

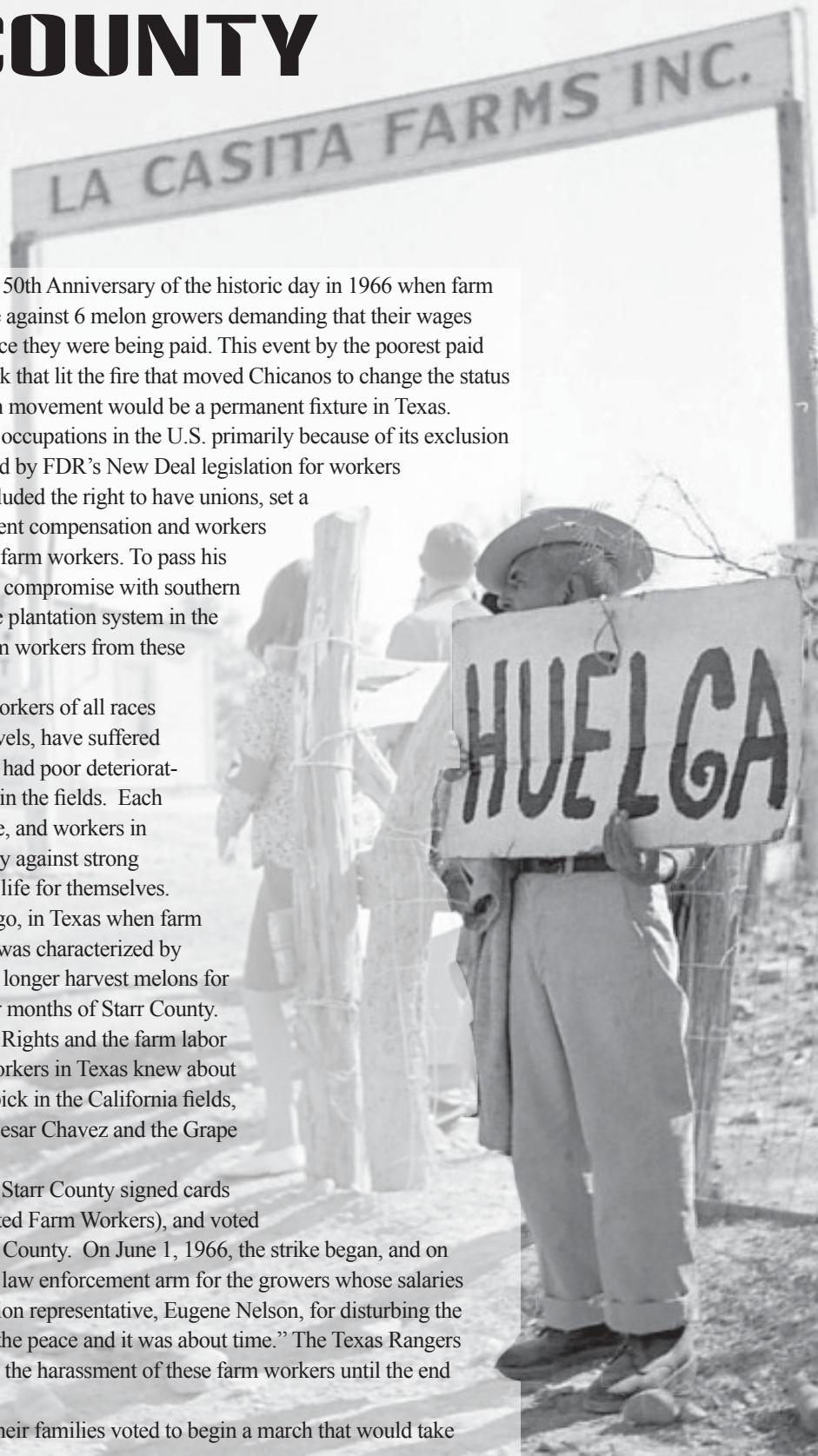
50TH ANNIVERSARY MELON PICKERS STRIKE OF STARR COUNTY

On June 1, 2016, Texas will celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the historic day in 1966 when farm workers in Starr County launched a strike against 6 melon growers demanding that their wages be raised from the 40cents-an-hour pittance they were being paid. This event by the poorest paid workers in the state of Texas was the spark that lit the fire that moved Chicanos to change the status quo. It insured that the farm worker union movement would be a permanent fixture in Texas. Farm labor has been one of the least paid occupations in the U.S. primarily because of its exclusion from protective legislation that was passed by FDR's New Deal legislation for workers in industrial jobs. This protection that included the right to have unions, set a minimum wage, allowed for unemployment compensation and workers compensation, was denied specifically to farm workers. To pass his New Deal legislation, FDR was forced to compromise with southern Congressmen who wanted to preserve the plantation system in the south, and exclude African American farm workers from these protections.

