

Cesar Chavez

Biography



Cesar Chavez Day
from the Department of Labour

- **Occupation:** Civil rights leader
- **Born:** March 31, 1927 in Yuma, Arizona
- **Died:** April 23, 1993 in San Luis, Arizona
- **Best known for:** Founded the National Farm Workers Association

Biography:

Where did Cesar Chavez grow up?

Cesar Chavez grew up on a farm in Yuma, Arizona with his two brothers and two sisters. His family owned a farm and a local grocery store. Cesar had a happy time growing up with family and relatives around him. His best friend was his brother Richard. His family lived in an adobe home built by his grandfather.

The Great Depression

When Cesar was around eleven years old, hard times from the [Great Depression](#) caused his father to lose the farm. The family didn't know what to do. They packed up all they owned and moved to [California](#) to find work.

Migrant Worker

Cesar's family became migrant workers. They moved from farm to farm in California looking for work. All the family members had to work, even Cesar. He worked in all sorts of different fields from grapes to beets. The days were long and the work was very hard. Despite working so hard, the family barely had enough to eat.

Moving so often, Cesar didn't go to school much any more. In just a few short years he had attended thirty-five different schools. The teachers were tough on him. One time when he didn't speak English, a teacher made him wear a sign that read "I am a clown. I speak Spanish". After graduating from the eighth grade, Cesar stopped going to school.

Poor Treatment

The working conditions at the fields for Cesar and his family were horrible. The farmers seldom treated them like people. They had to work long hours with no breaks, there weren't any bathrooms for them, and they didn't have clean water to drink. Anyone who complained was fired.

Latino Civil Rights

When Cesar was nineteen he joined the navy, but he left after two years and returned home to marry his sweetheart Helen Fabela in 1948. He worked in the fields for the next few years until he got a job at the Community Service Organization (CSO). At the CSO Cesar worked for the [civil rights](#) of Latinos. He worked for the CSO for ten years helping register voters and work for equal rights.

Starting a Union

Cesar read a lot and was influenced by a number of other leaders including [Mohandas Gandhi](#) and [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) He wanted to help the migrant field workers of California and he thought he could do it in a peaceful manner.

In 1962, Cesar quit his job in the CSO to start a union of migrant farm workers. He formed the National Farm Workers Association. There were only a few members at first, and they were mostly family members.

Growing the Union

Cesar went back to working in the fields where he could recruit workers to his union. It was a tough sell. People didn't believe that the union could work. They had tried it before. They were scared they would lose their jobs or even get beat up for joining. Cesar continued to work at it. Slowly but surely the union started to get more members. Cesar called the movement for better working conditions "La Causa", or The Cause.

Grape Workers March

One of Cesar's first major actions was to strike against grape farmers. A strike is when workers refuse to work. The strike started in Delano, California. Cesar and sixty-seven workers decided to march to Sacramento, the state capital. It took them several weeks to march the 340 miles. On the way there people joined them. The crowd grew larger and larger until thousands of workers arrived in Sacramento to protest. In the end, the grape growers agreed to many of the worker's conditions and signed a contract with the union.

Continued Work

Cesar and the union continued to work for the cause of the worker. Over the next several decades the union would grow and continue to fight for the rights and working conditions of the migrant farmer.

Fasting

In order to bring attention to his cause Cesar fasted. This is when you don't eat. One time he fasted for 36 days. Many celebrities also fasted with him.

Cesar died in his sleep on April 23, 1993. Over 50,000 people attended his funeral service.

Interesting Facts about Cesar Chavez

- His middle name was Estrada.
- Cesar was a vegetarian.
- After moving to California, his family lived in a poor barrio (town) called Sal Si Puedes which means "escape if you can".
- He and his wife Helen had eight children.
- Cesar turned down a good job from President Kennedy to be a leader in the Peace Corps in order keep working on his union.
- His motto was "Si Se Puede", meaning "Yes, it can be done".
- He was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom after his death.