



Don't Cry For Me Babey by Ernest Lowe

Don't Cry For Me Babey



Photographs of California Farm Workers 1960-1966

by Ernest Lowe

Compadre Press
Portage Wisconsin

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Cover photo: Farm Worker's
car in East Mendota , March 21,
1961

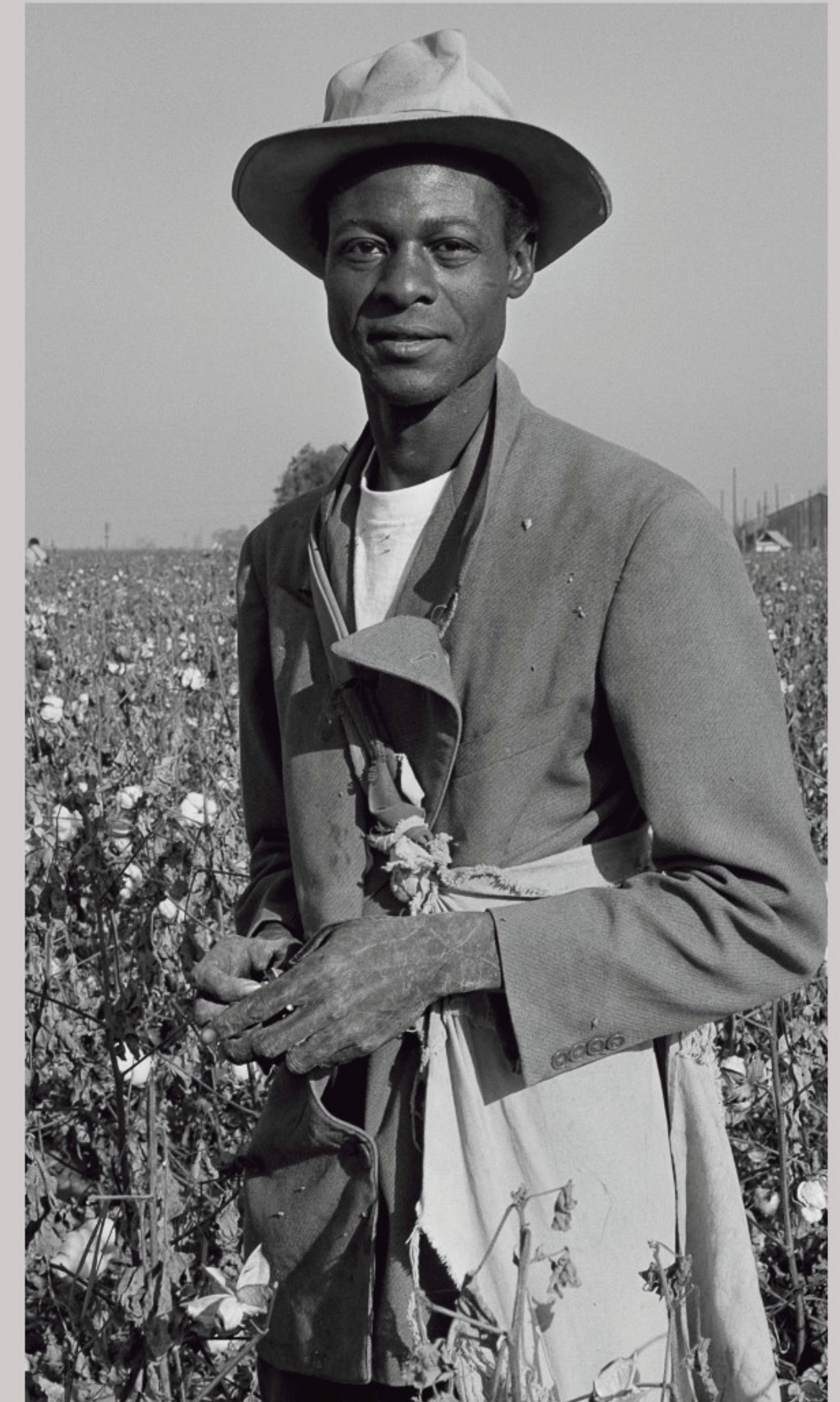
" . . . and about the way the deal
is, when you get a pretty good
car, make payments on it, about
the time you get it paid for and
you think you going to be all
right, down it goes and you got
to have another one."

Anglo woman, Porterville

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"Of all God's material gifts to man, the land is the most precious, the most everlasting. The land should draw men together, not divide them from each other. We are resolved to be united by the work and our love of the land and its wonderful bounty."

Preamble to Resolutions declared by the Agricultural Workers Organizing Conference, December 3, 1961

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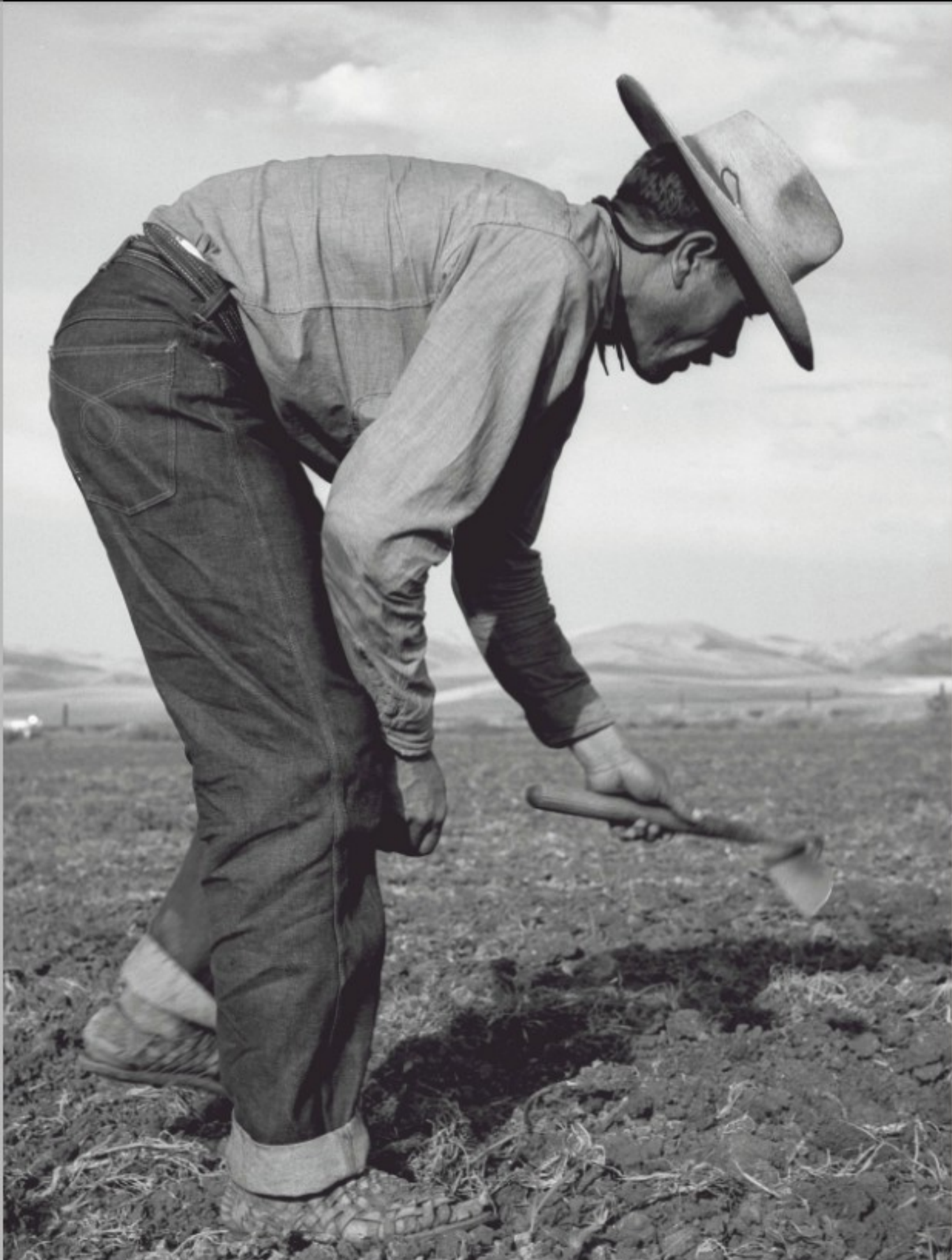
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Bracero thinning a new crop with a short-handled hoe, near Modesto, July 16, 1961



Earth-moving machines till the land, near Corcoran, November 11, 1961

Introduction

From 1960-63 and in 1966 I photographed California's farm workers and interviewed them about their work feeding the nation. Using time off from my work in public radio, I traveled along country roads and visited farm worker camps and communities. I was a freelance activist documentarian, never pretending to objectivity.

I'd just walk up to people in a camp or an orchard and say, "I hear you folks are getting a raw deal. I'd like to take your pictures and talk with you so people back in the city can do something about it" They very seldom turned me down. I documented scenes of dire poverty and backbreaking work, but my photos also revealed the dignity and humanity of these hard-working families and loners. My lens found the spark of beauty that lies within each person along with the tracks they leave in their environment.

I soon discovered that California's farm workers were playing against a stacked deck. Agribusiness corporations operating on huge tracts of land had powerful pull with government agencies, from county to national levels. They could get rivers diverted, lakes drained, dams and canals built, all paid for with public funds. They could get labor legislation excluding farm workers from the minimum wage and workplace protection. Growers could count on sheriffs and mercenaries to deal with "labor unrest", also known as union organizing.

In the Sixties my photos were first used in union events and publications. Then San Francisco's deYoung Museum hosted a major presentation in 1966. *Don't Cry For Me Babey* was a multi-media exhibition with over 200 photos, audio of farm workers voices, a bookcase of government studies, and the contents of an abandoned farm worker's shack.

