans: The Salinas Valley Bracero Tragedy of 1963. *Western Historical Quarterly*. Summer 2013, Vol. 44 Issue 2, preceding p125-143. 2013.

thousands of underpaid and unemployed Mexican Americans ceding their jobs to their ethnic brothers from across the border.¹⁰⁰

Meanwhile, multiple agencies rushed to investigate the incident along with laborers working conditions. Among the agencies were the Monterrey County sheriff, district attorney, and coroner; the California Department of Industrial Relations (CDIR), the California State Compensation Insurance Fund (CSCIF), the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL), the California Highway Patrol (CHP), and the Mexican Consulate. It was noted that across the U.S., many braceros had died in labor accidents. In Salinas and Brawley, 14 men died in a bus/train accident in 1953. In 1958, 14 men burned to death when their bus caught fire and chains prevented their escape as they did in the 1963 Salinas accident. From 1952-1962, one hundred twenty five farmworkers died and 2,754 were injured in transportation accidents, according to a California Department of Industrial Relations report.¹⁰¹

In the South Texas border town of Del Rio, 7 braceros died and 60 were injured when a bus driver dozed and drove off the road. The California Salinas Valley, like the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, is known for their “World Salad Bowl” status as agricultural growing havens through cheap labor practices. Working with depressed wages as non-unionized workers, 5.2 million bracero labor contracts all over the nation had been drawn up over the Bracero Programs 20 year history.

Dependent on Mexican laborers, growers everywhere lobbied to keep the Bracero Program going, but in 1964, the U.S. congress ended the program. The terms under which the labor was contracted had rarely been adhered to, and the braceros were nothing

¹⁰⁰ Lori Flores.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

more than “rented slaves,” replaced yearly with a newer, younger and more energetic crop. Economist Henry Anderson wrote: “Do you believe that freedom ought to mean choice? Braceros have no choices. They work for whomever they are told, doing whatever they are told, wherever they are told, for as long as they are told, under whatever conditions they are told.”¹⁰² The same is true for all Mexican Nationals, within or without government sanctioned agencies.

Though Mexicans and Mexican Americans were well aware of racial discrimination in society, politics, and capital; in the workplace, schools, and public places; and most especially in the agricultural fields; a chord was struck with the deaths of the Salinas migrant workers. It created an awakening to action among Hispanics, nationwide.

Concerning the fact that Mexican Nationals have been migrating to the U. S. to work, whether legally or illegally, since the early thirties, Ex-Texas State Representative Alex Moreno Jr. says that Mexico keeps exporting their problem to the U.S. The people who want change just come to the U. S. and the people who stay in Mexico are resigned to their situation. This mobilization provides Mexico from a revolution, since this exportation serves as a pressure release valve for the discontented of Mexico. As long as the U.S. offers itself as a safety valve for immigrants, they will keep coming. If the U.S. government ever closes the borders as they have continually promised to do, Mexico will potentially turn into a communist country, which would be a nightmare for the United States government. Reports say that half of Veracruz, in the Southern tip of Mexico, has left. They now reside in northern Mexico. The people who were in northern Mexico are

¹⁰² Lori Flores.

now all over the U.S. That is besides migration from Central and South America. Today, there are Hispanic communities in cities and states that once were White only spaces.¹⁰³

Mr. Moreno remembers when Antonio Orendain, TFWU founder, would go on the radio about thirty years ago and tell the listeners in Mexico, “Many of you think that there is gold on the streets of the U.S., and that all you have to do is get your broom and shovel it off the streets. That is not true. You are coming to take away food from other people.” On the other hand, there are hundreds if not thousands of individuals and businesses who want people who are undocumented, who will work for cheap labor as farmworkers, maids, restaurant dishwashers, janitors, and all the menial labors there are.¹⁰⁴

There was a direct link between the anti-Bracero mobilization in California and labor organizing in South Texas. When Antonio Orendain met Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta in California, they all had one thing in common as they worked for the Community Service Organization. They were all anti-violence advocates of the school of Mahatma Ghandi. An interview with Antonio Orendain brought out the importance of these successful tactics to a South Texas labor organizer.

Equalized Labor and Civil Rights for all Persons:

The idea of violence is only a tool to abuse the people. In the Chicago union massacre, who won? The poor does not win. The ones who win are the rich. It's a faulty system. There are different kinds of communism, including the Christian communism and the Russian communism. The evil is the oppression or exploitation of the proletariat, the lowest working class people. Even Jesus Christ

¹⁰³ Alex Moreno Jr. Interview.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

was preaching a Christian communism, and the political machines killed him. In Russia, they have not been able to help the people at the bottom of the barrel, either. We live in systems that qualify people, not as humans, but based on how much financial worth they have, how much they can be exploited. Let's say one man has 10 workers, and another man also has 10. In their conversation, the first man says his profit is one hundred dollars. The other says his profit is two hundred dollars. The first man asks him how he does it. The second man answers that he does not provide benefits. No medical insurance, no social security- nothing. By providing no benefits, all the labor is profit for him.¹⁰⁵

What is going to happen if everyone is educated and nobody wants to work the fields? In Mexico, the employers are already exploiting the workers like they do here. The Taro- Mara Indians are the new Mexican slaves, the new farmworkers. I've read many doctrines from many different countries. In all the doctrines, why is it not written that the farmworker, the lowest in the financial scale, also must be respected for his work? Only Don Quixote de la Mancha said: "Before things existed, the world was good. Before the words 'yours and mine' existed, everything was equal and there was fairness. Once the words, "yours and mine" came into being, everyone wants things to be theirs and nobody else's." Even in government, isn't it always "all for the government- nothing for the people?" The system wants to treat us like the little dog chasing his own tail. They want to keep the poor people down at the bottom.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Antonio Orendain Interview.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

Democracy, Activism, and the American Capitalist System:

If you have read history, you have read that democracy was invented in Athens Greece. But that democracy was founded on thousands of Athenian citizens and millions and millions of slaves. The United States also is founded on millions of illegal immigrants who come to America to work, and the thousands of employers who are exploiting the farm laborer. Why have they treated us so? We went to Washington and spoke to Vice President Walter Mondale under President Jimmy Carter. Why does government reject the union, and always say the farmworkers don't want a union? Why don't they let the farmworker have a union contract for a year, and assess the situation after one year to see if the worker will indeed reject the union or not? But since I have been involved in the farmworker struggle in this country, they have never allowed it.¹⁰⁷

The U.S. government will, however, allow more illegal immigrants into the country. Right now, they are saying they will allow the immigrants to have U.S. citizenship. They will give them citizenship, but they won't give them work. There is no work to give. It's the same competition. We come from Mexico, and we come very poor. The only thing we want to prove, is that we also know how to work. We are going to sacrifice ourselves, and perhaps make more money than you. I come, I work cheaply. I allow employers and people to abuse of me. I earn five hundred or a thousand dollars, and I leave to Mexico. I may return to the place I live. I'll buy a box of tomatoes, and now, I am a merchant. Now I am not a farmworker.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Antonio Orendain Interview.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

The problem is that we reserve the land only for the ignorant. For the people who can't learn. It's like a pyramid. Like students in high school who work for McDonalds. As they become more educated, they begin to climb up the pyramid. The higher they go on the pyramid scale, the more they draw from the ones on the lower scale of the pyramid. That is how the little guy at the bottom will survive, by being exploited by the others higher in the pyramid. But what is going to happen when the whole world is educated? When someone is asked, "do you want to work in the field?" and he responds, "No, I am a doctor." The other, "No, I am an engineer." And another, "No, I'm a lawyer." Who is going to work the land? What is needed is for the work of the farmworker to have a price, just as the educated have a price on their work, depending on the level of education. What I am saying, is that the millions of dollars in the U.S. are based on the labor and sweat of illegal immigrants from Mexico. Just as the riches of Athens were based on the millions of slaves, so it is in the U. S. If you study the pyramid, you will see that wherever you are on the pyramid, based on your education, the ones on top will not want you to advance. They want to keep you down, because you feed them. And as you escalate, you are served by the ones below you.¹⁰⁹

South Texas Labor Unions

Even before LULACS formation in 1929, mutual aid societies on both sides of the U.S. / Mexico border had already been at work on Texas Hispanic civil rights issues. These organizations served to instill worker unions with a rich store of knowledge, tactics, strategies, and politics with which to defend themselves from repressive

¹⁰⁹ Antonio Orendain Interview.

employers. A South Texas farmworker spoke to me of a time when employers voted for all their employees, without the employee consent or knowledge. He says that farmworkers were very simple and ignorant of the laws, and were afraid to speak up for fear of retaliation by employers.¹¹⁰ As industrialization and commercialized agriculture increased in South Texas, El Congreso Mexicanista worked to build a regional federation of Mexican community organizations. El Partido Liberal Mexicano (PLM) was one of the most important exile groups of the era. The PLM was formed after the repressive, American supported government of Mexico's President Porfirio Diaz' destroyed the Mexican labor union movement. Diaz received cash, arms and manpower from US merchants, bankers, and large Rio Grande Valley farmers, including Richard King of the King Ranch. The PLM was an anarchist-led Mexican Liberal Party that operated out of Los Angeles California at the turn of the century, during the American Revolution. The PLM was best known for its involvement in the Cananea, Mexico Miners' Strike owned by the Rockefeller controlled Anaconda Corporation, and managed by American William Green. The two day gun battle standoff in Cananea was an effort to bridge the huge labor and economic inequalities within the system. Anarchist brothers Ricardo and Enrique Magon's newspaper stressed the right to organize and the need for government overthrow by the working class people.¹¹¹ During the Cananea Strike, Maclovio Barrajas of El Paso sent food and funds from the U.S. to the Cananea Mexico strikers.¹¹² Left-wing Mexican organizations served to provide direction, organization, and unity to dis-satisfied striking employees. The PLM was instrumental to Mexican and Mexican American successes in

¹¹⁰ South Texas Interview.

¹¹¹ Hart, John. "Revolutionary Syndicalism - An International Perspective." London: Scolar Press. 1990. Web. March 2015.

¹¹² David Bacon.

their aid to combat poverty, social discrimination, and inequalities in education, employment, and public establishments. Historians have been vague concerning the considerable Hispanic organizing activities in the Rio Grande Valley, which had less than 25% non- union membership in the older industries that included food and agricultural processing.¹¹³

Abel Orendain remembers the the 1966 Rio Grande Valley Starr County Melon Strike. Abel feels that oftentimes, the establishment, or Anglo Americans, tag any organization that threatens the status quo as having communistic or leftist ties, out of the fear for change. Communism is used to scare people. Much of what is written about Cesar Chavez and the CSO is that the CSO was inspired by Sal Alinsky whom they tag as a communist or leftist. Yet, he says he never saw any communist activity or involvement with the CSO or the UFW. Their involvement was focused on organizing farmworkers for higher wages and better benefits. He says his dad, Antonio Orendain, would have loved following a template for organizing. He never got any help from anyone, except his “hands on” experience working with Cesar Chavez.

Abel Orendain says the Texas Farmworkers Union founded by his father, Antonio Orendain, was also redbaited and tied to leftist organizations like the Eastern Service Workers Association. Orendain claims that what farmworkers organizations work for, is “the right to put a price on your own brow,” and to “help the people at the bottom of the social barrel.” He states that the establishment looks at anyone helping the “little people

¹¹³ Ruth A. Allen, George N. Green, and James V. Reese, "Labor Organizations," Handbook of Texas. 2010.

at the bottom” as communists, as opposed to capitalism, in which “all the benefit goes to the guy at the top.”¹¹⁴

Abel Orendain remembers that in all his conversations with Cesar Chavez, Chavez’ influences came from Mahatma Gandhi and his values on non-violence. Abel Orendain remembers Cesar Chavez’ library filled with books by Gandhi, not by Saul Alinski or Karl Marx. Abel says Chavez’ always explained to him why the farmworkers had to be non-violent. There were acts of violence at different points, Abel says, but they were committed by militant Hispanics. Cesar did not tolerate violence.¹¹⁵

There were other connections to California labor in the South Texas civil rights community. Juanita Valdez Cox grew up in South Texas and traveled with her family to the northern states to work in agriculture.

The Farmworkers Plight:

As farm workers living in the colonia, my family traveled to many northern states to work in the fields. My parents had nine children, with only five that survived to adulthood. Every year we started in Hereford, Texas. In West Texas we stayed in the labor camps. There, we thinned lettuce rows with the short handle hoe that made you stoop low to the ground all day long, from sunup to sundown.¹¹⁶ Many farmworker backs were permanently damaged from the use of the short handle hoe, which was about 8-10 inches tall. Supervisors would tour the rows, and if they saw a worker standing up to rest their back from the work, they would whistle at the worker to get back down and work. Since each row was a mile long, a worker could not stand up until they got to the end of the row, and before they

¹¹⁴ Abel Orendain Interview.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Juanita Valdez Cox Interview.

went on to the next row. If a worker was allowed a water break or if they had to use the bathroom, then they were able to stretch their backs a little. It was very debilitating and humiliating work. Living conditions were also unjust and inexcusable. A place in Texas to which we traveled for work once housed us in an old, metal, train or box car wagon with no windows or ventilation. It had no kitchen or bathroom facilities. Water had to be fetched from outside and portable bathrooms were placed outside the railcars for the families to use. From Texas we traveled to Shelby, Michigan where we harvested cucumber, apple, and cherry. Our next stop was Leipsic, Ohio where we harvested tomato with the Campbell Soup Company. From Ohio we went to New Mexico where we harvested the weed that made the broom stalks. From there we came back home to South Texas.¹¹⁷

Farm Working Family Living and Working Conditions:

Living conditions varied along the way. Some were extremely unjust and inequitable. In New Mexico, we were given a grain silo (which was a metal cylindrical container without windows or ventilation with only a door) used to store grain, as a living residence. We went as far west as Oklahoma. But we always traveled eastward. I was the oldest who spoke English in my family, so my father used me to be the interpreter. In the back of my head, I always had a lot of questions about the treatment we received and our living and work conditions. I asked my dad a lot of questions, but received no answers. I always wondered why employers treated us this way. Why did we have to live in those places? I looked at their homes and they were not like ours. Why didn't we have drinking water?

¹¹⁷ Juanita Valdez Cox Interview.

