

Richard Steven Street 1988, 1993

Photographing from the Bullpen on Assignment When Cesar Chavez Ended His Fast at Forty Acres: August 21, 1988

On August 21, 1988, hundreds of photographers from all over the world descended on Delano to photograph the end of yet another of Cesar Chavez's death-defying fasts. At a ceremony in a huge circus tent, surrounded by thousands of farmworkers, supporters, and prominent Hollywood personalities, Chavez was to celebrate mass and break bread with Jesse Jackson, who was then campaigning for the presidency of the United States.

Herded into a bullpen, I and about 70 other still photographers took up positions to the right of the stage behind a rope barrier patrolled by Secret Service agents. For a while we contented ourselves with being led up on stage to take a few pictures behind Jesse Jackson as he addressed the crowd. But by the time Chavez was brought in by way of a back entrance, everyone was hot, soaked in sweat, thirsty, and impatient. With television crews and film photographers occupying an elevated platform behind us, we waited in the front row as late arrivals tried and failed to worm their way into position, saying, "Be cool, be cool." One photographer—with 1930s Leicas and wearing what appeared to be a fedora—was especially adept. Wiggling his way between, around, over and under other photographers, he impressed me as a worm-like individual, apparently adept in such gang-bang situations. Others were not so successful. All around me, photographers who had waited all day and were now tired and on deadline would have nothing of this and replied with "F...off" and "Don't block me." Refusing to give an inch, everyone held position. Several photographers threw elbows and shoved the newcomers aside. A few pushing matches occurred. There was not sympathy for those pleading that they had just stepped of a plane, asking where were they, anyway. When a Secret Service agent walked directly in front of the bullpen, inadvertently blocking the photographers from a perfect shot of Chavez as he was led into the tent, everyone began shouting. "Get out of the way," "Move your ass," and "Move. Move." So loud and angry were the shouts, oaths, and obscenities that the Secret Service agent seemed stunned. Immediately stepping aside, he cleared a line of sight, allowing photographers to take pictures as Chavez made his way to his seat at the front of the tent. Most of us used a 20-mm or 28-mm lens as Cesar passed within a few feet. Later, one agent was overheard exclaiming, "These photographers are animals. I've never experienced anything like this anywhere."

During the course of the service, photographers let loose thousands of strobe shots recording Chavez's every move. Shooting telephoto lenses and pushed film with shutter speeds of 1/250th and higher, every photographer exposed several roles of film, documenting Chavez receiving holy communion, meeting and greeting friends, being assisted by his son, Richard, and seeming to faint and reawaken. When Ethel Kennedy reached over to touch Chavez and placed her hand behind his head to prevent him from fainting, photographers fired off strings of shots. The whirl of motor drives and

photographers reloading cameras continued for perhaps 30 minutes. During this time, photographers never took their eyes from their viewfinders except briefly to wipe the sweat away. Everyone was waiting for a gesture they knew would soon come—the moment that Jesse Jackson cradled Chavez and gave him a small cross made out of grapevine twigs. At that moment, a blinding wave of flashes went off. Within the space of one minute, photographers made thousands of images. They all made exactly the same picture, with the main differences resulting from their choice of lenses and what position they had staked out in the bullpen. Later, I compared my photographs to those taken by Paul Fusco of Magnum, Carl Crawford of the *Fresno Bee*, and Felix Adamo of the *Bakersfield Californian*, who would win a Region Ten NPPA clip contest with his image. We had all taken exactly the same image. That moment when Jackson passed that little cross to Cesar may be the single most photographed instant in the history of the farmworker movement.