Concerned about the response of their agribusiness friends, deYoung Board members ordered the Director to cancel the show. Through my network from public radio I informed them that I would organize a city-wide storefront exhibition with signs saying, "Censored by the deYoung Museum". The Board cancelled their cancellation. The show enjoyed an enthusiastic response from visitors and reviewers.

At that time I started work as a producer-director at KQED-TV and had to learn a new craft. I stored my negatives and prints in a closet for over three decades until Matt Herron's Take Stock agency adopted them. They found new life in two independent documentaries broadcast on PBS, another independent documentary, and exhibitions in 2013 and 2018. The images are now archived at the Library of the University of California at Merced.

See the end page for links and references.



Japanese farm workers preparing land for a vineyard on the west side of Fresno County, March 21, 1961



Picking apricots in an orchard near Patterson. July 10, 1961



Four-year old Chicana girl pulling carrots. She was working continuously for the hour I photographed. Salinas Valley, July 1961

Topping onions in a field near Modesto with temperatures above 100 July 11, 1961



"I'll tell you man, people really have to run to make six dollars and that's nine hours, too, and besides, everything costs a lot around here. Yesterday, I worked like hell and I didn't make much; only made six lousy dollars. Picking onions."
Chicano (Mexican-American) man, Stockton

"Well, there's nine-tenths of them carries their kids and them little kids leaving them out there crying. They get out barefooted. I get sorry for 'em. I've seen 'em four years old picking."

Anglo Man, Poplar

Eleven-year old Chicana girl harvesting garlic with her Grandmother Salinas Valley, July 14, 1961





A Bracero on his knees picking strawberries. Salinas Valley July 14, 1961

Braceros competed with domestic workers for agricultural jobs. During World War II growers argued there weren't enough domestic farm workers and they had to have a public program to bring "guest workers" from Mexico. The federal government instituted a program recruiting Braceros ("one who works using his arms") driven by poverty to cross the border and work for wages well below U.S. standards.

Officials looked the other way when the growers provided poor housing and food and when Braceros were used as strikebreakers.

Public pressure finally forced the closure of the program in 1964.

Bracero dumping sack of melons into truck. Coit Ranch, Fresno County July 13, 1961.



California Senator George Murphy, formerly a movie star, defended the back breaking short-handled hoe. He said that Mexicans were genetically suited to farm labor because they were, "built lower to the ground," and it was "easier for them to stoop".

Braceros hoeing sugar beets with short-handled hoes Near Modesto, July 11, 1961





Cotton pickin' by people was on the way out in 1961. Boll weevils drove plantation cotton growers out of the South in the late 30s. The planters found ideal growing conditions in California and pressured the government to engineer huge water projects to irrigate their land. Agribusinessmen, like J.G. Boswell, sent recruiters back to the South to attract skilled Black farm workers to the Central Valley. By 1961 cotton picking machines were harvesting the cotton and eliminating most of their jobs. I took these photos in a cotton field too wet for the machines.

Near Pixley and Teviston, November 11, 1961.



"It takes real skill to pick cotton fibers from the boll quick enough to fill hundred pound sacks we drag along behind.

Black farm worker South Dos Palos



Chicana women fill ten foot long sacks they drag through the field.



A Black woman loads her hundred pound sack of cotton on the scale.

Each picker had to make dozens of trips from the field to the scales and up the ladder to dump their sack of cotton.

"They take out social security every time you take a weighing . . . don't even ask you for your social security number! When he get through I say what are you taking out the social security. That's for the state. Well, how are you going to pay in my social security and don't even know my number?"

Black farm worker, East Mendota



An elder struggled to the top of the ladder with his bulging sack.

"A picker may be so tired he can hardly get up to leave the field, he can't hardly straighten up."
Black farm worker, East Mendota







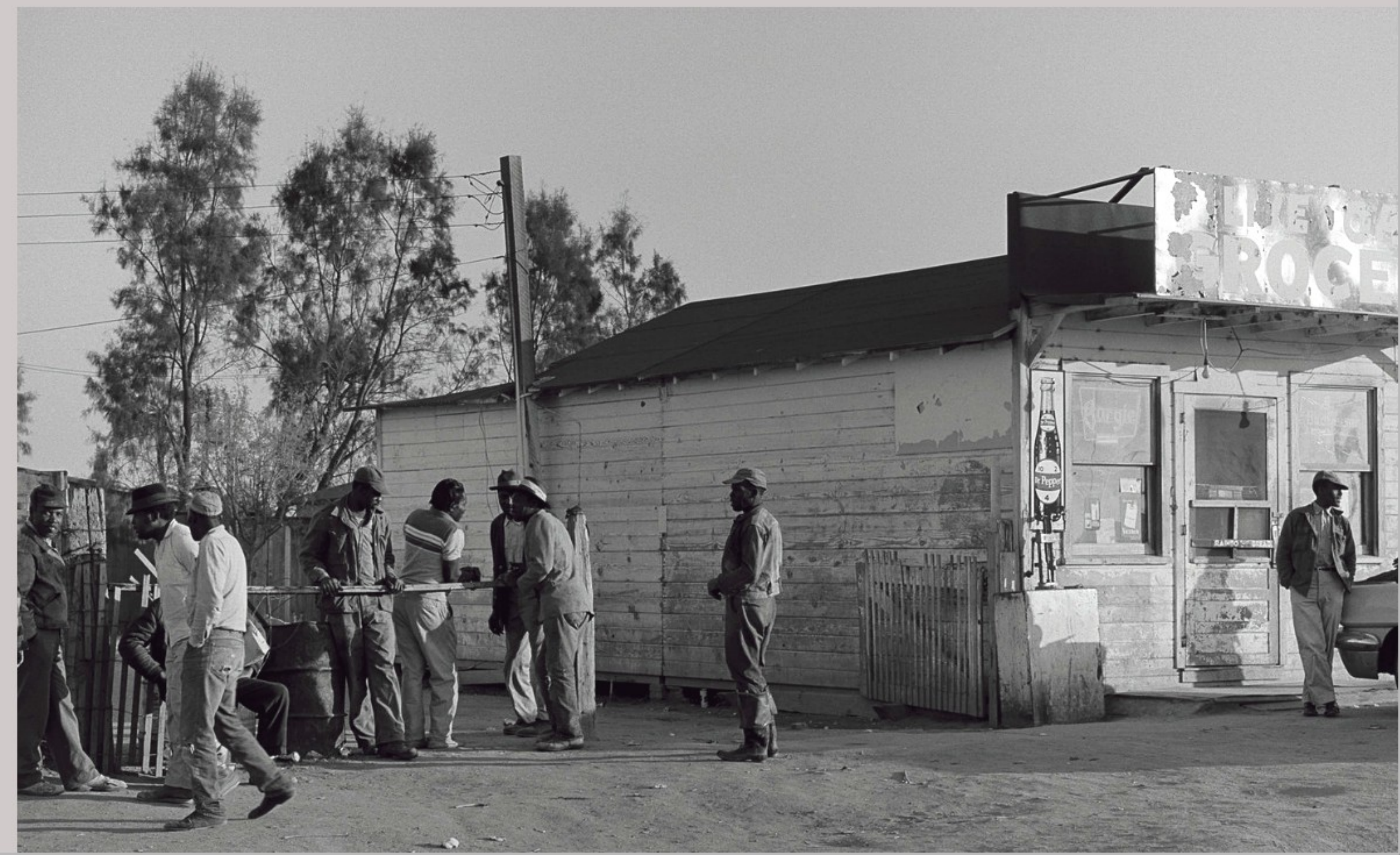
"See, the machines are pickin' most of the cotton. There's just little patches the machine can't get to that the people get to pick."

