

## Carol Schoenbrunn Lambiase 1973–1979

When I arrived in Delano in May of 1973, the parking lot at Forty Acres was filled with cars weighted down with the worldly goods of farmworker families leaving for the boycott. Clothes, toys, bedding, and food were packed in and on top of every conceivable space. Those cars soon left for cities all across the country, and many stayed far longer than they ever imagined they would. I was impressed, but I was a stranger who really had no conception or understanding of the vast level of organization and determination to fight for justice and dignity that drove these workers and their families to take the struggle out on the road. But that was soon to change.

My destination was the future sight of the Agbayani Village, over on the northeastern side of the Forty Acres. There I met Tina Solinas's uncle, George Solinas, who was a carpenter (and had the all-important contractor's license), Dave Philp, a carpenter who had lived in Three Rivers, Clyde Golden, a former boycott supporter from New York City, Chris Braga, a Pilipino activist, and Herb Aarons, another activist who had worked with Aggie Rose and others in Livingston on the Gallo campaign.

In the beginning, Ramona Holguin was in and out. She had worked with architect Luis Pina to donate plans and get the project off the ground. Work had begun in April of 1973.

A huge hole marked the spot on the far side of the Forty Acres where earth was removed and compacted to create a solid underlay for the village buildings. When I arrived, ditches for the foundation had been dug and wooden forms were in the process of being built to contain the concrete that would be poured in a few days, forming the slabs. I had never done this work before. But I joined right in and soon learned the importance of using the transom to make sure the forms were level and the buildings would have square corners, rather than be oblique parallelograms.

I was given a room at Schenley Camp, a former labor camp. The camp consisted of several concrete barracks surrounded by the fields of grapes of what was now White River Farms. The living quarters were no more than a concrete block building with cement floors. It had a central hall with doors at each end and 12-by-12 rooms off each side. Another concrete building housed the kitchen and dining quarters and served double duty as the meeting room. A third building had been recently renovated to provide toilets and showers for women as well as men.

About 10 of the Manongs also lived at Schenley Camp. "Manong" is a term of respect for an elder in Pilipino society, and as original strikers and founders of the UFW, the union Manongs were due this respect. The more I came to know the Manongs and appreciate the collective way they divided up tasks and dealt with problems, the more I felt not just respect but awe.

Although exhausted, frail, and weakened by a lifetime of farm labor, they ran the camp themselves, and each had his own particular job according to his skills and abilities. Tony Armington cooked (and fabulously, too). Another Manong did all the dishes. Another (perhaps Sixto Dulai) got the mail. Another watered the trees. Candido Feliciano did guard duty. Sebastian Sahagun took photographs. Catalino Taclibon helped in any way he could. And as problems arose, the extended Pilipino community arrived at the camp and discussed matters until they had a plan. The richness of their spirit of survival and warmth toward us was in sharp contrast to the sparseness of the camp itself.

When this generation of Pilipinos were brought by labor contractors to the country in the 1920s, there were anti-miscegenation laws that prohibited marriage outside of one's race. And they had brought hardly any women. Thus this entire generation had never married, and the men I lived with had no family to fall back on now that they were retired. Many others lived in rooming houses on the "other side" of the tracks, and most had no car.

Cesar had made a commitment to build a retirement village for those who had no family on the picket line when Paolo Agbayani died. This project was then sponsored by the National Farmworker Service Center, which generously footed the cost of construction with the understanding that the future inhabitants would pay a small rent to eventually pay off the building costs.

As word spread, at first a trickle and then droves of volunteers arrived to augment our small anchor crew on the weekends. Chris Braga coordinated the arrival of volunteer crews from groups such as the Third World Women's Alliance in the Bay Area, or the San Francisco Mime Troupe, who also performed some Luis Valdez *teatro* and taught us juggling. John Gibson coordinated groups of volunteers from the building trades, such as the Chicano Sheetmetal Workers Caucus, who helped to put in all the ductwork, members of the painters' union, the Resilient Floor and Decorative Covering Local Union, and carpenters from L.A., who helped with the installation of the doors.

