

Cesar Chavez Jacket

Q: Can you tell us— Can you sort of go step by step and sort of describe the jacket and tell us what you think is interesting about it?

Response: Okay. The [00:00:19] jacket is a black nylon jacket and it belonged to Cesar Chavez and I think that's the most important thing and he actually wore towards [00:00:28] the later years before his passing in 1993. It has the symbol of the United Farm Workers which is an eagle, black on a red background and [00:00:39] on the other side has his name embroidered and, yes, the fact that he wore it I think is what makes this object so powerful, to know that [00:00:50] he marched with it, that he was giving speeches and represent who it was as a person is just fascinating. It looks like a regular jacket, so really [00:01:02] what gives it meaning is the fact that he owned it and he wore it.

Q: Were other members of the UFW wearing similar jacket?

Response: Mostly [00:01:10], yeah, the higher management or managers had worn the jacket and I think are Arturo Rodriguez, the current representative of the UFW also has a jacket like [00:01:20] that and his friend Richard Chavez and it was actually Richard Chavez, the one that designed the eagle, the symbol for the United [00:01:27] Farm Workers back in 1962 and they saw— Cesar Chavez actually suggested to have a symbol for the Union when they first created it and [00:01:36] they decided to choose this, the symbol of an eagle because he felt that it could provide— encourage the workers and provide courage. Really, that's [00:01:46] what the eagle represents. It's an Aztec eagle and Cesar asked Richard to design it and Richard was having a hard time doing it until he decided [00:01:54] that if he were to [do] square off the edges of the eagle, it would make it really easier for farm workers to copy it and put it in the [00:02:03] flags that were all handmade and that they were used during the marches and boycotts.

Q: . . . [chit-chat] . . .

Response: The Smithsonian [00:02:45] Latino Center an opportunity came up to go and work with the Cesar Chavez Foundation in Keene, La Paz, California, so I started learning about him and I was just [00:02:54] fascinated and the fact that I was able to be there and we actually went into his room and because when— once he passed away, they closed the [00:03:05] doors and no one entered that room again. It was like holding his spirit there and so we were among the first people to go in and just saw it and saw [00:03:13] the books and learned so much about him and met all the family members. It's really amazing that the UFW or rather the Cesar [00:03:18] Chavez Foundation, they operate really as a family foundation and so I met Richard Chavez who is married to Dolores Huerta and I [00:03:29] met all their family members and while we were there, Cesar's third daughter, Lena Chavez, passed away and so it was— It added that extra [00:03:42] emotional, I guess, thing to it and being there, so the fact that I know them and

it made a whole difference, but he's such a big persona in American history and really [00:03:56] advocating for non-violence.

Q: . . . [chit-chat] . . . I suppose we should start with just sort of a little bit about how Chavez [00:04:17] became involved in labor work, in organizing labor work. . . . [chit-chat] . . .

Response: So, Cesar Chavez was born into [00:04:46] a farm worker family. His father was a farm worker in Arizona, and so he saw and personally lived all the challenges of being a farm worker [00:04:55] and all the injustices, even going to school and I think he went through about 34 different schools as a kid and he graduated [00:05:04] from 8th grade when he was 15 year old and after that he went to the Navy for about a couple of years and then he came back and he really admired Father [00:05:13] McDonald and followed his, Father McDonald's fight for justice and got very involved in farm laborers' rights and organizing [00:05:26] and he started with a group in California, visiting the valley there, San Joaquin Valley, organizing laborers and he met Dolores Huerta [00:05:33] and then jointly they founded the— I'm going to forget now—there was one organization started by the Filipinos which was the Agricultural Workers Organizing [00:05:47] Committee and then Cesar Chavez organized the National Farm Workers Association and they both came together in 1962 and created the United [00:05:56] Farm Workers of America and from then on he started really running the workers and advocating for rights. [00:06:05]

Farm workers at that time had basically no rights. They worked mostly in slavery conditions basically. They had no [00:06:11] potable water. They worked from sun—from dawn to sunset and they didn't have bathrooms and the work conditions were really miserable [00:06:25] working under California sun and when you get to see the short handled hoe, you'll see what piece of equipment they were using to do all the work in [00:06:33] the fields picking the strawberries and lettuce, asparagus mostly, so for him to be a farm worker himself and then witnessed the conditions of everybody [00:06:46] really started advocating for rights for them.

