

## CESAR CHAVEZ: He Made a Difference

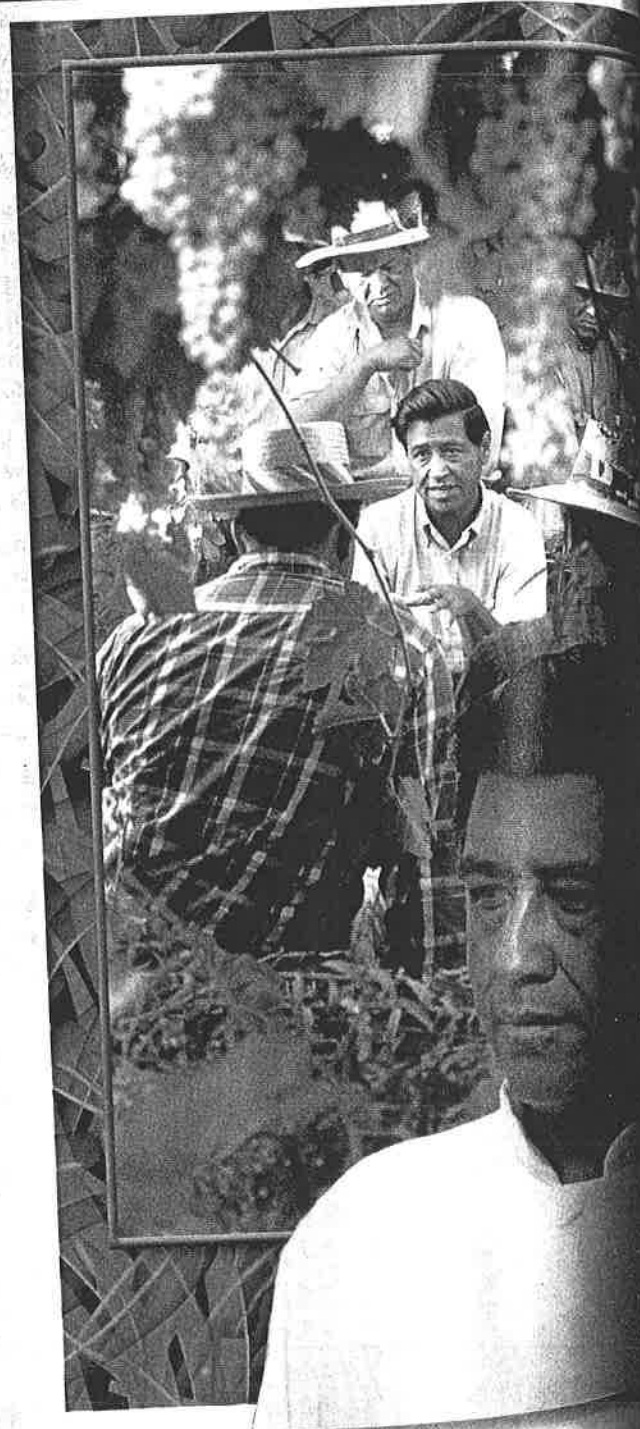
**W**HAT IS IT ABOUT THE PERSONAL experience of injustice that makes some people decide to help others while other people help only themselves?

One of the people who decided to help others was Cesar Chavez (1927–1993). When Chavez was growing up, his family members were migrant farmworkers. They traveled from region to region in California and worked long hours picking crops in the hot sun for very low wages. Since the whole family had to work to make enough money to survive, Chavez was able to go to school only when the harvests were in, and he had to quit school after eighth grade.

One year his father saw an opportunity to own his own land. He made an agreement with a landowner to clear eighty acres of the man's land and to take forty other acres of the man's land as payment for his work. Chavez's father cleared the eighty acres as promised, but when the time came for him to be paid, the landowner refused to give him the deed to the promised forty acres. Instead, he sold the land to another person.

When Cesar Chavez's father saw a lawyer about the matter, the lawyer advised him to borrow some money and buy the land from the other person. Chavez's father did just that. But cash was a difficult thing for his father to come by, and one day he didn't have the money to make an interest payment. The lawyer not only took the forty acres back but also sold it to the original owner—the man who had cheated Chavez's father in the first place.

