

Bob Thompson 1972–1978

I pulled down an old suitcase from the top shelf of the closet the other day. The bumper stickers on it urged one to boycott lettuce and grapes and support the United Farm Workers, AFL-CIO. The suitcase had traveled with me during my six years with the UFW and contained a jumble of newspaper clippings, leaflets, stickers (the boycott Gallo kind that seemed to appear everywhere by magic), and letters that traced out a path from Colorado to La Paz and back with later stops in Atlanta, La Paz, and Salinas. It seemed like the logical place to start.

I was a walk-on. During my two years with the Colorado Migrant Council as a VISTA volunteer, I became friends with the organizers of the Dicho y Hecho lettuce strike in Colorado in 1970. They were farmworkers and others who had fought on the side of the Office of Economic Opportunity in the poverty wars. The poverty warriors had tired of the OEO under Nixon and wanted to make a real change in workers' lives. Magdalena "Len" Avila had spent time with the UFW in California in 1971 and was back to organize an office in Alamosa, Colorado, for the 1972 lettuce harvest with Mel Finerman. After a year with the Forest Service, I wanted to get back into the movement. I hooked up with Len, who needed an office manager. The office was a drafty old building across from the railroad freight station.

We spent the summer of 1972 collecting dues, organizing a local cutting crew for Finerman, debating Jack Angell of the American Farm Bureau, selling buttons, and handing out dispatches. We also took a trip to Phoenix to support Cesar, who was fasting in opposition to the Farm Bureau's idea of a farm labor law. He was already very weak and his body barely moved as he spoke softly to us for five minutes from his bed.

As the fall passed, winter snows approached, and the ground froze to rock. Len told me that California was closing our office. We could continue, but without any money, or we could go to California, keep working, and get \$5 a week. He and the others decided to stay but suggested I would learn a lot by going. "Just don't forget about Colorado," they said. I told them not to worry.

In early December I left Colorado in my VW squareback packed with what I owned to travel to La Paz. By the time I got to Flagstaff, Arizona, it was dark, the snow was knee deep and falling in blinding clouds. The wind from the blizzard howled around as I tried to sleep in the back of my car at a truck stop. By sunrise the storm had subsided. As I rolled west out of the mountains toward California, the snow melted away and I took off the chains. By the time I hit the desert, there was no sign of the storm.

It was late Saturday night when I pulled up to the guard shack in La Paz. It was cold, wet, and foggy. After some confusion at the gate about a guy from Colorado that no one knew about, the guards let me through. I took a room in the hospital, where somehow Dolores Huerta found me. She decided that I was going to be a perfect replacement for Nancy

Kleiber, who had departed to work on the Jerry Pollock campaign in Arizona—Hit the Road, Jack. I was going to be assistant to Richard Chavez, who was in charge of the field offices.

My first day in La Paz was bright and sunny. After a night in the hospital, I wandered up to the administration building the next day to look around. Suddenly Cesar, the dogs, and the bodyguards burst out of the main meeting room. He was past me and out the door before I knew what had happened. He appeared to have fully recovered from the fast.

Dolores sent me to Delano to learn about the field office and hiring hall. Barbara Macri, a petite but powerfully energetic woman from Pittsburgh, ran the hall. She tied her hair back with a blue bandana in a way that said, “Don’t mess with me.” She got right to the point: the grape growers and the contractors were not rolling over just because the union had negotiated historic contracts. In the fields, the battle over the hearts of the farmworkers continued every day. Growers were using their old labor contractors to hire workers and refusing to use the hiring hall. If caught they would send the employees in to the hall to get dispatches. Frequently, these workers didn’t have seniority at that ranch or hadn’t paid their dues. Both of these situations could cause a problem and the growers knew it. This was part of Barbara’s everyday life in the window at the hall. That and dealing with fake green cards, as well as the other issues confronted by people on the economic edge.