For that decision, millions of farm workers of all races have lived at the bottom of the income levels, have suffered dire poverty during off seasons, and have had poor deteriorating health because of disabling accidents in the fields. Each state in this country has a farm labor force, and workers in each state have had to forge their own way against strong Farm Bureau opposition to make a better life for themselves. This began to change in 1966, 50 years ago, in Texas when farm workers in Starr County, a county which was characterized by stark poverty, decided that they would no longer harvest melons for 40cents an hour in the hot humid summer months of Starr County. The country was in the midst of the Civil Rights and the farm labor movement in Delano, California. Farmworkers in Texas knew about Delano because many would migrate to pick in the California fields, and they brought back the stories about Cesar Chavez and the Grape Strike of 1965.

In April 1966, 1000 farm workers in Starr County signed cards with the IWA (the predecessor of the United Farm Workers), and voted to strike against 6 melon growers in Starr County. On June 1, 1966, the strike began, and on that very first day, the Texas Rangers, the law enforcement arm for the growers whose salaries were paid with our taxes, arrested the Union representative, Eugene Nelson, for disturbing the peace. I say, "Hell yes he was disturbing the peace and it was about time." The Texas Rangers and the local Sheriff's deputies continued the harassment of these farm workers until the end of the melon season in mid-June.

On July 4, 1966, farm workers and their families voted to begin a march that would take

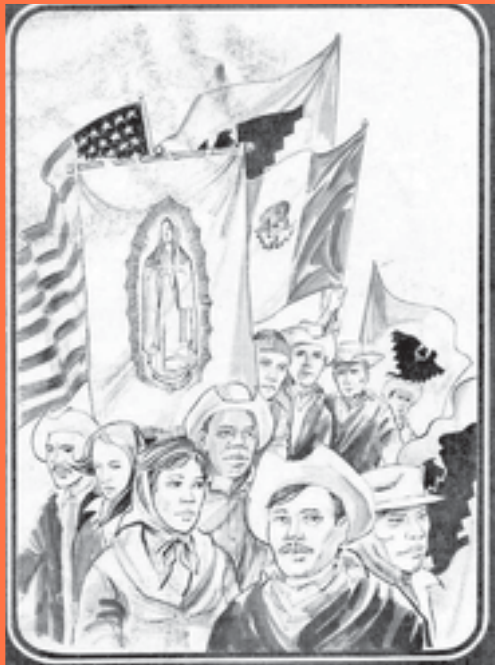




Rebecca Flores of the UFW has organized the 50th anniversary commemoration of the Melon Pickers March and Strike.



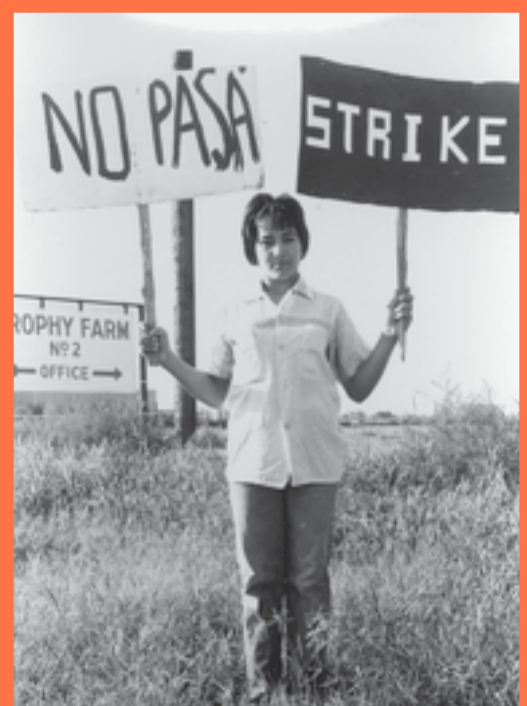
The workers in Rio Grande voted to join their Independent Workers Association with the National Farm Workers Association, led by Cesar Chavez. Then in August, 1966, the NFWA merged with the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee to form a new union, the United Farm Workers, AFL-CIO.



An unidentified artist depicted La Marcha that thousands joined along the way from the Valley to Austin ending on Labor Day, 1966. Over 15,000 people had joined the 400 mile Marcha by the final day.