Cesar Chavez says that he never forgot the injustice those men did to his father. For more than a hundred years, people like his father had been





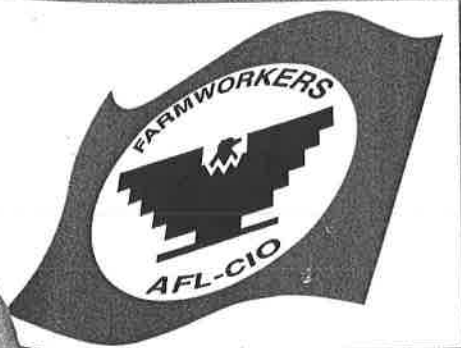
allowed to toil in the fields but had not been allowed to enjoy the fruits of their toil. Chavez hoped to change this, a task many regarded as hopeless.

Chavez believed that migrant farmworkers needed a union to help them get fair wages and better working conditions. In 1962, he organized the National Farm Workers Association, later called the United Farm Workers of America. The union's five-year strike against California's grape growers drew support from around the country. Many people across the United States refused to buy or eat grapes until the strike was settled.

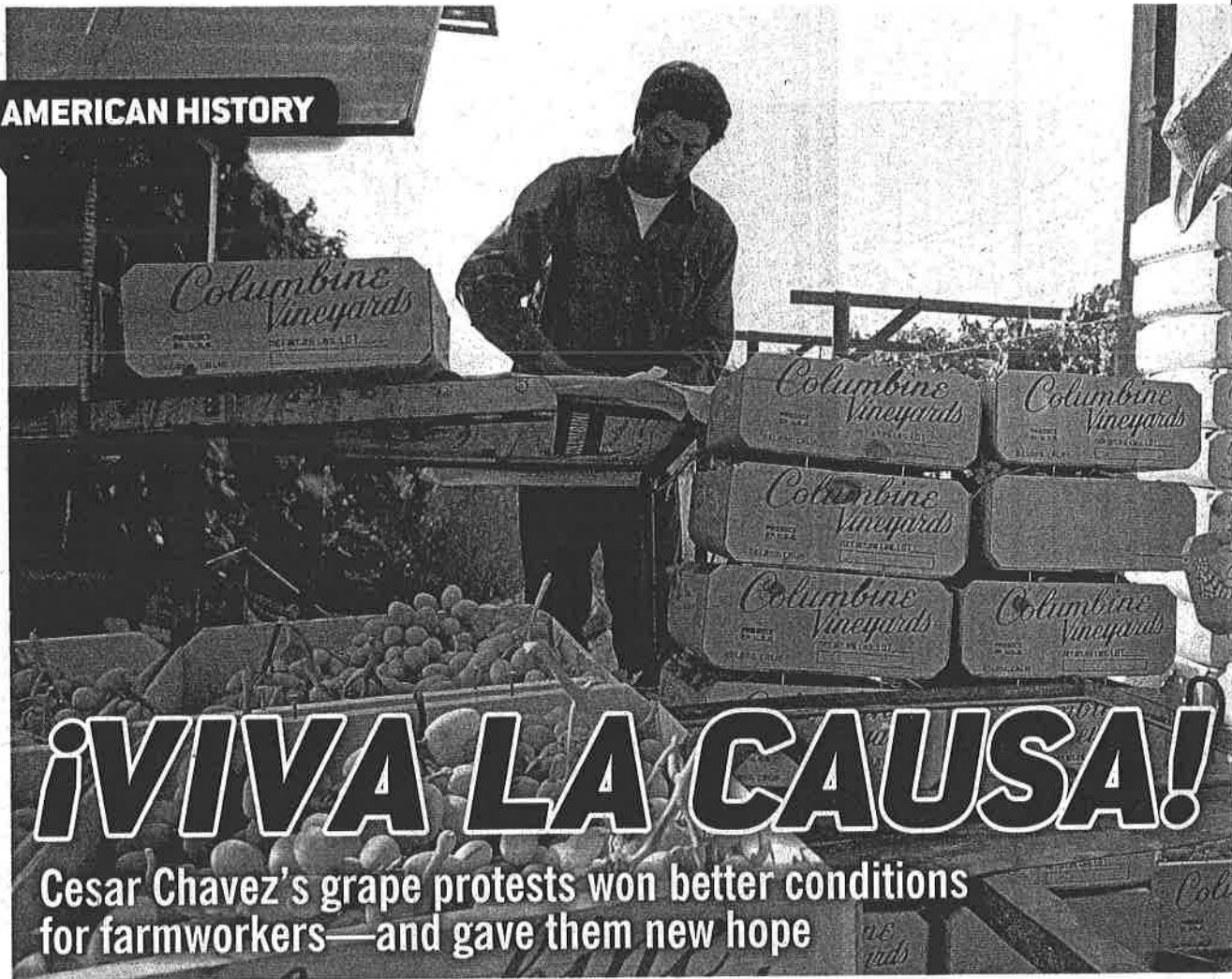
The union's actions were based on the non-violent principles of Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. However, many farmworkers were angry and believed that they could not win against the growers without violence. After all, the growers were using scare tactics and violence against them. Chavez met the threat of violence with a radical plan. He was willing to sacrifice his own life by going on a hunger strike to prevent violence and to ensure that the union would continue. His example won the angry workers over. By practicing nonviolence himself, Chavez inspired others in the farmworkers' movement to recommit themselves to the struggle for justice through nonviolence.

