



EPISODE 9, 2004: CHAVEZ BANNER? , SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA.

Gwen: Our last story explores the birth of a major American labor and cultural movement. It's March 17, 1966. On a cold winter morning, a small group of mostly Mexican and Mexican-American farm workers set out by foot from Delano, California, to the state capitol in Sacramento. Their goal: to gain public support for their struggle to end over a hundred years of exploitation of. At first, few people take notice. But as the marchers passed through town after town, they picked up more and more supporters... and national more attention. Twenty-five days, and 350 grueling miles later, they reached the steps of the state capitol, ten thousand people strong. What started as a tiny group of largely ignored day laborers has grown into a powerful movement that captures the nation's attention. Their leader, César Chávez, becomes a household name. The march marked a pivotal moment in American labor history, and the birth of a Latino cultural and political movement. Leading the way is a banner that hasn't been seen since. Over 30 years later, a woman from San Francisco believes this beautiful banner led the famous 1966 march. If she's right, then it's not only an artifact from a celebrated labor struggle, but also the symbolic focus of the emergence of Chicanos in American history. Vicki Vertiz came across the banner at San Francisco State University Labor Archives. In 1994, she joined another march commemorating César Chávez's life and legacy.

Vicki: It gave us a real appreciation for what the farm worker's life must be like, day in and day out to not only walk in the hot sun all day, but to labor. It really fueled our love for the movement. It would be really exciting to know that this banner had been part of the 1966 Delano march, because I believe that it's important to document such a momentous occasion in American history.

Gwen: I'm Gwen Wright, and I've come to San Francisco to meet Vicky.

Vicki: Well Gwen, here's the banner.

Gwen: But it really catches your eye, these two icons. This was the Virgin of Guadalupe, isn't that right?

Vicki: Yes, it is. She means a lot to a lot of different Mexican and Mexican-American communities, but in particular, in my upbringing, she represents strength, and unity, and power. And you can really tell that somebody took care in putting it together and making sure that everything was perfect.

Gwen: So Vicki, what exactly would you like to know about this banner?

Vicki: Well Gwen, I'd like to know if this banner led the 1966 Grape Boycott March.

Gwen: Well, it would be very, very important to tie a banner like this to a significant moment in American history. Well Vicki, I'll see what I can find out about it, and I'll let you know. It'll be a very interesting pursuit.

Vicki: Absolutely. Thank you Gwen.

Gwen: I vividly remember the National Grape Boycott of the mid 1960s. I'll never forget the national news coverage of the 1966 march, seeing prominent figures like Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy standing side by side with Chavez. And Chavez himself, on the steps of the Sacramento state capitol on Easter Sunday, announcing that one major grower had agreed to sign the first genuine labor contract with farm workers in American history. Over the next 30 years César Chávez continued to fight for the rights of farm workers. He finally died in his sleep in 1993. But he'll always be remembered for the march he led in 1966 – a march on which this banner could have led the way.

Gwen: Hi, Susan?

Susan: Hi!

Gwen: Since the banner is in the care of the San Francisco State University Labor Archives, I'm meeting with their director, Susan Sherwood.

Susan: It's a beautiful piece, and we are thrilled to have it.

Gwen: What do you know about the banner Susan? How did you acquire it?

Susan: Well, we actually don't know much. Um we have here a letter of acquisition- it's from the California State Archives- and about all the information we have is in that letter.

Gwen: According to this letter, a Margaret Almada donated the banner in 2001. Mrs. Almada states that she's the widow of one Louis Contreras. She claims Louis acquired the banner at the end of the 1966 march. So you haven't been able

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to verify any of these contentions though?

Susan: No, we have not, and we would love to find out if it is the 1966 banner. The 40th anniversary of the march is coming up in 2006. We would love to do an exhibit, and have the banner the centerpiece of the exhibit.

Gwen: Unfortunately, the letter has no contact information for Margaret Almada. It's going to take some work to find her. First though, I'd like to take a look at the banner itself. I know banners have been widely used throughout American history to embody organizations – and as potent symbols of hope and change. Political groups like suffragettes, antiwar protestors and unions often carried them in mass processions, just like soldiers carried battle standards. The Mexican American labor movement was particularly fond of using them. But could this banner have been carried on the 1966 march? I'm meeting with Tere Romo, the curator of the San Francisco Mexican Museum, and a historian of Chicano art. We're meeting at a gallery in Sacramento.