August 31, 1966: Texas Governor John Connally, Attorney General Waggoner Carr, and Speaker Ben Barnes met up with marchers near New Braunfels to tell them to go back—that Connally would not be at the Capitol on their arrival, and that he would not call for a special session for establishing a Texas Minimum Wage Law of \$1.25. (Pictured are Connally, Barnes and Catholic priest Antonio Gonzalez.)



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 them from Rio Grande City to Austin, Texas, to demand that the State legislature pass a Texas Minimum Wage law and set it at \$1.25. At that time Texas did not have a Minimum Wage Law; although the federal minimum wage was \$1.25. They marched through the valley and town after town through South Texas and garnered public attention through the media. Because of those thousands of steps on the dusty hot roads of Texas, people woke up along the way and witnessed up close their determination, their daily personal sacrifices, their humiliation by Governor Connally in New Braunfels and took it to heart. People across Texas decided that they also would take up this struggle and change the status quo.

This historic event 50 years ago by unassuming farm workers from Starr County has been untold in history books. The events that will be held in 2016 throughout Texas, starting with the June 1st event in Rio Grande City, are a first step in telling this story that is important to Chicanos and to all Texans who fight for equality every day.



Marchers with signs that state, in the front: “Justicia para el condado Estrella”/”Justice for Starr County” and behind, “Huelga”/”Strike.



The six major growers in Starr County included La Casita Farms, Griffen & Brand (aka Trophy Farms), Starr Farms (aka Los Puertos Plantations), Sun-Tex Farms, Margo Farms, and Elmore & Stahl.

HUELGA!

Over 400 workers voted to go on strike against the melon growers of Starr County on June 1, 1966. Many workers immediately sought work outside the strike zone. Others began their yearly migrations to other states, leaving a month earlier than usual. The growers immediately began recruiting strikebreakers in Mexico. And wages began going up, as La Casita announced a new wage of \$1 an hour and other growers began paying 70 cents or 80 cents an hour. Over 80% of the work force quit the first day, and every packing shed in the County was shut out.

“The Law” Against the Strike

The Starr County political machine (“New Party”) immediately sided with the growers. The County officials actively tried to break the strike. County employees sprayed union members with insecticide. County cops forcibly pushed workers into the fields, and made threats to keep them there, One District Judge outlawed all picketing.

United We Stand

The workers in Rio Grande voted to join their Independent Workers Association with the National Farm Workers Association, led by César Chavez. Then in August, 1966, the NFWA merged with the Agriculture Workers Organization Committee to form a new union, the United Farm Workers, AFL – CIO. Now all farm workers were united in one strong union, and the movement was gaining strength throughout the nation.

“We Must Let the Whole World Know”

The melon harvest ended in mid-June, with growers blaming their poor harvest on the weather and strikers claiming a partial victory. But no contracts were in sight. The workers decided to make a pilgrimage march, as had been done in California, to dramatize the state and nations the conditions and wages and suffering that farm workers must endure, and to rally support for the cause among other farm workers and sympathizers.

Friends Join Our Cause

As the March wound through South Texas, thousands of farm workers joined in for a mile, a day, a week. Mayors of Roma, Grulla. La Joya, and Edinburg endorsed the demands of the strikers. Bishop Humberto Medeiros greeted the farm workers in San Juan and held a special mass for them in the shrine there. Then the marchers set out for Corpus Christie, San Antonio, and finally Austin. Joining the farm workers were members from almost every union in Texas, religious leaders from all major faiths, and thousands of sympathizers.

La Marcha Ends an Era

La Marcha ended in triumph on Labor Day, 1966. Over 15,000 people joined in the final day. The leaders of the farm workers, Domingo Arredondo, Eugene Nelson, and César Chavez; leaders of the AFL-CIO and unions throughout the state and nation; public servants; Mexican-American groups; and thousands of rank and file workers from every walk of life joined in that final glorious day.

The March did not win any contracts, or even state passage of a \$1.25 minimum wage. But it ended forever the myth that Mexican-Americans were “happy, contented, satisfied” with second – class citizenship and a life of poverty. Political upsets that fall showed that Mexican-American would no longer blindly accept a corrupt political machine that opposed their interests. Thousands of workers began organizing and joining Unions throughout the State, and the whole labor movement was the beneficiary of this new spirit. La Marcha was symbolic of and contributed to the ever quickening awakening of the Mexican-Americans in Texas. It was symbolic of the end of an era. But the hard task of organizing farm workers of building a democratic Union and a new social order of justice lay ahead.

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