

Glen Percy 1972–1975

My wife, Susan Due Percy, and I worked for the United Farm Workers from April of 1972 through September of 1975. My major contribution to the work of the union was producing and directing the film *Fighting For Our Lives*, a documentary of the 1973 grape strike.

We joined the United Farm Workers in April of 1972. We were recruited by Richard and Barbara Cook, friends from Union Theological Seminary, who were already working for the UFW. I recall being personally interviewed by UFW President Cesar Chavez the winter before we came to La Paz. Cesar had a small office at one corner of what was called “the administration building.” When we were introduced and shook hands, I was struck by how small and delicate his hands were.

Interviewed at the same time as us were Jack and Nancy Quigley. The four of us had been working in Albany, Georgia, with the Southwest Georgia Project, an African-American community development and civil rights organization that originated with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the early 1960s. We moved across the country together in the Quigley’s two cars (one a classic 60s VW microbus, in the middle of which we set up a crib for our son Noah, 20 months old at the time, and the largest U-Haul moving van you could rent. I drove the van. Slowed by strong headwinds in New Mexico, it ran out of gas twice.

My wife, Susan, is an artist who contributed to the UFW by designing posters, buttons, and other graphics. I was brought to La Paz to be the staff photographer for *El Malcriado*, the union’s newspaper. I believe *El Malcriado* was being revived or expanded—I’m not sure which—my memory is that it had not been published for some time. At that time Venustiano Olguin and Blaise Bonpane were the paper’s editors, and it was being printed in parallel Spanish and English editions. In addition to doing the photographs for the paper, I was soon also writing articles (in English only; I am not bilingual).

We were “hired” at the standard \$5 a week plus room and board, like most other UFW volunteers. At first we lived in “the hospital” at La Paz, in two of the old patient rooms of what had been a county tuberculosis sanatorium, one for Susan and me and one for Noah. We shared a refrigerator with another family and cooked on a Coleman camp stove. We weren’t the only new volunteers in the hospital; Cesar was expanding the headquarters staff. The following winter the union bought half a dozen new mobile homes for staff housing and we moved into one of them.

At the time I joined the union, the paper’s office was in the administration building at La Paz. But the union soon expanded the newspaper’s printing and graphics capabilities and moved it into a large, new building about 100 yards north of the administration building. Cesar approved a new photographic darkroom as part of that structure. I can recall discussing the darkroom requirements with the carpenter who had primary responsibility

for the building's construction—an amiable red-haired guy whose name I cannot recall. I felt that the new darkroom was evidence of Cesar's commitment to the new/revived *El Malcriado* and to the photography for it.

It was also part of a period of optimism and expansion for the UFW. The original grape contracts would be up for renewal soon, and the union was aggressively seeking to move into other states and crops. I can remember early staff meetings where Cesar enthusiastically reported on Mack Lyons' organizing progress in the Coca-Cola Minute Maid orange groves in Florida. There were also plans for a really big organizing campaign in the California lettuce fields, which Cesar felt was a much bigger deal than the union's grape contracts organizing.

Two developments soon ruined these plans. The first was the Arizona campaign. Soon after Arizona Governor Jack Williams signed into law a bill inimical to the interests of farmworkers, Cesar launched a vigorous campaign against him and the law. Along with a lot of other staff, Susan and I moved to Phoenix, where I covered the struggle for *El Malcriado*. Cesar soon began fasting, and local and national religious and political figures rallied to the cause.

The union decided to launch a recall campaign against Governor Williams and backed Jerry Pollock to run against him. I have no knowledge of how this decision was made, but I covered Pollock's "walk across Arizona" for *El Malcriado* and recall thinking what a poor choice the union had made. This "walk" was billed as Pollock's way to introduce himself to the people of the state, but I observed that he was uncomfortable initiating contact with people—not good for a politician—and preferred just to walk.

The Arizona campaign occupied a major part of the union's attention and resources for the better part of a year, and (to my knowledge) yielded little politically or in new organizing or contracts. Others can better speak to these issues than I can, but in retrospect I think this was one of two developments that harmed the union beginning in 1972. The other was far worse: the infamous alliance between the growers and the Teamsters union that led to the grape strike of 1973.

When we joined the union in the spring of 1972, the renewal of the grape contracts—the union's first contracts, signed in 1970, that had been the foundation of the union—was at the top of the agenda. After they were renewed, the union would turn its attention to organizing the much larger body of lettuce workers, the success of which organizing would propel the union into a new period of expansion and power. I can recall Cesar discussing how grapes were a specialty, even a luxury item on America's tables. They're easier to boycott—the tactic that had ultimately proved so decisive—because they are relatively easy for consumers to forgo. But lettuce, Cesar explained, was different. It was an everyday staple, more difficult to boycott, but so much more widespread in the American food chain that winning contracts in this crop would be much more important.

That was the plan.

But by the winter of 1972 and 1973 it was becoming apparent that the grape contracts were in jeopardy. The growers were making plans to avoid renegotiating the UFW contracts by signing sweetheart deals with the Teamsters union. It was widely believed, inside and outside the UFW, that the real agenda was the destruction of the farmworkers' union. When the contracts expired and the harvest began in the Coachella Valley in April of 1973, Cesar decided to make a documentary film about what we all knew would be a bitter strike and a monumental struggle.