With every day a new adventure, it was Christmas Eve before I realized it. Jessica Govea asked me where I was going to spend the holiday. I hadn’t thought about it. Before I could explain more, she had me lined up to spend the evening and next day with her family in Bakersfield. That evening, I spent with the Goveas making and eating food in their kitchen. Their warmth and generosity reminded me of the farmworkers I had lived and worked with in Colorado. The people in the union were a family. They accepted me without question because I was there to contribute to their dream of a farmworker union. It didn’t matter where I had come from, what school I had gone to, whether I had new clothes or old. They were willing to give from their hearts. I saw this over and over again from coast to coast. These were people who were committed to something much bigger than themselves and willing to share with those who joined in their dream.

Richard and I shared a 10- by 12-foot office with two desks, a couple of filing cabinets, and two phones that seemed to ring constantly. One morning during my first week, I picked up the phone and the voice demanded to know if Richard was there. As a good administrative assistant, I inquired as to the caller’s identity. “His brother” was the reply. I managed to utter, “Oh,” and told Richard that Cesar was on the line. He wanted to see Richard right away in his office. Richard told me to come along to “take notes.” It was my first time in Cesar’s little corner office and I spent the first few minutes of the meeting just looking around at the pictures, books, and the German shepherd, either Boycott or Huelga.

I don’t remember the original reason for the meeting, probably some field office problem. But it was clear that the two brothers differed on how to deal with it. Quickly the

difference turned into a full-blown profane argument, with Cesar yelling at Richard that he should stop letting Dolores tell him what to do. Richard was yelling back that his involvement with Dolores was none of Cesar's business. I hadn't managed to take many notes up to that point and they were talking so fast, I wasn't sure even what to write down. Before I could put pen to paper, Richard was on his feet, took both arms and swept most everything on Cesar's desk onto the floor. He kicked the wooden folding chair out of his way and left. I sat quietly for a moment and then slipped out in the midst of the commotion and went back to the office to look for Richard. He had disappeared. When he returned about five days later, we picked up work as if nothing had happened.

Cesar was many different things to many different people. To some he was a religious figure, walking on water preaching Gandhi's message of nonviolence. To others, he was a poor farmworker who had persevered over many obstacles to form a union. To others, he was a charismatic leader who would finally bring justice to the fields, and to still others, he was a demonic zealot who would cause the destruction of the American family farm. Later I saw him as a teacher who motivated by example and a man who committed his life to an idea. At that moment, I saw him as a human with all the good and bad traits carried by all of us. He too had anger, pettiness, and a temper.

I worked with Richard through the early part of the 1973 grape strike, commuting from La Paz down to the picket lines at J. J. Kovacevich's ranch south of Lamont. "Johnny's" ranch had early peaches as well as grapes. At sunrise of the first morning of the strike we were out on the road with the ranch committee and the workers. There was no one in the fields. I thought things were looking good. Then a line of pickups, buses, and sheriff's cars came driving up through the picket line and into the orchards. A labor contractor from Bakersfield had rounded up anybody who was willing to work. There were regular farmworkers who had to work or didn't like the union. There were also a large group of winos who were rumored to have been bused up from Los Angeles. In any event, no amount of flag waving, chanting, cajoling, reasoning, or arguing brought those people out of the fields. The picket line then became a job. Hot, dry work standing on the side of the road, punctuated with moments of interchange with some workers picking near the road or a crew moving to a new orchard. All day trucks with bins full of peaches came out of the orchard, all under the watchful eye of the Kern County sheriff's deputies.

Cesar asked me to organize a strike back in Colorado to slow the lettuce harvest of the Mel Finerman Company. Along with Len Avila and other UFW local supporters, we staged a strike in June and July. One day, picketing a lettuce harvesting crew north of Monte Vista, someone came up with the idea of using mirrors. The next day everyone on the picket line had a small hand mirror, which we used to shine the sunlight into the workers' eyes. We thought it was a marvelous nonviolent tactic and it did seem to slow the harvest. After about five minutes, the local sheriff approached me and said that we had a choice, put the mirrors away or everybody was going to jail. The mirrors went into our pockets. With the end of the summer came the end of the strike. Most of the California strikers were going out on the boycott. I was sent to Atlanta.