He was also influenced by Martin Luther King and by Mahatma Gandhi. Those were really two figures that [00:06:57] inspired him and his style, I guess, of non-violence and peaceful. He was a vegetarian himself, Cesar Chavez. I don't know how that [00:07:11] relates to _____, but I think it's interesting and so they were the ones that the United Farm Workers through the leadership of Cesar [00:07:18] Chavez that organized the first boycott in 1965 and a year after the boycott, the grape boycott, and they managed to secure the first contract, [00:07:31] the first bargaining agreement with grape growers and from then on, they continued to go and really forcefully negotiated with the growers [00:07:41] and get the rights for the farm workers such as health insurance and retirement plans, the first credit union as well, so those were all accomplishments [00:07:54].

Q: So the workers that he's organizing, are they mostly migrant workers? Are they involved with the bracero program at all?

Response: Well, the bracero [00:08:06] program ends in 1965 so it's about at the same time that it ends that then the UFW work really and Cesar [00:08:14] Chavez picked up and the workers were many that came through the bracero program and decided to stay on. There were Mexican Americans [00:08:21] and there were Mexican immigrants. There were Filipino immigrants, so it's a combination of, let's say, some [00:08:29] legal status and non-legal status, but they really [saw] Cesar Chavez mostly for Mexican Americans and those with legal status really, encouraging them [00:08:39] to be part of the Union.

Q: You mentioned Father McDonald. Can you tell us a little bit about him?

Response: No, but I can point you to [00:08:48] the right information where I read it.

Q: I myself studied Catholic social [justice processes] and I was just sort of interested.

Response: Donald McDonald. Yeah, I didn't want to say first name not to _____ my tongue.

Q: A tongue twister.

Response: Yes, exactly.

Q: So can you tell [00:09:06] us a little about the grape boycott and sort of the scope of it, how he communicated with people, sort of his presence, his public presence.

Response: Well, the boycott [00:09:18] started in September 1965 and it lasted five years and it was really boycotting grapes and later on lettuce and he organized farm [00:09:30] worker families and an historical event is the march from Delano to Sacramento and that was hundreds and hundreds of people, really powerful experience [00:09:41], and it lasted a couple of days and Cesar Chavez was leading that march but many of the people participated really were really creative. [00:09:50] They created corridos along the way. The El Teatro Campesino was formed about at the same time that the United Farm Workers Union was created [00:10:00] and it was founded by Luis Valdez and he really was inspired by the work of the farm workers. He created all this place that could play every [00:10:12] Friday night and so _____ attend and everybody and they were really very inspiring stories and so that's very embedded in the whole farm workers movement [00:10:23], the El Teatro Campesino. Also a magazine called *El Malcriado* and that was produced by them and it was distributed. It was a way also to promote the work of the [00:10:33] United Farm Workers and Cesar's work and so after five years they really— Or actually after the first year of the boycott they accomplished [00:10:44] the first comprehensive bargaining agreement.

From then on, they started doing similar contracts with growers in the [00:10:57] valley and then another important protest on his first or rather his last fast, Cesar was fasting as a way to bring attention to the conditions of farm workers. [00:11:10] One that lasted 36 days was the one that he started in 1998 and that was to protest against pesticides and

how people that were working on the fields [00:11:21] really were getting all this DDT and pesticide and getting sick, so that was the last fast that he did at that time and that was accomplished actually.

Q: When [00:11:34] you think about visitors to the museum encountering the jacket when they come— Is the jacket on display?

Response: No. Not right now.

Q: Do you know—

Response: It [00:11:43] has been on display, was on display when the museum first received it as a donation in 1993, soon after Cesar Chavez passed away. It was [00:11:53] a History in the News small case that the museum had. It still has and then it was on display on a big show commemorating the [00:12:02] 150th anniversary of the Smithsonian and there was a traveling exhibition when this exhibition went to California. That's when members of the family saw the jacket and [00:12:14] they decided to, in addition to the jacket, to donate the short handled hoe and it was recently also on display with the Hispanic Heritage [00:12:26] Month commemoration.

Q: Take that again.