Why did we have to hide in the bushes to go to the bathroom? I would negotiate with the farmer because my father did not speak English. I got to learn many things at a young age, but had so many questions. I never did like farm work or working in the fields. When we got to a labor camp, I would tell the ladies that if they needed help with mail service, I could help. I learned how to drive at a young age. I was able to take them on errands and interpret. We all wrote money orders to pay our payments back home. I filled money orders, filled applications, took people to medical appointments, and so on. All that work kept me busy with the ladies in the labor camps. So that was my way of getting out of farm work. My parents and I joined the farm workers union, because of the treatment we received, the living conditions we endured, and the insensitivity to our needs as farm workers. My oldest brother who lived in Chicago, Illinois was also a strong union man. He worked for the United Auto Workers. Out of the five surviving children my parents had, every single one graduated from high school and went on to graduate with university degrees.¹¹⁸

Labor Organizing

When my parents and others joined the union, one of the very first things on the agenda was the elimination of the short handle hoe, because of the damage it inflicted on the farmworkers back. There were physicians who testified at an Austin, Texas hearing to outlaw the short handle hoe due to the extreme damage to the human body. Among those medical professionals who testified, was Dr. Ramiro Casso of Edinburg, Texas. The short handle hoe was eventually outlawed.

¹¹⁸ Juanita Valdez Cox Interview.

Now people can use the long handle hoe which is much friendlier to the human back while working.

Healthcare has always been non-existent among farm laborers. Most people go to Mexico for inexpensive medical care and medication. Workers Compensation for injuries in the field was recently given after we filed a lawsuit based on discrimination against the State of Texas. In the 1930s when the Workman's Compensation law was passed, the farmworker was excluded from eligibility. Most farmworkers in South Texas have always been Hispanics. The attorneys under the Civil Rights Project filed a discrimination lawsuit under the Equal Rights Amendment saying farmworkers were denied on the grounds of race. That lawsuit was won. Beforehand, if a person was injured in the fields, an employer would give a little bit of money until the laborer got back on their feet. Eventually, the Workman's Compensation Law was passed to include farm workers. The law brought protection, medical care, and financial aid until farmworkers recover, so the family does not have to go without help.¹¹⁹

Education and Segregation:

Education was difficult for farm laboring children, because they had to leave school before the school term ended in order to harvest the crops, and returned to South Texas long after the school term began. When migrant kids came back, they would be behind on their school work for the year. My parents tried to get back in time for school, but sometimes, farmers wouldn't let them return until the

¹¹⁹ Juanita Cox Interview.

crops were all harvested. Migrant kids missed on average about two to three months of school each year.¹²⁰

When we came back from the northern states, all the migrant children were segregated from the non-migrant children. We were not allowed to go to schools in town with non-migrant kids. Our migrant school was situated in a rural area away from town. The name of the school I went to was called “RUNN” and everyone knew that the school was a designated migrant school. Buses would pick us up in the colonias and take us away to the migrant school. Only when we reached the high school level were we allowed to go to the school in town. When I was a child, I did not know I was being discriminated against. But as I grew up, I heard that people did not think that the Hispanic migrant children who went to the migrant school were as smart as non-migrant children, which incidentally were White. I knew then, that I was discriminated against in being denied the right to mix with White children, because I was a Hispanic, and a migrant farm laborer.¹²¹

The struggle for equality among Mexican Americans began by making the FEPC permanent. Regardless of the communist charges and racist hysteria, Mexican Americans were determined to advance the cause for civil rights. With the rise of the cold war, McCarthyism, the purge by the CIO of Left-wing unions, the progress of Mexican American civil rights was impeded.¹²²

South Texas families have much to share about their hardships and struggles to ensure their children would at least obtain enough education to take them out of the

¹²⁰ Juanita Valdez Cox Interview

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Vargas, Labor Rights. Page 52, 158.

oppressive agricultural system. A Mexican-born immigrant, who had no formal education, shared his story with me in a February 2015 interview. Working as a low paying agricultural worker and seeking ways to increase his living standards in spite of widespread South Texas discrimination, this man ensured that his four children each receive a university education.¹²³ Mexican-born Lucio and Manuela Gonzalez also worked hard in the agricultural fields to ensure their children had a better life than they did. Of their seven children, all completed high school and three hold university degrees.¹²⁴ Men like Mexican American Enrique Rodriguez who succeeded in educating all of his nine children; though only five graduated high school and only one holds a university degree.¹²⁵ Juanita Valdez Cox was the child of Mexican-born parents who lived in a South Texas colonia in a ghetto type community, without the most basic living necessities, such as potable water, drainage or sewer systems, electricity, paved roads, and safe and sanitary housing. Her family was forced into agricultural labor when she was a small child. Yet, through the efforts of her parents work and counsel, and the family's involvement in the early union movement of South Texas, she and her four siblings each obtained a university degree.¹²⁶

Over time, Mexican Americans have been harassed, intimidated, their credibility compromised and have been denounced as subversives. Furthermore, many were threatened by the influx of braceros taking up Mexican American employment opportunities, reducing living standards, health and education for Mexican Americans and promoting the deeper racialization of Hispanics in an already hostile environment.

¹²³ Rio Grande Valley Resident Interview.

¹²⁴ Lucio and Manuela Gonzalez Interview.

¹²⁵ Enrique Rodriguez Interview

¹²⁶ Juanita Valdez Cox Interview.

Enrique Rodriguez of Weslaco, Texas was born in 1933 among eleven siblings, and raised in a single parent home. Struggling with their mother as they worked the fields in the Rio Grande Valley and migrating north to work, Rodriguez quit school in seventh grade to help support the family. Rodriguez worked an eighteen hour day shining shoes for .75 cents a day, while acquiring other odd jobs. Rodriguez recalls the hardships of the Great Depression rationing program. Though he and three siblings fought in WWII and the Korean War, they couldn't find work when they returned home from war in 1955. Rodriguez began to travel to the northern states to work with his family of nine children. Once back, he went looking for work at the Texsun citrus juice company in Weslaco every day for a month. Rodriguez remembers that companies didn't give you an application when you went working for work. If they needed a hand, they just told you to get to work and you were hired. Once hired by Texsun, a non-union company in 1956, Rodriguez worked for the company for thirty seven years. In 1975, the AFL-CIO union began to work with Rodriguez to organize workers for better pay and benefits. Rodriguez remembers they were earning .75 cents an hour when he started at Texsun. Rodriguez became a steward for the union, organizing people within the company of about 300 employees. He remembers many people did not want the union. The company hired a good number of illegal immigrant help. Whatever the supervisors demanded from undocumented workers, the workers complied. The Mexican American population of workers fought for positive change. The union representative was Benito Campos of Elsa, Texas. The attorney representing the workers at Texsun was Frank Herrera from San Antonio. Mr. Herrera now has offices in McAllen and Edinburg. Though Mr. Herrera was a small man, he was an excellent attorney and won many union cases for the Texsun

employees. By 1993 when Mr. Rodriguez left Texsun, he was earning eight dollars and fifty cents. He also received a twelve thousand separation package. Mr. Rodriguez remembers that only supervisors had pensions. His separation bonus served as his pension. As a result of the 1975 Texsun Strike, workers received better benefits and higher pay wages along with medical coverage which they did not have before the strike. Mr. Rodriguez was instrumental in negotiating the striker's contracts. Over time, Proctor and Gamble bought Texsun. Today, a small community college sits in the place where Texsun was once situated. Over time, Mr. Rodriguez used his earnings from his employment to send his nine children to school. Out of the nine, five finished high school and one has a university degree.¹²⁷

Ascencion Roman Ponce of Weslaco, Texas was born in Mexico and came to the United States in 1949 at the age of fourteen. She never went to school and never learned to read or write. She has always depended on others to do her reading and writing for her. She worked in agricultural farm labor all her life. After she married, she and her Mexican born husband would travel to the northern states following the harvest every year. She acquired Type II diabetes for which she suffered an amputated leg. Mrs. Ponce recalls that in 1985 when she was fifty years old, she worked in a Weslaco cannery earning \$3 an hour. Her duty was to pull the stem off chili peppers. The employers demanded that workers work harder and faster, whether they were on contract labor, or paid by the hour. Working ten hour days, they had to continually speed up their work. As a result, Mrs. Ponce developed a growth on her right thumb from pulling the stems off the peppers. Mrs. Ponce claims that growth was extremely painful over the years. As she held out her hand for me to see, she rubbed a mass sitting on her right thumb. She claims she still

¹²⁷ Enrique Rodriguez Interview

suffers pain from that injury. Mrs. Ponce claims that when the workers at the cannery could take the abuse no longer, they went on strike for benefits and wages. All the cannery employees walked off the job. She does not remember the union or the cannery names that were helping them at the time, but the strike ended when the cannery closed their business instead of providing for their employees. She does not know if there were any long term benefits to other laborers in South Texas as a consequence of the strike at the cannery she worked in.¹²⁸

Mrs. Ponce agrees with conservative labor economist Ruth Alice Allen's verdict on strikes that "Until dramatic changes occur in union effectiveness, public opinion, and the writing and administration of labor law, the strike will likely remain an ineffective tool for unions."¹²⁹ Labor organizers in South Texas clearly disagreed with this academic's opinion.

Chapter 5: 1966-1967 Starr County Melon Strike

South Texas, Labor, and the Great Society

The 1966 Starr County Melon Strike brought the unspoken labor dimension of the Chicano civil rights movement to the forefront. The country and U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson were dealing with the civil war in Vietnam. There were over 250,000 American soldiers on the ground in Vietnam. By the end of the year, the number would rise to 385,000. Many Hispanics from South Texas had been drafted or volunteered to go to war. Meanwhile, masses rallied against the war, surrounding the White House in Washington D.C. in the month of May. Anti-war protests and rallies were held in

¹²⁸ Ascencion Ponce Interview

¹²⁹ Ruth A. Allen, George N. Green, and James V. Reese, "STRIKES," Handbook of Texas Online

Washington, Chicago, Boston, New York, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and other major American cities.¹³⁰ For people in South Texas, the melon strike almost became part of the memories associated with the Vietnam War and the Chicano Movement.

Alfred Young Allee was a Texas Ranger following the footsteps of his father and grandfather when the Rio Grande City, Texas Melon Strike broke out in 1966. But Allee had a history of violence dating back to 1954, and that violence was not a result of war or in the quest for American freedoms or justice. Struggling with Texas Ranger George Parr in the hallways of the Alice City Courthouse in January of 1954 after a disagreement between the two men, Parr sustained light injuries and filed charges against Allee for attempted murder. Parr dropped the charges “for the good of the community,” but it would not be Allee’s last incident.¹³¹

In April 1963 in Crystal City, Texas, five Mexican Americans were elected to city office, displacing the Anglo political machines that had been there for generations. Among the famous five was Jose Angel Gutierrez, who later founded “La Raza Unida.” Consequently, the majority of Anglo city workers also resigned. Newly elected Crystal City Mayor Juan Cornejo accused Allee of physically and verbally abusing him. When witnesses were questioned, most stated Allee did not lay a hand on Cornejo. Once again, charges against Allee were dropped.¹³² In 1966, Allee would show himself again in the most brutal and violent labor strike South Texas has ever known.

The Rio Grande Valley of South Texas is considered one of the poorest regions in the U.S. Both progressives and conservatives call it a Third World region within Texas. The Valley’s decrepit medical care, terribly inferior educational opportunities, rampant

¹³⁰ The History Place. The Vietnam War: The Jungle War 1965 – 1968.

¹³¹ Norman Youngblood. "Allee, Alfred Young," [1905-1987], Handbook of Texas Online

¹³² Norman Youngblood.

hunger, substandard houses, political powerlessness, and economic exploitation, built on a long-standing history of discrimination, segregation, and racism is the shame of the nation. All of this has historically been reinforced by the states police power, which in 1966 was known as the Texas Rangers. The events at La Casita Farms were the culmination of 100 years of repression as the people stood up in one voice to cry out: “Ya Basta!” Enough!¹³³

Rio Grande City, Star County, Texas is located between Laredo and McAllen in the Rio Grande Valley. It is bordered on the South by the Rio Grande River that separates Mexico from the Texas borderlands. It is an arid stretch of land of mesquite, cactus and huisache. In 1966 and 1967, farm labor was readily available from Mexico, competing with Mexican Americans for the few farming jobs. Working for .40 cents an hour without water, bathroom facilities, or protections from pesticides, Mexican Americans were in survival mode. The only other option was a government job controlled by the school, district, or county officials who may or may not open the door to a Hispanic.¹³⁴

Antonio Orendain came to South Texas as the Vice President of the United Farm Workers Union established in Delano, California. Cesar Chavez, founder of the UFWU asked him to come to Texas to support the 1966 Starr County Melon Strike. Orendain had experience organizing people in California, Illinois, El Paso, and other places. Antonio Orendain shared his experiences with me in an April 2015 interview in his home in Pharr, Texas. In the walls of his living room, historical photos tell the Texas Farm Worker Union Founder’s story. One picture showed him speaking into a microphone at a radio station. Another picture included Orendain with Cesar Chavez. A TFWU flag and other

¹³³ James C. Harrington. 1966-1967 melon strike: From La Casita to LUPE.2004.

¹³⁴ Robert E. "Bob" Hall. Pickets, Politics and Power: The Farm Workers Strike in Starr County. May, 2007. Texas Bar Journal - - 70 Tex. B. J. 436. State Bar of Texas.

memorabilia were visible. The elderly Orendain had a hard time moving around, but his mind was sharp and his memory impeccable as he sat and shared his story enthusiastically.

A History of Cesar Chavez:

I came to the United States in 1950 and already knew about Cesar Chavez from reading about him in the Mexican newspaper called "*La Opinion*" in Guadalajara, Mexico. Every Sunday, this newspaper published a large front page article. In that paper, I read that Cesar Chavez who lived north of San Jose in Salsipuedes, California, was working for an organization called "Community Service Organization." Frank Ross was the director of the Southwest Community Service Organization and Saul Alinsky was the director of the Industrial Areas Foundation, which was a communist foundation.¹³⁵

Gilbert Padilla:

In Corcoran, I met Gilberto Padilla when I lived in Hanford, California. Gilberto Padilla would invite me to CSO meetings to help organize people to vote. At first I was against getting involved in any kind of community service. Later, I conceded to go. When I went for the first time, Padilla put me in the very back, because I came with dirty clothes. My pants were muddy and wet, and my hair was in a mess. The second time, I was in the middle of the thicket of people. By the third time, I was in the very front, making motions and emotionally charged. So I started out working for the labor movement with Gilberto Padilla.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Antonio Orendain Interview.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

The UFWU is Born:

Cesar would come over to the CSO and tell us what duties we needed to do. At the time, Cesar Chavez was the CSO organizer of the meetings. Cesar could make propositions but he could not vote in the Community Service Organization of Los Angeles as an organizer. Just before 1962, when Cesar was working for the CSO, for some unknown reason to me, he didn't work there anymore.¹³⁷

They said that Dolores Huerta had been the personal secretary of Mayor Pat Brown. Huerta knew more than anybody how to speak to legislators. She was the one who taught me, Cesar, and Padilla, along with about 6 or 8 people how to speak out. There was a time when we were lobbying and one of Chavez' feet began to swell. He had a hard time walking, because we were doing a lot of walking and climbing stairs and elevators. Dolores would tell us, "Look, this or that legislator or representative are in favor of the farm laborer- one of you go and speak to him." So that time Cesar was upset and he said, "I'm tired already, look at my foot! I can't even walk or put my shoes on!" At the time Dolores was very pregnant. She had a child at the same time I had one of my daughters. And she retorted: "Well, look at ME! Look at how I am and I'm still here!" So she put some fire under us. Dolores was already married and had about three or four kids with a guy named Ventura Huerta. Ventura Huerta was also an organizer for the unions. One day Ventura Huerta and Dolores had an argument and he told her, "or you stay with the CSO and Cesar Chavez or with me and your children." And she responded; "I will stay with Cesar Chavez and the CSO." After that, Huerta and

¹³⁷ Antonio Orendain Interview.