The Final Image: 1993

Photographic coverage of the United Farm Workers union probably reached its apogee on April 28 and 29, 1993, when the UFW was at a low point in its history. Weakened by internal union problems and the loss of valuable union leaders who had quit or been driven out and thwarted by the systematic gutting and defiance of the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act, union membership plummeted from well over 100,000 members in 1973 to fewer than 10,000. Withering under the onslaught of a half-dozen crippling court decisions holding the UFW responsible for violence and crop losses and imposing millions of dollars in fines that threatened to bankrupt the union, Cesar Chavez struggled to reverse the decline. But on April 23, while in San Luis, Arizona after testifying for two full days as part of a long, drawn-out legal battle with Salinas Valley lettuce grower Bruce Church Co., Cesar died, apparently worn out by his many death-defying fasts and nonstop schedule. But when he died, his hopes and aspirations, and his union and the farmworker cause did not die with him. These continued in the UFW, and among *campesinos* and *campesinas*, and large numbers of supporters inside and outside agriculture, in California, in Mexico, and across the United States.

Such was the shock and genuine outpouring of grief that his funeral in Delano six days later became the greatest media event in UFW and farmworker history. Every photographer who had ever covered the union, and many more who had not, arrived the day before the funeral, when Cesar lay in a small building at Forty Acres. Present all day, I greeted one friend after another, including a Los Angeles photographer whom I had just worked with in Haiti. As thousands of union members, friends, and admirers filed past the coffin to pay their last respects, UFW officials would periodically invite in one or two photographers. Brought in by UFW guards whom I took to be Delancey Street members, the photographers were each given two or three minutes to take the last pictures of Chavez. Every photographer took essentially the same shot of Chavez, or some variation on it, as he lay in the simple pine casket constructed by his brother, Richard. But several images did stand out. As an old man lifted his grandchild to his shoulder so that the child could see Chavez, one photographer caught the moment. Another captured elderly

farmworker women in black shawls reciting their rosaries. And so it went. Even in death, Chavez commanded respect and remained photogenic.

So large was the clot of photographers that it took three hours for all of the mourners and photographers to pass through. Determined not to be rushed, I wanted to take the very last and very best picture of Cesar. To do so, I had arrived with some very sophisticated, battery-powered strobes and soft boxes. Having used the equipment on countless occasions to make beautiful color portraits of in extremely difficult circumstances, I decided that the best way to approach the challenge of photographing Cesar in his coffin was to wait until the very last moment, when all the photographers had finished their work, the last mourners were paying their respects, and I could spend more than the allotted five minutes with Cesar, and do so with minimal interference, given my determination to use the same lighting equipment I would use to photograph the CEO of a Fortune 500 company or the president of the United States.

As the afternoon wore on, it grew uncomfortably warm, and I began to wither in the heat. Forty Acres was packed with people from all over the country, so I decided to stroll around and look for some drinking water. While listening to a *cantollanista* singing beautiful songs of the farmworker movement, I encountered *Bakersfield Californian* photographer Felix Adamo. Striking up a conversation, we both agreed that the afternoon had an odd feeling to it. There was a great sense of sadness and loss. Elderly union members were crying, and some were quite distraught. Veteran union members had pulled their children out of school and driven across country to be present. There was the lingering question of what would happen to the UFW, to *La Causa*. But there was also a feeling of reunion and solidarity. The oddest facet was the commercial activities. "It surprised me to see vendors hawking T-shirts, caps, pins, books, flags, and everything else," Felix later wrote to me. "I realized the UFW was raising funds for their cause, but it struck me as rather strange. But it was nice to see many of the older people, some of whom had actually marched with Cesar, had come to the funeral to pay their last respects to a man who had made their lives and working conditions better."

Late in the afternoon, as the line of mourners trickled to an end, I tucked in behind a group of elderly women dressed in black shawls and carrying rosary beads and a young *campesino* in a T-shirt carrying his three-year old boy on his shoulder. Working very slowly, I set up my strobe and soft box, made a test flash, took a meter reading, stood somewhat precariously on a folding steel chair so that I could look slightly down on Cesar, and waited.

As a historian, I was determined not to miss a chance to record history. As a photographer, I wanted to take the very best photograph possible. As a human being, I wanted to respect the man and the moment. All of these goals were in conflict. I kept thinking about the photographers present at Malcolm X's and Martin Luther King's funerals, and how important it was for later generations to have those pictures. The only way to accomplish that goal was to work as slowly and quietly as possible.