When Cesar Chavez died in 1993, more than fifty thousand mourners gathered to honor him at the United Farm Workers' field office in Delano, California. The field office is called Forty Acres.

—Flo Ota De Lange



## AMERICAN HISTORY



# ¡VIVA LA CAUSA!

Cesar Chavez's grape protests won better conditions for farmworkers—and gave them new hope

## CHARACTERS

\*ROBERTO } grape pickers  
\*JOSÉ }

LARRY ITLIONG, *president of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC)*

PHILIP VERA CRUZ, *an AWOC founder*

CESAR CHAVEZ, *a labor leader, political activist, and founder of the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA)*

PROTESTERS, *at a farmworkers' strike*

\*FERNANDO } striking farmworkers  
\*SILVIA }

\*BOSS, *an official of Schenley Industries, a large grape grower in Delano, California*

\*RAY, *Schenley Industries foreman*  
DOLORES HUERTA, *an activist and founding member of the NFWA*

HELEN CHAVEZ, *wife of Cesar Chavez*  
NARRATORS A-E

\*Indicates a fictional or composite character. All others were real people.

Note: The rallying cry ¡Viva la causa! is Spanish for "Long live the cause!"

## PROLOGUE

**Narrator A:** As a young boy, Cesar Chavez (*SAY-zar CHAH-vez*) loved to climb trees and look out over his family's farm in Yuma, Arizona—with acres of crops as far as his eyes could see. But that changed in 1937, when he was 10. During the Great Depression (1929-1939), millions of Americans lost their jobs, homes, and savings. Cesar's family fell behind on their bills and lost their farm.

**Narrator B:** Like thousands of other families, they headed to California to become **migrant** farmworkers. For years, Cesar traveled with his parents, brothers, and sisters to farms, orchards, and vineyards, harvesting crops anywhere they could find work. Some days all seven of them made

## WORDS TO KNOW

- **migrant** (*adj*): relating to a person who regularly moves from place to place to find work
- **recruit** (*v*): to seek out additional members
- **huelga** (*n*): Spanish for "strike"
- **boycott** (*v*): to refuse, as an act of protest, to buy particular products or services



**Left:** Migrant grape pickers at work in the dusty vineyards of Delano, California, in January 1970.  
**Above:** Cesar Chavez, 1950s

only \$1. They spent many nights sleeping by the side of the road.

**Narrator C:** At 17, Cesar joined the U.S. Navy. Later, he worked for a community group in San Jose, California, helping farmworkers register to vote. He became convinced that the only way to truly improve migrant workers' lives was to organize them.

**Narrator D:** In 1962, he formed the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA). He spent the next three years signing up members and looking for ways the NFWA could make a difference.

## SCENE 1

**Narrator E:** Nearly 30 years after Chavez arrived in California, life as a farmworker hasn't improved. Migrant workers have little say in

their hours, pay, or conditions.

**Narrator A:** By September 1965, grape pickers in the small farm town of Delano, California, decide they've had enough.

