

CHILDHOOD DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION 1930s

----- Cesar Chavez -----

During the Great Depression of the 1930s thousands of farmers (and their families) were left bankrupt, jobless, and then homeless. California became the most popular destination for those seeking employment as migrant farm workers. One of these uprooted families was the Chavez family, who left Arizona for California in 1934. In this excerpt, Cesar Chavez (1927–1993), the founder of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC), the first union of migratory workers in the country, recalls some of the challenges he and his family faced as Mexican-American migrant workers.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Recognizing Bias

What factors would you consider in evaluating this document as historical evidence?

Oh, I remember having to move out of our house. My father had brought in a team of horses and wagon. We had always lived in that house, and we couldn't understand why we were moving out. When we got to the other house, it was a worse house, a poor house. That must have been around 1934. I was about six years old.

It's known as the North Gila Valley, about fifty miles north of Yuma. My dad was being turned out of this small plot of land. He had inherited *this* from his father, who had homesteaded it. I saw my two, three other uncles also moving out. And for the same reason. The bank had foreclosed on the loan.

If the local bank approved, the Government would guarantee the loan and small farmers like my father would continue in business. It so happened the president of the bank was the guy who most wanted our land. We were surrounded by him; he owned all the land around us. Of course, he wouldn't pass the loan....

We had been poor, but we knew every night there was a bed *there*, and that *this* was our room. There was a kitchen. It was sort of a settled life, and we had chickens and hogs, eggs and all those things. But that all of a sudden changed. When you're small, you can't figure these things out. You know something's not right and you don't like it, but you don't question it and you don't let that get you down. You sort of just continue to move....

When we moved to California, we would work after school. Sometimes we wouldn't go. "Following the crops," we missed much school. Trying to get

enough money to stay alive the following winter, the whole family picking apricots, walnuts, prunes. We were pretty new, we had never been migratory workers. We were taken advantage of quite a bit by the labor contractor and the crew pusher [a man who specializes in contracting people to do cheap labor]....

Labor strikes were everywhere. We were one of the strikingest families, I guess. My dad didn't like the conditions, and he began to agitate. Some families would follow, and we'd go elsewhere. Sometimes we'd come back. We couldn't find a job elsewhere, so we'd come back. Sort of beg for a job. Employers would know and they would make it very humiliating....

One of the experiences I had. We went through Indio, California. Along the highway there were signs in most of the small restaurants that said "White Trade Only." My dad read English, but he didn't really know the meaning. He went in to get some coffee—a pot that he had, to get some coffee for my mother. He asked us not to come in, but we followed him anyway. And this young waitress said, "We don't serve Mexicans. Get out of here." I was there, and I saw it and heard it. She paid no more attention. I'm sure for the rest of her life she never thought of it again. But every time we thought of it, it hurt us. So we got back in the car and we had a difficult time trying—in fact, we never got the coffee....

We'd go to school two days sometimes, a week, two weeks, three weeks at most. This is when we were migrating. We'd come back to our winter base, and if we were lucky, we'd get in a good solid all of January, February, March, April, May. So we had five months out of a possible nine months. We started counting how many schools we'd been to and we counted thirty-seven. Elementary schools. From first to eighth grade. Thirty-seven. We never got a transfer. Friday we didn't tell the teacher or anything. We'd just go home. And they accepted this.

I remember one teacher—I wondered why she was asking so many questions. (In those days anybody asked questions, you became suspicious. Either a cop or a social worker.) She was a young teacher, and she just wanted to know why we were behind. One day she drove into the camp. That was quite an event, because we never had a teacher come over. Never. So it was, you know, a very meaningful day for us.

This I remember. Some people put this out of their minds and forget it. I don't want to forget it. I don't want it to take the best of me, but I want to be there because this is what happened. This is the truth, you know. History.

Source: *Hard Times* by Studs Terkel. Copyright © 1970 by Studs Terkel.
Reprinted by permission of Donadio & Ashworth, Inc.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER

Students may answer that several factors must be considered when evaluating this document as historical evidence. They may argue that Chavez's memories may omit some details and emphasize others. Students may note that this account provides useful historical information about Mexican migrant workers during the 1930s. To determine the account's value as historical evidence, students might compare it with other primary sources about migrant workers in the 1930s. They also might check the accuracy of factual information given in the account.