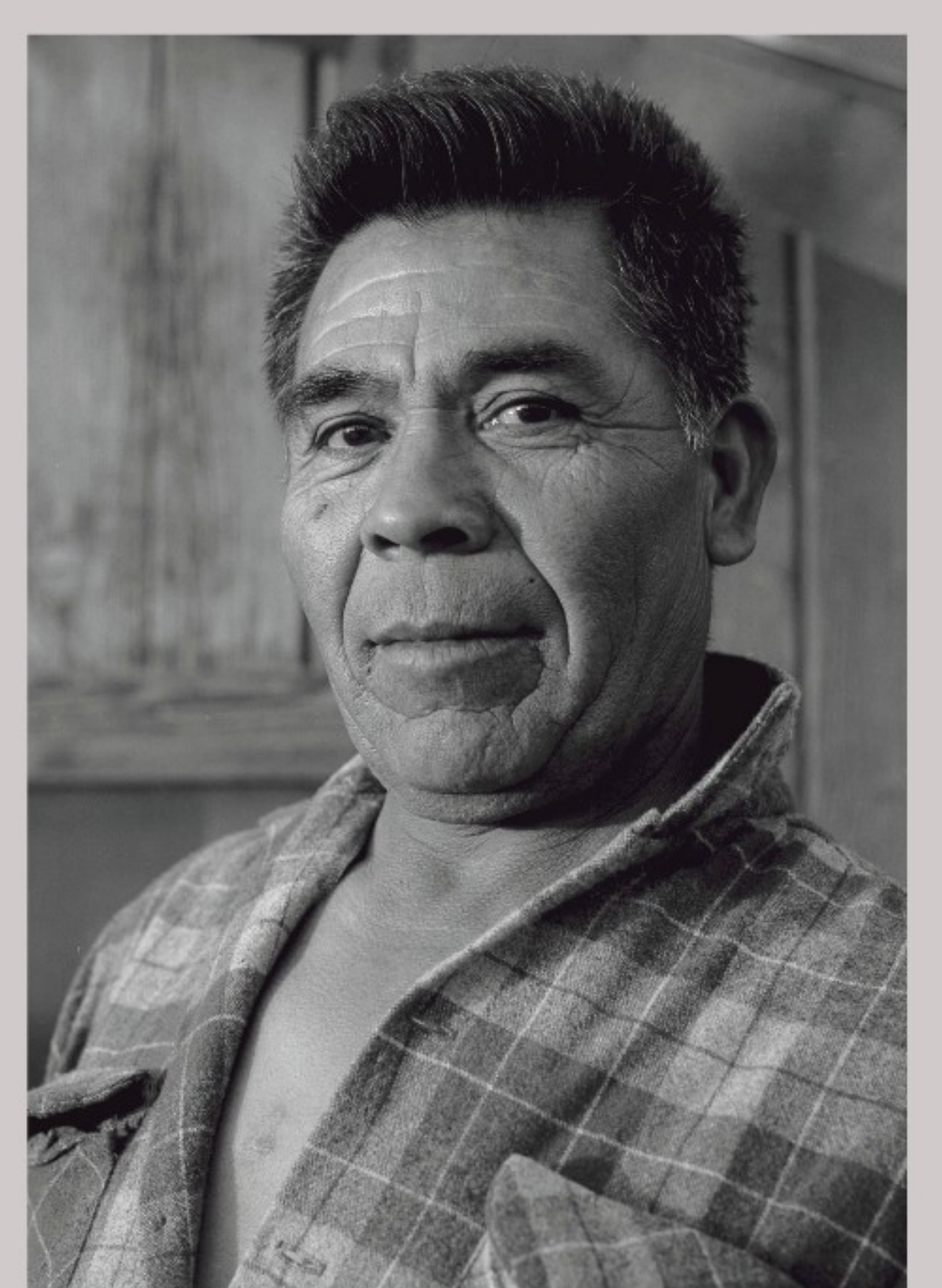
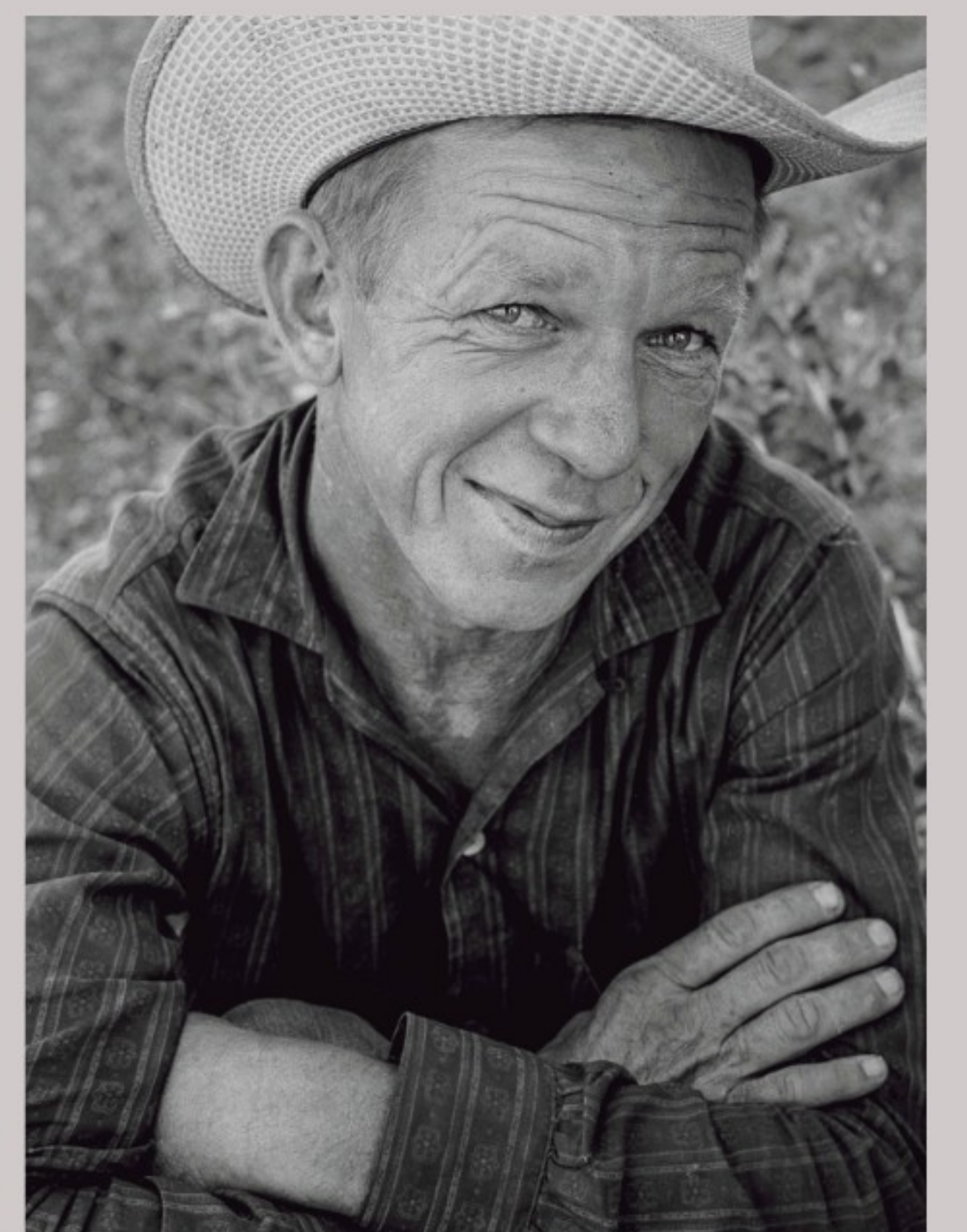
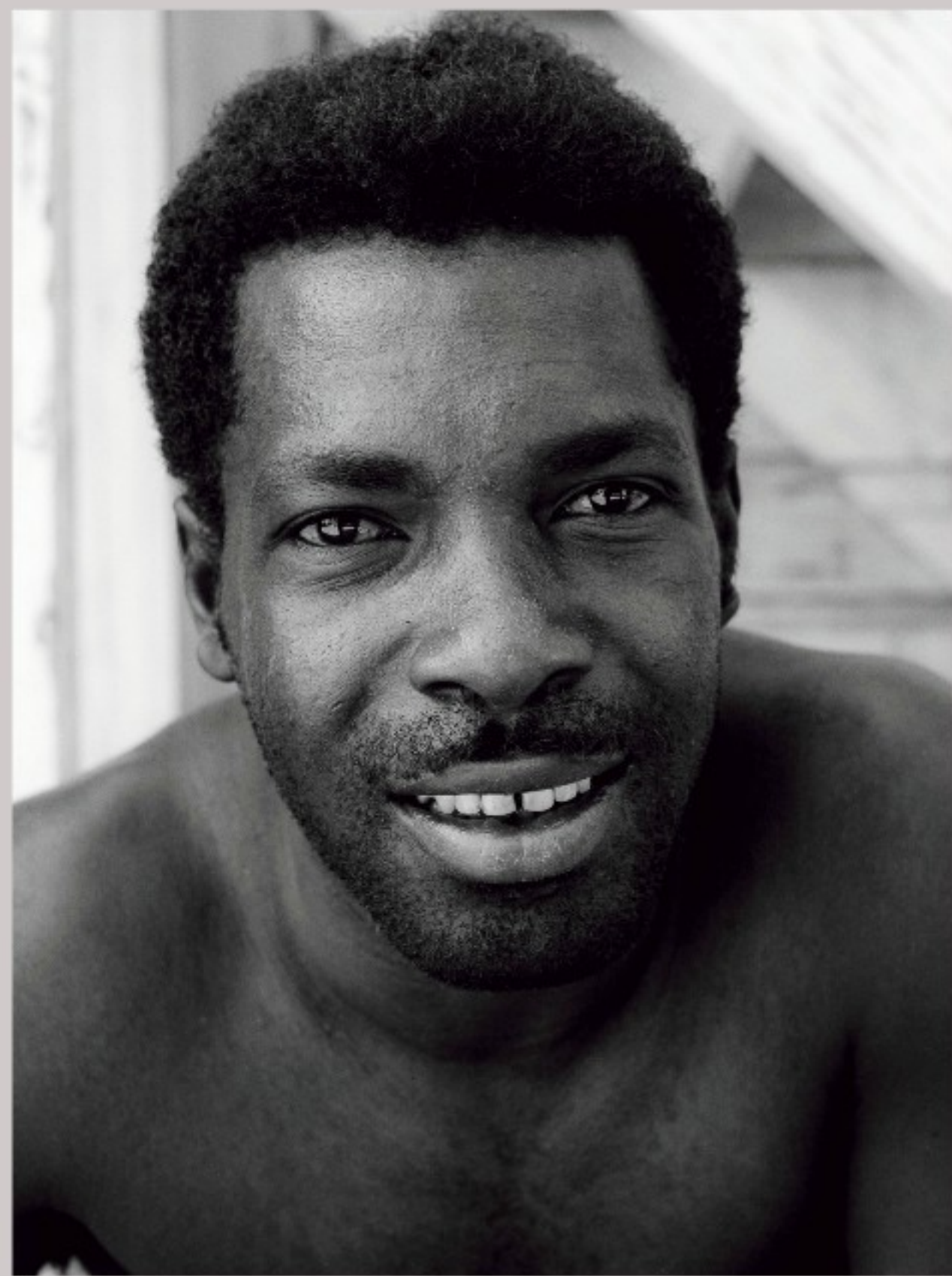
Near Corcoran, November 18, 1961

*"Net income from the San Joaquin Valley's cotton industry was the highest on record in 1964."
Giannini Foundation of Agricultural Economics*