Response: Okay. It was on display last year during the Hispanic Heritage Month commemoration at the [00:12:37] Smithsonian with a number of other Latino Hispanic objects from the collections and we did a small case last year commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Delano [00:12:48] grape strike. We had the flag there, not necessarily the jacket. It was right in front of the jacket on a different display case and I think when visitors come to [00:12:58] the museum and they see the jacket on display, it really— I'm hoping that it'll make them reflect about Cesar Chavez as a great hero leader [00:13:09] in American history and also reflect on the conditions of the farm worker and what he fought for.

Q: Right. That was exactly the question I was going to ask [00:13:19] you, what you want them to learn from it. In the most recent case, the Hispanic Heritage Case, what other—

Response: Well, [00:13:28] that was kind of an eclectic exhibition. It had some tools from a wonderful collection of Puerto Rican objects. It had a dress [00:13:37] designed by— Well, I'm forgetting his name, the Dominican famous designer, clothing, fashion.

Q: That's okay. We'll look it up.

Response: I'm [00:13:49] ashamed of me. So it was a combination of different objects from the collection. It did have also a hat that Peter Liebhold acquired [00:14:02] doing the bracero history so it had a couple of objects related to him.

Q: . . . [chit-chat] . . . If we can spend a couple of minutes talking about— [00:14:31] you already mentioned it, but maybe if we could do a little more detail, what Cesar Chavez's life as a teenager might have been. What that probably [00:14:39] looked like with all the moving and so he graduated in 8th grade, did he go straight to work at that point?

Response: Yes. Cesar [00:14:51] lived in different places. He was born close to Yuma, Arizona, but he was part of a farm worker family so even though they stayed in Yuma for [00:15:04] some time, then they went where the jobs were, so he went through a lot of schools until he finally graduated and then he went right into farm [00:15:14] work himself. His father passed away and he didn't want his mother, Juanita, to work so him and Richard and [00:15:23] other brothers started working in the farms and doing that kind of labor to support the family and then he met his wife, Helen, and they moved [00:15:31] to California. I believe he married when he was 20 years old, so his teenager years were mostly trying to juggle school wherever that school was with work [00:15:44] and really doing all this hard work. He suffered injustice in schools at that time. They were not allowed to speak Spanish. Spanish was his [00:15:52] first language and he saw all the injustices regarding blacks and Hispanics, all the signs that said white only and he was not allowed to go to those [00:16:05] places, so it was a really very tough time growing up being a farm worker at that time.

Q: . . . [chit-chat] . . . We might go back and do that again. [00:16:25] That's exactly what I was looking for, sort of something that the kids could relate to.

Response: Yes. It's really very sad if you— Yeah, as [00:16:35] a kid, you think of yourself having to do all this hard work, working under the hot sun, having no free time, no leisure time, [00:16:44] no chances to watch TV or listen to music maybe on the radio. If they were allowed to do that and listen to some [00:16:52] corridos but pretty much it was all about working and he was himself really into education. He graduated. He obviously didn't have a good time in [00:17:03] school because of everything he was going through, but later on he was a strong advocate for teaching, for education and he actually taught many of the farm [00:17:11] workers how to read and how to write and [his officers] wrote books that relate to education and he took it upon himself to educate other farm [00:17:22] workers.

Q: Can we go back to sort of the early part of the answer about him being born in Arizona?

Response: He was born March 31st, 1927, close [00:17:36] to Yuma in Arizona. His father was a farm worker and they had some property there that unfortunately they lost to some issues with [Anglos] in that [00:17:46] area and taking over property that they owned and he went to different schools and when his father passed away, he had [00:17:55] just graduated from the 8th grade and he was 15 years old. He went into work with his brother to support their mother. They didn't want their mother [00:18:06] to work, so he started doing farm laboring in Arizona and then later on moved to California and worked in the valley there.

Q: Good. Do you think—[00:18:19] So the jacket's been in the collection only since 1993. Do you think that the importance and the meaning of the jacket has sort of changed for visitors over time? [00:18:26] Has it changed for the staff over time?

