

John A. Kouns 1966

In 1958, I returned to the Bay Area, and I changed my plans to return to New York when a job opened up at United Press International. After two years with UPI, I quit and started over 30 years of freelance photography. This arrangement provided me the time to photograph socially significant issues that interested me: the Civil Rights movement, the organizing of farmworkers, the anti-war peace movement, and the problems of the aging. Freelancing for food and documenting for the soul.

I grew up in the Santa Clara Valley, “the Valley of Heart’s Delight,” in the early 1940s. I was aware of and worked in agriculture at a very early age. You could see it, smell it, and feel it. Taking off in any direction from the center of San Jose, you would very soon come upon an orchard.

In 1961, I went to Tulare County in the Visalia area. I found a place to stay at the Linnell Farm Labor Camp, where I set up a darkroom in my Quonset hut. I met Sandy Robbins, California Migrant Ministry Worker, and joined the group in visiting farm labor camps and photographing some of their activities. I was able to do a photo series on cotton picking before I returned to the Bay Area at the end of the summer.

In January 1966, I drove my VW Bug to Delano and found Filipino Hall, where the farmworkers held their union meetings. I stayed at the Gray House off and on for two months, slept on the floor, and had meals at Filipino Hall while doing some picket duty and some photography, sometimes topping off the day with a few beers at Peoples Bar.

Later in 1966, I initiated the idea of “Guerilla Camera.” I was trying to develop new ways to present my photographs of farmworkers, outside the gallery. I wanted my photographs to directly help the cause. The shows were portable, permanently mounted on pans with removable stands (for the farmworker show, the photos were mounted on prune drying trays). The exhibit was then carried on a rented trailer to various locations such as supermarkets, schoolyards, labor halls, colleges, churches, libraries, etc. My goal was to encourage the community to support the union, the grape strike, and the boycott.

From March 17, 1966, St. Patrick’s Day, to April 1, Easter Sunday, there was a walk from Delano to Sacramento, about 300 miles, which took 25 days. I walked the entire *peregrinación*. I was one of the 50 *originales*.

The photographs from this rich experience were used as the source to start Guerilla Camera. During the grape strike, more than 20 exhibits were set up to support the union. I have continued to support the UFW for 40 years. Over these years, I have, on my own, gone to Delano, Florida, Salinas, Coachella, and other places to photograph farmworkers and their determination to unionize. My support will continue even when I am unable to tote a camera.

Viva La Causa.

(Kathleen Lawrence was the copy editor for this essay)