I'm not sure the Delancey Street guards understood what I was doing. Had Dolores Huerta been there, she would have instantly recognized my gringo face from our hundreds of encounters over the years and simply smiled and gone about her business. But I had never seen these guards before and they had no idea that I had been photographing the union for 18 years, was familiar to most union members, and had many adventures to recount, ranging from the time in the Imperial Valley a Mario Saikhon Inc. office manager became enraged when I entered his office to photograph fired broccoli workers and tried to throw me through a plate glass window to the moment at the end of a long day during the H.P. Metzler peach pickers strike near Del Rey that Dolores Huerta almost choked to death on a fish bone at 2 a.m. in the Reedley Perkos restaurant while I was interviewing her.

Thinking I was disrespecting Cesar, the guards tried to hurry me out. At one point I thought we might get into a tussle. But as I balanced for 20 minutes on that chair waiting for each picture to happen, they seemed to loosen up and understand that I was not out for a cheap shot, that I was not a hit-and-run photographer. I took my last photograph as the last woman passed by the casket. A minute later the coffin lid was closed. I had taken the final image of Cesar.

One day later, with thousands people packing into Delano, even more photographers were present. Up before sunrise, I went over to the huge tent, where the funeral services were being held. Victor Alemán, who had once been the UFW's official photographer, was busy rigging a remotely controlled, motor-driven camera on a cross bar above the stage where the casket would lay. With a wide-angle lens, the camera would be a kind of eye of God, with a view of the ceremonies that no human could match. Lacking that kind of access, I realized that the funeral service would be the usual hot, sweaty affair, with photographers squirming for position. I walked the grounds and made some mental notes about the best sites, but was certain they would be taken and that I would have to improvise. As the morning wore on, however, I quickly realized that the most dramatic shots would not come from the funeral service, where it would be impossible to capture the scene, but from the funeral procession as it moved through Delano on the way to Forty Acres.

My hunch was confirmed around midmorning, as more than 30,000 people poured into the streets to march behind a group of celebrities, union members, and politicians carrying Cesar's casket through the streets of Delano toward Forty Acres. With the sun behind them and hundreds of vividly colorful backlit banners and union flags, they were a sight to behold as they filled the street and paraded across town. All around the casket, photographers maneuvered for shots of Jesse Jackson, Edward James Olmos, Luis Valdez, Willie Brown, Martin Sheen, the Kennedy clan, and other pallbearers, only to be chased off by UFW guards. Commandeering an alfalfa loader, I climbed to the top along with Mexican photographer Lydia Nieto del Rio. When the operator raised the bundle scoop to a height of 30 feet, we had a clear view the length of the procession, which stretched east for several miles, and proceeded to take telephoto shots of the march. Later, when I learned that the Mexican-American owner of the machine had parked at that point along

the procession hoping to help photographers get their shots, I found evidence of just how deeply photographic consciousness had worked itself into the farmworker consciousness.

At the funeral service, hundreds of photographers ringed the altar. Next to me was KGO-TV's Rigo Chacon, whom I had last seen and photographed 14 years earlier during the March on Salinas, Magnum photographer Paul Fusco, whom I had seen on and off at farmworker events for more than a decade, and Gorge Ballis, who had been photographing in the fields since the 1950s. As priests moved up and down the aisles, and dignitaries and old friends filed in for the mass, photographers kept up a steady stream of strobes. They illuminated every move, every expression, every tear, every gesture. They photographed Cesar's grandchildren placing a UFW eagle and short-handled hoe on the altar, Dolores Huerta eulogizing the man she had worked with over four decades, and Luis Valdez announcing, "You shall never die." At the height of the service, when Cardinal Roger Mahony gave his blessing and offered sympathies from the pope, Alemán used his remote device to trigger the camera he had planted above the casket. And then, just as suddenly as they had converged on Delano, the photographers went their separate ways. But they left with memories and images of an event the likes of which will never again be seen.