"Well, now, sometimes you work a day, sometimes you don't work nothing. That's how we get our food. If you work a day you can get your money, pickin' a few sacks of cotton, choppin' beets. But sometimes you don't find any. Well, you just come home, you





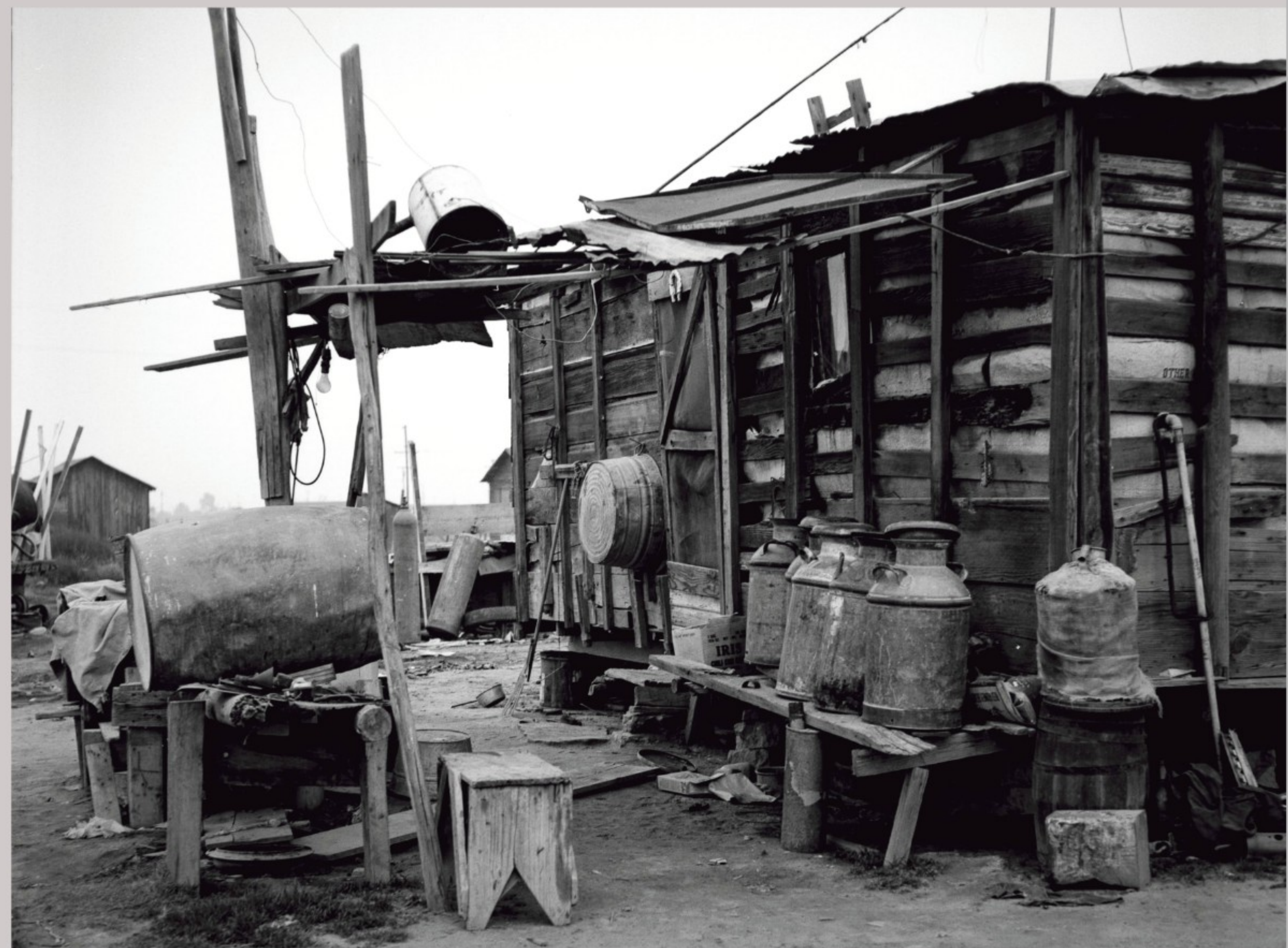
Teviston is one of at least eighteen little-known Black settlements in California's San Joaquin Valley. It is an unincorporated town on Highway 99 between Tulare and Delano, now largely Hispanic. In the Sixties farm workers lived in houses and shacks they had built or moved from farms where the county had condemned them. I photographed in Teviston in 1960-61 and then for two months in 1964.



Mutt and Blanche Jones were building their house from scrap lumber. Teviston, November 20, 1961



Charles Beavers Jr. hauled water three miles from Pixley for his family and others. Shallow well-water in Teviston was alkaline and unfit for drinking, cooking, or gardening. Reverend Daniels looked on. October, 1964



Tubs and milk cans stored household water, cotton filled the cracks in the walls. December 20, 1960



After the storm a homeowner and friend repaired his roof. November 19, 1961

November 19, 1961



A Teviston mother and children pause from doing laundry on their front porch
November 18, 1961

"We never went hungry, though some days we only had tortillas with some sugar on them. We never felt poor."
Ben Beavers Jr.



Sign for fruit stand on Highway 99 near Teviston

People I met in Teviston told stories of how Jim Crow had migrated to the Valley with them: sundown laws, race riots after football games, and threats of lynchings.

Bertha Mae Beavers told her twelve children,
"Just walk on by. Don't stoop to their level."



Ruth Beavers proudly showed me her trophies for winning track events. November, 1964



Lester Perry, October, 1964



Thomas Spencer reviewing the 1964 General Election sample ballot



Mr Spencer's living room
November, 1964

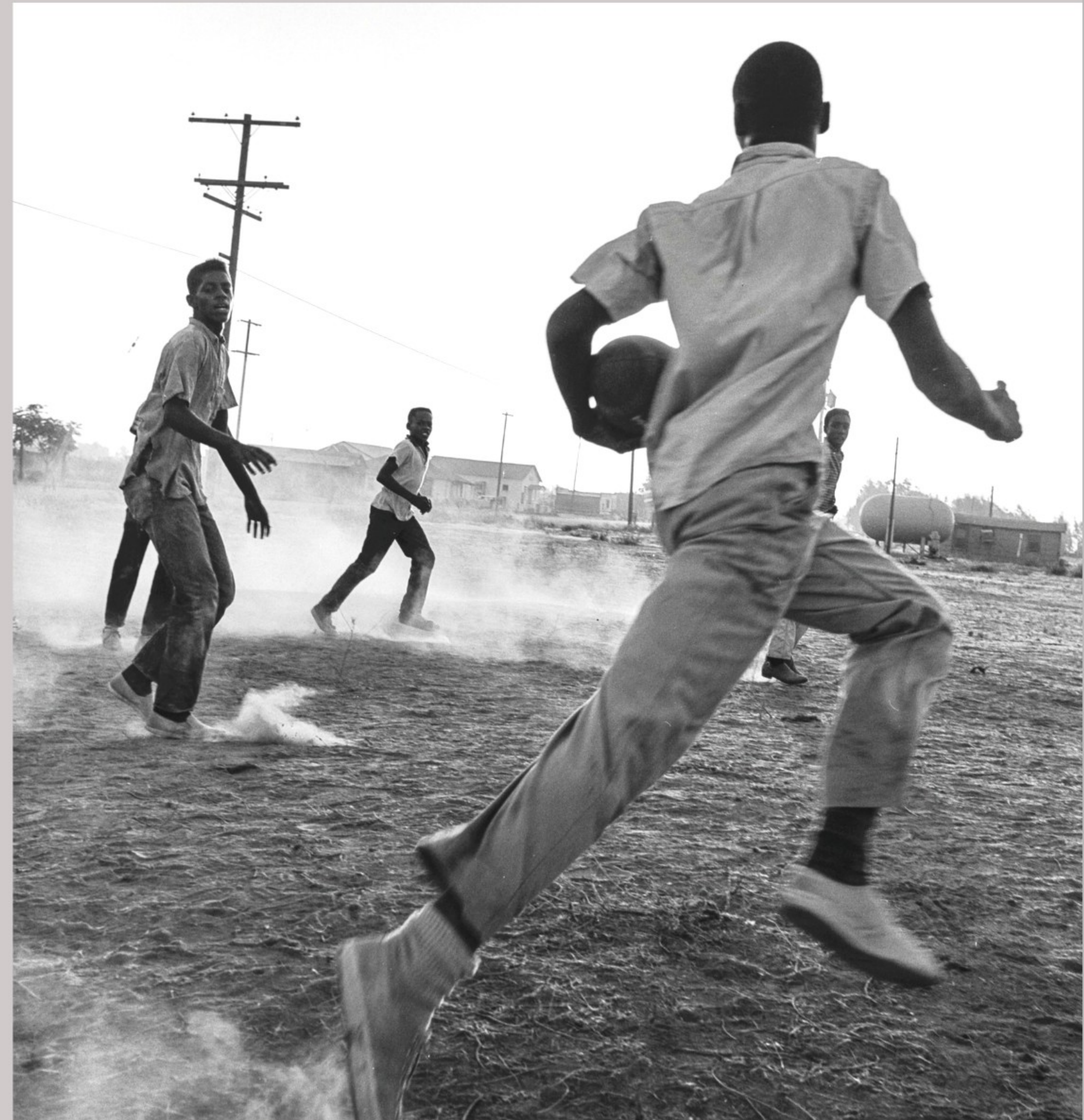


Charles Beavers Sr. lighting the wood stove.

Mr Beavers was a community leader who organized projects for self-help housing and financing a well deep enough to provide potable water. Later he became a minister.
October, 1964



A eucalyptus tree and a piece of rope provided hours of play for the Beavers children and their friends.



