Everyone Had Cameras: Photographers, Photography and the Farmworker Experience in California—A PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY

By Richard Steven Street

“César Chávez really knew the value of photography . . . He was very visually aware. I don't think he did anything during the first year of the strike without considering how it would look on film. To an extent that few realized, much of what the National Farm Worker Association did was conceived with the idea of shaping the visual record to their advantage. Everyone had cameras.”

—John Kouns, freelance photographer, Delano, California, 1965–1966

The photographers who have worked among California farmworkers have been called the eyes of conscience, but they have also been called propagandists for hire. They have recorded life and labor in the fields, even while obscuring its harsh realities. They have probed the human condition and glorified an industry, captured tenacity, generosity, and dignity, and also recorded suffering, injustice, and violent class warfare.

A diverse and eclectic group as varied in composition as are farmworkers themselves, these photographers never comprised a unified movement and went about their business individually, at their own pace, in their own ways, according to their own special visions. They include professionals and amateurs alike, some of the great chroniclers of the human condition, as well as photographers with a deeply selective, highly fragmented, episodic, and uneven perspective. Presenting a multitude of views and often inclined to overemphasizing certain people, places, and events, they have at times been lopsided in their boosterism and top-heavy with highly critical imagery stressing the dark side. Many have been physically, emotionally, and intellectually brave. A few have lived on next to nothing, under dangerous circumstances. Some have refused to take sides and shifted easily between lucrative advertising and unprofitable editorial images, between idealized and seductive representations of commercial farming and more probing explorations into the less beautiful, sometimes gruesome rural underside. Some have been little more than voyeurs, “day-tripping into someone else’s nightmare,” as British photographer Anthony Lloyd has said of certain war photographers covering Bosnia in 1993.

Photographers have drawn more attention to California farmworkers than any other chroniclers except for John Steinbeck and Carey McWilliams. Has their work made a difference? Some people might argue that images of immigrants living in caves and shelters made of garbage while picking strawberries remind us of the growing gap between rich and poor and the existence of a variety of American apartheid. Others might say that after being exposed again and
Of all the pre-1900 images of farmworkers, the most modern and unusual were taken by Carleton E. Watkins, who achieved fame by recording scenes of wonder and curiosity in the Yosemite Valley and along the Columbia River. A versatile commercial photographer, Watkins accepted all kinds of assignments. In 1888 he traveled from San Francisco to Bakersfield to make 750 views of ranches and property owned by land magnates James B. Haggin and Lloyd Tevis. Framed by ominous machinery and exuding danger, this view is one of four images moving in from a distant "establishing" view to a final, closely cropped image.

Courtesy of Tenneco West
again to such images we suffer a kind of “compassion fatigue” in which the I’ve-seen-it-before syndrome can only be overcome by seeking out ever more sensational images.

Most people would probably agree with what we intuitively know and see from common experience— that photographers matter very much to farmworkers. Their work exerts a pervasive influence on events. “No art form transforms human apathy quicker,” explains composer, novelist, and photographer Gordon Parks. “Having absorbed the message of a memorable photograph, the viewer’s sense of compassion and newfound wisdom come together like the two lips touching.” Even more so than writers, photographers have the capacity to change the world, or at least provide a kiss of enlightenment that can lead to change.

Although the work of documentary photographers during the Great Depression is usually cited as the best evidence for such impact, their modern counterparts have probably done more. In the Delano grape strike from 1965 to 1970, a small group of audacious photographers played a key role in projecting the conflict far beyond the vineyards into the larger public arena. Their work allowed farmworkers to launch a boycott of table grapes and disrupt the American conscience as much as any striking group of coal miners or auto workers.

As important to the United Farm Workers Union as politicians, picket captains, labor leaders, reporters, and the usual array of volunteers and sympathetic bystanders, photographers shape the organizing struggle alongside such traditional labor relations factors as the nature of the work force, structure of the industry, characteristics of employers, role of government, and public input. Just as scenes of police billy clubs and fire hoses unleashed against peaceful civil rights protesters in the American South seemed incredible to many citizens, scenes of mass marches, fasts, arrests, and nonviolent protests have had a similar galvanizing effect on public attitudes toward the farmworker struggle in California and throughout the United States. With the exception of the civil rights movement, few other struggles have been so strongly affected by photographers and photography.

