

THE TEXAS OBSERVER

A Journal of Free Voices

August 8, 1980

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THE ONION REVOLT

By Rod Davis

Hereford

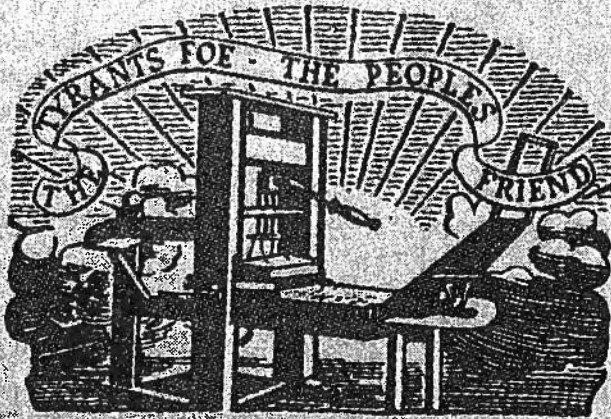
The odor of the onions drifts up from packing sheds and the broad High Plains fields and hangs in the air all day, simmering with a maddening sweetness. It completely covers Hereford, a West Texas town of about 15,000 squeezed up beside a Santa Fe rail line and busting over with the busiwork of agriculture. Semi-trailer trucks clog Highway 60 beside the railroad tracks, grain elevators rise up next to the tin packing sheds like skyscrapers, the houses on the acceptable side of the tracks seem tidy and prosperous and outside the town the fields are full of corn, sugar beets, cotton, soybeans, fat feedlot cattle, and onions.

The onions have changed Hereford. They have changed the High Plains. As the area became an agricultural oasis after World War II, sucking up water from the underground aquifers

to nourish the onions and the other vegetable crops, a northward migration of thousands of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans gradually pumped 60,000 Hispanics into the High Plains. Their purpose was always precise: harvest the crops, don't made trouble. Every season the Hispanic workers have fulfilled this function. They have stooped in the hot fields 10-12 hours at a stretch picking up the onions or beets or potatoes or cucumbers and have lived in the *barrio* labor camps where rats should not be housed and they have lost their bladders because they could not urinate in the fields. They have been faithful. They have been very, very poor. They have worked as individual laborers at the whim of some of Texas' largest corporations. They have been serfs.

As of June 24, 1980, those days were over. In a series of wildcat strikes among the 8,000 acres of summer onions being

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EDITOR Rod Davis

ASSOCIATE EDITOR Matthew Lyon

STAFF ASSISTANTS: Jenny Abdo, Beth Epstein, Susan Reid, Bob Sindermann Jr.

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CONTRIBUTING ARTISTS: Berke Breathed, Jeff Danziger, Dan Hubig, Ben Sargent, Mark Stinson

A journal of free voices

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BUSINESS MANAGER Cliff Olofson

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Editorial and Business Office
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(512) 477-0746

Publisher's Office
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harvested in June and July, Chicano farmworkers joined walkouts led by the Texas Farm Workers Union, an aggressive labor group that splintered from the United Farm Workers Union in 1975 because the UFW under Cesar Chavez was too busy concentrating on California. Striking workers in the High Plains asked for 60 cents per 53-lb. bag of onions, toilets in the fields, water, and the right enjoyed by every other labor union in America except farmworkers, the right to have a union.

The strike continued about six weeks, the length of the onion season. It was not universal and did not shut down all the fields and did not involve all the workers. But it put the Fear into the cartel of a dozen or so growers who control the market and it pushed the average wage in the fields up to 55 cents per bag. It did one other thing. It demonstrated to Chicano farmworkers the power of collective action. It also triggered a frenzy of repressive paranoia among the mostly Anglo growers and farmers, but that also will unite the farmworkers. Hereford today feels like Mississippi in 1963. Only this time it is not just civil rights but an economic revolution that is being sought.

Huelga

The first confrontation of the High Plains strike occurred just after 7 a.m. on Tuesday, June 24, when Jesus Moya and a handful of other TFWU organizers met a crew of 200 workers preparing to harvest a field contracted to the Howard Gault Co. about five miles west of Hereford. Positioning themselves along a public road at an entrance to the field, the TFWU set up a picket line and Moya, using a jerry-rigged loudspeaker attached to his bashed-in yellow van, began a peppery exhortation asking the workers to hold out for 60 cents per bag instead of the proffered 45 cents.

Moya's rationale, as every worker knew, was that 45 cents was simply not enough. At 45 cents per 53-lb. bag, a worker must fill seven or eight bags per hour just to meet the federal minimum wage of \$3.10, which does, contrary to popular myth, apply to farmworkers. Some very strong workers can harvest more than eight bags per hour, especially if their children or wives are helping and using the same social security number, and if the onions are big; but the crop this year, hurt by the drought, is poor. The onions are small. Most workers can clip and sack only four or five bags per hour at best, in some cases only two or three. The average effective wage in the fields is estimated by the TFWU at \$1.85 per hour.

In addition, Moya explained in Spanish, workers ought to have sanitary facilities and they ought not to have to carry their own water to the fields. Nor should they be subjected to the hundred and one indignities of the Texas farm labor system, which include swindling, beating, loan-sharking, eviction and legal intimidation as regular means of worker control. But especially, said Moya, workers ought to get a fair wage for what may be the hardest physical labor currently practiced in America.