Teviston's teenagers named their football field *The Dust Bowl*. Several went on to play college and pro football. Teviston. October. 1964



William McKinley "Buck" Ashmore repaired cars in his backyard shop .
Teviston, October, 1964

Annie Beavers comforts her sister Barbara. Connie Beavers in background.
Teviston, October 1964

I recorded Mr Ashmore's life story. He told me he was born in Palestine, Texas, where he said the town square had a statue of a white man with his foot on a Black man's neck. Buck left with his family when an illiterate friend was found hanging from a tree with a suicide note.

He started his family's migration west through several years, picking cotton in West Texas and Arizona. He then reached California, working first as a picker and then a labor contractor and labor camp owner. He "retired" to work as a backyard mechanic in Teviston.



Cafe in East Mendota, September 21, 1961

Joe's Mercury was a working vehicle, not a toy. Joe Marshall, on the left, Willie Brewster, and Lee Marshall used it to deliver water and produce to families in South Dos Palos, July 12, 1961.



Three Rocks was a western Fresno County settlement of houses condemned as unfit for occupation on a grower's land and moved here by a shady developer. The County finally demolished the settlement a year after I photographed here on March 21, 1961.

"Well, it just ain't no good for anyone to live in, no water, nothing like that. Raymond, he charged 35 dollars I understand for moving the houses in here. And the way he puts it to me, he don't rent the houses, he just leases the land." Anglo Man at Three Rocks



"You go out in the mornings and just look around and go home. They don't have enough work for all of us. They tell you, 'Come tomorrow.' Well, come next day they tell you, 'We don't need you any more, there's too many people.'" Chicana woman, Three Rocks





Anglo child with a tortilla



Washday at Three Rocks



Mother and child, East Mendota, Fresno County, March 21, 1961



Anglo farm worker fixing his car with his children. He worked as an irrigator year-round. Western Fresno County, March 23, 1961



Black teenager on steps of her family's Victorian home.
Stockton, September 3, 1960



Filipino farm worker by the door of a dormitory for single men.
Near Patterson, July 10, 1961



The Wilson family proudly called themselves "fruit tramps", the upper class of farm workers who travel from fruit crop to fruit crop within California, some years to Oregon. They spent the winter in a trailer camp in Porterville, Tulare County, because the orange crop generally gave employment.

I spent a full day with this family in a vineyard picking salvage grapes,



The grower's tractor wouldn't start. Two of the Wilson boys worked with a friend for 30 minutes to fix it.

I took these pictures on a cold foggy day in December, 1960, shortly before Christmas. All five children worked the full day. The Wilsons arrived at the vineyard near Porterville around 7:30 AM. Several grower equipment failures delayed the start of picking. This wasted hour was not credited in their piece rate payment, which amounted to twenty dollars for the day's work of seven people.



The younger boy holding his cutting knife



The youngest Wilson gathered mustard greens for dinner.

"Well, sir, of course, they're seven of us. That little girl is only nine years old. You'd be surprised how much she can make during the summer."
Woody Wilson



Hauling a fifty pound tub of grapes to "Wilson's Wine Wagon"



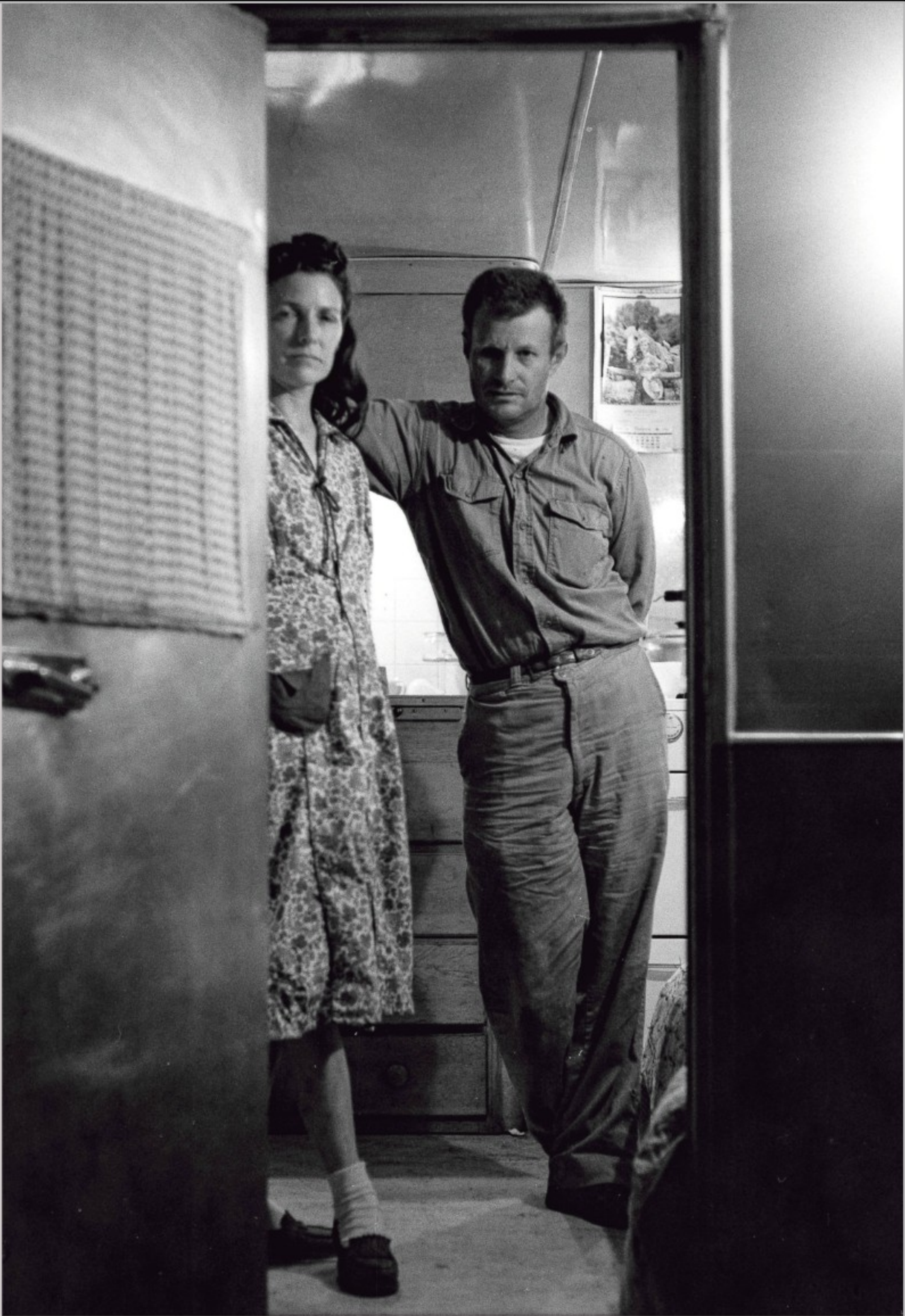
The Wilson's lived frugally, using every square inch of their trailer. They provided their own services, such as hair cuts and car repairs. Their strong family spirit enabled them to endure this crowded migrant home with remarkable grace. They worked together cheerfully at home and in the harvest.

The Wilsons stand out as one of the healthiest and most loving families I've ever met.





Mother Wilson says goodnight to her five children.



"... the seven of us last year, I think we made \$4,100 dollars. Well, that seems like a lot of money, but not when you don't have a house, you got to move from one place to another, you got to tear up an automobile every year, you got payments on a house trailer."

Woody Wilson

\$4,100 in 1961 equals around \$32,000 in 2021, about what two workers at minimum wage would earn today and half the median family income for a family of seven. Clearly the very hard working Wilson family earned poverty level wages, even with all five children working part time.

Growing Farm Worker Unions

Organizing farm workers in California has a long and scarred history, beginning in the late 19th Century. I witnessed only a few years of this struggle in my photos and radio shows. I started a few months after the AFL-CIO funded the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) in mid-1959. From 1959 to 1961 AWOC launched over a hundred strikes throughout California.

AFL-CIO directors were not happy about the legal costs mounting up from these labor struggles, and they pulled the plug on AWOC. But dedicated organizers continued working. On December 2-3, 1961 they convened rank-and-file members in an Agricultural Workers Organizing Conference to form a strategy to save their union.