Moving through the farmworker community down to the grass roots level, photographers today are a ubiquitous presence. No organizing activity, no strike, no protest, no boycott is set in motion without ample photographic coverage, notification of all possible newspaper photographers, or contact with all variety of freelancers. So deeply imbedded in the farmworker story are photographers that it cannot be told, studied, or understood without paying attention to their still evolving vision. So common are they as witnesses on picket lines, and at strikes and demonstrations, that it is normal to see not only photojournalists and documentary photographers but also security guards, police, growers, farmworkers, and assorted bystanders, all armed with cameras, each awaiting some decisive—or incriminating—moment.

Trained as a professional historian (Ph.D. Wisconsin), Richard Steven Street is founder of Streetshots agricultural photography. His clients include some of the largest farming operations in the United States. He returned to academic life as a visiting professor at Stanford University in 2000. A Guggenheim Fellow and the Ansel Adams Fellow at the Center for Creative Photography, he is the author of Beasts of the Field: A Narrative History of California Farmworkers, 1769–1913 (Stanford University Press, 2004), and Photographing Farmworkers in California (Stanford University Press, 2004). Street presently holds an American Philosophical Society Fellowship and is completing Knife Fight City and Other Essays, (University of Oklahoma Press) a collection of his photographic essays on rural California, named after his Pulitzer Prize-nominated essay on the poorest town in California.
Photographic engagement developed remarkably late in the arc of photography's involvement with farmworkers.

During the first seventy-five years, photographers with few exceptions saw farmworkers as adjuncts of a landscape, props in a composition, or elements of scale in a picture of this or that crop, process, or new machine, not as people struggling with life's dilemmas, worthy of coverage in their own right. Despite their talents and expertise, photographers at this time were mostly businessmen and friends of agriculture. As photographers they were, notwithstanding a certain creative flare and technical expertise, conventional craftsmen who preferred to duck issues. They did not see photography as a voice for transcendent moral values, a way to inspire action, a mechanism for expressing political feelings, or an instrument of reform. Largely ignoring sweat, heat, dirt, pain, exhaustion, and living conditions, they concocted a perspectives that minimized disagreeable and bothersome components and maximized sales potential.

Adding to these biases, large, bulky cameras, along with wet and dry glass plate negatives requiring long exposures, eliminated spontaneity and attention to work motion. Lacking both the ability and inclination to criticize the status quo or even to see farmworkers as individuals, their formal, predictable, highly ritualized work, despite its documentary value, did not directly confront life or labor in the fields. Projecting an image of ordered abundance, this perspective dominated the picture well into the first decades of the twentieth century. We see this approach well-represented in William Feckler's 1915 night-time flash lit shot of a fumigation crew lowering a tent over a tree in a Covina citrus grove before pumping in hydrocyanic gas.

Courtesy of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California
During the 1933 San Joaquin Valley cotton pickers' strike, seventeen-year-old high school student Ralph Powell was at his father's Hanford studio one morning when a California Highway Patrol captain from the office next door suggested that someone ought to head over to the strike and take pictures. After photographing the strikers' camp, Powell documented a Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union funeral parade through downtown Corcoran, then followed strikers out to the picket lines. In one photograph, about twenty Mexican women are crowded into the back of a truck. The driver has opened the cab door and is looking out, smoking a cigarette. The women, barely tall enough to see over the wooden scaffolding, stare unsmiling toward Powell. Featured prominently in full-page stories on the strike and Corcoran tent city that appeared in the Los Angeles Times, La Opinión, Sacramento Bee, and the Fresno Bee, Powell's work captured the first images of picketing in the fields.