The workers, their shirts buttoned up and hats in place against the sun, listened. No one had ever told them this on the High Plains fields before. Even the foreman, or *troquero*, who hires the crews on a contract with the grower, couldn't believe it. The *troquero*, Alejo Aguillon, first tried arguing with Moya about the economics of the market and how the farmers were facing a bad year. Alejo even pleaded with Ed Tuddenham, a lawyer from the federally-funded and locally detested Texas Rural Legal Aid office in Hereford who was present to advise the TFWU or migrant workers in the event of arrests or legal troubles. But Alejo got nowhere and his employer, Gault, would not up the wage.

The workers struck. Instead of entering the field, most of them followed Moya into Hereford for an impromptu caravan demonstration past the row of packing sheds on New York Avenue and then into the downtown business district, a quaint



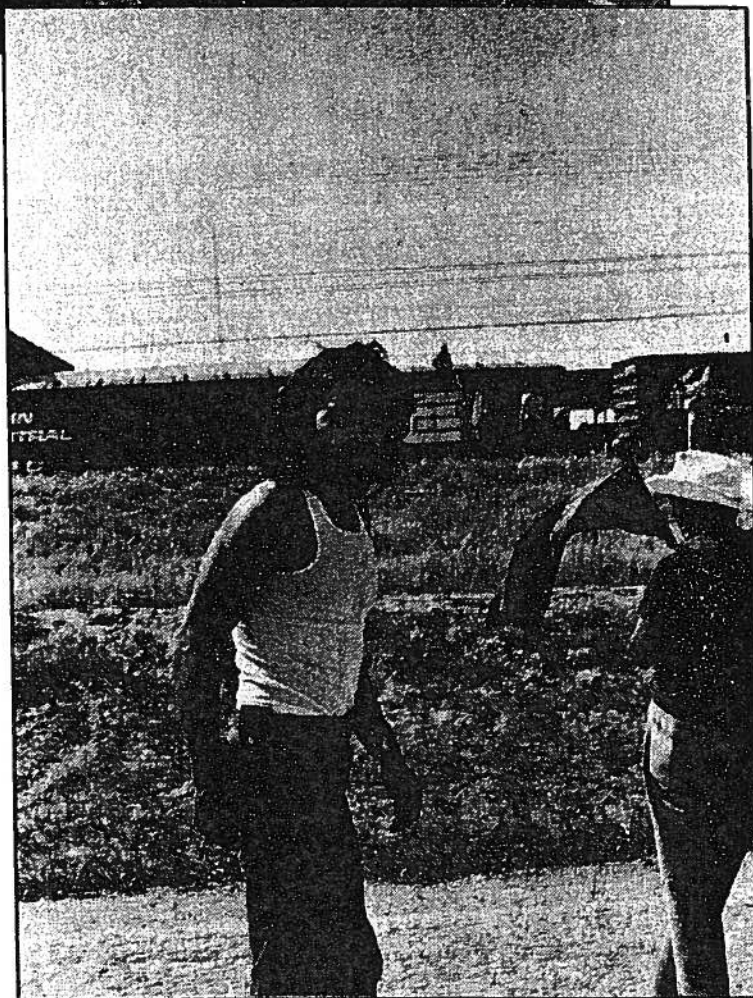
Above, Ed Tuddenham (l) of Texas Rural Legal Aid discusses the strike with workers.

At right, Jesus Moya, TFWU organizer, during picketing near a Griffin and Brand packing shed outside Hereford.

few blocks half of which cater to Spanish-speaking persons. Hereford had never witnessed such a spectacle: a hundred Chicanos of all ages led by a union organizer who looks like a muscular Jesus Christ and talks like Ché Guevara. It was sheer jubilation and a good day. But things would get tougher.

The Law

After the first strike, 15 High Plains growers and two growers' associations, the Harlingen-based Texas Citrus and Vegetable Growers and Shippers, Inc., filed suit in the 222nd state district court of Judge Wesley Gulley seeking \$6,000 in damages on behalf of the Howard Gault Co., whose field was the first one struck (and which bore the brunt of the strike action). The suit also asked for a temporary injunction against a broad spectrum of union activities, including the use of pickets any closer to each other than 50 feet. Named as defendants were TFWU, TRLA, Moya, Tuddenham, and two other individuals. They were accused of "conspiracy" to foment a work stoppage and sundry other violations. The growers were especially anxious to attack the TRLA. Since opening an office to handle the legal problems of migrant workers two years ago, the TRLA, funded by the Legal Services Corporation, has been cordoned off from the Anglo community as though it were a breeding ground of lepers. Through filing not very dramatic lawsuits for minimum wage claims, housing and health care discrimination and illegal detention of Hispanics, often against local government bodies, the TRLA has become *the* force of social change for Hispanics on the High Plains. As such, it is a direct threat to the power



structure. The growers' lawsuit thus had more in mind than redress of the immediate strike, but in its zeal it may have exposed an unexpected vulnerability, of which more later.

Representing the growers in the suit was the Hereford firm of Saul, Smith and Davis. Roland Saul is the district attorney of Deaf Smith County. Jerry Smith and Don Davis are assistant district attorneys. While the practice of private law by publicly-funded attorneys on behalf of private citizens in a case ostensibly at least touching official responsibility is not illegal in Texas, it is, in the words of one attorney, "ironic."