**Roberto:** The way we are treated is shameful. We have hardly any breaks and we don't even get drinking water in the fields.

**José:** I know. We melt in this heat all day, hunched over, picking grapes—and for what? A few dollars?

**Roberto:** It's going to get worse. I heard that the growers are planning to cut our pay.

**José:** We barely make enough to support our families right now, even with our wives and children working beside us. How are we going to survive?

**Roberto:** It's time we stood up for

ourselves—even if it means losing our jobs.

## SCENE 2

**Narrator B:** The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), a union of mostly Filipino-American farmworkers, launches a strike of the Delano vineyards on September 8, 1965.

**Larry Itliong:** Our members won't harvest any more grapes until their pay is raised to at least \$1.40 an hour. If the AWOC sticks together, the growers will meet our terms.

**Philip Vera Cruz:** There's just one problem. Mexican-American farmworkers are still harvesting grapes. As long as they're working, the growers don't need us. They'll never agree to our demands.

**Itliong:** True. We need to get *all* the grape pickers on board. Many of those Mexican-American workers are part of Cesar Chavez's union. Maybe he can convince them to join us.

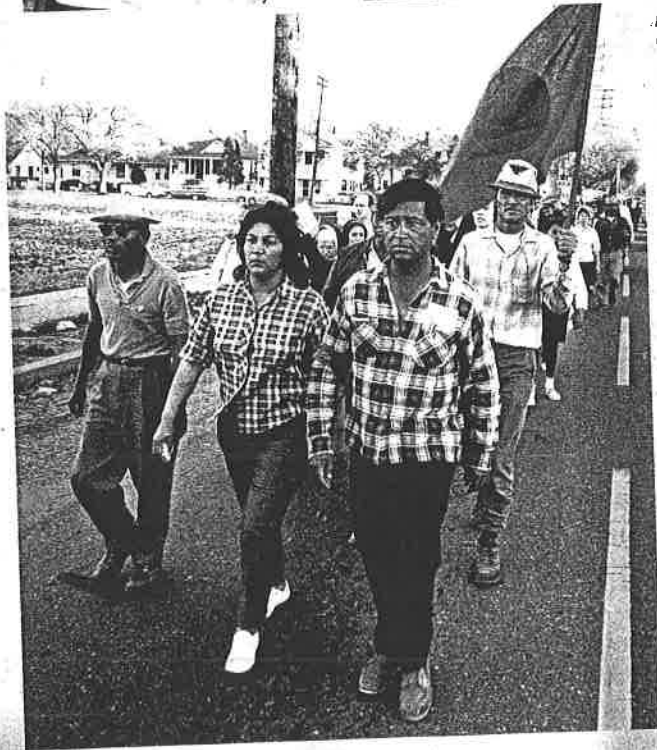
**Narrator C:** The AWOC meets with Chavez, hoping to get the much-larger NFWA on its side.

**Itliong:** Cesar, we need your help. The strike is the only way to show growers that our workers deserve better conditions and pay. But we can't do it alone.

**Vera Cruz:** If we want to force the growers to meet our demands, we need you and the NFWA to strike with us.

**Cesar Chavez:** We'll join you, as long as no violence is used. We'll keep pressure on Delano, but let's focus our efforts on one of the largest growers instead of trying to picket all of them. Schenley Industries has more than 3,000 acres of vineyards and employs

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**Top:** Protesters support a boycott of an Oakland, California, store that carries grapes picked by nonunion workers. **Middle left:** Dolores Huerta. **Middle right:** Larry Itliong, early 1960s. **Lower left:** Helen and Cesar Chavez leading the Delano-to-Sacramento march. **Across bottom of page:** Farmworkers and supporters near the end of the march.

hundreds of migrant workers. If we can make Schenley cave, nearby growers might follow suit. **Itliong:** That sounds like a plan. **Chavez:** I'll start by reaching out to local church leaders and college students. If we tell them about the farmworkers' situation, they might join us. The more folks we recruit, the stronger our strike will be.

### SCENE 3

**Narrator D:** Under Chavez's direction, teams of farmworkers, students, and other activists start protesting each day at 4 a.m. They crowd the roads along the vineyards, disrupting trucks trying to carry grapes to market.