After photographing the strike, Powell moved into his father's business. He never again photographed in the fields, even though Hanford, the community where he would reside for the next sixty years, was prime farm country. Powell's work is preserved today because, while investigating the strike, University of California economics professor Paul Taylor acquired a set of Powell's prints, incorporated one set into a documentary history of the cotton strike that was published as part of the LaFollette Civil Liberties Committee hearings in 1940, then deposited one set of prints in the Library of Congress and another in the Bancroft Library, where they would be consulted and used by countless historians without proper attribution or payment over the next sixty-five years.

Courtesy of Ralph H. Powell
Dreamers, idealists, and avid readers of Jack London's novels and stories of high adventure, Otto Hagel and Hansel Mieth Hagel met while growing up in working class families near Fellbach, a small provincial village near Stuttgart in southwestern Germany. Otto headed for the United States in 1928, one of the first of dozens of first-rate photographers to flee Germany. Hansel followed in 1930. Bringing with them a good measure of daring and chutzpah born of fear and a desperate desire to succeed, they engaged in an early version of the participant-observer reporting. During the 1936 Salinas Valley lettuce packers' strike, Otto abandoned the Speed Graphic and Graflex cameras that were the standard photographic equipment of the era and used his 35-millimeter Leica to produce a stunning photo essay that went far beyond that of any other photographer. During a lull in the action, he snapped this picture of deputies and armed vigilantes near the lettuce coolers in downtown Salinas.

Courtesy of Hansel Mieth Hagel
Having missed the Salinas Valley lettuce packers' strike of 1936, Dorothea Lange was determined to do better in October 1938, when cotton pickers went on strike in the southern San Joaquin Valley. Working late into the night, Lange was assisted by Rondal Partridge (Imogen Cunningham's son), who used two strobe lights to make this photograph of a crowd listening to speakers from the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers Union at a clandestine meeting in the Mexican section of Shafter.

Courtesy of Rondal Partridge
Attempting to produce “a photographic project where I would interpret the camp and its people, their daily life, and their relationship to their community and their environment,” Ansel Adams traveled to Manzanar War Relocation Camp in the fall of 1943. Sympathetic and upbeat, Adams tried to stress that Japanese internees were engaged in productive agricultural work. Drawn to the farms and fields surrounding Manzanar, Adams avoided the barbed wire and guard towers and found perspectives that transformed fields full of captive workers into dramatic landscapes where people appeared, much as they had in pre-1930s photographs, as incidental elements amid scenes of enduring, even breathtaking beauty. No single image more clearly demonstrates this than his photograph of the North Farm. Finding an elevated location, possibly on top of his car, Adams used the early morning light to create what is in essence a grand panorama of neat, cultivated rows converging at the base of the towering Sierra Nevada. Without a caption identifying the workers as internees, a viewer might easily mistake the image as a sublime modernist vision of commercial agriculture.

Courtesy of the War Relocation Authority Collection, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
Documentary photography had dominated the picture of California farmworkers since Dorothea Lange established it in the mid-1930s, then all but passed from the scene during and after World War II. Although known for his celebrity portraits, Life magazine photographer Loomis Dean made an important contribution to the documentary record in 1951, when he photographed an essay on undocumented workers crossing the border to work on farms in the Imperial Valley. After the Border Patrol arrested one group, Dean followed them into the Calexico jail. Using a Leica camera with a 28-millimeter lens, Dean leaned against the cell bars and overcame the low light with a series of exposures at one-half or one-tenth of a second.

Courtesy of Life Magazine and Time Inc.
Lacking government support, photographers could seldom follow farmworkers over a sustained period, as Dorothea Lange had done in the 1930s. But several produced notable essays during a brief sojourn in the fields. Los Angeles commercial photographer Leonard Nadel produced some extremely graphic images during the six months he devoted to documenting the bracero labor program in 1956. At the Calexico processing center he captured this image of braceros lining up to have their heads and genital areas sprayed with DDT.

