

## Richard Gagan 1972–1973

### United Farmworkers: A Memoir Dedicated to Augie Vanden Bosche

Past director of the Florida Christian Migrant Ministry, Augie passed away two years ago.

He was the heart of the Florida farmworker movement. He shared with Manuel Chavez the courage, insight, and daring to hold together a strong and diverse group of hardworking dreamers. Some of the dreams were brought to fruition.

In the fall of 1971, my wife was visited one evening by a friend who was working with her on the grape boycott. I was at home with one of my projects and got to meet him.

He was a roly-poly guy. His Dutch nose had a wart on the side. My son Robert called him “Augie with the Pimple on His Nose.”

Augie Vanden Bosche was to become one of my best friends.

While there were times I regretted following his recruitment of me to the dream, we were always thick friends. Nothing touches driving through the black sky past midnight within the sounds of the Everglades and talking of everything from the damaging effects of round rung ladders on the citrus pickers’ arches, to beautiful babes, to basketball. (Augie could watch a basketball game and then afterward recount every play for you!)

Our “team” in Florida became an extensive, argumentative, very hardworking, and loving group.

Augie, Do, Muriel, Nancy, Suzie, Oren, Rick, Hughie, Judy, Ramon Rod, Ramon Ram, Luna, Pancho, and, of course, Manuel. And occasionally, when fatigue required a party, we were treated to the night-long music of Wally’s Irish Band, or Jon Caulfield’s “Banish Misfortune,” or a dinner of Muriel’s veggies!

The organizing of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee in Florida flowed from five centers: Apopka, Avon Park, Bean City, Miami, and Tampa. We rented houses in each place and moved among them like shadows of the moon—arriving by day or night. We ate pinto beans, rice, and vegetables donated from home gardens. Better fare than most of us choose today. We slept where we could find bare floor or sofa if so lucky.

We would rise at 4 a.m. to go to the loading docks where people congregated to find work. There we would talk about the advantages of the union and attempt to have representation cards signed for a company election. We often received little interest because people were being fired for associating with that “communist cell.” The Wagner Act, passed by Congress and signed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, legalized the process of union representation. The company was required to give the census of workers to the union so all could be canvassed. If 30 percent of the workforce of a company signed the cards, an election was required subsequently. Then a booth election would be sponsored by the National Labor Relations Board. However, when the Wagner Act was passed, a trade-off was made with the Southern states excepting agricultural labor from the law. Therefore, we would have to follow workers home from the company gates to try to meet with them.

Consider someone following you home from work and invading your space, asking you to participate in something that could lose you your job just for talking to the organizers. Consider that this person is a different race.

I considered this one afternoon in Belle Glade when I followed a well-used Oldsmobile from the gates. He drove slowly enough so he would not lose me. He turned on a back road. I followed. He turned into a dusty cane field road. The cane was about eight feet high. We were isolated. He got out of his car and motioned me over. He was a head taller than I. I didn't miss that he was missing an ear.

“Are you one of those union guys?”

“Yes.”

“You got those cards with you?”

“Yes.”

“Bring 'em over here.”

“You got a pen?”

He took it and placed the card on the hot hood of his car. And signed it. In the months to come, James joined us and became our best organizer.

Since I raised it, I want to comment on race relations. Most of us organizers were white or Hispanic. I don't think any of us ever had any trouble due to race. Workers patiently listened when they weren't threatened. I had an ongoing humorous relationship with a black deputy. We got along.

The danger came not from diverse laborers, but from company leaders. There were seven large sugar companies around Lake Okeechobee. One night after midnight, a friend who worked at one of the companies called me.

“Richard, you must come see me quickly. I can't say what it is on the phone.” When I got there, he told me the company sought my death.

“They said they heard you were going to picket in the morning and would cut you down with mowers, approaching from all sides.” My naïve response was that this was great press. There was no real danger since I was swift of foot. I went back to our little house in Bean City to plan the picket. At 3 a.m. the Florida director, Eliseo, drove in from north Florida. I told him of the plan.

“No, you're not. They really will kill you. Those machines are faster than you. Just take it as a sign we are making some headway, but DO NOT picket.”

The purpose of a union is to provide a legal channel for bargaining collectively to establish contracts. For the company, contracts provide a stable workforce. For workers, they provide security, wage scales, and benefits. Security for migrant workers is provided through hiring halls. The wage should be a living wage that gives fair reward for work. Benefits are health and life insurance, participation on company committees—such as health and safety—and retirement.

While we were organizing in south Florida, a bill was introduced into the Florida congress that would outlaw hiring halls. If passed, it would destroy workers' opportunities to control their own fates regarding hiring. The traditional structure of hiring was for crew leaders to form their own groups of workers. More successful leaders ran their own camps. In turn, they were contracted with "grovers," who owned the land and crops. Workers could quickly go into debt by being obligated for room and board, tying them to one and only one leader. This monopolistic control came as close to slavery as you could get without actual legal ownership of a person. Hiring halls would remove the crew leader from that network, allowing freedom of job choice at the hiring hall.

In the 120-seat House, the bill was introduced with 49 cosigners. They were 11 votes shy of our defeat. Susan Cary and I went to Tallahassee to lobby for the defeat of the bill. With Susan's very clever handling of strategy, lobbying of the House Committee by Suzy Gagan and Nancy Hickey, and Augie appearing as our "Gandalf," the bill was defeated. (I call him Gandalf because when things looked darkest—or impossible—Augie would appear and find new paths for us.)

At the top of this memoir, I noted that some dreams were brought to fruition. Contracts were established with Coca-Cola Minute Maid, and with Hood Company. Benefits became most secure with Minute Maid. Hiring became stable. Fair wages were defined. Workers were heard and respected in their committee roles. Benefits were established, and now former migrants have secure retirement incomes.

I have hardly mentioned Manuel Chavez's leadership as the director of UFW organizing in Florida, or that he and I worked together on a daily basis. (When Manuel needed to get away and rest, I held the secret of his whereabouts.) I hold him dearly. And that is another story.

But in another 30 years or so when I go looking for the Pearly Gate, it is Augie whom I expect to find there.