Dolores got a divorce. So that's how I met them all, and how our early work got started.¹³⁸

Working with the HOD Local Union of California:

Now, the first time that Pat Brown was elected to her position as mayor; I began to work for the HOD Carriers Local Union # 166 of the AFL-CIO because they had built a Navy Base in Lemoore, California; and the agents came from Fresno. At the time, the business agent that came to Hanford had stolen all the union funds. He left the area and ran off with the money. I saw that the opportunity presented itself to create a committee. So I told Padilla, "We can start a HOD Carriers Union here." He did not ascent, because he said we should wait. It was time for the Second Democratic Convention in El Tejon. Padilla told me that I should bring the issue up with Cesar. So I called Cesar and brought up the idea. Cesar told me, "Look, Antonio, it's a shame that you are talking about the AFL-CIO, but they have just awarded us \$19,000 for the voting process. Right now we can't act against them. If it was any other organization, I would help you all the way to hell." I would tease him by saying, "I thought Chavez could do this, and Chavez could do that."¹³⁹

Working with Cesar Chavez:

But I continued to support Cesar Chavez, not because he was better than anyone else, but because at the time, there was nobody else to support in the farmworker's struggle. I felt that way, because I always felt incompetent to work alone, because I was an illegal alien. I was a Mexican. I would try to express

¹³⁸ Antonio Orendain Interview.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

myself in English, and sometimes I fell short on the language, and interjected Spanish words. I was not fluent in English. My work was as a farmworker. I had no education in English. I never forced myself to master the language. The majority of the time, I dealt with Spanish speaking Hispanics. I felt I had no need for the language. As I worked with Cesar, we were working with Hispanics all the time.¹⁴⁰

During that time, I got a job in television station Channel 21 in Hanford, California. That's where I began speaking English. They asked me, "How much are we going to pay you?" I traded my work for airtime. I told them, that if they allowed me five to ten minutes to speak to the working people, that would be my pay. That is how I began to work with Chavez. After a while working with him, he sent me to Chicago, Illinois for the Delano Grape Boycott. After I returned from Chicago, Cesar sent me to El Paso, Texas. In those places, I tried to speak to the people about the issues concerning farmworkers.

I can't say that I actually organized them, because you can unite one hundred people, and you are going to have problems with one hundred people. They want to know what we are going to do, and have a zillion other questions. So we tried to identify the problems, find the easiest solutions, and address the things that were reachable to accomplish. The union did not last very long, because at that time, other factors played in, such as luck and politics.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Antonio Orendain Interview.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

Organizers or Mobilizers?

Before all that, we went to San Francisco. The Longshoreman's Union was going to help us. When we were on the road to San Francisco, Cesar told me, "Look, Antonio. If we manage to obtain the financial and physical support of the church, we are going to win this battle." I did not like the idea that we were going to involve religion at all. But in the end, that became one of Cesar's and the UFW's strongest ties to accomplish what he did. Right now, nothing is being done.

Nothing is heard about organizing any more. As I used to tell the people all the time: one thing is to organize, and another thing is to mobilize. For me, Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez were the same. Both were mobilizers of people. I was a mobilizer. We can gather the people, but we don't know how to organize and execute a work. If I ask you, who founded the Shoemakers Union? Who founded the Carpenters Union; or the Coal Miners Union? They were organizers. They are still around. They finished the job and their organizations continue to grow. Cesar's UFW in Texas is not growing anymore. They have made it into a foundation that helps.

I know how we started, and I know what we accomplished and how far we went. I was with Cesar Chavez. Cesar did not want to do too much, because in the CSO, he helped them about five years and they threw him out without compensation. So when I began to help him, I felt he deserved more, and I took care that the same thing that happened to him before in the CSO would not happen to him again.

And it didn't happen.¹⁴²

¹⁴² Antonio Orendain Interview.

Texas Bound:

The work that we did in the UFW and the TFW was always voluntary. Cesar sent me to Texas to organize the farmworkers, not to the prisons. I say this because when I first arrived in Texas, for the first few weeks, every two or three days, I was in jail with different charges containing bonds. The charges included anything from inciting a riot to invading private property. All we were trying to do was talk to the people when the police would arrive and begin arresting people. We were working in Rio Grande City at the Casita Farm during the 1966 Starr County Melon Strike and also the Lettuce Strike.

We tried to boycott the melon strike, but because it is seasonal, when the season ended, it didn't do us any good. After the harvest, the workers go work somewhere else. It is very hard to organize farmworkers. It's not like organizing a factory or a store chain. In this area, you organize one hundred people and you now have one hundred different problems.¹⁴³

I don't know how much you know about Cesar Chavez' UFW. There are many books that have been written with paid authors. For example, the fasting strikes that he had. I was with him both times. In part it was a fasting strike. But in everything, there was a lot of luck helping us in the way things happened. For example, try to find union contracts for farmworkers today; you will not find them. Union contracts are disappearing altogether. Cesar Chavez, MLK and I were mobilizers of people but not organizers because we did not have the foundational base to organize. For example, here in the Rio Grande Valley, when the onion harvest was over, what more could I tell the people? They either had to

¹⁴³ Antonio Orendain Interview.

find work locally, or travel to the northern states to find work. My desire and my goal throughout all my work, was for farmworkers everywhere, to have the ability to put a price on the work of their hands, the same as an educated person has a price tag for their labor.¹⁴⁴

Winning Farm Workers Confidence in Texas:

When the Starr County Strike occurred, the Texas Rangers never did beat me up. I was very much afraid that they would. When they would throw us in jail, the other men would tell me that my mustache would tremble when I got angry. I told them that it was not anger, but fear that made me tremble. We were the first to close the International Bridge in Roma, Texas when I first got to Rio Grande City. I had to win the confidence of the workers, because I had been told that there were some young men among the strikers who said they were going to beat me up. They planned to send me off to California as if I had never been here. So, I told the farmworkers that we were going to close the bridge, and prohibit the illegal immigrants from entering the U.S. I told them they had to do what I told them to do. I told them we were going to provoke the officials to insult us, or cuss us out. We had to withstand whatever happened. Some of them said that if they got cussed out, they would teach the officials a lesson. I told those guys I couldn't have them, because they would not help the cause. So they had to leave. I took ten persons and we shut down the Roma Bridge.¹⁴⁵

In 1966, Rio Grande City, Texas, farmers controlled politics, and politics were generated by the 79th District Court of Judge C. Woodrow Laughlin, who empaneled and

¹⁴⁴ Antonio Orendain Interview.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

dissolved grand juries and decided election contests. Laughlin had been in office since 1952. He had been removed from office once for misconduct, but he just ran for re-election and was back on the bench. Attorney Robert E. 'Bob Hall' Hall remembers Laughlin and his court well.¹⁴⁶ With his law practice based in Houston, Texas since November of 1954, Mr. Hall would come face to face with the infamous Judge C. Woodrow Laughlin.¹⁴⁷

In Rio Grande City, on a May day in 1966, melon laborers disputed with their employers over wages at La Casita Farms.¹⁴⁸ Eugene Nelson was involved with the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) which would soon become the United Farm Workers Union (UFW) (AFL-CIO). Nelson was author, organizer, and worker for the NFWA. Organizing workers into the Independent Workers Association (IWA), Nelson based himself in Rio Grande City, Starr County, Texas. On June 1st, 1966, Nelson led Melon laborers on a Melon Strike. The workers were demanding an increase from .85 cents an hour to the minimum wage of \$1.25 an hour, improved working conditions, and union bargaining force recognition.¹⁴⁹

But who or what is "La Casita Farms?" According to UFW documentation, La Casita Farms is owned by Rio Grande Valley absentee landlords from California. More specifically, it is the only subsidiary of Harden Farms of California Inc. in Salinas, California who owns 100% of its stock. The 1926 founding owner to the California Enterprise was Eugene E. Harden. The Texas Farm was incorporated in 1954 with Clarence Morse as its president. Their manager and vice president at La Casita Farms in

¹⁴⁶ Robert E. "Bob" Hall. Pickets, Politics, and Power.

¹⁴⁷ Robert E. 'Bob Hall' Hall. State Bar of Texas Website. 2015.

¹⁴⁸ James C. Harrington.

¹⁴⁹ Richard Bailey, "Starr County Strike," Handbook of Texas Online. 2010.

Rio Grande City since 1961 was Roy Rochester, an ex-marine from Arizona. The assistant manager was Rochester's brother, Jim Rochester. La Casita Farms grows, packs, and ships; melons, peppers, carrots, cabbage, celery, lettuce and other vegetables. Laborers work approximately 300 days a year. La Casita often delivers their produce to stores in their own company trucks. They carry the brand names "Hi Goal," "La Casita," "Harden Crisp," and "Hard'n Fresh." In April 1966, La Casita Farm sales were \$1,843,530. Because La Casita Farms is committed to hiring cheap labor, they contract between 300-400 workers on a steady basis, who receive between .60 cents to one dollar an hour. In the Salinas California Farms, the pay is \$1.40 to \$2.00 per hour.¹⁵⁰

Edgar Krueger grew up in Robinson near Waco, Texas where his father was involved in farming. As a young 12 year old farm boy, Edgar worked the fields hoeing and picking cotton, harvesting corn, and other crops. Young Edgar also worked in the cow dairy milking cows. Krueger also had relatives in Kansas, where he worked as a truck driver in the corn harvests there. He learned firsthand the hardships of working in the fields, and the struggle to earn enough to survive. He claims that ever since he was in high school he studied Ghandi and the Indian movement. He remembers where he was the day Ghandi was shot. He feels this is where he internalized the value and dignity of every person, and developed deep motivations for human value. He says his parents supported and added to his empathy.

The Reverend Edgar Krueger was involved in the 1966-1967 Starr County Melon Strike in Rio Grande City. He says he became involved in supporting the strikers seeking

¹⁵⁰ Manny Romero. Farmworkers Ask help against "Terror Campaign". Texas Farm Workers Union-Support Committee. Washington D.C. 1979

better benefits and higher wages out of a sense of religious responsibility for human dignity and civil rights.

The Reverend Edgar Krueger believes that wherever there is abuse of human persons, he feels a deep commitment to try and do something to help them. At the time of the Starr County Strike, he was working with the Texas Conference of Churches. He says that the United Church of Christ, The Catholic Church, The Methodist Church and several other groups were supplying financial and moral support to the strikers and their families.¹⁵¹

As Nelson and the Mexican American union members picketed, Rangers and local police appeared and arrested protestors. The UFWU and the courts agreed that that the arrests were uncalled for, the bonds excessively high, and the actions of law enforcement unconstitutional. Nevertheless, law enforcement continued to arrest protestors under claims they were enforcing the law. With multiple arrests and injunctions, along with the melon seasons end, the 1966 strike was rendered ineffectual by June.¹⁵² In the meantime, during the length of the strike, Jim Rochester paid for the Texas Rangers meals at the local restaurant where they regularly ate, and additionally supplied them with melons.¹⁵³

Juanita Valdez Cox of Donna, Texas was born in 1947. While attending a local university, Juanita wrote a paper on the Starr County melon strike that led to her meeting two university students from the University of Texas at Austin. The students had come to Rio Grande City to support the strike and bring food and helps. Among the students was Alejandro Moreno Jr. The Reverend Edgar Krueger also came to Rio Grande City as a

¹⁵¹ Edgar Krueger Interview.

¹⁵² Richard Bailey.

¹⁵³ Manny Romero.

supporter. These gentlemen shared with Juanita how they were beaten by Texas Rangers, and Mr. Krueger told of being held with his face inches from a moving train by a Texas Ranger, in order to create fear, and in retaliation for their support of the strikers.¹⁵⁴ Mr. Moreno went on to become an attorney and Texas State Representative from 1983 to 1991. He now practices law in Edinburg, Texas.¹⁵⁵ Mr. Krueger continued to advocate for laborer rights in the Texas/Mexico border of the Rio Grande Valley all his life.¹⁵⁶

Cesar Chavez, UFWU President in California arrived at Rio Grande City on June 16, 1966. In a press conference he stated: “The fact that Harden Farms of California has continually refused to enter into negotiations with the union is reason enough to blame them for every bit of violence against the strikers here. They could sit down and talk things over with us, just like Guerro (a Rio Grande City Company who recognized the UFWOC, AFL-CIO). Instead, they sit in their offices in Salinas California and give orders to destroy the strike, and the strikers. THE BLOOD IS ON HARDEN’S HANDS.”¹⁵⁷

According to an Edcouch, Texas resident which I interviewed, there were lots of little strikes in the Rio Grande Valley before the Starr County Melon Strike that didn’t lead to much, but the big strikes that brought change occurred after Antonio Orendain and Cesar Chavez got involved. He says that before Chavez came to the Valley, people were afraid of job loss and wage decreases from their employers. He says he was never involved in any strikes, but when he started working at the cannery, his pay was .30 cents an hour. He says wages jumped to .75 cents an hour. He believes everything started with

¹⁵⁴ Juanita Valdez Cox Interview.

¹⁵⁵ Alejandro 'Alex' Moreno Jr. State Bar of Texas.

¹⁵⁶ Ed Krueger. Partners for Responsible Trade Inc.: All Workers Count.

¹⁵⁷ Manny Romero.

the 1966 melon strike. He said that after the melon strike, people who were afraid before, began to speak out for their rights. He remembers when the minimum wage law passed. He was unaware that strikes influenced wages but remembers when his supervisors came to inform him that they would be starting a new wage on Monday, related to a government law for minimum wages.¹⁵⁸

Juanita Valdez Cox was nineteen years old when Cesar Chavez and Antonio Orendain traveled to South Texas to help the agricultural workers at a time when South Texas was undergoing agricultural duress with the Starr County Melon Strike. When the UFW heard reports of the violence being inflicted upon workers by the Texas Rangers, they came to try to diffuse some of that violence.¹⁵⁹

On July 4th, 1966, amidst great media coverage, Cesar Chavez, Antonio Orendain, and Dolores Huerta along with agricultural laborers, marched to the Austin capital enveloped by throngs of supporters. Texans and the world became aware of “La Causa” or “The Cause” for which marchers took to the streets. Their goal was to seek reprieve from Texas Governor John Connelly. Fighting for a living wage, and hoping to address the minimum wage standard for agricultural laborers, the strike, and the violence going on in South Texas, and about the behavior of the Texas Rangers; marchers were met by Governor John Connelly in New Braunfels, Texas. Sitting in his limousine in the hot, August, Texas sun, the governor did not give them the time of day. With him were Speaker of the House Ben Barnes and Attorney General Waggoner Carr. Ultimately, Connelly refused to meet the marchers in Austin. Insulted, the marchers continued on their journey as the media recorded the story. The marchers received no resolution. Sixty

¹⁵⁸ Edcouch, Texas Resident Interview.