Response: I'm not sure it has changed, but certainly as we know more about the conditions of farm workers [00:18:41] and a lot of progress has been made— a lot of progress has happened or a lot has been accomplished by the work of people like Cesar [00:18:50] and the UFW, but I think that when we know that the conditions are still really bad, that there are many families under the poverty line, that [00:19:01] there is a high percentage of injury and deaths of people that work in the fields, that not everything is nice and pretty with the EPA and on pesticides. [00:19:11] It really has strong meaning when people know who he was and what he was advocating for.

Q: Do you find— So if it was on display, the jacket was [00:19:21] on display last year, do you find sort of that there has been an increased interest in these issues in the last couple of years? No.

Response: I don't want [00:19:33] to get into that.

Q: Okay.

Response: Yes, so let me think for a minute.

Q: Are we doing more Latino culture?

Response: Oh, that— Yeah, [00:19:46] that _____, yes. I thought you were talking specifically about— Yeah, I think Latino representation has improved a lot here at the Smithsonian, the [00:19:55] fact that there is more funding available to the museums to be able to produce more programming, more exhibitions. That's certainly a very positive change. [00:20:06] This program in Latino history and culture that I work for started last year at the museum and I feel we have done a lot to bring more Latino population [00:20:15] to the museum. We are now very interested in translating and particularly interested in new immigrants and language is barrier for many of them, so we are trying to [00:20:28] have big exhibitions like the Presidency or the Price of Freedom translated into Spanish. We've done work and we _____ focus groups and we know that the community really would [00:20:37] like to know about American history and come and visit the museum, so that would be a good thing to do, a service to the community.

Q: You mentioned that the jacket [00:20:49] came into the collection in '93. Do you know the story of how the jacket came into the collection?

Response: I know that curator Harry Rubenstein had had [00:20:59] conversations with Paul Chavez, Cesar's oldest son and he's the founder of the Cesar Chavez Foundation and the museum was very interested in having something from [00:21:09] Cesar Chavez

be part of the collections and when he passed away, Helen Chavez decided to donate this jacket to the museum and along with the jacket they also sent [00:21:19] some other memorabilia _____ related to the United Farm Workers.

Q: Do you know what those are?

Response: There're a couple of pins that says No Grapes, [00:21:28] a couple of bumper stickers, one of the UFW flags and I think that's about it.

Q: _____

Response: It could be— Yeah, it'd be interesting to have a link. [00:21:42] I still— I believe it's still up. Last year we did a roundtable conversation. We brought Luis Valdez to talk El Teatro Campesino [00:21:49] and Dolores Huerta and Andy Imutan who's actually one of the Filipino farm workers organizers of the Filipino workers, and that's [00:22:01] all documented. We have a DVD of that _____ program and we created a web page and some of the objects from the case that we did out there so it'll [00:22:11] be interesting to link to that. Check and see if it's still online.

Q: And in fact if we could use excerpts from that DVD.

Response: Yeah, absolutely. [00:22:20]

Q: Do you want to say something, sort of a statement sort of specifically about Chavez's relationship to non-violence and those [theories]? How [00:22:33] that came to be important to him and how he promoted that in his organizing.

Response: Gosh, I wish I knew more about [00:22:45] Father McDonald because he's the one name so I don't know what he's done, but really his work was inspired by Gandhi and Martin Luther King and really non-violence. [00:22:59] He saw through the work of this amazing men how non-violence, you can accomplish so much more than with violence and so he [00:23:08] really advocated for that and everybody that was part of the United Farm Workers followed him. I think it also is related to his strong spirituality [00:23:19] and religion and the Catholic church was very involved or he was very also involved. I guess it's the other way around and so those [00:23:30] are values that are also promoted by the church and everybody followed that [predicament].

Q: Other questions?

Q: Can you talk [00:23:48] about Cesar would organize or how he'd reach out to the workers and—

Q: Sort of the process—

Res: He could go on the field and really, and [00:24:00] there are great pictures of him and Dolores Huerta of really yelling, calling the workers there on the farm and gathering

them around and [00:24:07] telling them about the work of the United Farm Workers, letting them know that they had rights and they really need to fight and unionize to [00:24:17] achieve that and so they could endlessly go through the rows and call out to people and talk to them, distribute flyers, distribute *El Malcriado*, do little flags [00:24:30] and distribute that to the people, encourage them to tell others about the union and the rights that they have so it was [00:24:38] pretty much basically one-on-one going to the fields and yelling and calling them up and letting them know about their rights.