The boycott was a state of mind. While living in a big city where everyone else was going about its business of working, playing, raising families, and paying bills, the boycotter was on a mission to rid the city of its nonunion grapes and lettuce. It was far more than a job, it was the reason for getting up every morning. That and the early morning WATTS line call from Boycott Central in La Paz. The boycott was the fight between the good of the farmworkers and the evil of the grocery chain, an extension of the heartless, soulless corporate America.

The focus was to build the picket lines for the weekends when most people shopped. This meant going to meetings with whoever would listen to our presentation or buy our buttons and bumper stickers. And then calling. Calling from endless handwritten sign-up sheets or scraps of papers with people's names and numbers, frequently written in illegible script. This was before answering machines, so the result of dialing was either a voice or endless ringing. When the voice came on it was our job to convince that person that the picket line would not succeed unless he or she personally attended for as many hours as possible. These calls were made almost every night of the week up to Thursday. Then the reminder calls would begin. Don't forget, this Saturday, the Colonial Market on 14th, 10:30. No, no, we have signs and leaflets; just wear comfortable shoes and warm clothes.

To some the boycott was the beginning of the revolution. The people with this vision usually belonged to groups like the Socialist Workers Party, the October League, or the Revolutionary Vanguard. These folks loved to come to the picket lines. Frequently they brought their own signs with slogans like "Free George Jackson," "Death to the Capitalist Pigs," and "Up the Revolution." Working on the boycott meant encouraging the revolutionaries' energetic participation while keeping their political agendas off the table.

This state of mind was punctuated with momentous events. The bishop in Birmingham graciously granted an audience to discuss how the church could help the farmworkers, while reminding me that Bruno was a strong supporter of the church and that boycotting his chain of stores might be the wrong way to make our point. One time, an elegantly dressed woman approached our picket line after parking her expensive sedan in a no-parking zone. After I asked her if she could help farmworkers by not shopping at this store, she exclaimed that she was on her way to a party and just had to pick up a few items. I handed her our leaflet with a picture of the four poor farmworker kids sitting on the dirty farm labor camp stoop and asked her if she couldn't find another store just down the street. "This doesn't help the niggers, does it?" she asked. "Well ma'am, it helps the poor farmworkers." was the only thing I could think to say. "Well then, OK," she said and walked quickly back to her car and drove off.

One especially busy Saturday, the supermarket we were picketing ran out of shopping carts. A crowd gathered inside the front door waiting for carts. The store manager, aggravated by the problem and our picket line, gathered up a train of shopping carts from the parking lot. Using the downhill run from the lot to the front door of the store, he gathered a good head

of steam, intending to run me over with the carts as I stood by the door handing out leaflets to prospective customers. Although my head was turned away from him, I caught the motion out of the corner of my eye and heard the rattle of the metal carts as they came flying out of the lot. At the last minute, like a toreador, I stepped aside and let the rushing carts fly by. Their momentum carried them past me, and they crashed directly into the front door of the store. Customers standing on the other side of the door patiently waiting for carts were knocked aside by the door flying open and a runaway train of shopping carts.

In an effort to expand the boycott's reach, I was assigned to scout out a store in a middle-class African-American neighborhood on a Sunday afternoon. I had one sign and a ream of leaflets. I didn't have high expectations because our picketing at stores in middle- and upper-income areas had been mostly unsuccessful. As people drove up and saw me and then drove away without even parking, I began to realize this Sunday was going to be different. The few people who actually stopped to park would approach the store more to find out what was going on than to shop. After a couple of hours, only a few customers had entered the store. Dozens of people had talked with me, taken leaflets, wished me good luck, and left the parking lot without groceries. They told me of their time walking picket lines and asking people to boycott stores during the days of Jim Crow. Clearly, boycotts and the fight for social justice didn't begin or end with the farmworkers. We were part of a continual process of one generation teaching another.

