

A TRAILBLAZING ORGANIZERS' ORGANIZER (8/07)

For more than a half-century Fred Ross was among the most influential, skilled, dedicated and successful of the community organizers who have done so much for the underdogs of American society.

Yet most people probably have never heard of Ross, a tall, gray, lean man, a quiet but fiercely committed man who died 15 years ago, in September of 1992, at age 82.

That, however, is exactly how Fred Ross wanted it. He saw his job as training others to assume leadership and the public recognition that accompanies it. And train them he did, hundreds of them, including farm worker leader Cesar Chavez.

Chavez was a typical Ross trainee – a poor, inexperienced member of an oppressed minority who was inspired to mobilize others like him to stand up to their oppressors.

“Fred did such a good job of explaining how poor people could build power I could taste it,” Chavez recalled.

Chavez was among the Mexican-Americans living in California’s barrios in the 1950s that Ross, then with Saul Alinsky’s Industrial Areas Foundation, was helping form political blocs to demand improvements in the woefully inadequate community services provided them.

Ross’ approach was, as always, to get people to organize themselves, and he sensed correctly that young Chavez was “potentially the best grass-roots leader I’d ever run into.”

Within just a few years, the small organizations formed by residents of particular barrios joined into a potent statewide group, the Community Services Organization, headed by Chavez.

A few years later, Chavez founded what became the United Farm Workers union. It was the country’s first effective organization of farmworkers precisely because it was built in accord with Ross’ principles – from the ground up by Chavez and other farmworkers relying heavily on such non-violent tactics as the boycott.

Ross had started out to be a classroom teacher after working his way through the University of Southern California in 1936. But he could find no teaching jobs in that dark year of the Great Depression. He took other public work, eventually managing the federal migratory labor camp near Bakersfield, California, that novelist John Steinbeck used as the model for the camp that had a central role in “The Grapes of Wrath.”

Fiction though it was, Steinbeck’s account was accurate. Conditions in the camp were deplorable. So were the conditions imposed on the migrants by the local growers for whom they worked.

But the migrants organized themselves to win better living and working conditions, thanks to young Fred Ross. He went from cabin to cabin and tent to tent “every morning after daybreak,” encouraging camp residents to form the organizations that helped improve their conditions.

Ross had found his life’s work. He would become a full-time organizer, a task he described as being “a social arsonist who goes around setting people on fire,” Never was Ross paid more than a marginal salary, sometimes no more than room, board and expenses, but never would he falter.

His goal was “to help people do away with fear – fear to speak up and demand their rights ... to push the people to get out in front so they could prove to themselves they could do it.”

Ross left the migrant camp to work with the Japanese Americans on the West Coast who were herded into internment camps during World War II. Ross, then with the American Friends Service Committee, helped internees win release by finding them jobs in the manpower-short steel plants and other factories in the Midwest that produced vital war materials.

After the war, he returned to southern California to help African Americans and Mexican Americans fight against housing and school segregation. They fought effectively, too, against police brutality and elected Los Angeles’ first Hispanic City Councilman.

Ross also worked in Arizona, helping Yaqui Indians get sewers, paved streets, medical facilities and other basic needs that had been denied their communities.

Ross’ most ambitious and probably most satisfying work came during his 15 years of training hundreds of organizers and negotiators for the United Farm

Workers from the UFW's inexperienced and long oppressed rank-and-file members.

Ross kept at it for virtually the rest of his life – organizing grass-roots campaigns for liberal politicians, joining his son Fred Jr., a highly regarded organizer himself, in the national campaigns against U.S. policies in Central America, and working with anti-nuclear and peace groups.

It was not until just four years before his death, when Alzheimer's Disease struck, that he finally stopped.

Fred Ross was an organizer's organizer, a trailblazer, a pioneer. He was – and he remains – a vitally important model for those seeking to empower the powerless and to truly reform, if not perfect, this imperfect society.

“Fred fought more fights and trained more organizers and planted more seeds of righteous indignation against social injustice than anyone we're ever likely to see again,” noted Jerry Cohen, formerly the UFW's general counsel.

“He was a giant,” said filmmaker, playwright and former UFW activist Luis Valdez. “He was an uncommon common man.”