

**By Blanca Alvarado**

In his 1965 address to Congress proposing the Voting Rights Act, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared, “At times history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom. So it was at Lexington and Concord. So it was a century ago at Appomattox. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama.”

A joining of history and fate for the Latino civil rights movement occurred 13 years earlier during the first unlikely encounter in San Jose between a 25-year old Cesar Chavez and Fred Ross, the San Francisco native who Chavez would later credit with “training me and inspiring me and being my hero [and] best friend.” Governor Brown just announced Ross’ induction into the California Hall of Fame.

According to Chavez’s eulogy for Ross in 1992, only seven months before his own death, Ross “was about the last person I wanted to see” in the hard-scrabble eastside San Jose barrio of *Sal Si Puedes* (Get Out If You Can), where Chavez and his family first came as migrant farm workers in the late 1930s.

Ross arrived in *Sal Si Puedes* during spring 1952 to organize a chapter of the Community Service Organization, a fledgling Latino civil rights group sponsored by Chicago community organizer Saul Alinsky. At first Chavez thought Ross was a *gringo* university student or professor using *Sal Si Puedes* for research and posing insulting questions.

Still, Ross looked different. He was tall and slender, wore rumpled clothing and drove an old beat-up car. So Chavez agreed to Ross’ request to invite friends and

neighbors to a “house meeting,” during which Ross would discuss CSO. Chavez also invited some of his *Pachuco* buddies, hotheaded young men who at Chavez’s signal would confront Ross.

Ross got a chilled welcome from the barrio residents Chavez assembled in his home. Then Ross started talking, and Chavez’s life changed. Ross had worked across Southern California where conditions for Latinos were similar to Sal Si Puedes: young men being beaten up by police who entered homes without warrants; lack of parks, sidewalks and streetlights; and unsanitary conditions causing disease.

Ross quietly spoke about how people on Los Angeles’ eastside built their own civic-action group—CSO—that registered and turned out voters. He spoke about “Bloody Christmas 1951,” when CSO for the first time got drunken LAPD cops fired for beating young Latinos.

When the *Pachucos* became restless for the signal to harass Ross, Chavez said to shut up or leave. Chavez asked Ross if CSO could organize farm workers too. “Sure,” Ross replied, “If the people want it.”

Chavez tirelessly worked during a non-stop 40-day CSO drive registering thousands of new voters. Soon, Ross convinced Alinsky to hire Chavez as a full-time organizer. Ross and Chavez together organized 22 CSO chapters across California, making it the most militant and successful Latino civil rights group of its day.

Chavez left CSO in 1962 to begin what became the United Farm Workers of America. “And then,” as Ross later wrote, his protégé “just walked into history.”

“Fred Ross gave me and so many others a chance,” Chavez said in eulogizing his mentor. “And that led to a lot of things.”

One outcome was the kind of union Chavez created. The genesis of his organizing philosophy was in community, not union, organizing. So Chavez applied what he learned from Ross, from Catholic social teachings from his parish priest, Father Donald McDonnell, and from careful study of Gandhi and Dr. King. Chavez pioneered strategies and tactics that were outside of labor's modern experience: nonviolence, boycotts, marches, fasts and creating what Ross called "social arsonists," organizers who "set people on fire."

Another outcome was Chavez's unique brand of trade unionism. Some UFW leaders wanted a traditional business union devoted to wages, hours and conditions for union members. Chavez's vision was of a movement as well as a union. Most of his time was spent helping farm workers score economic gains through the UFW. But he was also committed to helping workers overcome crippling obstacles in the community as well as championing an emerging class of Latino working families and other poor people. Chavez's vision prevailed. Most Americans would likely choose Chavez's side today; maybe that's why 17 million Americans boycotted grapes in the '70s.

Those historic milestones all began with that first meeting between Fred Ross and Cesar Chavez in June 1952.

I was one of those social arsonists whom Fred Ross gave a chance in the San Jose CSO chapter during the 1950s, one of many he mentored. It led me to become the first Latina elected to the San Jose City Council and Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors. It was indeed a time when history and fate came together.

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