On June 30, Judge Gully granted a 10-day injunction on an *ex parte* basis, meaning the defendants weren't notified in time to present arguments. Deaf Smith County Sheriff Travis McPherson, a three-piece-suited impressario who once described himself as "proud to be redneck," immediately enforced the injunction, and although there was no brutality by deputies, organizing efforts were hamstrung for several days. Antonio Orendain, president of the TFWU, called the injunction "the most unconstitutional action ever taken against farmworkers in Texas." Subsequent legal action indicated he was right. TRLA attorneys promptly moved the case to federal court, where Judge Mary Lou Robinson immediately ruled in favor of dropping of the 50-foot rule. Ten days after the injunction was issued, another U.S. Dist. Court Judge, Halbert O. Woodward, allowed it to expire completely.

Court action was not the only means the growers used to respond to the strike. Within days of the first action by the TFWU, landowners put up "No Trespassing" signs at every private road entrance, which meant any one who ventured onto the property could be arrested without further warning. Deputies and Texas Rangers were much in evidence, mostly photographing demonstrators and making sure picketers did not cross right-of-way lines.

The subtleties of economic pressures also were mounted. Workers who joined strikes found themselves evicted from their labor camp dwellings or physically intimidated by goons working for *troqueros*. The use of *troqueros* has been an ingenious method of controlling the labor market in agriculture. Because a *troquero*, not a grower, contracts with the workers, the growers are immune from lawsuits stemming from worker mistreatment. The *troqueros*, who often make not much more than the workers they contract, thus become the scapegoats of labor law crackdown. Caught in the middle, *troqueros* are either sympathetic to the workers, or, more commonly, in thrall to the growers. If their crews mutiny in the fields and join the strike, the *troqueros* are impelled toward hiring a new crew and blacklisting known strikers. Firing people or discriminating against them for union organizing activities is of course against the law; but what the law does not know it cannot correct.

In attempting to organize the fields, the TFWU and the farmworkers faced a further set of tiered relations with growers, making it difficult to deal with the final source of economic control. As farming has become a corporate enterprise, the mechanisms of corporate management and accounting have been planted in the fields along with the hybrid seeds. Corporations like to create layers of insularity. Doing this enables them to achieve tax breaks, lop off unprofitable subsidiaries and operate empires. In the onion fields, corporate structuring has inspired complex farm-to-market systems, the most common of which are: independent farmers under contract to corporate growers, and farms directly owned and operated by the growers themselves. At the top of the system are the packing and shipping sheds, the biggest of which are operated by the growers. The terms "grower" or "packer" are frequently interchangeable.

In a typical arrangement, a farmer leases to a grower/packer who hires a *troquero* and crew to harvest the field. The grower

takes the crop and delivers it to the packing shed, where it is sold to a receiver, who either is a retailer or who sends the crop to a retail outlet. The grower totals up all the costs of the crop, subtracts the cost from the market price, and splits the gross profit with the farmer according to whatever terms they've worked out. Typical costs in a 50-lb. bag (the 53-lb. field bag is reduced to 50 lbs. for the market) of onions are: 45-60 cents for harvesting, 13 cents for the foreman's wages and social security, 1½ cents for the truck foreman, 9 cents for loading and 20 cents for hauling. The packer charges about \$1.90 to rebag and sell the onions. The grower and farmer also share, about 50/50, the costs of planting, which can run about \$650 per acre. There's also a 20 percent "shrinkage" loss in getting the onions from field to market. Obviously, eliminating the farmer from the transaction means more profit for the grower; but the grower in that case also accepts more risk for a poor crop.

In good years, there's enough profit for both farmer and grower. A very good year would see a yield of 1,000 bags of onions per acre and a market price of \$10 or more per bag.

This year, yields are 300, 400 bags or less, say the growers. The market price to the retailer is \$4-\$6. According to the Texas A&M Agricultural Extension Service, a yield of 300 bags per acre must fetch a market price of \$5.32 for a farmer to break even. On a 400-acre yield, the break-even point is about \$4.60.

If then, the onion crop, for the fifth year running, promises to be an economic loser, launching a drive for higher wages is bound to stir up arguments that there just isn't enough money to go around. Which is precisely what the growers are saying. There should be a distinction — a small farmer complaining that he's barely hanging on and can't grant a 10-cent wage increase is one thing; the same line from a firm like Griffin and Brand, the largest vegetable grower in Texas, simply doesn't ring true.

Regardless of the market economics, however, there is the law. Minimum wage is minimum wage. If farmers or growers can't pay enough per bag to enable workers to make \$3.10 per hour perhaps they should switch crops. Forcing farmworkers to artificially subsidize the unprofitability of the onion market is neither just nor smart. It can't last. Whether that means wages, and the retail price of onions, must rise, or whether onion-picking machines will eliminate human harvesters, as was the case with potatoes, the *status quo* cannot continue. Everybody knows that.

But even that is not the reason the Hereford strike has provoked such resistance from the growers. As Bill Weeks of Texas Citrus and Vegetable Growers and Shippers, Inc., an association dominated by Griffin and Grand philosophy, said, "Okay, 10 cents a bag isn't that much. We just don't want the union to come in and toot its horn." Or, quoting Howard Gault, whose firm after repeated strikes went up to 60 cents per bag and to 90 cents in one very poor field, "These people have always been happy here. Now these outsiders (the union and TRLA) have stirred everything up. Now put that pencil down and listen to me Once we used these people for the potatoes. Now we use a machine. It's going to happen to onions, too. That's how these outsiders are going to help those workers. There won't be any jobs at all."