¹⁵⁹ Juanita Valdez Cox Interview.

five thousand marchers rallied at the Austin Capital Building on Labor Day, 1966.¹⁶⁰ It seemed to no avail. Continuing to labor for change in South Texas, the same patterns remained with more arrests, and repeated accusations of brutality, civil rights violations, and violence.¹⁶¹

From that point on, Antonio Orendain and Cesar Chavez began to organize workers in the Rio Grande Valley. Juanita Valdez Cox had been working in the social services area when she became a community organizer for the UFW. With the establishment of LUPE (La Union del Pueblo Entero), organizers steadily moved forward increasing benefits and wages for farm workers through labor stoppages all over the Rio Grande Valley.¹⁶²

LUPE was designed as a union of the community, instead of a labor union. LUPE does not sign union contracts, but instead involves the community in all aspects of community benefit and change. According to Juanita, Cesar Chavez encouraged them to perform work stoppages that were not strikes, and were not violent activities. Through work stoppages, employers increased wages rather than face a strike. Chavez and Dolores Huerta made numerous trips to South Texas to train people on labor organizing techniques, while Antonio Orendain stayed in the Rio Grande Valley permanently as a farmworker organizer.¹⁶³

Juanita remembers Mr. Chavez' core values well. They are values that LUPE continues to enforce. Among them: 1. A Non-Violence Philosophy. 2. A Self-Help Ideology. 3. Respect. According to Juanita, Mr. Chavez was adamant about not

¹⁶⁰ James C. Harrington. 1966-1967 melon strike: From La Casita to LUPE

¹⁶¹ Richard Bailey, "STARR COUNTY STRIKE," Handbook of Texas Online

¹⁶² Juanita Valdez Cox Interview.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

exhibiting violence during work stoppages or strikes. He believed that peaceful negotiations were much more effective. His belief was so strong that he went on two religious fasts to reinforce that tradition. His self-help ideology was based on teaching an obligation and responsibility to troubleshoot problems and address them individually or as a group.¹⁶⁴

As a result, many low income colonias or Hispanic ghettos' were restructured and renewed by community organizations. People learned to donate time and funds to get things done. For Juanita, this was especially important since she spent her childhood living in the colonia. Colonias are defined as hidden communities or "ghettos" in unincorporated areas of the county, miles away from main highways along the Texas-Mexico borders. Colonias are economically distressed areas where Hispanic families of low income or very low income live. Colonias may lack some of the most basic living necessities, such as potable water, drainage or sewer systems, electricity, paved roads, and safe and sanitary housing. Most flood during rainy season. In the colonia, everyone is a farm laborer. People buy a property lot and build a one or two bedroom wood structure on the lot according to their means. Through community organization, Juanita's colonia went from being called Colonia Seca (dry ghetto) to Colonia Nueva (new neighborhood).¹⁶⁵

Finally, Mr. Chavez taught the idea of respect to and from individuals. It taught the Hispanic community that they deserved respect and that they should strive to receive it from others, including agricultural employers. Through respect, employers would not treat them inhumanely, pay substandard wages, or deny them the basic necessities in the

¹⁶⁴ Juanita Valdez Cox Interview.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

fields such as toilets and water. This core value gave Hispanics a higher sense of self-esteem and self-identity other than the subversive, dominated laborer that had been created by Deep South employers imposing Jim Crow laws upon Hispanics. It taught workers to expect others to value their hard work. In 1971, Rebecca Flores, California's UFWU Union Director came to LUPE to work with organizers.¹⁶⁶

Antonio Orendain was the Vice President of the UFWU California branch when he was sent by Cesar Chavez to organize the Texas farmworkers in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. He had been working hand in hand with Cesar Chavez for the California farmworkers plight since 1951. On October 24th, 1966, Antonio Orendain was determined not to allow Mexican Nationals to come to Rio Grande City to be used as strikebreakers for the Starr County Melon Strike. Antonio Orendain was fighting for an eight hour day instead of a fourteen hour day, a minimum wage increase from .40 cents to \$1.25, and collective bargaining rights. Also on the agenda was an end to the green card program allowing Mexican workers to work in the U.S., while taking work from U.S. born laborers. The Roma International Bridge accesses Ciudad Miguel Aleman in Mexico and Roma, Texas close to Rio Grande City on the U.S. side. Leading members to the bridge, Orendain and the group protested Mexicans crossing to the U.S. to work on the melon fields by lying down on the road as they sang "We shall overcome, we shall overcome," in Spanish. Orendain was arrested multiple times during the strike and was falsely accused on bogus charges. He would eventually break his alliance with Chavez to form the independent Texas Farmworkers Union in 1975. It was a bitter and painful breakup, but Orendain was convinced that Chavez would never do for Texas workers what he had accomplished for California workers. It was up to him to stand in the gap.

¹⁶⁶ Juanita Valdez Cox Interview.

For his work, Orendain has received no recognition, no street names, no holidays named after him, and no statues erected in his honor. But for Antonio Orendain, the work was not a waste, rather, it was a work that had to be done, and he took up the armor and fought so that others could survive.¹⁶⁷ Antonio Orendain's son Abel was working along his father as an activist by the time he was ten. Rubbing shoulders with Robert Kennedy and Cesar Chavez, Abel says those experiences outweighed the scoffers who thought less of him for being "Mexican." His father and Chavez encouraged him to get an education, but it was seeing his father in jail for fighting for workers' rights that propelled the young Orendain into the legal field. According to Abel Orendain, his father's work helped get fresh water and toilets to South Texas fields for field workers through his insistent lobbying and legislative law.¹⁶⁸

In an April 2015 interview with Abel Orendain, he recalled the 1966 Starr County Melon Strike. Abel Orendain is an attorney in McAllen, Texas and the son of the Texas Farm Workers Union Founder Antonio Orendain, who started working with the Community Service Organization in California with Cesar Chavez in early 60's. Abel Orendain worked with his father organizing and laying the groundwork for the UFW, both in California and in South Texas. Abel Orendain states he felt differently about himself as opposed to the average kid growing up, as far as his involvement in union organizing, and meeting important historical figures. For Abel Orendain, life was a continuous organizing and adult politics.¹⁶⁹

Abel Orendain's parents met picking apricots in California and had 5 children. Of the five Orendain children, four became attorneys and the youngest became a physician.

¹⁶⁷ Sean Gaffney. Standing Up

¹⁶⁸ Melissa Montoya. Orendain Shares Experience in Farmworkers' Union. 2013.

¹⁶⁹ Abel Orendain Interview.

Education was a big word in the Orendain household. Antonio Orendain stressed this to his children continually. He did not allow his children's involvement in agricultural work except in the summer vacation periods. Antonio Orendain drilled the value of education into his children constantly. Abel Orendain remembers that at first, Antonio Orendain's goal was for his children to finish high school. After the oldest went on to college, that became the new goal. And all of them fulfilled their father's wish. But even when the family lived in Hanford and then Delano, the family was always involved in political organizing.

Abel Orendain remembers the difference, working in unionized California fields in 1974, after California was unionized under the UFW. California now had regulated 8-5 hour days, a farmworkers clinic, and actual paychecks. He feels that unionizing and farm labor enabled him to be a progressive individual wherever he went, but especially throughout his college years. Abel Orendain feels his activism moved him towards a more radical and liberal stand, because of the way he grew up. In 1984, Abel Orendain became less active in community work while helping his father on legal charges stemming from the 1966-1979 Starr County Melon Strike and the 1979 Raymondville Onion Strike in which Antonio Orendain was intensely involved.¹⁷⁰

Antonio Orendain came to the Rio Grande Valley Starr County Melon Strike from California in 1966. He then moved his family to the Rio Grande Valley in 1969. Abel remembers working in field labor in Texas as crop dusting planes sprayed chemicals overhead on fieldworkers. At the time, no toilets or drinking water were supplied for employees. Employers paid cash or with disorganized checks with only minimal and

¹⁷⁰ Abel Orendain Interview.

indistinct information with a name and wage amounts which was usually cashed at the employer's bank.¹⁷¹

Activist activities were imposed by his father early on, requiring Abel Orendain at an early age to sell UFW newspapers on street corners, and joining his father in political rallies. In Texas, Antonio Orendain published a newspaper called "Ya Mero" or "Almost," which Abel sold all day on the corner of 10th and business Hwy. 83, in McAllen, Texas. He says selling political newspapers to Hispanics for .10 cents each is the hardest thing to do. Abel Orendain received .3 cents for each paper he sold. His activities gave Abel Orendain a strong sense of work ethics and leadership.¹⁷²

As a teenager, Abel Orendain remembers standing in front of Kroger grocery stores in the 70's, picketing and boycotting the grapes in South Texas, on behalf of the Delano Grape Strike. He remembers the mixed feelings he had while standing for something, while his school friends didn't have to. Abel Orendain resented the fact that his friends got to be kids, while he was busy organizing farmworkers. Yet, the activism allowed him to be an organizer among the student bodies of the university and law school campuses he attended. His work while he went to college involved trying to get more Hispanics to attend universities and law school. He helped start the United Minority Counsel composed of minority students involved in recruiting others to attend college. Abel Orendain attended the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. He says that in the 1970's, there was a lot of financial aid and scholarships available for Hispanics to attend the university. Many farmworker youth did not break the cycle and did not go on

¹⁷¹ Abel Orendain Interview.

¹⁷² Ibid.

to college. Even some of Cesar Chavez' children did not take advantage of the college opportunity.

One of the barriers for migrant children not going on to college were the missing educational links, as a result of leaving school for the fields early, and returning late in the year. Some were lured by the little money they made without an education, and were satisfied with that. Some families continued to depend on their large families as a form of subsistence in the labor fields. Abel Orendain saw how families in the colonias dedicated themselves to raising farm working hands to help the family survive; the more hands, the more funds. These families did not ordinarily stress education.

He is proud that a poor man with almost no education managed to get all of his children educated by his example as a community leader. He says his father's library had Spanish books by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle which Abel would later read in college. Abel says his mother was a large financial contributor to the family, because Antonio Orendain's organizing contributions were largely voluntary.¹⁷³

Abel Orendain feels that as Rio Grande Valley youth saw the kids coming back to the Valley with good college educations, it motivated them to seek their own education. Now more than ever, kids are trying hard to be educated and are succeeding. Abel Orendain thinks that the Rio Grande Valley has changed, in that there is not so much agricultural labor as there used to be, with the growth of urbanization. After Antonio Orendain's organizing slowed and eventually stopped, the majority of South Texas organizing also stopped, but his father's work helped to spur other organizations to speak out for civil rights. Abel Orendain says his father was a Mexican National with a third

¹⁷³ Abel Orendain Interview.

grade education working for the farmworker struggle and founded the Texas Farmworkers Union despite great opposition.¹⁷⁴

The 1968 Edcouch-Elsa Student Walk-out Strike was one of the effects of the TFWU quest for civil rights. At the time, most of the Edcouch Elsa High School students came from farm working families. Hispanic students were discouraged from attending college altogether. The Reverend Edgar Krueger believes that MAYO (the Mexican American Youth Organization) came really alive during the 1966-1967 Starr County Melon Strike. He remembers the Texas Council of Churches had some Vista volunteers on location, also, helping to raise the consciousness of the students for civil rights.¹⁷⁵ He believes the strike helped to open the consciousness of, primarily, Hispanic high school and college students. They understood the Hispanic troubles and struggles in the rural areas, and were moved to action for Hispanic betterment in education, civil rights and other areas. In Edcouch Elsa, the Hispanic high school student body initiated a Walk-Out in which countless of underage students were arrested and taken to the Edinburg County jail. The student body was protesting dilapidated buildings, books, and school equipment, broken windows and leaking roofs, teacher oppression and other civil rights issues and discriminations. Mr. Krueger remembers having a vigil outside the Edinburg County jail for the students who were being held there. Mr. Krueger's brother in law, Abel Ochoa was a teacher at Edcouch Elsa High, and a supporter of the Walk-Out. Mr. Ochoa was participating in the vigil that night. Apparently, more than thirty five students were expelled from Edcouch-Elsa High, and thirty five were sent to the La Joya High School. The La Joya School District later sent a charge for \$10 per student, equaling \$350 dollars

¹⁷⁴ Abel Orendain Interview.

¹⁷⁵ Edgar Krueger Interview.

for the students for that semester. In the under-privileged area of Edcouch Elsa in the heart of the Rio Grande Valley of 1968, ten dollars was a lot of money. As a result, of the 1968 walkout, changes emerged that helped propel Hispanic students forward, academically. Edcouch Elsa High has since sent hundreds of Hispanic Students to Ivey League schools all across America.

According to Abel Orendain , the fact that the TFWU did not get union contracts in Texas, despite the strikes and organization, is part of the reason the TFWU under Antonio Orendain was not successful. He feels the TFWU was short lived but still accomplished much as far as the awakening among Hispanics and farmworkers for civil rights and benefits. He feels that pesticide regulations, toilets, and drinking water in the fields; unemployment insurance and higher wages, are all a result of the farmworkers struggle. The issues were brought to the forefront as a direct result of the UFWU and TFWU in the 1960's and 1970's. He states that Jim Harrington, the TFWU attorney fought for those benefits for farmworkers. He says Antonio Orendain had a bill sponsored by Senator Lloyd Chris for farmworkers bargaining rights for a long time.¹⁷⁶

The TFWU served to keep the South Texas farmworkers plight in the public eye through the work of its founder Antonio Orendain. Abel Orendain states that workers compensation insurance came first and then unemployment insurance in the 1980's. He states that the TFWU march to Washington from Austin in 1977 for human rights, with Antonio Orendain at the head, opened the door for Jim Harrington to be able to represent some cases that received workers compensation and unemployment benefits in the 1980's. Cesar Chavez and Antonio Orendain had parted ways in 1975, due to Orendain's

¹⁷⁶ Abel Orendain Interview.

feeling that Chavez was not doing enough for Texas farmworkers, but was concentrating all his physical and financial efforts in California.¹⁷⁷

Abel Orendain points to pictures on his walls where Antonio Orendain stands before a microphone next to Cesar Chavez at a union meeting in Delano, California, as we sat visiting in his office. Another picture shows Antonio Orendain next to Hillary Clinton at Cesar Chavez funeral in 1993. Ten year old Abel Orendain can be seen in a 1968 photo.

