

Cesar Chavez: Migrant Hero

By Terry L. Scott



Harvested by Hand

- 1 You probably know that the fruits, nuts, and vegetables you eat were once crops that grew in fields. But did you ever stop to wonder how those crops are harvested? Some are harvested by machines, but many—fruits in particular—are too delicate. Research shows that nearly half of all U.S. fruit is still harvested by hand.
- 2 Most of those hands belong to **migrant** workers, who travel from farm to farm, picking fresh food so that we can eat it. It's hard work that can pay little, and migrant workers aren't always treated well by the farmers who hire them.
- 3 One man spent his life trying to help migrant workers. His name was Cesar Chavez.

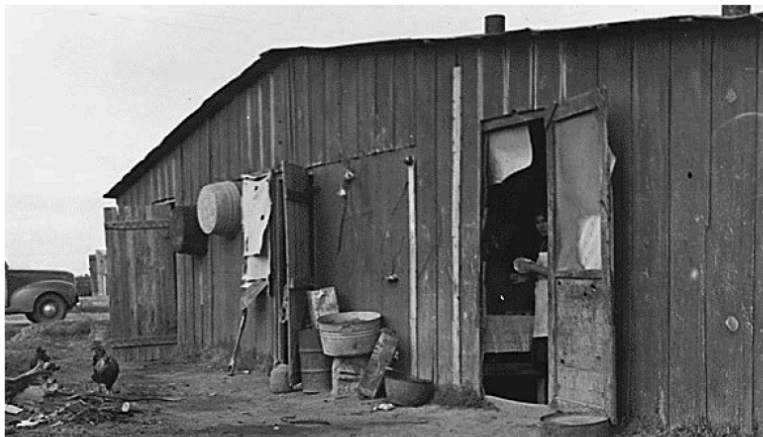


A migrant boy travels west during the Great Depression.

A Migrant's Life

- 4 Cesar Estrada Chavez was born to a Mexican-American family in 1927 near Yuma, Arizona. As a child, he lived on a small farm. Cesar loved life on the farm, but dishonest men cheated the Chavez family. In 1937 they lost their land. The family joined the many other poor families who traveled west during the Great Depression, looking for jobs as migrant farm workers.

5 Life on the road was very different for the Chavez family from life on their farm in Arizona. Many farmers in California wanted people to work for little pay. Then the farmers could keep more money from the food they sold. As a result, life for migrant farm workers was often terrible. Workers toiled in the hot sun for hours but sometimes had to pay for any water they drank in the fields. The workers spent much of the little money they made on temporary housing, usually run-down shacks that were hot in summer, cold in winter. The shacks often came with holes and insects but no bathrooms or any way to cook. Sometimes instead of mattresses to sleep on, owners gave the workers straw.



Growers often provided migrants with poor housing.

6 For several years, the Chavez family moved around California, finding work wherever they could. By the time Cesar graduated from the eighth grade, he had gone to more than thirty schools. He was often teased because he didn't have decent clothes or shoes and because he spoke English with a Spanish accent.

7 Cesar and his siblings worked in the fields with their parents on weekends and during the summer. It was hard work, yet migrant workers were often cheated out of their already-low **wages**. One time, Cesar's whole family worked for seven weeks, seven days a week. At the end of the harvest, they found that their boss had left without paying them, and there was nothing they could do.

8 Even though they harvested tons of fruit and vegetables, they barely earned enough to feed themselves, let alone enough to save and get ahead.

Too Many Dropouts

Instead of attending school, children like this one grew up working in the fields. Even today, young migrant workers drop out of school at four times the national average. U.S. child labor laws allow twelve-year-olds to work long hours on farms—and despite the law, thousands of children under twelve still work long hours, too.



9 The best hope for most migrants was—and is—the education of their children, but education for migrant children was hard to come by. Many migrant children grew up in the fields and started working as young as age eight. Cesar himself left school after the eighth grade to work in the fields full time to help support his family. Without a good education, the children often kept doing migrant work when they grew up, and the cycle continued.

The Birth of a Union

10 When Chavez grew up, he decided to start a **labor union** for farm workers. A labor union is a group of workers who unite to demand certain rights and benefits. A union can go on **strike**, refusing to work and shutting down a factory or company until its demands are met. Almost every industry, from truck drivers to movie actors, has a union to protect its workers. Chavez knew a union could make big improvements in the lives of farm workers, too.

11 Yet many people considered **organizing** a labor union for farm workers to be impossible. Farm workers moved around to follow the crops, never staying in one place long enough to plan action. They were often recent immigrants who did not speak English well. Also, farm workers had no laws protecting them from being fired if they tried to form a union. Although other people before Chavez had tried and failed, he said, *Si se puede*—“Yes, it can be done.”

12 Chavez met with farm workers in their homes and talked with them about their problems. He was small and soft-spoken, but he was very **persuasive**. His union grew slowly, one worker at a time.



Chavez speaks to farm workers in California in 1973.