They [00:24:53] also had this— I guess I'm having trouble focusing on Cesar Chavez himself versus the United Farm Workers but it's kind of the same, so [00:25:02] also with the United Farm Workers, one of the very important things he did is start a radio, Radio Campesina, and so that was also a wonderful [00:25:14] way to get the word out because many workers listened to the radio and this was a Spanish language radio so that was another besides the word-of-mouth [00:25:23] and the *Malcriado* or the publications _____ radio and still it's very powerful medium to communicate with workers in the field.

I need to double [00:25:32] check, though, if it's Radio campesina. I'm pretty sure it is but now it might be called something else, so—

Q: That'll be good because students, [00:25:44] music, they tend to get it.

Response: Peter is the lead on—

Q: I didn't ask you specifically if you were to put the jacket on display now and thinking about [00:26:14] Cesar and his relationship to the union, what other things you might like to put with it, not necessarily stuff that is in the collection here but sort of _____ [00:26:22] in the grand universe what you might like to see with it.

Response: Yes. Well, I think it's very important to have, obviously, [00:26:30] his jacket, some of the books. It's amazing. In his office, he's got wonderful diversity of books, so many related to non-violence and I [00:26:39] think those could be really very important objects to have on display. He was awarded the Medal of Honor. No. The Presidential Medal— Sorry, [00:26:48] let me look at my notes. Clinton gave it to him, so what is it called? It's like the highest honor, Presidential—

Q: Presidential Medal of Freedom?

Response: Yes. [00:26:59] Presidential Medal of Freedom was awarded to him _____ Clinton so that I think it's a very important object that I would have on display along with [00:27:08] the jacket. Some of the pictures. There was a lot of art created also around this time. The United Farm Workers and the [00:27:18] spearheading basically the Latino civil rights and the whole Chicano movement at the same time and there were many artists, not only Luis Valdez [00:27:26] and El Teatro Campesino but many visual artists that also were creating art work about the marches and the work of Cesar Chavez and there're some beautiful paintings [00:27:38] that'll be very powerful to exhibit along with the jacket and also some other objects that relate to what was going on

in the country at that time in [00:27:47] the '60s and '70s related to civil rights and I'd like to have some of Cesar's materials, pair up with Martin Luther King personal objects and speeches, [00:27:58] have side-by-side speeches almost up to each other. That would be neat.

Q: Can you tell us for folks who don't know [00:28:06] what a corrido is.

Response: Okay. A corridor is a song and lyrics and they're usually played with a guitar and I know there are specifics about how [00:28:18] many lines but I don't remember and there's a great website, corridos website that'll be wonderful to link to, but it's like folkloric songs and it comes [00:28:30] from Mexico and it's a tradition and it's a way when they originated to tell a story or to carry on a message.

Q: Good. Is there anything that [00:28:41] appears to you that we haven't covered that you think would be—

Response: No. I think you did very well covering all the material that I [00:28:56] had. It'll be interesting to ask _____ so how this relates to the major, the bigger picture of American history so that it's not so focused on [00:29:08] this community and Cesar but how it relates to American history.

Q: Well, I have a question. As a curator, you see things come into the museum, there's the [00:29:21] Hope Diamond, there's wealthy dresses, this place is filled with very expensive, high-end objects and yet Cesar's shirt or his [00:29:31] jacket, that's all that stands for him. It's more of what he did. It's not the things he owned. In other words, when you— Can you speak [00:29:42] to that because the museum is full of so many opulent things that this is something that's so simple yet it stands for an amazing life.

Response: Yes.

Q: And [00:29:53] as a curator, you really know this probably better than most people coming in.

Response: I'm trying to think how to say that. It's not the object itself; it's [00:30:08] what it means. Is that what you're—

Q: Yeah. It sort of stands for his life in a sense. It's so simple. He wore that and he was threatened [00:30:16] and he was hungry and he was _____. As museums go, it's just a jacket but it's his whole life.

Response: Exactly.

Q: And that's something that sometimes [00:30:32] maybe the kids miss, that they want to see something expensive thing that somebody had or something amazing, but it's not like that. If you [00:30:41] could— Just that meaning of his life in that sense because the museum collects things, that they stand for something, [00:30:50] but the thing he

gave isn't some wealthy big object. It's not a car collection or diamond rings or exotic stuff.

