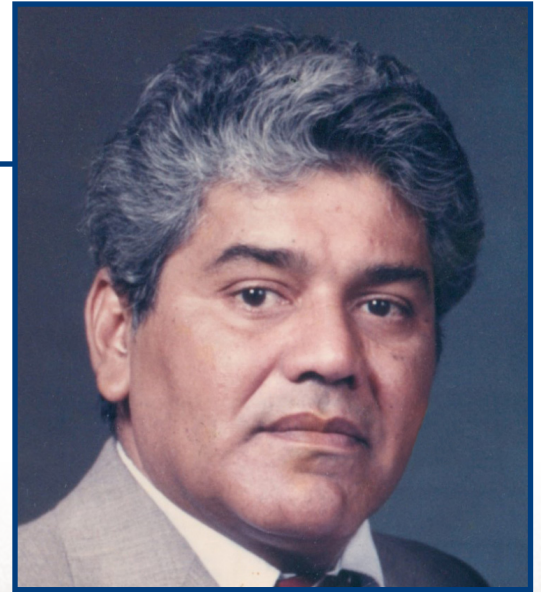


An Interview

with

Jesus Salas



OBREEROS UNIDOS

THE ROOTS AND LEGACY
OF THE FARMWORKERS
MOVEMENT

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POPULATION
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HISTORICAL
SOCIETY



WHS Press How can this book help illuminate the history of Wisconsin and the Midwest?

■ Migrant workers transformed the agricultural economies of the Midwest and Wisconsin. At the time of my family's migration in the 1950s, more than 100,000 migrant seasonal workers journeyed to the Great Lakes region annually, more than 15,000 to Wisconsin. Migrants helped convert a household harvesting and food processing industry based mostly in

rural communities to a national power that helps feed the growing urban centers of the Midwest.

In Wisconsin, their legacy is seen in an energetic resettlement of Milwaukee's Walker Point community development. Here, the farmworkers movement intersects with Black civil rights in the desegregation of schools, the establishment of bilingual education, and the creation of equal employment opportunities and access to UW—Milwaukee and UW—Madison.



WHS Press What do you hope readers learn about migrant labor and community organizing from reading this book?

■ I hope that they learn about the history of our fight for fairness. As part of that, they can learn how we utilized walkouts to effect change. We experienced, after the first strike in the fall of 1966, the brutal reaction by food processing companies, firing workers simply

for being members of our union and throwing them out of the migrant labor camps. In 1967, we engaged in walkouts of Libby, only for a day to protect workers. In 1968, walkouts were conducted during workers' lunch hour to protect them from being fired. We followed these same strategies when we protested in Milwaukee, where we faced riot police with batons, and at the state capitol, where we faced the National Guard.





WHS Press How did migration and resettlement impact your family and community?

The workforce that journeyed from the Texas borderlands to the Midwest for the last three generations was family-based. Harvesting asparagus, hoeing and thinning sugar beets, and picking cucumbers, tomatoes, or cotton, we worked in family groups, primarily guided by women. Men undertook loading and transporting the product to be weighed, graded, and paid for.

Obreros Unidos speaks of a family who spent three generations as migrant workers. My grandparents' multi-decade settlement

of Crystal City, Texas, was disrupted by the Great Depression, and they were forced to migrate to the Texas coastal counties and the panhandle. My parents migrated to Wisconsin in the early 1940s, and my brothers and I spent nearly ten years migrating to the Great Lakes region until we resettled in Wautoma, Wisconsin, in 1959. The resettlement did not come all at once. Only some of us initially resettled, and the extended family was torn apart, with some returning to the Texas borderland. Even after we resettled, we made yearly multi-week visits to visit grandparents, aunts, and uncles. This was our experience, but it was similar to the experiences of many other families.



WHS Press Your book combines history and memoir. What did you find to be the most challenging part of writing this story?

Writing in the early chapters about the brutal working conditions, I was challenged

by attempting to describe my mother and aunt, who I worked closest to and who were recognized as the most productive workers in our crew. I also noted the demands placed on women, in caring and feeding us in the crudest, most deprived living conditions.



WHS Press What experiences in your formative years prepared you to be a community leader?

I spent my childhood in the segregated barrio that we called Mexico Grande in Crystal City, Texas, with no sewer system and poorly lit, unpaved streets. We, the third generation of laborers, although we had minimal access to social services, lived in a barrio that was self-sustaining. When the decade-long seasonal journeys to the Great Lakes region

began, my two older brothers and I were farmed out to assist new crews coming from the borderlands. We read maps for the chauffeurs and guided them through the detours. At gas stops, we oversaw payment and receipts of gas and food. During the tomato harvest, my brother and I lived in a different labor camp than the rest of the family. We would actually be assigned to create daily records of bushels picked and oversee cash payment for bushels picked by recent fellow crews that had joined us.



WHS Press What inspired you to write a memoir?

I began writing before I knew how. All I knew was that I had something to say. My first writing that was not classroom-driven was a letter to the editor of a student newspaper in my second year of college. I later worked along with J. Johnson developing a “shopper” directed at migrant families for the local Wautoma newspaper before founding *La Voz Mexicana* in 1964. *La Voz* later became an arm of the farmworkers union, Obreros Unidos.

Working for Chicano civil rights and community development led to writing grant proposals for migrant social services. Later, in the 1980s, there was a dearth of educational materials and guides that taught English to Spanish-dominant adults using their Spanish language skills. This curriculum and instruction work was my task for nearly two decades. Finally, in the years of my retirement, I have had the time to learn how to write about the roots and legacy of the three generations of migrant families in Wisconsin.





WHS Press A strong theme throughout your book is mutual aid. In what ways did mutual aid help sustain the farmworker's movement?

When we came together as a union, we were already a community who had survived the most horrendous political system of denial of basic services, and our first two generations were unschooled. The Mexican American settlements survived because of the fundamental value of coming together

as “socios,” and self-sustaining, dues-paying, self-help organizations sustained them during these times. This was evident when migrant workers came together to form a farmworkers union and proceeded to improve their working and living conditions. Their mutual aid was evident as they defended their right to be represented by Obreros Unidos and win the WERC Certification Election of 1968 for cucumber harvesters by 405–8.