This intransigence is based on the history of labor as interpreted by the big growers. "Texas has never liked unions and Texans don't want to be in them," said Weeks who, coming up from Harlingen, curiously refers to the Valley neighbor TFWU as an "outside influence." Weeks doesn't believe collective bargaining, from which farmworkers are specifically excluded in the Taft-Hartley Act, is needed in the fields. "As a worker, you have the prerogative of asking for a better wage and if the boss doesn't pay, you can quit and go somewhere else," he explains. Weeks also insists workers can pick at least 10 bags an hour. As for poor housing and working conditions in the fields, Weeks offers a standard grower sentiment: "It's all relative."

When you go to where these people call home, and then you go to where they are here, you see they're better off up here. That's why they come."

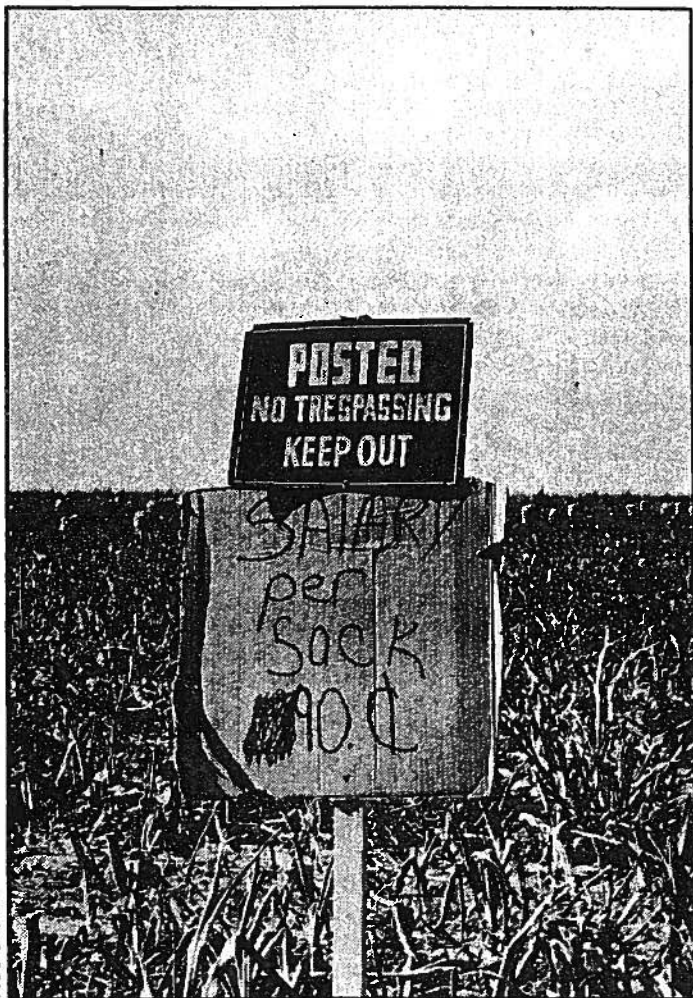
A Hereford grower said that the poor conditions at the labor camps are the fault of the people who live there. "They just don't keep the places up. They tear the screens out and break the doors . . . I guess maybe they don't have a pride of ownership like we do."

The Union

While the lawsuits were being filed and the union organizers dismissed as outsiders, or worse, the organizing continued. The TFWU set up headquarters in the annex of a Catholic church in the San Jose labor camp just outside Hereford. The headquarters room is about 20-by-20 feet with a single desk, two folding tables, a few chairs, a water cooler, a telephone and an ever-changing cast of onlookers and volunteers.

The modest office befits the union's modest circumstances. Because neither federal nor state law requires growers or farmers to collectively bargain with farm laborers, organizing among farmworkers is a frustrating business. Even if single strikes can be mounted, there is no way to force a grower to negotiate a contract. Growers may, and do, refuse to recognize the union (either TFWU or UFW), hire strikebreakers, and pit one group of low-paid workers against another. The TFWU has worked hard to obtain collective bargaining legislation for Texas similar to that in California, where UFW contracts are now widespread, but efforts have failed in a legislature dominated by conservative and rural interests. A new bill will be presented in the 1981 session.

Under the utter vacuum of law to assist in organizing, the



Rod Davis

Sign advertising wage increase in an onion field west of Hereford.

TFWU proceeds in fitful starts. It does not accept dues from members on Orendain's theory that until a contract with the TFWU can be obtained — none has been so far — dues shouldn't be collected. Financing for the union thus comes from grants and donations. The money is very meager, keeping up a skeleton staff of organizers paid as little as \$150 per month for gruesome 12 to 18 hour days. In the past, the TFWU, based at San Juan, has received funding from the Catholic church, but that support has weakened. A three-year grant of about \$80,000 annually recently was turned down by the Church, and the TFWU says the rejection came because of the influence of the UFW, which likes to paint the TFWU as too radical and too "red" to take on the business of organizing. But it is the TFWU which is forcing the strikes, galvanizing the workers, advancing what it sees, clearly, as a class struggle.