According to Abel Orendain, the Texas farmworkers had to be self-sustaining for the most part, which made it hard for the organizers who received little help from the UFWU out of California. Local churches sometimes donated financial help for the farmworkers cause. The Methodist Church donated land to Antonio Orendain. It came to house the UFWU South Texas headquarters. The UFWU headquarters offices were built on the donated land with the labor of South Texas farmworkers.¹⁷⁸

Under the UFWU, his father Antonio, his mother, and other farmworkers often lay on the American side of the International road bridges between the U.S. and Mexico in Roma and Reynosa. Their goal was to inhibit Mexicans from coming to work in the U.S. in order to keep wages from dipping for Mexican American workers. He says this was the type of regular political act of disobedience that tended to get the attention of the media and the people. Mexican officials would go over to the American side of the bridge and physically remove the farmworkers to get traffic going again because the American officials did not want to get involved.

¹⁷⁷ Abel Orendain Interview.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

Once Antonio Orendain began organizing the Mexican workers, he found they were politically oriented, and sometimes struck en masse. Abel Orendain says sometimes the strikers would strike by themselves, coming out of the fields. The authorities had to call Antonio Orendain to come and calm strikers down. Once, when strikers surrounded McAllen Mayor Othal Brand, one of the largest Rio Grande Valley growers, Brand put a gun on Antonio Orendain's back and threatened him. Brand held Orendain responsible for strikers actions.

Abel Orendain says that the U.S. has always catered to the agricultural community, and that is why we have a food stamp program. According to Abel Orendain, it is a program designed to help the growers sell their foodstuff, not to help the poor, necessarily. Abel Orendain claims that South Texas was so hard to organize because Mexican National who came to work for a day were not interested in organizing for something they were not a part of. Often, Mexican Americans did not organize for fear of employer retribution, and the risk of job loss to the much lower paid Mexicans from Mexico. By maintaining cheap labor from Mexico, without rights or benefits, the agricultural community could continue to reign. According to Abel Orendain, the U.S. is continually seeking "guest worker programs" in one form or another to continue to bring cheap labor to the U.S.¹⁷⁹

Abel Orendain feels that the fact that his father, Antonio Orendain's work with the farmworkers was so antagonistic to the farming establishment is the reason why his father is not properly recognized for his work in the Rio Grande Valley. He feels that some of the rejections are a result of the fact that Antonio Orendain was the first to fully come against the agricultural establishment that reigned in the Valley, in order to defend

¹⁷⁹ Abel Orendain Interview.

workers' rights and livelihoods. At the head of all Valley growers was the number one multi-millionaire, mayor, businessman, Othal Brand. When young Abel Orendain was involved in an organization called Leadership McAllen, he and Othal Brand went nose to nose on a debate.

Abel Orendain feels there are many people who have streets named after them, who have done much less than Antonio Orendain, because of political reasons. Abel thinks that liberalism is now under attack. Unions are under attack with extremely low union members due to the right to work laws. He says these laws are bad for the community and the country. He says that as union memberships have fallen, so has the middle class, making the wedge between the rich and poor much larger because of the lack of unions in every area of society. He says unions are being legislated out of existence.

Abel Orendain thinks Cesar Chavez was a great man but had strong and weak points like everyone else, but his ideas and work did some great things for farmworkers. UFWU was a large social/political organization in several states but when California would be in distress, Cesar would call all organizers back to California, contributing to California farmworker's success. After the UFWU/TFWU split, Cesar did not organize for farmworkers but instead founded La Union del Pueblo Entero which is a community organization.¹⁸⁰

In May 1967, as the melon harvest season drew near, unrest was in the air. The Texas Council of Churches, the United States Commission on Civil Rights, and the United States Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor were all focused on the events in the Rio Grande Valley. June 1, 1967, would be an infamous day in the history of

¹⁸⁰ Abel Orendain Interview.

Mexican American civil rights. That day was the most violent and brutal as Texas Rangers beat union members almost beyond recognition. The Rangers were under the direction of none other than Senior Texas Ranger, Captain Alfred Young Allee.¹⁸¹

Alejandro (Alex) Moreno Jr. is an attorney in Edinburg, Texas. His family background spans for two hundred years in Laredo, Texas. His family moved to the Rio Grande Valley in 1950. Mr. Moreno Graduated from Mercedes High School in 1964. Mr. Moreno's father was the first Hispanics customs officer in Brownsville in 1950 and his family was a middle class family living in South Texas. Mr. Moreno's father was involved in community aid programs and believed in the responsibility to aid the poor, and fight injustices. He taught his children likewise.¹⁸²

According to Alex Moreno Jr., he became a supporter of the Starr County Melon Strike, which is composed almost one hundred percent of Hispanic laborers from the U.S. or Mexico, while he was a student at the University of Texas at Austin studying law. At U.T. Austin, he was in the Farmworker Support Committee working out of Austin, involved with gathering farmworkers community support all over Texas, long before the Starr County Melon Strike broke out.¹⁸³

In 1966 when the Hispanic farmworkers in Rio Grande City went on strike, marched to Austin for resolution and were rejected by Governor Connelly, Mr. Moreno was ready to support the cause. While participating in a summer internship, he worked with Reverend Edgar Krueger. Mr. Moreno came to the South Texas on June 1st of 1967 and was initially at the UFWU headquarters situated in Rio Grande City working closely

¹⁸¹ Richard Bailey.

¹⁸² Alex Moreno Jr. Interview.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

with UFW Vice President Antonio Orendain, who was then heading the UFW union in the Rio Grande Valley Starr County Strike.¹⁸⁴

Towards the end of 1966, Antonio Orendain was involved in the dramatic and famous U.S. Mexico strike at the Roma International Bridge. There, farmworkers lay on the road to prevent the passage of green card holders from Mexico, coming to work in the U.S. to break the strike. The summer of 1967 when melon harvest season came around, strikers were again actively striking for higher wages and better benefits. As the strikers encouraged fieldworkers to abandon the fields and join the strike, the political machines worked against the strikers by bringing in the Texas Rangers to suppress the strike.¹⁸⁵

Since before the turn of the century, the Texas Rangers suppressed strikes and destroyed union activity in every facet of the workforce including oilfield and longshoreman strikes. Accustomed to their old tradition of provoking strikers to violence, they did not know how to address the non-violence stance taken by many striking farmworkers and picketers. The local community at the time was divided between support for the two camps, composed of the workers and the growers. The Rangers meanwhile, sought ways to exploit divisions among the groups and bait supporters of the strike who had criminal records. The Rangers were focused on arresting anyone striking during the melon strike, and actively did so throughout the striking phases. Strikers developed a habit of picketing by railroad tracks, because the Railroad Union supported the strikers and would not cross the picket lines. Often, they stopped the railroad trains carrying melons outside the Rio Grande Valley to market. This incensed the Rangers who

¹⁸⁴ Alex Moreno Jr. Interview.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

commenced to mass arrest picketers before the trains passed through, so trains would not have a reason to stop.¹⁸⁶

On about the third day after Mr. Moreno's arrival, the Rangers came looking for a certain individual named Dimas at the UFWU headquarters, who had a criminal record. He had been seen walking past a shed by the picketers with a rifle, because he was out hunting rabbits. Mr. Moreno was at the UFWU headquarters when the Rangers came looking for Dimas around eight in the evening. Meanwhile, Dimas' friend Benito Rodriguez, who also had a criminal record, was being provoked to retaliate against the Rangers. In an effort to warn Dimas and Rodriguez of the Rangers intent; a group of men drove to Rodriguez' home around 8pm. Unbeknown to the men, they were followed by the Texas Rangers. Mr. Moreno states that as he exited Rodriguez' home, he was quickly arrested by Ranger Captain Alfred Allee.

As Mr. Moreno was leaving the yard by the perimeter gate, Allee grabbed Mr. Moreno by the back of the neck and rammed a shotgun into Moreno's right ribs. Mr. Moreno wondered if Allee was an "old Ranger" or a "new Ranger." Mr. Moreno feared with the knowledge of how the old Rangers worked in "accidentally" shooting their victims, in which case if he was shot, it would be Mr. Moreno's fault for struggling. A new Ranger would be concerned with his public relations political image and the fact that he shouldn't be out killing a college student, who doesn't have a record, and who hadn't broken any laws.¹⁸⁷

Mr. Moreno witnessed as the local justice of the peace came and handed over a warrant to enter the dwelling which was a 20x30 wooden home structure. He says that

¹⁸⁶ Alex Moreno Jr. Interview.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

about 5-6 Texas Rangers in addition to sheriffs, reserve deputy sheriffs, and constables entered the house, totaling about 20-30 law enforcement officials, and he could hear loud noises within the dwelling and could just see the small structure shaking with the activity going on within. A few minutes later, the Rangers began exiting the dwelling.

Mr. Moreno later saw Benito Rodriguez and Dimas in jail, because they were all taken to jail. They were pretty badly beaten. In jail, the men exposed their wounds, showing a great deal of violence after being kicked, hit with guns, and other objects. Dr. Ramiro Casso of McAllen came to treat the wounded men. Also present later that night were the union attorneys representing the wounded men. Unable to get a bond because the assault occurred in late evening, and it was ten o'clock at night, the wounded men were forced to spend the night in jail.¹⁸⁸ It was later found that Magdaleno Dimas suffered a severe head concussion from being hit on the head with a rifle, and massive internal injuries.¹⁸⁹

Mr. Moreno remembers that the jail at that time was housed on the third floor of the County Courthouse in Rio Grande City, Texas. That space is now housing district courts. Mr. Moreno was charged with something like, "evasion of arrest," for which there is no such crime in the Texas law statutes. To Mr. Moreno's recollection, after that incident, the incidences of violence were unheard of, and picketing continued without much resistance on behalf of the Rangers. Strikers continued to picket bridges and fields but no more railroads,

After the melon harvest in late June, Mr. Moreno dedicated himself to working with the Reverend Edgar Kreuger visiting farm working communities in Starr and

¹⁸⁸ Alex Moreno Jr. Interview.

¹⁸⁹ Manny Romero.

Hidalgo County. Because of Mr. Moreno's belief in the value of supporting justice and fighting injustice wherever possible, Mr. Moreno supported and suffered for low income farmworkers whose wages were miserly. During the melon strike, the minimum wage law had just taken effect, and raised wages to \$1.25 an hour, but there was no enforcement of the law. Eventually, when it was enforced, workers thought the Starr County Melon Strike had affected the wage increase, and were much encouraged by it.¹⁹⁰

Mr. Moreno claims that the Starr County Melon Strike led by Antonio Orendain was the first massive community supported strike in South Texas history in support of local farmworkers and their families. According to Mr. Moreno, Antonio Orendain wanted to continue organizing and striking in support of Texas farmworkers but the UFW under Cesar Chavez did not believe that any further strikes would be successful in Texas.

There was massive farmworker support, as well as support by the AFL-CIO and local churches who invested large amounts of financial aid into the strike to help the striking families with funds to subsist while the strikes were ongoing. Ultimately, even though the union activity was very successful, they were not successful in unionizing the people. In Elsa, a union labor organizer out of San Antonio, Franklin Garcia, who worked with Benito Campos, the local leader for the local Meat-cutters Union, were very successful in their organizational practices. They organized and unionized the Rotel Canning Company and the Texas Plastics in Elsa. Franklin Garcia was a unique legend as far as organizing in South Texas. He accomplished many successes on behalf of non-agricultural workers in South Texas.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Alex Moreno Jr. Interview.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

Mr. Moreno remembers meeting Cesar Chavez in June of 1967. He states that he doesn't remember Chavez coming during the time that UFWU Vice President Antonio Orendain was in charge of the UFWU in the Rio Grande Valley. He states that the strained relationship between the two men kept Chavez focused in California and other places. Apparently their difficult relationship emerged as a consequence of differences in leadership tactics. Orendain did not feel Chavez was working for Texas like he was for California workers. Mr. Moreno states that Orendain was not allowed to do anything, after difficulties in his relationship with Chavez emerged. As a consequence, Orendain grew restless.

Later, after UFWU organizer Rebecca Flores replaced Antonio Orendain, Cesar Chavez made more trips to the Rio Grande Valley. Mr. Moreno refutes charges that there was more farmworker organization under Rebecca Flores than there was under Antonio Orendain. Mr. Moreno states the resentment in the UFWU organization against Antonio Orendain can still be felt. It was Antonio Orendain who came to Texas to fight for the Texas farmworkers and stayed in Texas. He never returned to California to live.¹⁹²

Mr. Moreno points out that Rebecca's organizational activities along with Juanita Valdez Cox at La Union del Pueblo were community organizing activities that are not focused specifically on the farmworker but rather on immigration issues, civil rights abuse cases, and colonias among other issues. Mr. Moreno helped LUPE on legal immigration cases at one point.¹⁹³

He believes there will not be any more farm worker union organizing by the UFWU in Texas, because they decided that they would focus their energies in California,

¹⁹² Alex Moreno Jr. Interview.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

which was Orendain's fear. Orendain believed that through union support and organization, they could make a difference in Texas. Mr. Moreno remembers that in the 1980's when he was already a State Representative, he would come down to the Valley to UFWU Conventions and Cesar Chavez would be there on behalf of LUPE.

Mr. Moreno states that the UFWU is a union for California, and even though there may be UFW or similar farmworker organizations in other states, the California UFWU leadership does not believe the other states have a favorable enough environment to win nor does California's UFWU have the resources to sustain strikes in other states, so they seclude their union activities to California.

Accordingly, the California UFWU under Cesar Chavez did not send Antonio Orendain to organize a strike in Texas. The people were already organizing among themselves with the aid of local small businesses that were supporting them. They were looking for a leader to help them strike, but were concerned with individual family financial subsistence if they went on strike. When Antonio Orendain came to South Texas, Valley farmworkers were ready to strike.¹⁹⁴

It was small local businesses who actually contacted Eugene Nelson who was performing grape boycotts in Dallas at the time. But Eugene Nelson was not an organizer; he was a boycotter for the UFWU. Eugene Nelson started the strike and when the AFL-CIO said they would also help, it was then that the UFWU became fully involved. There were other unions who also supported the UFWU with financial aid by sending thousands of dollars a week so that people could eat and pay their bills during the

¹⁹⁴ Alex Moreno Jr. Interview.

strikes. It was Nelson who contacted the UFWU who sent Antonio Orendain to the Rio Grande Valley, because Orendain was a strong organizer and leader.¹⁹⁵

Mr. Moreno states Cesar Chavez had a self-sacrificing idealism that said they would pay the bills and food for farm workers, but for spending money, they would only give the people five dollars a week for gas and other things. In this way, farm workers were kept in poverty and focused on the work at hand which was striking. The Texas farmworkers were also asked to sacrifice by supporting California's UFWU with the hope the Texas farmworkers would eventually be addressed, but help never came to anybody else. With the California UFWU's refusal to support the TFWU, only California workers were ever helped. As a consequence of the benefits obtained, farmworkers in California make more money than Texas farmworkers. Part of the reason is also because farming in California is more efficient than farming in Texas, and California has better soil. California soil yields ten times more produce than the same amount of land in Texas, according to Mr. Moreno.