**Protesters:** Huelga! Huelga! We deserve better pay! Huelga! Huelga! We deserve better pay!

**Narrator E:** The protesters try to convince grape pickers in the fields to walk off the job.

**Fernando:** Leave the fruit on the vine and join our picket line!

**Silvia:** Don't let the growers win!

**Narrator A:** The picketing angers the growers and slows the harvest.

**Boss:** Hey, foreman! Get those strikers out of here. Half our workers have walked off the job. I can't afford to lose any more people today. We're already behind schedule on the harvest. I don't want our grapes to rot on the vines.

**Ray:** Understood! I'll stir up trouble and call the cops if I need to.

**Narrator B:** Ray and other foremen race tractors down the roads to swirl up clouds of dust. They spray insecticides and fertilizer at protesters. Local police officers mostly side with the growers, arresting



protesters for minor offenses.

**Narrator C:** But the strikers still refuse to work. Schenley is forced to bus in farmworkers from other parts of California and even Mexico. The replacements, who are inexperienced, work slowly and damage the grapes. The growers can't sell the damaged fruit for as much money. That hurts their profits.

## SCENE 4

**Narrator D:** By December 1965, Schenley still hasn't agreed to any of the strikers' demands.

**Chavez:** Support for our cause is growing. Our picketers convinced some longshoremen in San Francisco not to load Delano grapes onto a ship bound for Asia.

**Dolores Huerta:** I heard! More than a thousand 10-ton cases of the fruit were left rotting on the dock.

**Chavez:** We need to keep up the pressure on the growers. Let's ask Americans to **boycott** all grapes harvested in Delano.

**Huerta:** That could work, but only if people know about the farmworkers' struggle.

**Chavez:** I'll send NFWA organizers to major cities.

**Huerta:** They can spread the word—and score more news coverage for our movement.

**Chavez:** I'll station students and other activists outside supermarkets nationwide, asking

shoppers not to buy Delano grapes.

**Narrator E:** As the months pass, the number of people involved in the boycott rises.

**Huerta:** More than 13 million Americans have joined the boycott!

**Chavez:** That gives me great hope. The growers had better be paying attention.

## SCENE 5

**Narrator A:** In early 1966, Chavez comes up with a plan to publicize the strike and the boycott.

**Chavez:** I'll lead the NFWA members in a 300-mile march from Delano to Sacramento, the state capital. Americans will take notice, and the growers will too.

**Helen Chavez:** When you get to Sacramento, see if you can talk directly with the governor. Maybe he can help settle the strike.

**Chavez:** You're right. Getting him on our side would put even more pressure on the growers.

**Narrator B:** In March 1966, Chavez and a few dozen NFWA members, students, and activists set off. Every night, they hold a rally to draw attention to their efforts. As the national media cover the trek, the number of marchers grows.

**Narrator C:** By the time Chavez arrives in Sacramento 25 days later, more than 5,000 people are marching behind him, with 10,000 bystanders cheering them on.

Chavez shares exciting news with the crowd.

**Chavez:** We did it! I've just gotten word that Schenley Industries has agreed to meet our terms. They'll now pay all grape pickers \$1.75 an hour. They'll also formally recognize the NFWA as a union.

**Huerta:** That's huge. It's the first union contract for farmworkers in U.S. history!

**Chavez:** We've proven that farmworkers deserve fair treatment. Let this be a lesson to all growers!

## EPILOGUE

**Narrator D:** Chavez led the grape protests for four more years, until the Delano growers settled with his union in 1970. Workers won three-year contracts with better wages, health insurance, and other benefits.

**Narrator E:** Chavez continued to protest on behalf of migrant workers until his death in 1993, at age 66. His commitment and peaceful approach to improving the lives of farmworkers earned him the respect of millions of people around the world. In 1994, Chavez was posthumously awarded the Medal of Freedom, the country's highest civilian honor, by President Bill Clinton. Today, many Americans celebrate Cesar Chavez Day on March 31, his birthday.

**Narrator A:** Chavez's words continue to inspire to this day:

*I am convinced that the truest act of courage . . . is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice.*

—Laura Anastasia

**"I am convinced that the truest act of courage . . . is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice."—Cesar Chavez**