Orendain is an intense veteran of the American labor movement. His black hat and drooping mustache are his trademarks, whether directing the High Plains strike of 1980, a 1979 strike in Raymondville in South Texas, last year's march of farmworkers from the Valley to Austin or other actions. Orendain is considered to be very cool, very wise and very committed. A friend and colleague of Chavez in the UFW since 1950, Orendain's painful 1975 break was testimony to his stubborn insistence that the needs of Texas farmworkers cannot be subordinated to those of workers in other states. It is not that Orendain has no sympathy for California workers — quite the contrary — he simply sees the struggle as requiring more than one front. Everyone outside the two unions views the split as a tragedy and hopes it can be resolved. But the unions no longer trust each other and, questions of strategy aside, much bad blood must be turned good before a coherent and unified farm labor movement in Texas will be realized.

Action

Under the direction of Orendain and his principal Hereford organizer, the 32-year-old Moya, a Chicano activist from California with roots deep in the social revolution of the 1960s, the High Plains strike consisted of a series of tactical, guerrilla-style skirmishes. As in good guerrilla action, tactics were adapted to the increasingly sophisticated response of the growers.

Initially, Orendain and the other TFWU organizers would meet with the workers in the labor camps at night, discuss the need for better pay and other union issues, and decide which field to "hit" the following day. But as the strikes drew increasing attention, it became less possible to pinpoint the next day's

Antonio Orendain, TFWU president.



field of operation. More than 8,000 acres of onions were under harvest in the area, but not every field was ready every day, and not every field that was ready got picked every day. Thus the growers, in an effort to outsmart the strikers, began concealing the fields to be picked until the morning of the day of work. By week three of the strike, TFWU organizers were rising at 3 or 4 a.m. to follow workers to the fields. Even then, the fields had to be along a public road or the picketers would be arrested. At best, the union was able to picket one good field each day. Two if they were lucky and had enough volunteers.

Martha Owen, a TFWU paralegal, described a typical action midway through the harvest:

"We went out about 4 a.m. The field was near Dimmitt and it wasn't by a public road, so the TFWU couldn't go in. We sat around until noon waiting to follow the people to the next onion field. When they went, we drove up and waved the flags around. Nobody went into that field.

"Moya talked to the workers. They were making 50 cents but the onions were real small. So everyone stood around. There were two crew leaders and they were going to work opposite sides of the field. One crew leader was a jerk. The other was real nice. We were waiting for word from the contract grower (La Mantia, Collum and Collier) about getting 60 cents. Word came back no. The workers who were there, left. Moya said no other workers should come into that field, and no one did, except the Texas Rangers to take our pictures.

"We went home. The next morning we were back at that field by 5 a.m. Some new people came. We shouted "Huelga! Huelga!" but there was a gate around back and the workers went in there. I guess it was a limited success."

As the strike continued, wages inched up in isolated settlements to what seemed an area average of 55 cents per bag. Concessions on other issues, such as sanitation, were negligible, although the TFWU said the Gault Co. agreed to provide toilets in some fields. No contracts were signed.

On July 15, the strike received encouragement from Bishop L. T. Matthiesen of Amarillo, who in a letter to the *Hereford Brand* said, "Recent events . . . have again raised the moral questions of just wages and acceptable working conditions for farm workers, as well as of the right of growers and packers to a fair return on their investment.

"While recognizing and reaffirming the right of owners to a fair profit, we once more assert the right of laborers, including farm workers, to a just wage and to decent working conditions, including the right of workers to form a union, if they wish to do so, to help them achieve these goals through collective bargaining . . ."

On July 16, with most of the fields harvested, the TFWU modified tactics, concentrating on picketing at the packing sheds in Hereford. At the sheds, workers get the minimum wage, but little else. It is more difficult to organize at the packing sheds because the workers are more easily segregated from the union organizers, but the sheds, which do not skip around in the pre-dawn hours, are much easier to hit.

Wednesday afternoon, July 16, after rising at 4 a.m. to look, without success, for a field, Moya rallied a dozen workers and children and traveled the short distance from the labor camp to the Griffin and Brand shed along Highway 60 west of town, next to a meat-packing plant. An unpaved public road runs behind the Griffin and Brand shed, but between the road and the shed is a Santa Fe railroad track.

Moya and his band parked on the road. Flags were distributed to several picketers, who quickly stormed up a bluff overlooking the tracks and waved their flags so that the workers across the tracks on the shed loading dock, a distance of about 50 yards, could see. They began shouting in Spanish, cajoling

and taunting and pleading for the workers to walk out. "The children are amazing, man," said Moya, "they're really political." He turned on his loudspeaker and began a harangue, much like a filibuster, except he wasn't in a cool Senate chamber. He was in 101 heat and dust from the road clouded up every time a car, usually bearing a deputy or a company official, passed.

After 10 or 15 minutes, two officials from the Santa Fe railroad drove up. One, a middle-aged man wearing a white hard hat, told Moya the picket line would have to be pulled back about 20 yards from the bluff toward the road. "That's our right of way and you're trespassing," he said.

"It's not posted," replied Moya.

"Yes, it is." The man pointed to a sign about 50 yards down the track. It had been freshly planted that day or the previous one.