There is no doubt that the Starr County Melon Strike, which was headed in large part by Antonio Orendain, set in motion a progression of civil rights movements focused on obtaining civil rights long denied to Hispanics in the Rio Grande Valley, and the whole area South of San Antonio.¹⁹⁶

It also forged political changes through legislation, many of which were passed as a consequence of State Representative Alex Moreno Jr's. input while he was in the House of Representatives. He remembers that the big bill that he helped work on was the workers compensation bill for farmworkers. Sadly, they were not able to pass that

¹⁹⁵ Alex Moreno Jr. Interview.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

legislation while he was in office, but the groundwork was laid. They did pass legislation to protect workers from pesticides and when some tried to detract some of those protections for workers, Mr. Moreno fought against it. They did pass the toilet requirements and the increase to the Minimum Wage Law. All of these laws were passed in conjunction with the TFW and UFW. Mr. Moreno feels all these legislative bills were improvements for farmworkers they did not have before. He says a union makes improvements by getting employers to agree to positive change on behalf of the worker. But sometimes the changes have to be imposed by government. The focus of unions and legislation is for the farmworker to have better, and more dignified, and humane working conditions while improving their economic status.¹⁹⁷

In June of 1967, Attorney Robert E. Hall of Houston was in Rio Grande City defending the UFW union led by its President, Cesar Chavez against an injunction by La Casita Farms, the site of the Valley Melon Strike. According to the charges, the UFW's group had made threats, committed violence, and breached the law and the peace in an attempt to terrify laborers from their work. According to the report, on December 28, 1966, an employee of La Casita named Manuel Balli drove up to the farm, when a picketer named Librado de la Cruz reached through the trucks open window, and attempted to grab Balli's coat. Failing, Balli drove on through the gate entrance. Sheriffs quickly arrested de la Cruz and filed charges. This was the strongest evidence that was ever presented on picketer's violence. Star County unions combined picket lines with demonstrations, prayer vigils, and symbolic marches. These were all tactics of South

¹⁹⁷ Alex Moreno Jr. Interview

Texas civil rights movements committed to the non-violent philosophies of Cesar Chavez.¹⁹⁸

In the sweltering June heat, the 70th District Courtroom of Judge Laughlin was packed with union sympathizers. The jury box, replete with armed Texas Rangers, railroad detectives, and deputy sheriffs gave Hall a glimpse of South Texas justice. Gary Gurwitz of the law firm Morris Atlas was the prosecuting attorney. Witnesses testified about flat tires, malfunctioning truck engines, mass picketing of more than two men, mysterious gunshots that hit nobody, a fire damaged road-bridge, behavior attitudes that seemed to pick a fight, but no union sympathizer shooters, arsonists, or blows were ever physically presented in court.¹⁹⁹

The only evidence of brutality and violence was committed by Texas Rangers and deputy sheriffs. Captain Allee testified that when he encountered Alex Moreno and Bill Chandler on the sidewalk of a house, knowing they were union sympathizers, he knocked Moreno down and jammed a sawed off shotgun into his chest and continued on his way into the house without permission or a warrant. When he found Benjamin Rodriguez and Kathy Baker at a small table, he ordered Rodriguez to put his hands on the table while pointing a gun at him. When Rodriguez complied, Allee struck him over the head with the shotgun, knocking him over to the floor. He proceeded to attack Dimas who was now in the house. Dimas sustained a brain concussion, multiple bruises and serious back injuries. Rodriguez was left with a broken finger, cuts, bruises, and a nail torn plum off

¹⁹⁸ Robert E. "Bob" Hall. "Pickets, Politics, and Power."

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

his finger. When asked what Allee would have done if Rodriguez had refused Allee's instructions, Allee responded he would have shot him same as a cockroach.²⁰⁰

The Reverend Edgar Krueger witnessed and personally experienced violence on behalf of the Texas Rangers during the time frame of the Starr County Strike. Mr. Krueger distinctly remembers one day during the strike when he and a group of supporters were standing in the street near the Rio Grande City, Texas- Camargo, Mexico International Bridge. They were just talking amongst themselves when suddenly a Texas Ranger named Jack Van Cleave came around and began pushing Mr. Krueger and shoving him around without any particular reason. When Cleave was asked later why he pushed and shoved Mr. Krueger, he responded that he was trying to clear the way for traffic. But Mr. Krueger was the only one pushed around. Mr. Krueger remembers Texas Ranger Cleave's name, because Mr. Krueger marked him as the Ranger whose actions were the most unpredictable during that strike.²⁰¹

Another incidence of violence that Mr. Krueger experienced at the hands of the Texas Rangers was in Mission, Texas. In the center of the City of Mission, along the railroad tracks crossing, the Rangers often committed acts of violence against strikers and supporters. Every Friday during the strike, the strikers and supporters, along with the UFWU and supporting unions, would hold a union meeting at the old Rio Grande City theatre around seven in the evening. Mr. Krueger would usually go down there to the meetings, because he usually began the meeting with a prayer.²⁰²

On one particular day, he had been painting all day, and it was getting late when he headed to the Rio Grande City theatre dressed in his old painting clothes. When he

²⁰⁰ Robert E. "Bob" Hall. "Pickets, Politics, and Power."

²⁰¹ Edgar Krueger Interview.

²⁰² Ibid.

arrived, he was told everyone was over in Mission at the Railroad Crossing. When Mr. Krueger arrived, there were only a few people there who had apparently arrived late along with Mr. Krueger. He was told that all the people who had gathered for the meeting beforehand had been arrested and taken away to jail. Since the train would transport melon in and out of the Rio Grande Valley, strikers would picket the trains. On that day, the group at the meeting had intended to strike by the railroad tracks to stop the train from taking the melons out of the Valley.²⁰³

Naturally, the group began to question, “where were the people taken?” Mr. Krueger saw Texas Ranger Alfred Allee with other Rangers walking along the railroad track towards the train station. When Mr. Krueger approached Ranger Allee to inquire upon the missing group members, he claims Ranger Allee was extremely belligerent. He would not answer the question as to the whereabouts of the group members. He claims Ranger Allee finally turned to him and said, “Krueger, you’re no preacher, you’re just a troublemaker!” He then brushed him off without answering Mr. Krueger’s question about the group. Mr. Krueger walked back to the remaining group who were sitting around on car fenders. Many had come straight from work and had no supper. So Krueger ordered some hamburgers so they could eat while they waited for news. As they sat eating the hamburgers, the sun was beginning to set, and it was getting dark. While the men stood on the south side of the tracks, a group of Rangers along with the media were standing on the north side of the tracks.²⁰⁴

As darkness fell upon the land, the train began to come through the crossing where they stood. Just before the engine of the train got to where they stood, the Rangers

²⁰³ Edgar Krueger Interview.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

quickly jumped to the south side of the tracks, leaving the media behind the moving train. The Rangers immediately commenced to arrest the remaining group of men standing there eating their food. All the media could see was feet moving and bodies being tossed about as the train went by. Mr. Krueger relates,

“While Magdaleno Dimas, one of the strikers who was with us stood there, Captain Allee slapped the hamburger off of his hand and he was arrested. After that Captain Allee came up to me and grabbed me by the belt and took me over to Jack Van Cleave who took me in the same way, by the collar and back of my pants and held me inches away from the moving train. I feared because I had seen Jack Van Cleave do so many unpredictable things. As the train passed, a photographer snapped a quick shot of Jack Van Cleave holding me up by the neck and collar just inches from the railroad tracks. When I looked down, I saw that with one step, I could have stepped on the track itself. That’s how close I was to the moving train.”²⁰⁵

The men were arrested for unlawful assembly, secondary picketing, and other trumped up charges, even though nobody was holding signs at the time they assembled to meet the other group members for the union meeting. There were no signs present by anyone at the time. The Rangers then put four men in the back seat of a police car designed for three people. Jack Van Cleave was in the passenger seat of the vehicle. Since the seat was too small for the four men, Mr. Krueger was sitting towards the front of the back seat. As they traveled on a roadway from Mission to Edinburg, they were coming up to an extremely sharp turn on the road. Mr. Krueger looked at the speedometer and saw that it was registering eighty miles per hour. He warned the driver of the

²⁰⁵ Edgar Krueger Interview.

impending curve, to which the driver slowed the vehicle enough to make the curve. Jack Van Cleave turned around and said to Mr. Krueger the same thing Allee told him, “Krueger, you’re no preacher, you’re just a troublemaker!” To which Mr. Krueger responded, “Bless you.” At that point, Ranger Jack Van Cleave landed Mr. Krueger with a forceful slap on the face.²⁰⁶

Mr. Krueger remembers the lawsuit that was later filed in Brownsville with the Texas Supreme Court against the Texas Rangers which sided with the farmworkers, the supporters and the union. At that hearing for the case, Mr. Krueger testified for about 2-3 hours on the witness stand about cases of violence inflicted by the Texas Rangers against himself and other persons. He remembers that five of the laws the Texas Rangers used to arrest persons during the Starr County Strike were proved unconstitutional.

Mr. Krueger remembers that a woman that now lives in Colorado, at the time was doing quite a bit of work for the UFW. The Texas Rangers went to her home and even though the door was not locked, the Texas Rangers broke down the door, entered her house, and arrested the woman and some men who were there having supper. One of the men was Magdaleno Dimas, whom they beat with guns and other objects, in the face of no provocation on behalf of that citizen. Mr. Krueger claims the brutality of the Texas Rangers towards the people was horrendous.²⁰⁷

Mr. Krueger believes that some of the reasons why the Texas Rangers acted so viciously against the farmworkers and anyone who would support them in their struggle for better benefits and higher wages were based on racist ideology. In addition to racism, there was also the negation in the belief for workers’ right to protest, or to form a union

²⁰⁶ Edgar Krueger Interview.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

who would help improve their livelihood. Their actions displayed an anti-union stand. Mr. Krueger recalls that no growers in the area were arrested for acts of violence towards persons involved in the strike, although he knows for a fact that one grower fired shots but never suffered the consequence. Mr. Krueger states that when a situation is as tense as it was during the Starr County Strike between growers, Rangers, the union, and farmworkers, even the sound of a gunshot could turn violent.²⁰⁸

Regarding the harshness dispelled upon the Starr County Strikers, Mr. Krueger remembers a story told by Eugene Nelson, first responding organizer for the United Farm Workers Union in the 1966 Rio Grande Strike. Mr. Nelson was quoted as saying that workers in Rio Grande City melon fields were receiving .33 cents an hour. Mr. Krueger says a local grower ridiculously contradicted that report and stated that he was paying .37 cents an hour. Mr. Krueger states that sometimes, some people are so completely unrealistic about what it takes to support a family, in regards to the current cost of living. He believes wages are a major source of suffering for farm working families. Mr. Krueger says he has a problem with employers who are more concerned with getting production out, than in workers safety. Mr. Krueger stated that Reynaldo de la Cruz with the Starr County Melon Strike would know many more incidences of violence and abuse than he did. He says women were among the most abused in the fields as they had no toilets in the fields or drinking water. He states that some women had to walk a quarter of a mile to find some bushes to hide behind, in order to urinate. Often women would go to use the bathroom in groups for protection, even though he is aware of sexual assaults and

²⁰⁸ Edgar Krueger Interview.

rapes of women farmworkers while they went to use the bathroom while working in the fields.²⁰⁹

Maria Luisa Limas was born in Cameron County, Texas in 1924 to a tenant farmer. As a child, she and her siblings helped her father in the fields. She only went to school for about three months of the year, between farm labor. At times, Maria remembers being paid .75 cents a day for hard labor from 7 am to 6 pm. Men earned a dollar a day working in the fields. Maria worked in the Rio Grande Valley around 1968 in the sugar cane fields. She remembers how the men wielding machetes would cut and strip the twelve foot sugar cane stalks, and hand them to one of four girls walking side by side to a tractor pulled enclosed trailer. These girls would in turn hand the cane stalks to one of four girls riding atop the trailer who would then line them up, ready to be transported to the sugar mill. Maria remembers she was paid about \$1.50 an hour working 10-12 hour days in 1968. She stated that they used the bathroom among the cane stalks but they never went alone. When they had to use the bathroom, three or four girls went together because there were too many men working the fields.²¹⁰

In the Starr County Melon Strike, a San Antonio Court ruled 18 months later, that "Judge Laughlin's findings and conclusions based on "mass picketing," trespassing, and violations of the "right-to-work" law did not justify the blanket ban on picketing. The court based its decision on Judge Laughlin's finding that the union's picketing had become "'so enmeshed with violence, threats of violence, harassment, vandalism, and destruction of property, creating an imminently dangerous and aggravated situation' as to divest it of its status as constitutionally protected communication of the facts of a labor

²⁰⁹ Edgar Kruegar Interview.

²¹⁰ Maria Luisa Limas Interview.

dispute." The court also acknowledged that no union member or sympathizer was identified as having committed those actions.²¹¹

Understanding that the case would not get justice in Judge Laughlins court, Attorney Robert E. Hall and his partner Chris Dixie filed a complaint in the Southern District of Texas at Brownsville against Allee, his Rangers, the Starr County Sheriff and his deputies, La Casita Farms official and special deputy Jim Rochester and a Starr County justice of the peace. The Plaintiffs were UAW union official Francisco Medrano, National AFL-CIO field representative David Lopez, and several union members and organizers. The case was heard by a three judge panel consisting of Judge Woodrow Seals of Houston, Judge Reynaldo Garza of Brownsville, and Judge John Brown of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit.

The allegations were as follows:

October 1967. In addition to the statutory challenges, we alleged that Rangers and other peace officers had lawlessly brutalized and intimidated union members and supporters; had, in bad faith, filed multiple criminal charges against union members and supporters; had acted as strike-breakers by offering inducements to strikers if they would abandon the union; and otherwise used their authority to support the growers and oppose the union.²¹²

To which the court responded:

The court declared all five Texas statutes to be unconstitutional. It found that the Rangers, the sheriff, and his deputies, including Rochester, had unlawfully used their authority to break the strike. Permanent injunctive relief was granted to

²¹¹ Robert E. "Bob" Hall. "Pickets, Politics, and Power."