Courtesy of Evelyn De Wolfe Nadel
Hauntingly beautiful in the way it suggests a lifetime of pruning pear trees in the Sacramento-San Joaquin delta, Roger Minick's exquisite 1966 photograph "Cheng's Hands and Hat" bridges the various genres of high art, documentary photography, and photojournalism. Minick took this picture while photographing his Delta West series. To underscore the weathered hands and well-worn hat, Minick placed a piece of black felt on Cheng's lap and photographed in the open shade.

Copyright 1966, Roger Minick. From the series Delta West, 1969. Courtesy of Roger Minick
In 1974, the state of California banned the short-handled hoe, also known as el cortido and el diablo. Requiring workers to stoop over in the shape of a question mark while they waddled down the furrows, the tool destroyed the backs of generations of farmworkers, but was still being used as late as 1992. George Ballis took this classic shot in a San Joaquin Valley field in 1958.

Courtesy of George Ballis
After following farmworkers for more than a decade, George Ballis produced his most important images during the first months of the Delano Grape strike. When Senator Robert F. Kennedy visited Delano in March 1966, Ballis recorded him giving this impromptu press conference in an Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee hall just after questioning various law enforcement authorities about their handling of the strike.

Courtesy of George Ballis
An ordained minister, Bob Fitch learned photography while covering the civil rights movement in the South. During 1973, he produced some of the most dramatic images of the farmworker movement while covering events in the southern San Joaquin Valley. During a bloody confrontation on the Giumarra Ranch in July, Fitch was hunkered down beside an automobile bumper when he captured a series of images of seventeen-year-old Marta Rodriguez, splattered with mud, defiant, and gritting her teeth in anger while being arrested along with friends and family members.

Courtesy of Bob Fitch
As part of a larger photo essay on undocumented farmworkers, Roger Minick spent considerable time on a tomato farm in north San Diego County. Winning their trust by giving them Polaroid snapshots, which they promptly folded in half and stuffed in a back pocket to later be sent home as proof that they were doing well in California, Minick focused on one large camp of undocumented farmworkers living in caves dug in a nearby hillside and shelters constructed of junk. In this image, two men bathe in plastic-lined tomato bins following a hard day in the fields.

Courtesy of Roger Minick
While photographing an essay on how agricultural chemicals were poisoning the Central Valley, freelance photographer David Wells captured a flagger being exposed to drifting spray as a crop duster works an alfalfa field west of Fresno in 1988. From the series The Pesticide Poisoning of America, 1988.

COURTESY OF DAVID WELLS
Today, few in the farmworker movement doubt that photography and photographers play a pivotal role in their cause. Aware of the key role that images play in their struggle, activists continue to design spectacles generating the kind of pictures that attract coverage, win public support, and shift the scene of conflict beyond the fields. I became acutely aware of this on July 8, 1997, in Watsonville, when Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., visited Arturo Rodriguez, the new president of the UFW, to inaugurate a big organizing campaign among strawberry workers. Going to great lengths to make the meeting especially photogenic, union members distributed photographs of a George Ballis photograph of the March 11, 1966, meeting between Kennedy's father and Chávez in Delano. Using a wide-angle lens, I captured a photograph that reveals the creative lengths to which the UFW will go to generate the kind of images that attract coverage. Original in color.

Courtesy of Richard Steven Street/Streetshots
To much public fanfare, the United States Postal Service on April 25, 2003, issued a postage stamp of a smiling young Chávez. Appearing exactly ten years after Chávez died, the stamp was based on one of Bob Fitch’s color portraits. But in constructing the image, painter Robert Rodriguez had removed a UFW flag behind Chávez and replaced it with a picture of a lettuce field extracted from a second image shot by freelance photographer Ted Streshinsky and obtained from Corbis Images. Appearing at a time of increased sensitivities following the furor over editorial manipulation of a pyramid to fit a National Geographic cover and darkening of a mug shot of O. J. Simpson for a Time magazine cover, the beautiful composite raised issues about the power of photographic truth and artistic manipulation. For Bob Fitch, it was almost too much to bear. “The U.S. government,” he told reporters upon seeing the rendition, “was not ready to put a union label on a stamp.” Original in color.

Photograph by Frederick Larson. Courtesy of the San Francisco Chronicle.