The Santa Fe man then informed Moya he had asked for a Texas Ranger to come and enforce the trespassing limit.

Instead, Moya ignored the threat. He berated the Santa Fe man for not showing solidarity with the TFWU. "The struggle of the railroad workers went on for a long time, man. Now you should be working with the farmworkers . . ." The man walked away. Moya returned to the loudspeaker: "Anything which hurts one worker hurts all workers . . . Workers should stand together for each other . . ."

During this, Deaf Smith County deputy Phil Sciumbato stood by taking notes. Sciumbato once narrated an anti-TRLA ditty called "The Ballad of Travis McPherson," dedicated to the sheriff. "You carpet-baggers are not gonna win . . . I am for Truth, Justice and the American Way, so get out of Hereford, TRLA," the song said. It was in response to suits filed by the TRLA to prevent McPherson's office from illegally detaining suspected aliens who, according to the song, live here in a country "they don't even deserve."

Sciumbato explained that the sheriff's office was attempting to keep things cool, which was true. The only "incidents" during the strike were caused by two farmers near Hart. One ran his pickup down a road filled with picketers and sprayed them with anhydrous ammonia gas. He also sprayed a couple of Castro County deputies, who busted him. In the other incident, a farmer opened his pants before a group of female farmworkers and was charged with indecent exposure.

Given the attitude of most Anglos in the area, the only explanation for the lack of police harassment on the picket lines would seem to be that it was judged best to keep things very quiet and out of the consciousness of outside media or federal meddlers. Both LULAC (League of United Latin American Citizens) and the American GI Forum early in the strike asked the government to monitor the area. Justice Department examiners visited but found nothing to report, which suited Sheriff McPherson just fine.

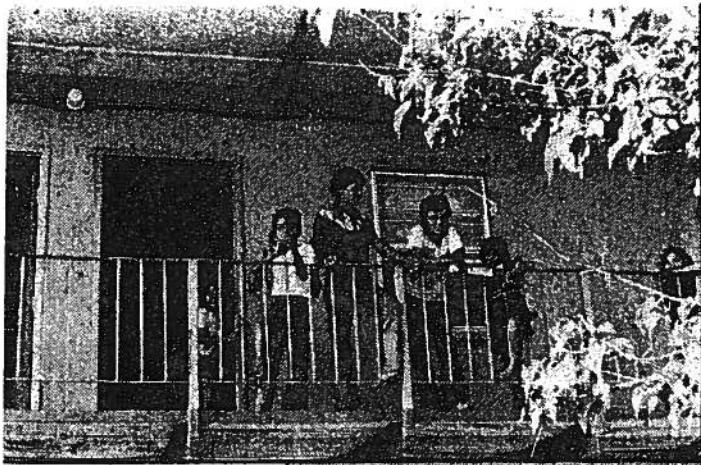
As Sciumbato was surveying the area, Moya conferred with other TFWU organizers and decided mass arrest would serve no purpose. He called the picket line back to the Santa Fe right-of-way. The children reluctantly obeyed, taunting the railroad official, "Why you wearing that hat? You afraid to show your bald head?" Their vigor was sobering.

Moya kept up the picketing at the new line for another hour, then, without talking any workers out of the shed, returned to union headquarters. The picketers dispersed to their quarters.

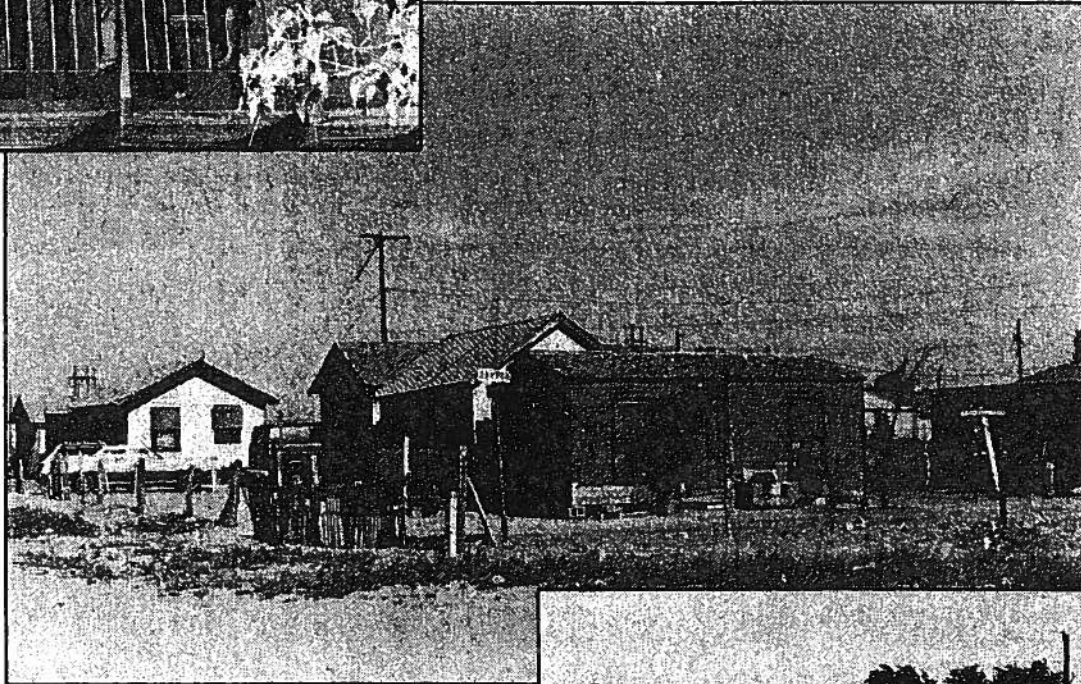
The Camps

In some ways, the story of the strike is not in the fields but in the labor camps. The nomenclature itself is indicative.