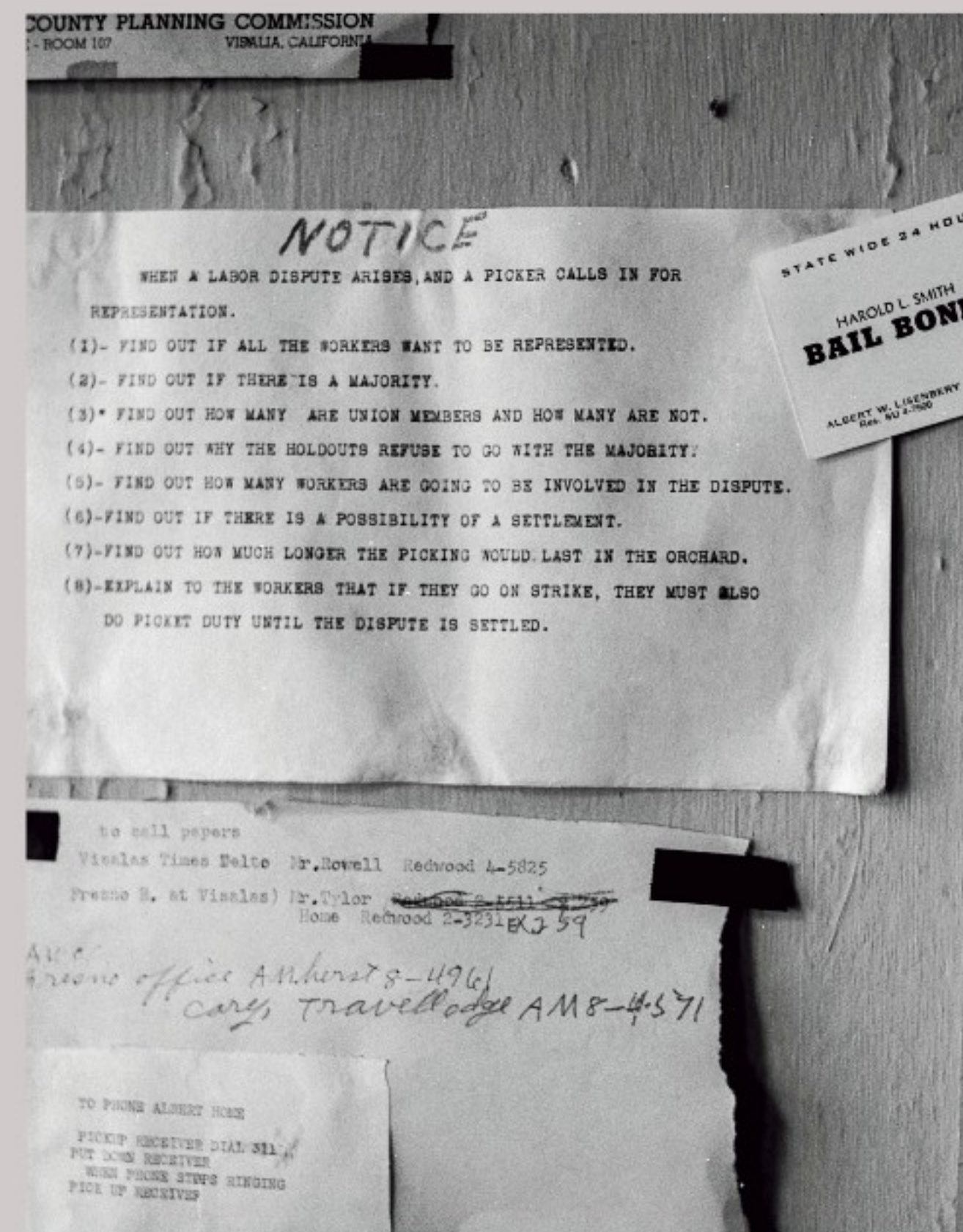
With my camera and tape recorder, I captured the passionate deliberations among Okie, Arkie, Black, Filipino and Mexican American farm workers and their supporters. They elected Maria Moreno, a charismatic organizer, migrant worker, and mother of twelve, to be their official speaker at the national Convention of the AFL-CIO.

Mrs Moreno succeeded in restoring funding for AWOC, but AFL-CIO President George Meany sent in Al Green as Director. He was a bureaucrat who fired outspoken organizers, including Maria Moreno and Research Director Hank Anderson.

Although most AWOC members drifted away, Filipino farm workers under Larry Itliong's militant leadership continued using its name to fight for higher wages

Meanwhile Cesar Chavez launched the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA). He pursued a strategy of grassroots organizing, holding house meetings up and down California. When Filipino AWOC workers walked out on strike against the Delano grape growers in 1965, Chavez and the NFWA joined.

Along with a host of photographers and filmmakers, I documented the strikers' historic 250-mile march from Delano to Sacramento. In 1966 the two unions merged, becoming the United Farm Workers (UFW). Their strike eventually expanded into an international boycott of table grapes, pushing the grape industry to recognize the union and negotiate contracts with California grape workers.

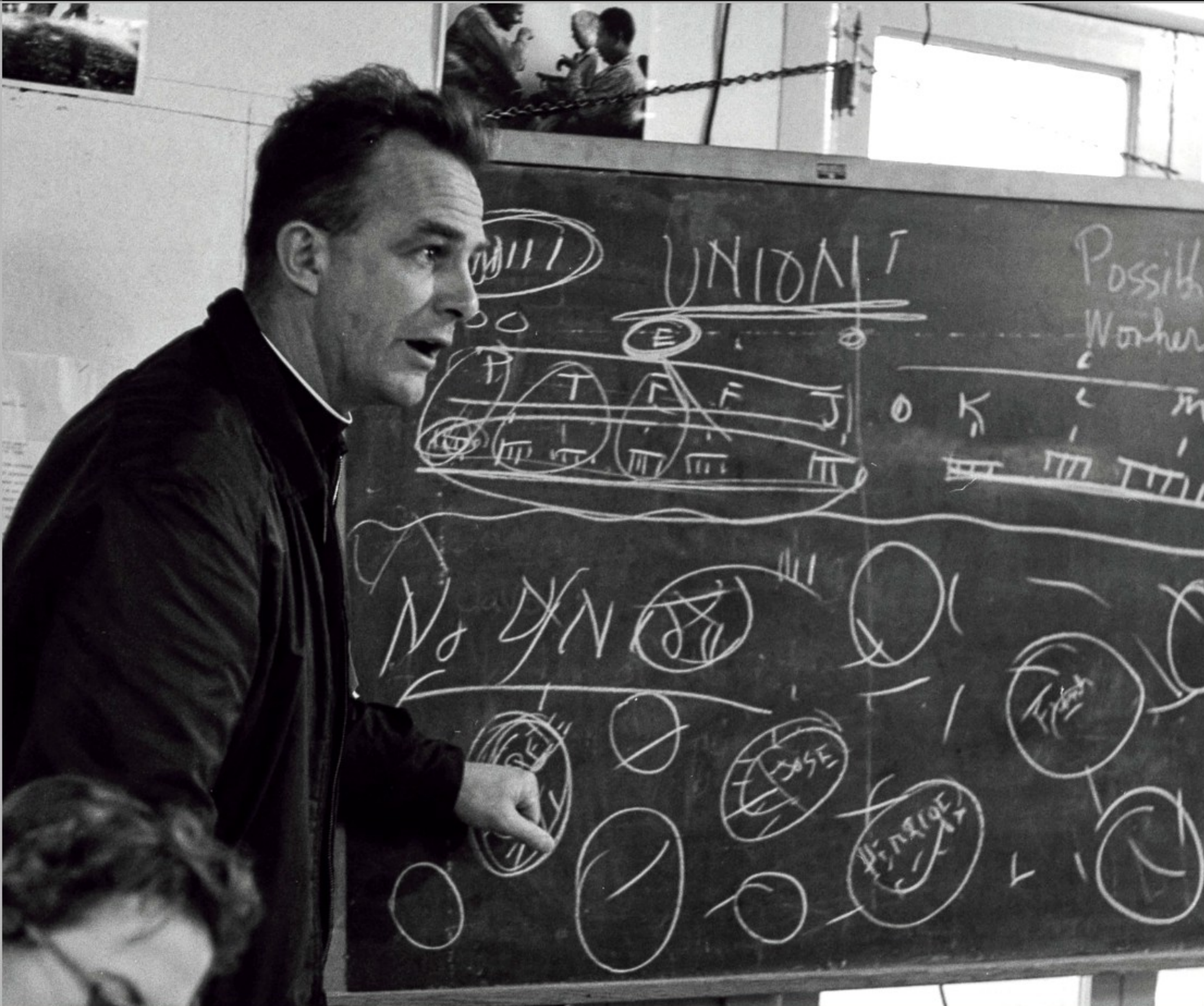


Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee office, Strathmore, California December, 19, 1960



Larry Itliong came from the Philippines in his early 20s and spent decades as a crew leader of Filipino farm workers. Prevented by anti-miscegenation laws from marrying non-Asians, and by immigration laws from bringing Filipino wives to the States, Filipino farm workers lived and worked in tight-knit teams. This unity empowered their collective action in calling the 1965 grape strike.

"If we are going to have an organization, we have to suffer some hardships," organizer Larry Itliong insisted to AWOOC members. "If we set our hearts to this job, then through our willingness, understanding, and efforts, we will succeed."