²¹² Ibid.

protect the union, its members, and supporters from further abuse. n22 The opinion was a litany of brutality and misuse of authority: Magdaleno Dimas and Benjamin Rodriguez, assaulted by Rangers; Domingo Arredondo, the union president, struck and threatened with a pistol for shouting "viva la huelga" while in a Starr County jail; Eugene Nelson, a union organizer, arrested while picketing at the international bridge and then jailed without charge for four hours, told he would be investigated by the FBI, and accused of threatening to blow up the courthouse; 25 union supporters peacefully picketing at one of the farms, forced to disperse by sheriff deputies; Bill Chandler, arrested and charged with "breach of the peace" for arguing with a deputy sheriff and having his bond set at \$ 500 although the maximum fine for the charged offense was \$ 200; Reynaldo De La Cruz, a union supporter, arrested by Rangers for "secondary picketing" and, while under arrest, told that if he would abandon the strike, he would be hired by La Casita at \$ 1.25 an hour (the rate being sought by the union); Gilbert Padilla and Rev. James Drake, union activists, arrested for "unlawful assembly" while kneeling in prayer on the steps of the Starr County courthouse, leading a prayer vigil in support of union members who had been jailed; several groups of peacefully picketing union supporters and members arrested at various times, including one occasion when five Catholic priests were arrested for trying to persuade the field workers to leave their work and join the strike; and David Lopez, knocked to the ground for arguing with a Ranger. n23²¹³

Capt. Allee committed the most serious violence. His armed assault on Alex Moreno, Magdaleno Dimas, and Benjamin Rodriguez was described in some

²¹³ Robert E. "Bob" Hall. "Pickets, Politics, and Power."

detail in the opinion. n24 On another occasion, Capt. Allee arrested Rev. Edward Krueger, Krueger's wife, and Dimas while they were picketing at a railroad station where a train load of struck produce was due to pass. After arresting them, as the train passed, Capt. Allee held the two so that their faces were inches from the moving freight cars.²¹⁴

The court found that deputy sheriffs picked up and distributed copies of a violently anti-union newspaper, *La Verdad*, printed in Corpus Christi. There was abundant evidence of bad faith arrests. The civil rights committee later reported that there were 113 arrests of union members and supporters during the strike. Only 13 charges were ever brought to trial. Ten of those were dismissed. n25.²¹⁵

At the end of harvest time, the strike ended without resolution and the Rangers left town. On September 20, 1967, Hurricane Beulah devastated the Rio Grande Valley. Unions gathered to help the devastated Rio Grande Valley economy. Thereafter, the UFW moved their offices out of Rio Grande City and down to San Juan, Texas. Leadership, tactics, and organizational changes came as the unions struggled to provide more services to their members.²¹⁶

In 1974, the Supreme Court ruled on the case of *Allee vs Medrano*, 416 U.S.802 (1974). Issuing a stinging rebuke of Allee and his “Henchmen,” the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Rio Grande farm workers and UFWOC organizers. Until that point, the Texas Rangers worked under the modus operandi of “one riot, one Ranger.” After the

²¹⁴ Robert E. "Bob" Hall. “Pickets, Politics, and Power.”

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

²¹⁶ Richard Bailey.

Supreme Court ruling, the gun-slinging macho Rangers were assimilated into the Department of Public Safety.²¹⁷

Allee re-energized the farm worker movement as wildcat strikes broke out across Hidalgo and Starr Counties and at La Casita Farms. The strikes became a give and take between farmers and workers as growers met strikes with violence and retaliation. When the courts intervened, allowing peaceful strikes, growers hiked wages to undercut organizing efforts.

Drawing the attention of UFW President Cesar Chavez was pivotal in the formation of the South Texas farm workers movement. Chavez traveled to South Texas and helped turn resources and attention to establishing colonia organizing committees and statewide membership conventions. Among Cesar's tactics was the idea of work stoppages in strategic fields to demand better wages and working conditions. By calling on the media before the stoppages, pressure mounted for farmers to comply with workers' demands. This method proved to be effective all over the Rio Grande Valley.

Organizing around community issues, local and statewide elections, and legislative work, the Rio Grande Valley local UFWU has been instrumental in mobilizing workers under LUPE. When McAllen Mayor Othal Brand, one of the Valley's largest growers and landowners, tried to sell the city's public hospital, the farmworkers went to court and forced a referendum.²¹⁸

Cesar Chavez helped found Proyecto Azteca and La Union del Pueblo Entero (LUPE) - The Union of the Whole Community. They are non-profit organizations dedicated to community organizing; self- development, civic engagement, and self- help

²¹⁷ James C. Harrington.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

colonia housing projects. LUPE and the National Farm Workers Center (NFWSC) are both UFW extensions. The NFWSC is dedicated to building low to moderate income apartment units near Pharr, Mercedes, Temple, San Antonio, and Austin. The work of the UFW under LUPE paid off when state and local political leaders began attending UFW membership conventions in the Rio Grande Valley. This had been unheard of 10 years earlier when the Democrats in Hidalgo County closed the convention in three minutes. The UFW has helped organize workers to bring down inefficient judges, helped re-elect congressmen, had Governor Mark White sign the Workman's Compensation law at the Shrine of la Virgen de San Juan, hosted Governor Bill Hobby at a farm workers convention, and successfully boycotted grocery stores to increase workers' wages. Cesar Chavez' motto, "Si Se Puede!" - Yes We Can! - Is still in force.²¹⁹

On May, 2007, Robert Hall joined the masses for the 40th anniversary observance of the 1967 Melon Strike in Rio Grande City, Starr County, Texas. In his opinion, the legal system that at first seemed to fail the workers miserably, in the end protected the civil rights of the courageous men and women who dared to unite, speak up, and suffer in order to bring about change against opposition that was based on raw political power. In the end, the marches, boycotts, and police confrontations, paved the way for Hispanic farm workers right to unionize. In spite of the Texas Rangers claims of communism within the Starr County strikers, Mr. Alex Moreno Jr., the Reverend Edgar Krueger, Abel Orendain, and his father, TFW founder Antonio Orendain all claim there were no communist ties within the organizations involved in that strike. These were all men who were there and actively fought for justice on behalf of the Rio Grande Valley farmworkers.

²¹⁹ James C. Harrington.

Mr. Moreno believes the Starr County Melon Strike served to motivate Hispanics to speak out without fear and retaliation and hope for a change in the status quo. He feels the people were waiting for a cause to stand behind. Hispanics looked at the melon strike as a motivation, inspiration and pattern to follow to bring about change.²²⁰

While Mr. Moreno was in the House of Representatives, he helped forge change in the Rio Grande Valley. Mr. Moreno's involvement in Colonias Del Valle focused in bringing the basics to unorganized ghettos along the Texas – Mexico border which had no electricity, running water, or drainage. Colonia projects are for rural people. Since Mr. Moreno worked to better conditions in the colonias, he sponsored a bill in 1989 called the "Colonia Bill." This bill was designed to take water, sewer, and electricity to the colonias. Its outcome greatly benefited those communities.²²¹

Chapter 6: The 1979 Raymondville Onion Strike

Labor Activism at the dawn of the Conservative Era

April 4th, 1979 was the day that farm workers in one of the largest agricultural farms in the Rio Grande Valley walked off the field, organizing a strike that would change the face of Raymondville, Texas, forever. It was the farm of Charles Wetegrove who also owned the Wetegrove packing shed. When Wetegrove reduced wages by 50%, 1500 workers walked off the job.²²² According to the UFWU, they were contacted by Wetegrove employees when their wages were reduced to lower than minimum wage. As the TFWU led laborers to strike, Wetegrove claimed he had \$300,000 worth of onions in

²²⁰ Alex Moreno Jr. Interview.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Armando Gutiérrez. The Texas Farm Worker's Onion Strike. La Onda Latina. The University of Texas at Austin. 1979.

the field that were spoiling.²²³ Incensed, Wetegrove called in the local law enforcement. The media, siding with the growers, covered the story from their point of view. While picketers marched in protest, they suffered provocations from area growers, political machines and police. An environment charged with emotion that pitted the local White political elite against what they considered an inferior class of people escalated into violence. At the time, the Texas Farm Workers founder Antonio Orendain was actively investigating its bid to legalize collective bargaining for farm workers. Jose and James Garza, members of the Texas Farm Workers union were also on hand to support the strikers.²²⁴

Raymondville is a rich agricultural area on the South Texas gulf coast with one of the most impoverished farming laboring communities in the country. Raymondville was once the onion capital of the world and was known for its yearly parade dating back for generations. Involving the whole community, it was the local Anglo population who controlled every aspect of the event. The conditions found on the Wetegrove farm in 1979 were typical conditions found among the largest Rio Grande Valley growers.²²⁵

The TFWU strikers picketed Wetegrove's onion fields, refusing to pick the onion crop that could quickly spoil if not harvested. A sense of solidarity engulfed the local Hispanic community as many came out to support the strikers. In the Rio Grande Valley, few Hispanics escaped agricultural labor, even if only as teenagers earning summer spending cash. But for the majority, working the fields of South Texas was the only form of financial survival. As the strike continued, Wategrove sent for workers to break the strike and pick the onion crops. According to Marcial Silva, a TFWU organizer, 80 % of

²²³ Manny Romero.

²²⁴ Armando Gutiérrez.

²²⁵ Valley of Tears. A Latino Public Broadcasting Presentation. Review. 1979.

those strike breakers refused to enter the fields when they were confronted by the picket line. The remaining 20% withstood 2 hours of stooping labor under the eyes of the picketing community before they too, forsook the field labor.

Antonio Orendain remembers that strike. He had this to say:

When we were fighting the Raymondville Onion Strike, a minister was helping us. We almost had a contract. Then, Othal Brand, a large landowner and the mayor of McAllen, came and bought all the produce in the field and ended the strike by bringing his own people. He threw the Rangers and all kinds of law enforcement on us.²²⁶

Eighty- two year old Salome Cardona of Hargill, Texas was forty eight years old when the Raymondville Strike broke out. He had worked in the agricultural fields in the Rio Grande Valley all his life. With only a fourth grade education, he learned farming and agricultural labor from his father. He has worked hoeing crops, picking fruits and vegetables, and picking cotton. As an adult, he followed agricultural labor starting in the Rio Grande Valley and working his way to the northern states as the harvest season traveled northward. He doesn't remember what his wages were in any place he worked, because he figured everyone was earning the same, so it must always be a fair wage. For him, agricultural labor was how he put food on the table. He remembers that it was only late in life, that he was able to afford a small cottage for his family, because according to him, living conditions were always very poor.²²⁷

Mr. Cardona remembers that he never saw his employers provide water, bathrooms, or medical care for their workers until the late 70s and early 80s. He

²²⁶ Antonio Orendain Interview.

²²⁷ Salome Cardona Interview.

remembers that workers, including him, had to carry their own roll of toilet paper to work, because in the fields, they had to find a hiding place to use the bathrooms. Whether they hid among the citrus orchards, or among the bushes, as long as they thought they weren't seen, that was where they went. Mr. Cardona remembers running over another worker while working in a field. As he was driving a tractor, the tractor tire, planter, and then a plow hook dug into the man's arm. Because Texas did not mandate Workman's Comp for farm workers, Cardona took the man to the hospital where he was treated.²²⁸

Mr. Cardona was one of the strikebreakers for the Raymondville Onion Strike. According to him, picketers were at the head of the rows, not doing anything, just standing around. He says he was there to work because he needed the money. He said he did not address the strikers and the strikers did not address him, so he just continued doing his job. He remembers the strikers wanted better pay and benefits, but he doesn't remember what the employers were paying at the time. He wasn't aware of union involvement or if the strike was resolved or not. He said he was there to work, and so he just did his job. Mr. Cardona quit working the fields in 1984, at the age of fifty-three, when he suffered a heart attack. The only aid farm workers could apply for was food stamps.²²⁹ In spite of the strikebreakers hired by Wetegrove, workers from as far away as Reynosa and Las Flores Mexico came to support the strikers. People from Colorado state also showed up to support "La Causa" in Raymondville.²³⁰

When no workers would pick the crops decaying in the fields, Wetegrove contracted with Griffin and Brand, the largest agricultural landowner in the Rio Grande

²²⁸ The Raymondville Strike. More on the Plight of the Texas Farm Workers: La Onda Latina
The Texas Farm Worker's Onion Strike. The University of Texas at Austin. 1979.

²²⁹ Salome Cardona Interview

²³⁰ The Raymondville Strike.

Valley. Brand was also the mayor of the city of McAllen, Texas, down the road. After Wetegrove sold his onion crop to Griffin and Brand, Brand had his own farmworkers come in and harvested Wetegrove's fields. The strikers were infuriated at the tactics being employed by the growers. Since the Wetegrove field crop was sold to Griffin and Brand, the strikers were swiftly and legally removed from the land as trespassers. Because the onion crops were coming into the Wetegrove packing shed without enough hands to receive and process them, the Anglo community united in solidarity as well; bankers, lawyers, country club members, and police officers complainingly worked the shed. Getting a taste of the stench and hard work the local farm laborers performed daily, these elite could not make the connection to the suffering of the farm laborer.²³¹ According to Wetegrove, there could be no future in vegetable farming in the Rio Grande Valley if U.S. growers had to pay higher than those in Mexico.²³²

Solidarity among Hispanic farm laborers had to do with their presence at the Hidalgo International Bridge, as well as Mexican Radio Broadcasting from Reynosa, Mexico, bringing awareness to the public about the Raymondville Onion Strike. Silva pointed out to the deep and impenetrable land owning interests, local court systems, and criminal law enforcement which united against the Hispanic laboring class. During the strike, organizers and picketers were charged and jailed for disturbing the peace, grand felony, resisting arrest, and numerous other charges. As the TFWU union supplied the funds to release jailed workers, their coffers dwindled and dried up.²³³ Migrant worker

²³¹ The Raymondville Strike.

²³² Manny Romero.

²³³ The Raymondville Strike.

Juanita Valdez commented on the fact that, perhaps for the first time, many of those laborers found that, as Mexican Americans, they had rights.²³⁴

In 1979, the same year that the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas was involved in the Raymondville Onion Strike, the Reverend Edgar Krueger extended his hand across the border to help immigrants working for American companies based along the U.S./Mexico border to exploit cheap labor that cannot make it across the International Bridges. After the 1966 Starr County Melon Strike, the Reverend Edgar Krueger contacted the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) which is a Quaker organization. He has long supported the value of every person. Mr. Krueger worked with this organization for a good number of years in Chile and with the Northern Mexico based “Maquiladoras” that line the U.S. Mexico border in South Texas.

He began advocating for the Maquiladoras since November 20th, 1979 to the present, after the Raymondville Onion Strike in the Rio Grande Valley. He remembers the day was a Mexican holiday called “Dia de la Revolucion,” and as women workers were returning from their “desfile” or parade, he began to speak to them near the Maquiladora plants. Maquiladora plants are American based factories who have established themselves along the border towns to hire cheap and unregulated labor. They expose workers to extremely hazardous conditions.²³⁵

The Reverend Edgar Krueger is well aware of how Mexican Nationals are treated in the work force in Mexico, employed by American companies. He claims that some of the Maquiladoras in 1979 worked for companies such as Zenith and 3-M. There have been continuous employee accidents related to malfunctioning equipment which is

²³⁴ Valley of Tears.