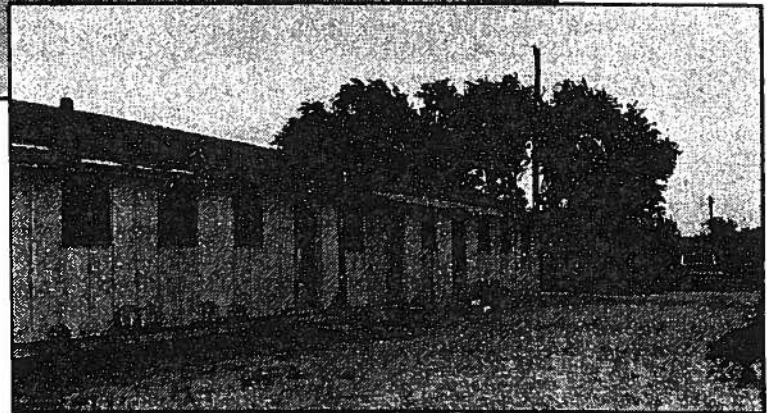
The San Jose Camp at Hereford has a special distinction. The open bay barracks in which families crowd for space were originally built in World War II and housed German and Italian prisoners of war a few miles away. The barracks were torn off



Left, children at the Dimmitt labor camp; center, a house at the Hereford camp; right, former POW barracks used to house migrant workers at Hereford.



Photos by Rod Davis



their concrete pilings and moved across fertile cotton fields to the new site along the highway to Dimmitt several years ago.

The San Jose camp is home to about 1,000 persons. Some stay only during the harvesting season but others, known as seasonal workers, base in Hereford and spend much of the year following America's growing seasons from Florida to the Valley to Washington state.

The more fortunate laborers live in wooden or slab houses scattered around the six or seven block area which comprises the camp. Some of the houses have a small patch of lawn, a fence to keep the dogs out, and flower boxes. In front of most of the houses are reasonably new pickup trucks or cars. "People say, 'If the workers are so bad off, why do they have such good cars?' They *have* to," one resident said, "or they can't get to the harvests."

The worst structures are the barracks, long, dull firetraps, ugly, set amid unpaved streets. Probably the only way to exist in them is to work so hard all day you could collapse anywhere at night.

At one end of the Hereford camp is the Church, and next to it is the health clinic, where physicians from Amarillo come in several days a week to help the local nursing staff. The clinic is usually full of women and children. Men go only if they absolutely cannot work.

Not working is the worst thing that can happen to a migrant or seasonal laborer, which is another factor weighing against the success of the unionization effort. A worker who joins the strike sacrifices a day's wages, which, small though they may be, are more than he makes pleading for social justice. Such questions are more intense than those faced by 90 percent of middle class America. Talking strike is one thing. Striking — taking action — that is something else.

The camp boasts its own life. From one edge, at night, the Hereford skyline — grain elevators, packing plants, feed mills

— butts up against the flat horizon. As the day ends, the laborers trickle back in and there are the sounds of radios, a few guitars, children and dogs. It isn't a raucous place. There is no energy for the nightlife in harvesting season.

Perched at the edge of Hereford, the camp has no city water, city sewage, city electricity. Until a HUD grant last year, the camp's only water came from a polluted well. The camp is owned mostly by slumlords, although some seasonal workers have scraped up enough to purchase the houses. According to those who have seen both, living conditions for laborers in the High Plains are worse than in the Rio Grande Valley. An explosion would seem in order. But it is quiet.

If the camp at Hereford is a hodgepodge of hovels and plaster and dirt, the camp at Dimmitt [*Obs.*, Feb. 29] is a 1980 concentration camp. It is publicly-owned, managed by the Castro County Housing Authority and funded by the federal government through the Farmers Home Administration. Rayford Smithson, director of the housing authority, has acknowledged striking tenants, including a woman, in the course of disputes over rent and debts.

The Dimmitt camp consists of brown concrete block units aligned in stark rows separated by pitted parking areas. A high fence encircles the compound and a sign, quite illegally, ad-

vises, "No Trespassing."

Law hasn't always meant much at the camp. Stories of overnight evictions, beatings and even murder tumble forth from those who have lived there. In a recent instance, a family returned one day to find their apartment hosed out and water standing a foot deep. The family had been working for a crew not affiliated with a powerful *troquero* who lived in the camp. The TRLA has filed suit on behalf of several workers subjected to discrimination, eviction or exclusion from the facility.

Entering the Dimmitt camp is considered a risk. A Department of Labor inspector assigned to enforce the minimum wage law in the Panhandle says he prefers not to broach the camp at night, and not much in the day. TFWU's Moya also has reservations, but goes in anyway. When the children in the camp see Moya, they yell, "Huelga! Huelga!"