I had told Cesar I was interested in making films for the union and he chose me to make this film. I had a little experience as a filmmaker, but only a little: I had made two student/experimental films in 16 mm while doing graduate work at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Both of them grew out of our civil rights movement experience in Georgia.

Luckily, the immediate demands of making the UFW film played to my strength: photography. (My major weakness—the lack of editing experience—would not be a factor until later; more on that below.) I went to Los Angeles to buy film stock and rent the necessary equipment and then to the Coachella Valley, where the 1973 grape strike would begin with the first harvests in April. I can remember sleeping on the floor of a trailer with a dozen strike organizers and getting up at 3 a.m. to meet at the local union office before heading out to the picket lines.

For the initial filming in the Coachella Valley, Gayanne Fietinghoff served as my sound recordist. Soon thereafter Cres Fraley replaced Fietinghoff and did the field sound recording for most of the rest of the production, especially after the strike moved north from Coachella into the Central Valley. Cres had no experience in film sound recording (nor had I), but together we figured out reasonably good working procedures. Without Cres's contribution, the film could not have been made.

Soon it was apparent that this would be a lengthy production, so Cesar approved the purchase of film and sound equipment, which I chose.

When the harvest moved north from Coachella, Cres and I followed it up the Central Valley. One of the most dramatic scenes in the film is the violence committed on striking farmworkers by the Kern County police. The deaths of Nagi Daifulla and Juan De la Cruz and their funerals are also pivotal events in the film. The haunting Islamic chants of Daifulla's countrymen at his funeral and the music Taj Mahal and Joan Baez contributed to the De la Cruz funeral, make these sequences all the more powerful.

By September the grape harvest was largely complete and Cesar had decided to fight on with a revived grape boycott. UFW veterans gathered in La Paz and got their assignments before fanning out across the country. Farmworkers acclimated to the heat of California's

Central Valley would soon be buffeted by winter winds in Chicago and Detroit on sidewalks outside Safeway stores. These planning meetings at La Paz and the dispersal to the boycott cities are the final scenes in the film.

But in that September of 1973 there was no film, only thousands of feet of raw footage and sound. I had begun attempting to edit the footage with the simplest of equipment at La Paz. It soon became obvious to me that my editing experience was as inadequate as the equipment.

A chance encounter on a strike picket line with Frank Greer, a media consultant and organizer, led me to Bob Dalva, a USC-trained filmmaker who was then head of Francis Ford Coppola's Zoetrope Studios' commercial division in San Francisco. Dalva gave me unlimited access to the proper editing equipment in his offices and, more important, helped me learn the language of film editing. He regularly reviewed my work and made suggestions that constantly improved it. Greer and his partner, Karen Ohmans, facilitated the transition by giving me and my family—Susan, Noah (3), and Rebecca (7 months, born the month before the strike began)—living space in their San Francisco home for free, always an important consideration to the union. We lived with them and I edited in Dalva's studio at Zoetrope each day and many nights.

Cesar was well known for holding critical work close at La Paz, so his approval of my request to move to San Francisco to edit the film was no small concession. It was very wise. If he had required me to stay in La Paz, with my inadequate equipment and experience and with no mentor to help me, I doubt the film would have ever been finished. Certainly I could not have finished it under those conditions. And without Dalva's help it would not have been the film it is.

In my enthusiastic naïveté, I had promised Cesar the film would be finished in a matter of weeks following the strike's conclusion. When that deadline passed I promised delivery by the end of the year (1973). Those weeks and months passed quickly and the editing process was barely under way. At each new deadline there was progress, but each time what was most apparent was that the film needed more work.

This was all due to my inexperience in film editing and my lack of understanding of the scope of the work before me. This must have caused Cesar some problems. The union was in a fight for its life and this film was badly needed to support the struggle. And its delivery was repeatedly being postponed. There must have been people urging a variety of draconian solutions—kill the project, put someone else in charge of it—pressures I was insulated from by distance from La Paz and, I believe, by Cesar. If my assumptions here are correct, I owe Cesar a great debt for protecting me from these demands and permitting me to finish the film.

In the meantime I finished a short, simple version—*Why We Boycott*—to support the boycott activity around the country. I returned to La Paz every couple of months for

screenings of the full film in its developing editions, usually before the union's executive board. Each of those screenings revealed shortcomings—deficiencies that I imagine increased the pressure on Cesar to make some change in the project's direction. Each time he sent me back for further editing.

The film *Fighting For Our Lives* was finally delivered in the winter of 1974-75, about a year after I had initially promised it. It runs about an hour. I can remember the final approval screening vividly, because when the lights went on, Cesar came over to me, obviously moved, and said, "You did it, brother."

Of course it was soon a staple of the UFW's boycott and organizing efforts and has been shown and broadcast all around the country. The union had the contacts in Hollywood to arrange screenings there, and it was nominated for an Academy Award in the documentary feature category and won a top prize at the Grenoble Film Festival in France.

The Man Who Skied Down Everest, a Japanese film, won the Oscar.