

La Paz UFW Headquarters 1969

Even as early as 1968, Cesar Chavez talked to me about finding a union headquarters outside of Delano.

He said the “ideal” place could also serve as a vacation area for farmworker families, especially those members of the union who were elected to ranch committees. I found a place in Santa Barbara—one of Cesar’s favorite places in the world—and we went to look at. It was on a hill overlooking the city and the ocean but it was too fancy a neighborhood for our needs. Then there were a few hundred acres I found on the side of a hill overlooking the ocean, but the terrain was quite steep and it was bare ground. I looked around in the area of Mission San Antonio because Cesar loved to come there for some of our retreat meetings—it was quiet and secluded. I could find nothing.

I found “La Paz” in Keene, California, a few miles down the mountain from Tehachapi, and Cesar Chavez wanted it. Frank Denison, our Service Center attorney at that time, structured the deal with movie producer, Edie Lewis, who bought it at auction from Kern County on behalf of the National Farm Worker’s Service Center.

It suited Cesar’s purposes. There was a wide range of housing (duplexes, hospital rooms, single family homes, etc.), there were offices, there was a central kitchen and dining facility, it had acreage, it was in the mountains, and was off the beaten track.

I take whatever credit is appropriate for the purchase of this property for the headquarters of the union and I was a most loyal supporter, but I still wonder if our relocation from Delano to Keene (renamed La Paz by Cesar) was wise. I think a case could be made that this remote headquarters isolated us from the farmworkers’ dirt and changed our orientation. But now that it is Cesar’s burial place it will serve a purpose in history that outstrips any second-guessing on my part about what was best for the farmworker union movement. Cesar Chavez has the last word, again!