The tenants in the multi-family units seem to be mostly transient, staying 4-6 weeks. Felix Salazar of Mission came in early June with his wife, a 10-year-old son and 8-year-old daughter. For a one-bedroom unit with no air conditioning and few amenities he paid \$79 per month, plus a \$50 deposit. He has come up for the onion harvest eight years running to supplement his social security income of \$272. He is 73.

"This year it's been pretty hot," he said. "I worked in June but only made \$75. This month I got a little more, but not enough. I don't think I'll come next year. I had \$200 when I got here but I had to spend it to live here and they don't pay right away in the field." On Wednesday, July 16, he had returned from six hours work. He said he does it "to make a little money to buy clothes and send my kids to school."

In the old days, he said, he was able to work for a grower doing domestic chores, which were easier on him and paid better. But he came back last year and the grower had found a younger helper.

Raymond Perez, 18, came to Dimmitt from Big Spring with his five sisters, a brother, mother and father. He has done so for four years. He said he started about 5 a.m. each day this year and returned at six, stopping only for lunch, carrying his own water because it was not provided in the fields.

This year was a bad one and Raymond was anxious to move on to Carrizo Springs and then Florida. As he spoke, he cradled his hands under his armpits either to comfort them or hide them. They were red meat raw, blistered, peeling.

"The onions were so little," he said, "I worked five hours today and made about \$5."

"How do you feel when you come home?"

Raymond considered the question with a mixture of humor and contempt. He answered matter-of-factly. "I'm tired."

"Too tired to do anything else?"

"No . . . but I'm . . . I get tired."

The Long Season

With the end of summer, the expectation of the landlords and growers and political powers of the High Plains is that the revolution will dissolve. Expectation is perhaps not the right word. Hope is better. They hope it will go away, that all the outside agitators will be gone and massah'll be able to run the farm again. "You won't write anything to keep this stirred up, will you?" beseeched one grower.

The hope seems slender, even poignant. But it is also tragic and stupid and reactionary. Time does not stand still, not even in West Texas. Already Chicanos have attained a place on the Hereford school board and, with 55 percent of the city population, they are destined to gain seats, sooner or later, on the town council, the county court. They will do so through direct and forceful challenge, because the shortsightedness of the economic elite, led by the corporate growers, admits no alternative. Nobody in control is giving away anything.

In that sense, the *patron* mentality which insists on uncompromising resistance to the union and other social changes insures precisely the conflict and ultimate defeat the growers hope to avoid. It does this in two ways: first, by polarizing the community along racial lines, giving the workers and other Hispanic residents a sense of solidarity against a common foe; and second, by promulgating a bunker atmosphere among growers which has and will produce foolhardy actions based on anger.

A good example of grower folly may be found in the filing of the June lawsuit. Although shorn of its anti-strike injunction, the remainder of the suit, seeking \$6,000 in damages, remains in contention. Which is exactly where the defendants, the TFWU and TRLA, like Brer Rabbits in the briar patch, want it; and exactly where the growers do not.

After filing the suit, the growers and their attorneys realized they had set themselves on their own petard; the nature of the litigation opens the door to all manner of countersuits, financial inquiries and publicity. Already the TFWU and TRLA have responded with three legal moves, the most important of which is a motion asking federal Judge Woodward to order elections among the farmworkers to see whether the TFWU qualifies as their bargaining agent. The motion derives from a provision in the mass picketing statute cited in the growers' suit which says that in any proceeding stemming from the statute, the court is authorized to order elections to prove or disprove a union's claim to representation.

In a separate action, the TFWU has filed a counter claim against the growers accusing them of conspiracy to violate the civil rights of the union and farmworkers by attempting to deny freedom of speech and peaceful assembly. The counter claim seeks \$150,000 in damages.

The third motion ricocheting from the growers' suit asks the court to require growers to enter contract negotiations with the TFWU as the best means of resolving the dispute.

Beyond these actions, there is the probability of motions from the TRLA or TFWU seeking financial data in order to respond to the growers' claim for damages. Such information could open the books of some major agri-corporations, providing grist not only for the union but for journalists and the government. Had the growers reacted to the strike with more deliberation and less knee-jerk anti-unionism these legal tactics might not have been possible.

The TFWU, meanwhile, has found volunteers in Hereford to keep open the office at the San Jose church annex. Although field organizing activity tapered off with the end of the onion crop, the TFWU office will continue educational and agitation programs designed to reach workers for subsequent seasons. Orendain and Moya will travel around the state through the fall evaluating the possibility of other strike campaigns, for example in the peach orchards of North Central Texas. The spirits, if not the finances, of the TFWU have been lifted by the strike.

As this is being printed, and being read, the exploitation — there is no better word — of farm labor in the fields of Texas continues, shifting from crop to crop. Perhaps, as some believe, the resolution will not come until machines have taken over. Perhaps that would not be bad. Perhaps it would be better if no one ever had to spend his or her life bent double in a hot field for wages that may total as little as \$1 per hour. But that time is not here. For now, the tragedy of the farmworker continues, unabated, very nearly unnoticed, except through actions such as the High Plains strike.

Think, eating your next salad, who might've picked the lettuce, where they might be sleeping, whether their children have gone supperless. Ask your legislator how he or she feels about giving farmworkers collective bargaining. Note how many times you hear someone say how much better off the Mexican workers are here than across the border. Then act. The onions are foul with crime. □