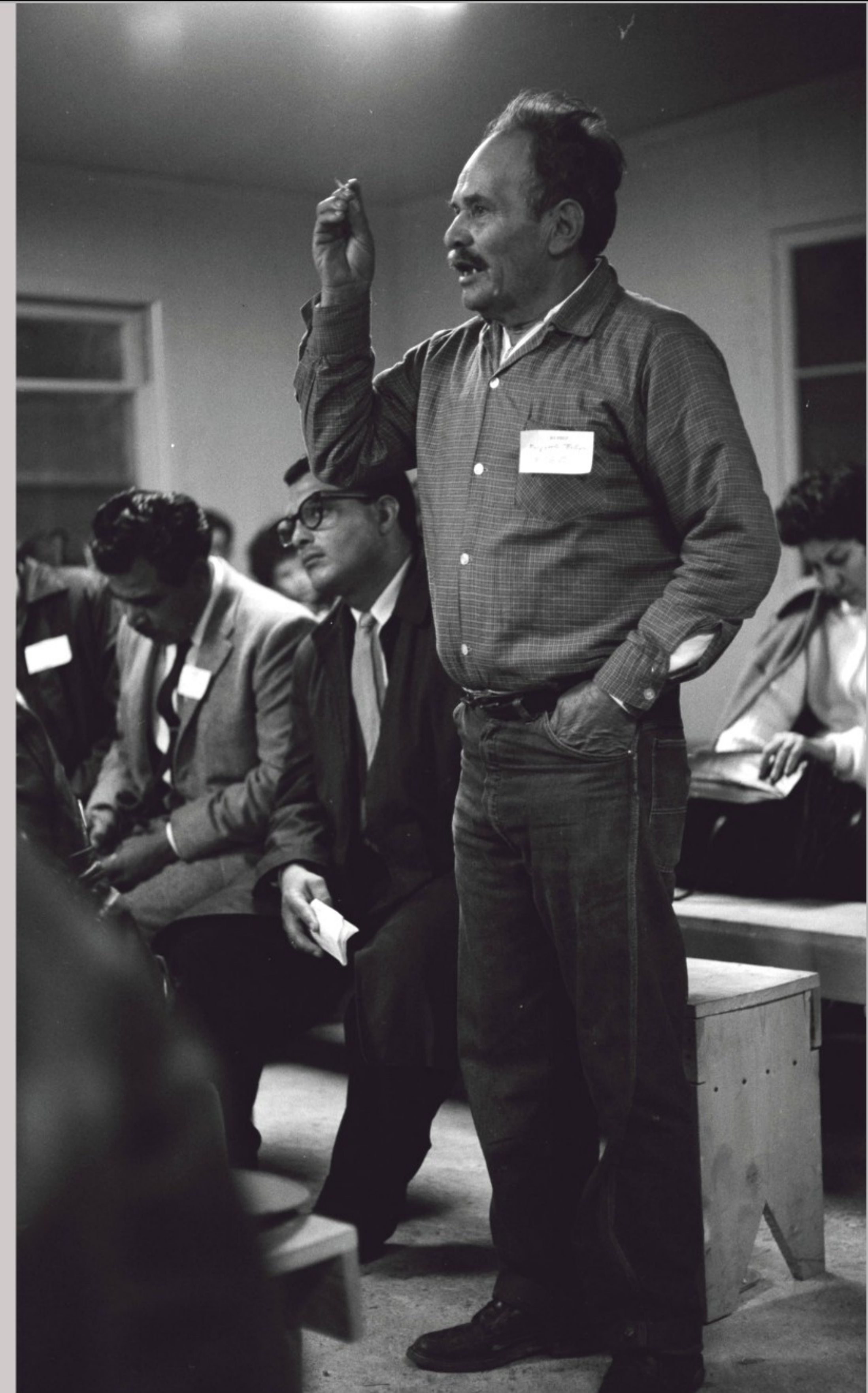
Father Thomas McCullough described house meeting organizing at the Strathmore conference.

"The union is possible. It's possible and it can be done and the workers have to do it. Suppose Pete talks with four or five other men. And Pete has around him his five fellows. And Enrique, here's his five fellows. Then say there are twenty fellows, each representing five. You group together in these groups. Say you have a council of ten fellows to decide. Each has the confidence of five fellows, each can say, I have a constituency."

"Like a little raindrop in the cloud, a little mist, it becomes a big raindrop."

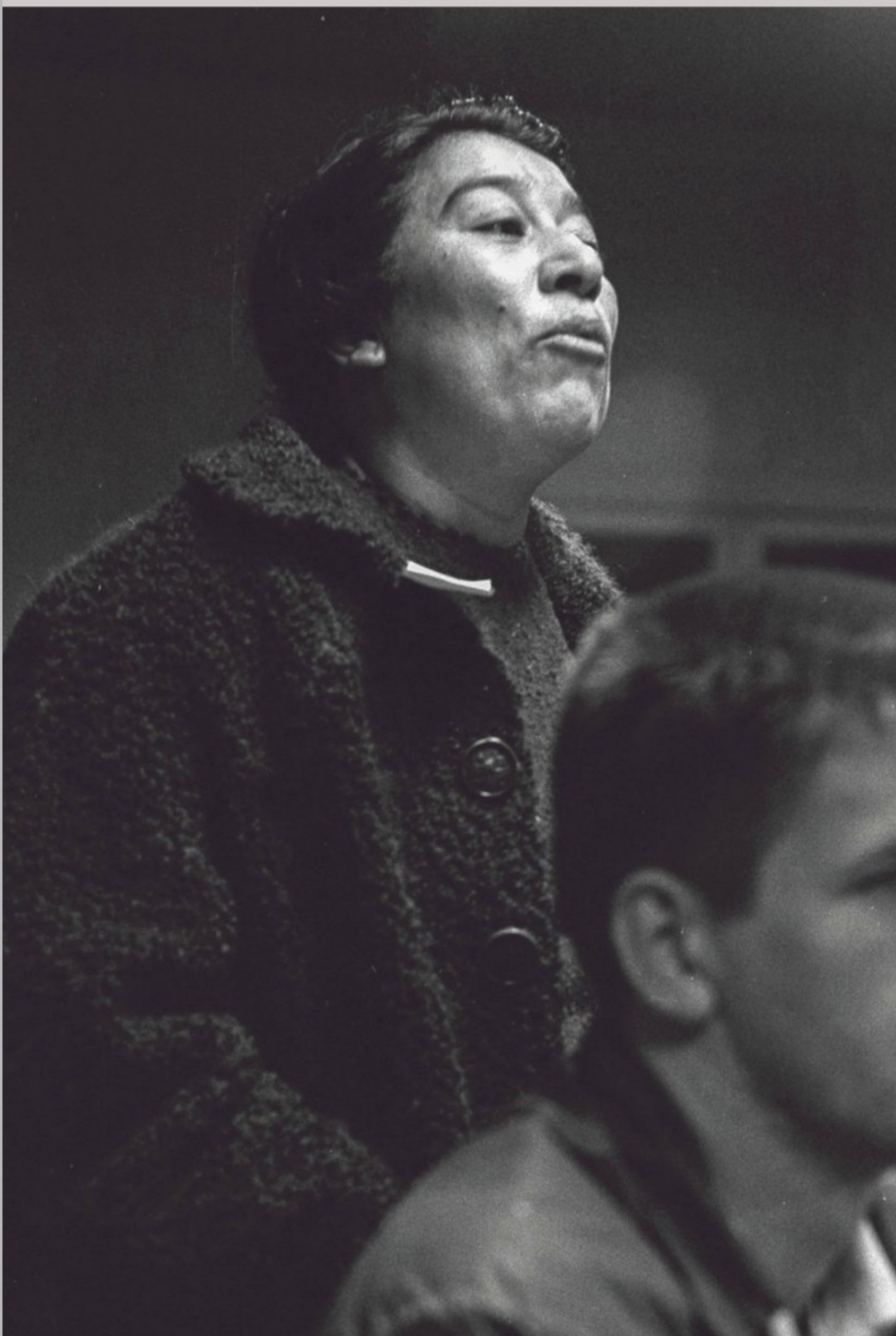
Father McCullough was one of the "Mission Band" of Catholic priests who ministered to migrant workers up and down California. He would travel from one camp to the next wearing a long cassock and riding a motorcycle.

Even before Cesar Chavez started his house meetings, McCullough was organizing farm workers through the strategy he described on the chalk board.



Margarito Ortega speaks from the floor of the AWOC conference.

"I've been working in agriculture for over 40 years and like Father McCullough says, we've been forming small groups in various neighborhoods and places . . ."



Maria Moreno was one of four delegates elected to attend the National AFL-CIO Convention in 1962. Her passionate speech moved delegates to restore funding to continue the unionization of California farm workers. Nevertheless, the new Director, with no experience organizing the agriculture industry, fired her.



AWOC conference participants passed resolutions to end the Bracero program and to go on organizing with or without AFL-CIO support.

They approved this preamble to their resolutions:

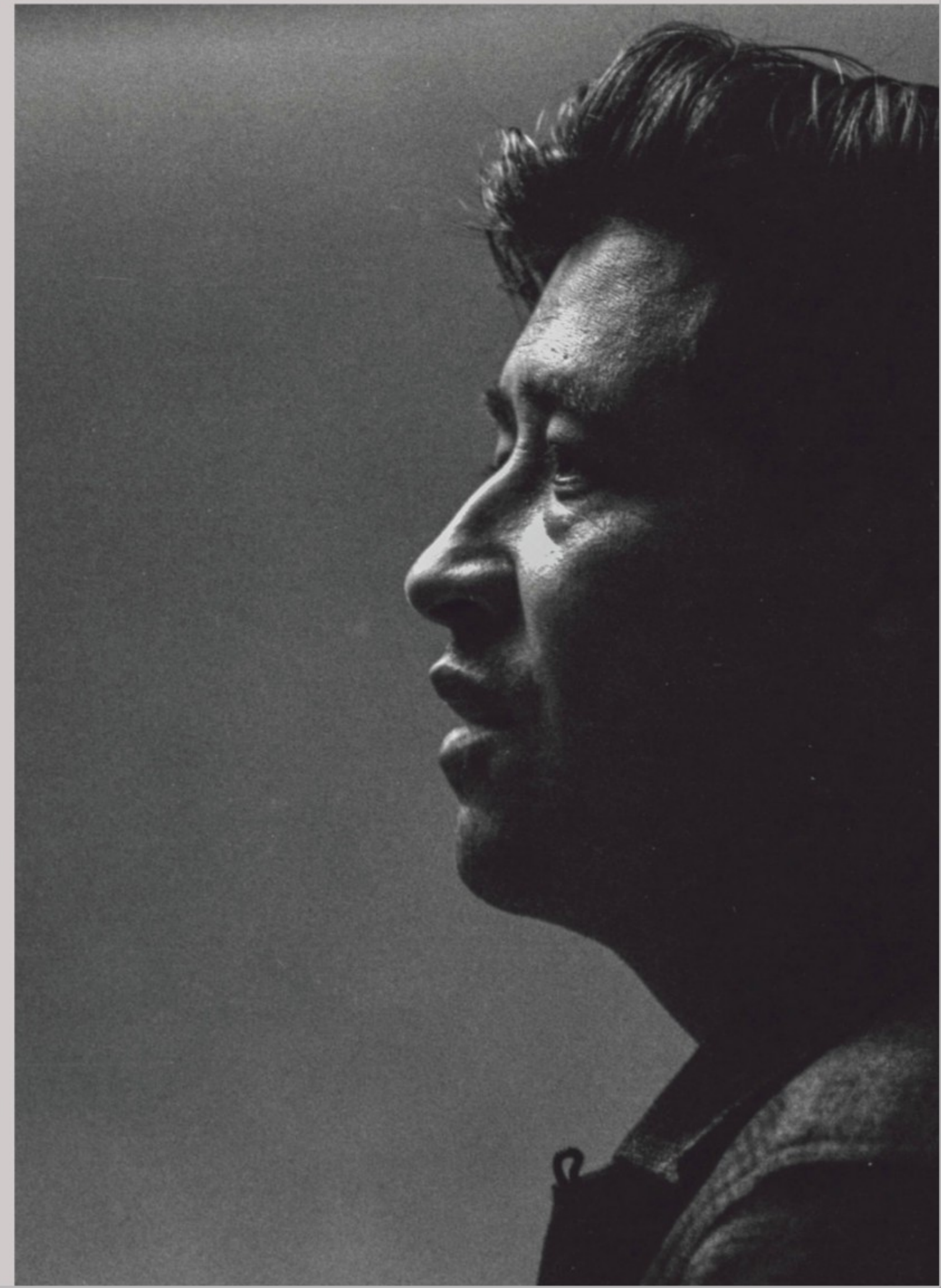
"Of all God's material gifts to man, the land is the most precious, the most everlasting. The land should draw men together, not divide them from each other. We are resolved to be united by the work and our love of the land and its wonderful bounty."