In 1974 Cesar brought me back to California to work with him on maintaining the field offices. During the nine-month period I worked on this assignment, I drove more than 45,000 miles. There was always a fire to be put out or forms to be distributed or collected. One day Cesar told me that I should go to Yuma because there was a wildcat strike in the lettuce at Mel Finerman. I explained that I didn't know the first thing about how to deal with a wildcat strike. Besides, I had a problem with my car and thus no way to get to Yuma. Cesar gave me that paternal look and asked whether I would be able to get to Yuma if my girlfriend was waiting there for me. "Of course," I replied. "So go talk to the mechanics," he said.

With the passage of the Agricultural Labor Relations Act, I moved to Salinas and began work with the legal department. The summer of 1975 witnessed a whirlwind of farmworker organizing in preparation for the first government-run elections for farmworkers to determine whether they wanted to be represented by a union. I didn't realize at the time that winning the elections was only the first step in a long process. Unfair labor practice charges, objections to election results, hearings, and other legal maneuverings frequently followed.

I worked mostly on the antitrust lawsuit against the Teamsters and about 110 vegetable growers that arose out of the contracts signed between them in 1970. Our job was to copy and evaluate thousands of pages of grower and Teamster records. In addition, we had to provide thousands of pages of UFW records to the growers for their inspection. We

worked out of a storefront across from the Greyhound station. The work seemed isolated from the rest of the union. Eventually, it produced a few needles of information from the haystack of paper that helped forge a deal to get the Teamsters out of the fields.

Meanwhile, elections were held, unfair labor practice charges filed, and hearings held. In one of these hearings I was assisting Jerry Goldman, a labor lawyer from Los Angeles who was sent by the United AutoWorkers to help. I was learning by doing. In some cases I was doing and only later trying to figure out what I learned. In this hearing, Roy Mendoza was representing the local Teamsters union. For some reason Jerry had to take the witness stand to testify about some event that had occurred before the election. He had given me a set of questions to ask him. This part went as planned. Then Roy got to cross-examine him. Roy really got into it. After Roy asked his tenth question Jerry looked over at me. When he saw my blank face, Jerry calmly responded to Roy, "I object." Roy looked at the hearing officer and said, "He can't object, he's the witness." The hearing officer was looking at Jerry, Jerry was looking at me, and I finally said, "Yeah, I object too." The hearing officer turned to me and said, "On what grounds?" When it became clear that the answer wasn't on the tip of my tongue, Jerry chimed in, "On relevance, of course." I agreed.

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Hey, mister

I need a beer,
cut the chalk taste in my mouth, erase the ache.
Camacho's sandpaper coffee scrapes my temples.
I need a drink to mend my soul.

Why did I get on the bus?
Bouncing, stale bodies and sweat,
washed by the already warm 5:00 am Valley air, dusty sulfur.
Come on buddy, pick peaches today, 27 cents a lug, good price.
Better than the dumpsters and pop bottles.

Red flags, bull horns and cop cars meant trouble.
I slide lower, *buelga, buelga*, rock exploded windshield,
tall tan shirts chasing pickets, billys swinging.
The bus roars through the gate, deep into the orchard,
leaving the ruckus behind.

Vamonos, trae sus escaleras, andale.
Ladder dragging down the row, picking bag hanging.
The sun's treacherous heat comes early, 108 today.

I thirst for white port, shade of east Bakersfield.
Estos arboles aqui, boracho, pendejo!

The first bag fills fast - a good tree, thick with big peaches. Soon, the ladder is falling
harder, the fruit thin and small.

The sun roaring overhead, a baloney sandwich
lunch that costs 6 lugs, cuts into my will.

At the fence, a young woman, sweet brown innocence, a flag,

“Heh mister, won’t you help us, join the strike.”

Soft darkness of her eyes urge flight. Mama’s eyes.

Those eyes.

My vision is cut short by Chato, Camacho’s fat kid.

Get to work, back by the bus.

“Heh, brother don’t work for Camacho. He treats you like dirt.

You don’t want to be a scab, help us get a better life.”

Those eyes.

I return to the bus.

Sleep rides the bus back to town.

\$12.42 for a body of pain.

Come back, first picking, you will make more tomorrow.

I try to say no, but only my mind responds.

To those eyes.