Q: Everyday objects.

Response: Yeah. We [00:31:07] have quite a few everyday objects. Let me think how can I say that. Well, I think with the black nylon jacket it really looks like a [00:31:26] simple object. Many people may have jackets like that, but it's really the fact that Cesar Chavez was the owner of this jacket and even more than owning it, [00:31:37] the fact that he put it on, he sweated while marching and rallying the farm workers and the fact that he was such a big persona, to know that this [00:31:47] belonged to him is really what gives meaning to this object. In the museum, we often collect things that are very important just because of the [00:31:55] aesthetics because of how they look and not necessarily many times how they relate to the people and to everyday people in the country, so I think this [00:32:05] object really speaks to the commonality of the human being, the humanity of all of us but the fact that he owned it and the purpose of it is what [00:32:14] gives meaning. I didn't say that quite right, though.

Q: You can have as many chances as you want. I thought that was great.

Q: I thought that was good. That was a great answer. You also _____ [00:32:33] this thing about how he was still working in the fields even though he was organizing, too, but how he supported his family.

Response: When he was [00:32:41] young? Or later on? Yes.

Q: A professional organizer. He was still out in the fields himself.

Response: I could characterize Cesar Chavez [00:32:49] as a very much grounded, down-to-earth leader. He was really out there working alongside many of the farm workers while he was spreading the [00:33:01] word about unionizing and how they needed to come together and fight for their own rights. He was an endless worker. He was an endless reader. [00:33:12] He spent many many hours reading. He wrote all his own speeches and many times he didn't write them and so it was whatever came to him that he [00:33:20] was saying in important meetings at the different conventions and when he was rallying the kids.

They have at the Cesar Chavez Foundation in La Paz in Keene, [00:33:33] California, and they have many of his papers there and his correspondence and it's quite interesting to go through those materials and see his own handwriting [00:33:45] and the way he could express himself very simple at the same time well educated and that came from all the reading that he was doing and also being [00:33:54] a farm worker himself, knowing how to communicate with the people that he needed to reach out to.

Q: Great.

Q: And his family continuing his work?

Response: Oh, [00:34:07] absolutely. Everybody. I was very fortunate to work with the Cesar Chavez Foundation which is at the headquarters in La Paz Keene and it's really a family [00:34:20] affair. All Cesar's son and Helen's sons and daughters followed his work. They are all activists. Even Cesar's grandchildren are now [00:34:30] leading the Foundation and very involved in rights for the farm workers and Helen Chavez lives there still in La Paz and Cesar Chavez [00:34:42] is buried there and they recently redid a pantheon for him at the Foundation, but everybody in the family and Richard Chavez [being] his brother [00:34:55]. He married Dolores Huerta so it's also Dolores's family and her children very involved in the Foundation on all the work. Almost everybody's [00:35:05] related to everybody there.

Q: Excellent.

Q: I'm just curious given current events that teenagers would certainly be aware of whether an encounter [00:35:22] with this jacket would have today some special poignance or extra significance. Do you know what I'm saying?

Response: Yes. Well, I hope when they come and see the [00:35:35] jacket here they realize that Cesar Chavez came from a migrant family and who he was working for were also people that immigrated into this country and I'm hoping [00:35:47] that they could be able to make the connection of how important it is to the sustainability of this country to continue immigration. That was my political [00:36:00] views, but I didn't know if you were pointing to that, but it also reflects on his work but also that although he was born in the United States, he [00:36:11] came from a family that immigrated from Mexico.

Q: The life of the jacket is alive today. It's not— The story isn't just 30 years.

Response: Oh, [00:36:23] I can— Yes, and I was kind of pointing to that when I was talking about some of the statistics and that I think when they see this jacket, they [00:36:31] realize that there are still many farm workers' families working in this country and those that bring the food to our tables and still many [00:36:40] under poverty line. There's a high rate of death in the field, of injury, or different kinds of illnesses and there are pretty well documented statistics [00:36:52] about the conditions of farm workers, that even though the UFW has accomplished a great deal, there're still many families [00:37:00] doing this kind of work that don't have access to many of the resources and opportunities that this country provides.

Q: Great. . . . [chit-chat] . . .