Severino Manglio, one of the Manongs, and Francisco Garcia, a local farmworker, laid the adobe and built the fireplace. As I recall, the clay tiles were laid by Dave Philp and Clyde Golden, and I coordinated the work of the grouting, using large groups of volunteers for what seemed like an endless number of weekends.

Among the anchor crew of volunteers, we set ourselves up as a work collective, which meant that we expected everyone to shoulder a certain level of responsibility and participate in the decision-making process. This was harder than anyone expected; not everyone *wanted* to participate in the decision-making process. As part of a commitment to affirmative action, which we took very seriously, we encouraged and helped women and people of color to learn construction skills. I learned how to pour a foundation, some rough carpentry and finish work, plumbing, roofing, and other skills too numerous to mention.

The crew expanded as folks came to volunteer for a weekend and then stayed on and became part of the full-time anchor crew. At its height the anchor crew was up to 22. It included the original five I already mentioned, plus Henry Aguilar, Margarita Avila, Daniel Castro, Cheryl Charles, Richard and Sue Cook, Jose Adon Dongallo, Ray Grott, Sherry Higgins, Patty Moore, Daniel Morales, Bob Ream, Martha Reed, Edy Scripps and Catherine Watson, among others. Ben Maddock laid the tile in the corner bathroom, and Bill Kong put in many weekends doing plumbing and the walk-in refrigerator. Barbara Morita helped to coordinate volunteers from the Bay Area.

On Saturday night after the work was done we'd eat Tony Armington's cooking and then have a big meeting at the camp, talking about what was done that day and putting it in the context of the larger struggle. Philip Vera Cruz excelled at this. He would start speaking calmly and then his voice and passion would come to a crescendo as he recounted the history and exploitation of farm labor and the struggle for human dignity. Vera Cruz and others, such as Fred Abad, shared stories of how, after decades of working in farm labor, they were now retiring with nothing, while witnessing the growers increasing their wealth and expanding their holdings across the entire San Joaquin Valley.

Everything on the project, however, wasn't always rosy. But one experience, in particular, showed me the depth of how community, solidarity, and humanity could prevail in the face of autocratic behavior. It was my job to write out everyone's \$5 check at the end of the week. But sometimes the check from La Paz to cover these checks would be late (or deliberately held back, some thought). We did not take kindly to this, and I would call the bank and tell them that the check was on its way and get their permission to go ahead and write the checks. Then I would distribute the checks on time. Anna Puharich (head of the National Farmworker Service Center at the time and quite a type A personality) discovered this bending of the rules and came down to Delano and fired me.

The next day I went to work in the raisins with a farmworker family, but meanwhile the Manongs were very upset at what they considered to be untoward interference in the building of the village.

They held several meetings and decided to picket La Paz if I wasn't rehired. I was quite surprised by this development—it wasn't anything I or anyone else on the anchor crew had asked for or anticipated. A few days later Cesar came down and met with me and I was rehired. It was my first lesson in labor solidarity. I stayed with the project until the village was finished. When the election law went into effect I began working out of the Delano field office as a paralegal.

I stayed with the UFW for four years and then took an indefinite leave of absence in 1979. In that period Cesar had gone to the Philippines and come back with photos of himself riding an elephant with Marcos. Many of the Manongs were highly opposed to martial law in the Philippines and were very incensed at this; some along with Bob Ream picketed the hall in Delano when Dolores Huerta came to speak about the trip. I weathered the Game

but in 1979 decided that it was time for me to leave. I took an indefinite leave of absence, and then Henry Giler, an attorney I had met when he volunteered his time to help the UFW, recruited me to work on a United Electrical Workers (UE) strike of undocumented workers in L.A. I've been working with UE ever since.

But I've often thought about the social movement aspects of the Agbayani Village project and why it was such a success. We saw ourselves as much engaged in construction as in building an alternative society. And unlike much of the organizing I've done, there were immediate tangible results. We were able to put into practice a dedication and love for the heroes of the working class that put enormous meaning in our lives and was one of the richest experiences I've ever had. And I came to understand the power of labor solidarity and the spirit of resistance and why farmworkers volunteered to travel thousands of miles across the country to be part of the boycott.