²³⁵ Edgar Krueger Interview.

reported as malfunctioning but are still used. One woman named Rosa lost her two hands while working at assembling televisions. She is a single mother with six children and now has no hands. Solvents, miscarriages, cancer, and birth defects are all common effects of the Maquiladoras. A woman lost her husband at the 3-M plant. Another man lost his arm. In Mexico, the workers have no voice, no benefits, low wages, and no advocacy. The Reverend Krueger feels there must be advocacy for oppressed workers, everywhere²³⁶.

Hart Perry who was on the scene during the 1979 Raymondville Onion Strike. Mr. Perry portrays a firsthand historical narrative of South Texas life. Mr. Perry displays the unfolding scenes of violence and emotional frustrations on both sides, for the world to see, in his documentary “Valley of Tears.” In the documentary, pistols can be seen flourishing from the hands of growers and law enforcement; strikers are arrested, and emotions run high.²³⁷ Police confrontations brought numerous arrests. “Troqueros” or labor contractors reportedly pulled guns on organizers for talking to farmworkers. When a car broke through a picket line, one person was hospitalized. Police arrested two TFWU organizers but let the vehicle driver go free. The TFWU bus which was used as a strike headquarters unit was firebombed and destroyed. When Wetegrove raised pay to 70-80 cents per bushel, some laborers returned to work, leaving the union coffers empty, legal battles to address, and continued harassment and arrests.²³⁸

On May 29, 1979, the UFWU’s agent Manny Romero contacted Washington D.C.’s Texas Farm Workers Support Committee asking for help against a “terror campaign” against Rio Grande Valley Onion Strikers in Raymondville, Texas. The strike

²³⁶ Edgar Krueger Interview.

²³⁷ Valley of Tears.

²³⁸ Ibid.

had been in effect for a month when they complained of “harassment and abuse” at the hands of the growers and police who were having laborers arrested on “trumped up charges.” Texas was and is a “right to work” state, and as such, unionization is difficult to achieve. Unionizations was further complicated by the fact that Texas farmworkers do not fall under NRA protections. Texas Farm Workers Union has sought to repeal the Taft-Hartley Act under which the Texas “right to work” law was passed. They are also seeking a federal Agricultural Labor Relations Act to pass through Congress. According to Manny Romero’s report, it cited the UFW’s presence at the Raymondville Onion Strike, regardless of the fact that Antonio Orendain had established the Texas Farmworkers Union in South Texas in 1975 when the UFW and the TFW split.²³⁹ At the time of the Raymondville Onion Strike, Cesar Chavez and LUPE were involved in work stoppages in the Valley and it was in fact, Antonio Orendain who was heading the TFWU strikes. In 1979, Juanita Valdez Cox’s confirms that Cesar Chavez was involved in establishing the community organization named LUPE (La Union del Pueblo Entero.)²⁴⁰

Hart Perry’s documentary explores the struggle found in every Rio Grande Valley community; the struggle to overcome inequalities in the face of a repressive, dominant Anglo population refusing to give up social, economic and political control.²⁴¹ Few national newspapers covered the story of the South Texas Onion Strike. President Jimmy Carter voiced no opinion. Regardless of those facts, Hispanics continue the fight for equal rights, racial equality in every aspect of society, and strive to give their children better opportunities than they were offered.

²³⁹ Manny Romero.

²⁴⁰ Teresa Palomo Acosta, "Texas Farm Workers Union." 2010.

²⁴¹ Valley of Tears.

Lucio and Manuela Gonzalez of Edcouch, Texas were both Mexican-born immigrants who worked in agricultural labor all their lives, because they had no other options. Their seven children soon joined them in the fields. Manuela remembers when Cesar Chavez was conducting work stoppages in the fields. One day they were picking onions on Monte Cristo Road when Cesar Chavez came by. "Come out of the fields for your own good," he told them. They walked out. They knew that the wages paid by employers were extremely poor. After the work stoppages in the fields, the Gonzalez' claim wages increased for workers and eventually, water and toilets were provided for field workers. Mrs. Gonzalez stated that for women agricultural workers, life was twice as hard. Women had to rise early in the morning around 5 am to make breakfast and lunch. After breakfast, they joined the family in the fields for ten to twelve hour days. In the evening, they had to wash laundry with a washboard and a tub of water in order to have clean clothes for the next days' work. According to Mrs. Gonzalez, field work would render them soaking wet. At high noon, the sun would dry their clothes, only to walk off in the evening wet and muddy again. Most days, women went to bed around ten at night, only to begin the cycle again the next day. These women sacrificed so that their children would have a better life than they did, she stated. At age seventy four, her body aches and pains remind her of those years of hard labor working in the fields.²⁴²

Mr. Alex Moreno Jr. remembers growing up in the Rio Grande Valley and how the political machines controlled everything. He remembers having to buy his poll tax the first time he voted. He states that the Texas Rangers are no longer involved in strike

²⁴² Manuela Gonzalez Interview.

activities as a result of the lawsuit that was filed against them. The last strike they participated in was the 1966 Rio Grande Melon Strike.²⁴³

After the strike, the Supreme Court of Texas forbade Texas Rangers from participating in certain anti-union activities in Texas. They were also prohibited from committing violence during strikes. Since the Melon Strike, they have not been involved in supporting or suppressing strike activity in Texas. These policies changed some activist's attitudes. While Mr. Moreno was in the House of Representatives, a Texas Ranger he knew came to ask him to vouch for some pay raises for the Rangers.

Despite being abused by Texas Ranger Alfred Allee, and seeing the indiscriminate injustices they inflicted on farmworkers and supporters of the Starr County Melon Strike, Mr. Moreno worked in their behalf and helped get them their raise. When I asked him why, he simply said, "they were working, they are doing good things now, they were not being paid enough, so, yes; I helped them. We should work for what we are instead of who we are." This is the heart of one working for justice for all.²⁴⁴

Alex Moreno Jr., Abel Orendain, and Edgar Krueger claim that civil rights organizations such as LULAC, the G.I. Forum and others did not play an active part in the San Antonio Pecan Sheller's Strike, the Starr County Melon Strike, or the Raymondville Onion Strike. It is the belief that the older civil rights organizations were working in civil rights cases, but not specifically for the Texas farmworker. Mr. Moreno, Mr. Krueger and Mr. Orendain believe these organizations have worked slowly to advance the cause of Hispanics in South Texas but have played an important role by

²⁴³ Alex Moreno Jr. Interview.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

being the first organizations to organize the Hispanic populations of South Texas and work towards positive change.

Reflections

From the period extending from 1930-1979, the Hispanic community of South Texas underwent some of the most gruesome treatments by many of their White neighbors, which has been a continued source of shame over time. As Hispanics are contributing firsthand accounts of the plight and suffering of their cultural backgrounds from the early 1930's to the present, more people of all ethnicities are claiming solidarity with this community than ever before.

On hindsight, the fact that Jim Crow treatment of Hispanics by Deep South Anglo's, reinforced by laws that did not protect Hispanics; but rather, those laws created an atmosphere of oppression and abuse, is inexcusable. The United States government continues to create laws accessing cheap labor from illegal immigrants coming from Mexico, while many Americans go jobless. In addition to accessing Mexican cheap labor, Mexican Nationals continue to be denied the social services required to survive in a low wage labor system.

It was this unequal treatment that spurred civil rights organizations to bind together as advocates of the Hispanic community. Had it not been for LULAC's founding in 1929, which stood in the gap first, and that throughout time has continued to reinforce justice for Latinos, perhaps all the other civil rights organizations would not exist today. It was from LULAC that two of the most powerful civil rights advocate organizations stemmed. They were the 1948 American G.I. Forum and MALDEF in 1967. From the

G.I. Forum stemmed the 1960 Viva Kennedy Clubs that opened the political field for Hispanics to bring about change through legislation and the political process. When the Viva Kennedy-Viva Johnson Clubs organized, and encouraged LBJ concerning the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts; it was only a matter of time before the people were empowered to speak up for political, social and economic equality, justice, and the end of discrimination. Among the organizations that arose was the 1974 Southwestern Voters Registration Education Project which provided extensive education to Hispanics concerning the voting process, now that the poll tax had been removed?

After the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Law were passed, Hispanics were more apt to seek justice and equality. When Cesar Chavez, Antonio Orendain, and Dolores Huerta led the Hispanic farm working community in California on the Delano Grape Boycott, the fervor among Hispanic farmworkers and the Hispanic community exploded. When Antonio Orendain came to Texas to organize farmworkers in the 1966 Starr County Melon Strike, the time was ripe for people to rebel against generations of oppression, discrimination, and segregation from their own societies. As more and more people became involved in the struggle, a sense of solidarity and the need for change emerged. The Edcouch-Elsa High School and the Crystal City High School Walkouts gave a new generation a new vision that would propel them out of the farmworkers fields their parents had been tied to. Thus the 1967 emergence of MAYO was pivotal in helping to bring about change among the young Hispanic student communities across the nation.

The 1970 Raza Unida Party emerged out of MAYO's activism in an effort to place Hispanics in political positions where they could make a difference for Hispanics and thus, somewhat, equalize their societies.

Thus, the Pecan Sheller Strike, The Starr County Melon Strike, and the Raymondville Onion Strike were a result of the solidarity among Hispanics in an effort to say, “Ya Basta!” Enough!

Redbaiting was always a favorite tactic by law enforcement and political machines to suppress the oppressed whenever they were bold enough to speak up. The invaluable tactics and organizational skills that have been handed down from Mexican unions, even some tied with communistic ties, has allowed progress for the downtrodden. A great example is the Pecan Sheller Strike with Emma Tenayuca at the head. If she had not been bold to instruct the people and lead that strike, the people of San Antonio and all Hispanics nationwide might still be an oppressed people. Attention is not often given to the positive effects of strikes or the subversive methods of all involved trying to suppress Hispanics looking for a better life.

I do not condone communism in any way, but I appreciate when anyone stands up to advocate for others less fortunate. Some heroic figures have been incarcerated, beaten, and sometimes even murdered, in the quest for civil rights for others.

I have early recollections of “the Magic Valley.” Returning to South Texas from the northern states in late fall, the sight of palm trees, the smell of the citrus trees, and “Mexican” music on the radio made us aware that we were almost “home.” I never knew how it had evolved into the portrayal of the “Magic Vallery,” or of the harsh realities of farm working families in South Texas. It stuns me how some individuals such as John Shary, along with the emerging farmers and growers of South Texas, felt justified in abusing, exploiting, and discriminating against the people that made them rich. It is a system that had been clearly fed by the policies of the U.S. government with a greater

agenda. The fact that loss of lives and health have not mattered to any of these entities is one of the reasons for civil rights movements and union uprisings. But what will be done when civil rights are quenched and unions are unable to forge ahead in defense of the common worker? As civil rights organizations have been established, clearly some positive change has come in the form of civil rights protections for Hispanics. Laws have been passed in favor of farm worker justice that, as Alex Moreno Jr. has stated, override the evil wills of men who must become accountable to the legal system.

As I read the Rio Grande Valley history regarding farmworkers, their struggles and their plight, I came to understand why my parents took us north to work the fields, instead of allowing us to be further abused by South Texas farmers and growers low wages. I understand why my father could not find work in South Texas. I can't say that my parents earned very much more "up north," because I remember a life of extreme poverty as we grew up in South Texas. Always in my mind, were the images of a middle class lifestyle in Illinois where we owned our own home, wore store bought clothes, and lived in a two parent household.

In south Texas, images of my mother rising early in the mornings once a month to stand in line to receive government commodities so that we could eat, replaced my happy memories. From those commodities, we ate canned shredded chicken, beef, turkey and pork. My mother found a hundred ways to prepare it for us. Eggs came in powder form and could only be scrambled. The milk also came in powder form. My mother heated the water she mixed the milk in and told us it was like fresh cow milk. The five pound block of cheese was integrated into a million dishes, and the cans of peanut butter found their way into my mother's fresh made tortillas. I remember being teased in school because we

could not afford the traditional bread and bologna sandwiches the other kids brought. Sometimes, we brought chorizo and egg tacos to school for lunch. The sausage smell and the red stained paper bag let everyone know our economic status. By the time I went to middle school, the Child Nutrition Program was in place and I remember our excitement at the fact we didn't have to bring homemade lunch anymore. We felt we were finally going to be like everybody else.

Our clothes were always resale shop clothes. I remember my mother would tell us that if anyone asked us where we bought our clothes; that we should say we bought them at J.C. Penney. I didn't even know what J.C. Penney was, because we never went to department stores. We never went to restaurants, either, because there was never any money left. Even the clothes we bought at resale shops were handed down to the next sibling down the line until everyone had outgrown the garment.

I became ill at a young age with rheumatic fever due to an untreated strep throat infection. Working in the fields in the northern states always exacerbated my condition, and I inevitably ended up in the hospital several times a year. Images of county hospitals in different states were a yearly event. With no health insurance, my parents could not afford my care. I remember trying to help my family in the fields, and sometimes, burning with fever, my mother had to race me to an emergency room, barely clinging to life. In South Texas, migrant families with no insurance were subject to the Mercedes or Pharr County Clinics. There, whole days were spent waiting for my name to be called, only to return home long after sunset. I remember my father's tears as he verbalized his frustration and inability to do anything for me concerning my illness. In my family alone, many of my siblings are afflicted with autoimmune disorders such as diabetes,

rheumatoid arthritis, lupus and heart disease, all illnesses that medical science has declared are in direct relationship to pesticide exposures. My father died of a massive heart attack and my mother died of cancer. Having retired from the medical field working with dialysis patients, I found that the majority of dialysis patients are Hispanics who lost their kidney function due to autoimmune disorders, particularly diabetes and its related illnesses such as high blood pressure.

After undertaking this research project, I am more than ever determined to be an advocate for low income families. I remember as a child, illegal aliens seeking work would often knock on our family's door. Sometimes they asked for work, but more often, they asked for something to eat. My mother never turned anyone away. We didn't have much, but she always felt that food was the last thing you denied a hungry person. It has always been my stand that Mexican citizens seeking a better life for their children is the desire of every parent, and that right should not be denied them. Chapter five of Zaragoza Vargas book, *Labor Rights Are Civil Rights...*, "The lie of 'America's Greatest Generation': Mexican Americans Fight against Prejudice, Intolerance, and Hatred during WWII speaks volumes to me."²⁴⁵ I believe the Hispanic population has always had much to contribute to American society, but have only recently been allowed the opportunity to impact America. Overall, this project has been an exercise in bringing memories of past struggles AND VICTORIES into conversation with our difficult present.

Upon finalizing this project, it has left me even hungrier to know the things that are not included in this writing. My plan is to continue studying Mexican American history and help bring awareness of this rich and diverse history that has been hidden too long.

²⁴⁵ Vargas, *Labor Rights*. Page 203.

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