"In 1962 Cesar Chavez began organizing in the Delano area, naming his group the Farm Workers Association. He organized up and down the valley in small house meetings in their own homes. They talked about their day-to-day problems, getting to know each other as individuals and beginning to select their own natural leaders. He later recalled that he had met in 86 different barrios, or shoestring communities . . . hundreds and hundreds of meetings. . . . on the basis of these interpersonal relationships he had a solid foundation when the time came that he needed to call upon people to make the sacrifices required when they got into making demands." -

From interviews of Hank Anderson, the AWOC Research Director, conducted by Laurie Coyle for her film on Maria Moreno, *Adios Amor*

When Larry Itliong's Filipino local of AWOC struck grape growers near Delano, Cesar's organization joined the strike and allied with the Filipino union to form United Farm Workers.



Cesar Chavez speaking to a union meeting in Delano, March 15, 1966.

On the picket line during the California grape strike
Second from left, Daniel Valdez; standing in the background with Huelga (Strike) sign, Agustin Lira
Near Delano



Musicians enlivened the United Farm Workers march from Delano to Sacramento. March 17, 1966



Catholic priests held Mass and many UFW members took communion at the beginning of the 250 mile march from Delano to Sacramento. March 17, 1966



Grape strikers met at night in Porterville, California, on their March to Sacramento. They were responding to the militant comedy of el Teatro Campesino. March 18, 1966



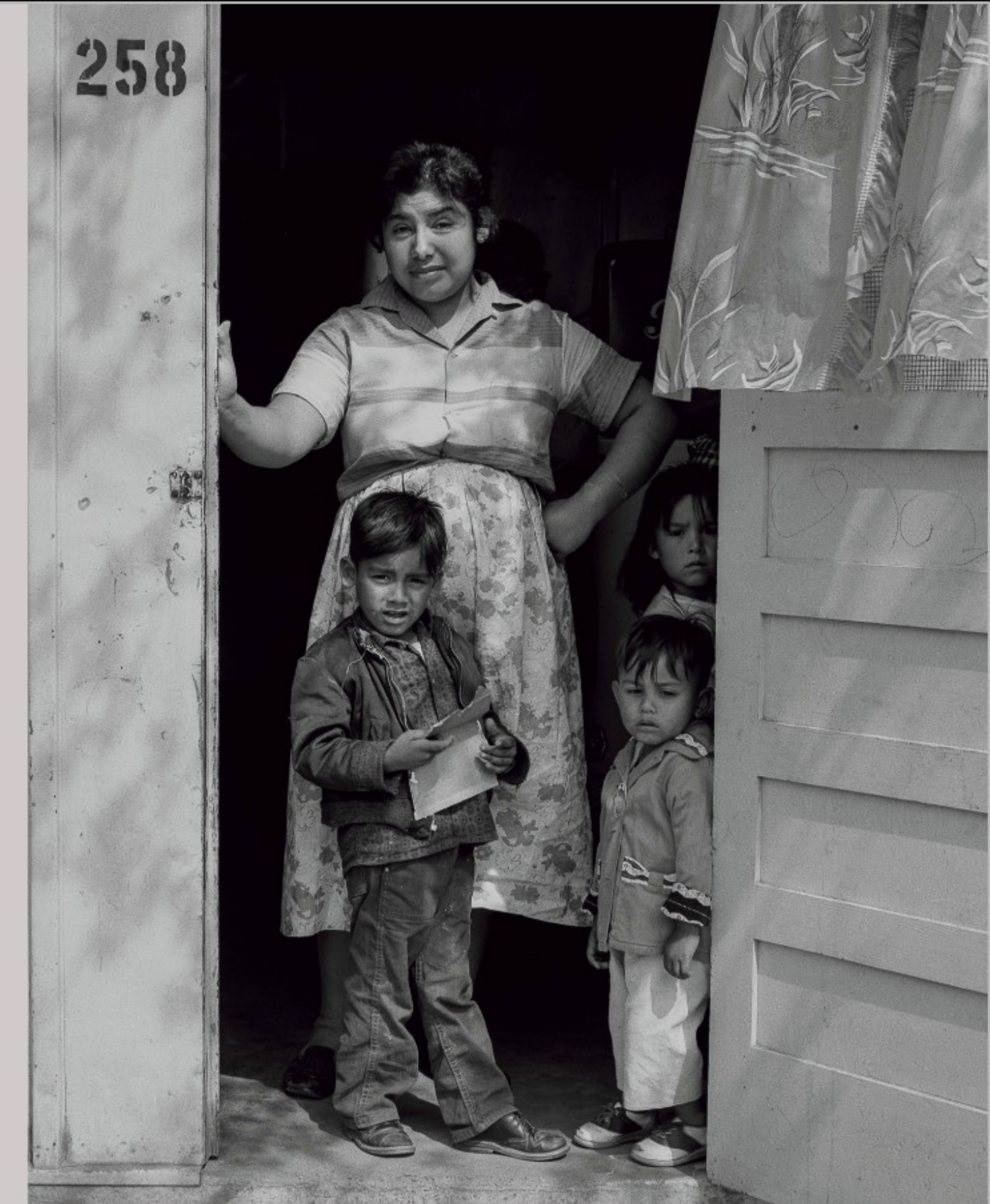
Playwright and actor Luis Valdez founded El Teatro Campesino, The Farm Workers Theater, to support union organizing. He improvised with farm workers to create *actos* or short socio-political comedies.

El Teatro would perform in union meetings, in the midst of strike picket lines, and along the route of the Delano to Sacramento march. The *actos* were enormously popular since they reflected the living experience of farm workers.

Valdez is the man in dialogue with Patroncito, slang for "little boss".
Porterville, March 18, 1966



Lula Jenkins, Annie Beavers, Goldie Beavers, Delores Perry, and Joyce Perry riding with the big tub of water for their Teviston homes. October, 1964



Much appreciation of the folks who made these photos possible:

The farm workers & their families
 AWOC & NFWA organizers
 John Collier Jr.
 Dorothea Lange
 Henry Anderson
 Ellen Margron
 George Ballis
 Matt Herron
 Ken Light
 Richard Street
 Phil Greene
 Laurie Coyle
 Najib Joe Hakim

Grace Lowe
 Martha Lowe
 Ralph Kanz
 Bill Ricco
 Lesleigh Lippitt
 Don Mayall
 Ram Esher
 Joel Pickford
 Zach Stewart
 Dan Osborne
 Trevor Thomas
 Virgil & Esther Lowe

Resources for Ernest Lowe's farm worker photos

The Library of the University of California at Merced is the digital repository of all of my farm worker photos, under a Creative Commons license. This site has 2,767 of these images online: <https://calisphere.org/collections/27647/>

My personal site has images from my farm worker exhibitions: <http://www.ernestlowe.com>

Take Stock is my photo agency: <http://www.takestockphotos.com/imagepages/folioframes.php?FolioID=9>

A selection of my photos is available on the stock photo agency, Topfoto. <https://www.topfoto.co.uk/search/?searchQuery=Ernest+Lowe>

My photos appear in two independent documentaries broadcast on PBS:
The Fight in the Fields, Cesar Chavez and the Farmworkers' Struggle: www.fightinthefields.net/cesarchavez.html and
Adios Amor, The Search for Maria Moreno: www.adiosamorfilm.com/

Black Okies, a documentary on Teviston, produced by Mark Arax & Joel Pickford <https://vimeo.com/user25968631/blackokies>

In the first decades my farm worker photos were used in trade and text books and union publications, especially *El Malcriado*, a weekly published by the United Farm Workers.

Books with my photos include:

Joan London & Henry Anderson: *So Shall Ye Reap, The Story of Cesar Chavez & the Farm Workers' Movement*, Apollo Editions, NY. NY. 1970

Peter Matthiessen, Ilan Stavans: *Sal Si Puedes (Escape If You Can)*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000 (cover photo).

Richard Steven Street: *Photographing Farmworkers in California*, Stanford University Press, 2004 (cover photo & text and other photos inside).

Richard Steven Street: *Everyone Had Cameras: Photography and Farmworkers in California, 1850-2000*, University of Minnesota Press. 2008 (back cover photo & text and additional photos inside).



Going out for a pass in Teviston's Dust Bowl, October 1964