Tere: That's beautiful. It's a gorgeous piece, and definitely in the format of the banners that were carried.

Gwen: In what sense?

Tere: Well, you see that it has a way to pin it up to the top, which meant it would have had a pole, which would have meant that it was carried on some kind of a, an, a, a armature. And this is very much in the keeping of the way they carried these banners in Mexico, all the way through Mexican history. This is the standard banners, with the fringe at the bottom, and then the main image, which would have been the Virgen de Guadalupe at that time as well.

Gwen: The Virgin of Guadalupe is a dark-skinned, uniquely Mexican interpretation of the Virgin Mary.

Tere: The Virgen de Guadalupe is the protectress, and she's also the patron of Mexico, and it's an image that a lot of Mexicans would have associated right away with a Mexican effort. César Chávez, who was a very astute organizer, would have known that if he used the symbol, he would have then made a very direct, sort of shorthand, for people, especially Mexicanos, that this was a union that was tied back to not only religion, but also a cultural connection as well.

Gwen: And what about this imagery?

Tere: This is the symbol that came to stand for the United Farm Workers movement. If you look at it upside-down, it's an inverted pyramid.

Gwen: Oh, so it's referring back to the Aztec pyramid.

Tere: Exactly. Someone who was also maybe not Mexican would see the eagle and think of the U.S. uses eagles for its government emblems, and also as a symbol of power.

Gwen: So the imagery looks right. But I need more than that to authenticate the banner. Is there any way to date this banner precisely?

Tere: Well, I think there's a very key clue in the letters down here at the bottom, because as you can see, it says "N-F-W-A". The NFWA was a union that César Chávez had started in 1962.

Gwen: The NFWA later merged with another union to become the United Farm Workers. That was in the summer of 1966. The march occurred about five months earlier. This means it could indeed have been carried in the '66 march and it probably wouldn't have been used after that.

Tere: It would put it in that time period of before the summer of '66, and very much in keeping with the march.

Gwen: So the story behind the banner could be true. But to be sure, I need to find out how it got into the hands of Margaret Almada, who donated it to the Archives. I need to track her down. I make a list of names from local phone directories, but none of the Almas I contact know anything about the banner. What about the Internet? After more searching, I discover a Margaret Almada in Hawaii. I'll send her an e-mail and see if the lead pans out. The next morning I get my answer.

Gwen (on phone): Oh! I'm so relieved to find you. I've got a few questions I want to ask about the history of that banner.

Gwen: It's Margaret Almada in Hawaii. She is the one who donated the banner to the Archives.

Gwen (on phone): Could I arrange for us to meet?

Gwen: Hopefully, Margaret can tell me if our banner led the Delano march. We're meeting at the capital building in



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Sacramento, where the marchers gathered in 1966 at the end of their 350 mile journey. The first thing I ask is how her late husband Louis Contreras ended up with our banner? Margaret, did you find the picture of Louis to show me?

Margaret: Yes, I did.

Gwen: Oh, wonderful. Oh Margaret, he looks like such a lovely man. You can see these two sides of being very fun but also solid.

Margaret: Oh yes, yes. He told me about it probably five years after we were married, umm and, like many of the stories he had told me, I wasn't quite certain how accurate it was.

Gwen: [laughs]

Margaret: And so it wasn't until, unfortunately, after he passed, I was at home watching television, and I was watching a program about the César Chávez march. And so I was moved when I saw the program start with the banner at the beginning of the program. And naturally, I jumped up, pulled it out, looked at it, and got goose bumps, because I knew I had a piece of history.

Gwen: How did Louis get the banner? Was he on the march?

Margaret: He was not actually in the march, he was at the church, which received them at the end of the march, and that was Our Lady of Guadalupe, here in Sacramento.

Gwen: Louis was a parishioner, and a caretaker at the church.

Margaret: Well, Louis was making certain that everybody had housing that night. Those individuals who had not been sent out to the community, were staying in the cafeteria. And so he turned to the banner and also made sure it was secure, by removing it from the cafeteria.

Gwen: This is interesting, but the problem is that Margaret wasn't there. Fortunately, I've just heard from someone who can really help me. Harvard professor Marshall Ganz was the union organizer, and in 1966, he marched alongside his close friend, César Chávez, all the way to Sacramento.

Marshall: I think his great strength at this point of the movement was his ability to draw all sorts of threads together from different sources to weave a tapestry that was different than all of them, but embraced them.

Gwen: Marshall kept a journal that reveals the genesis of the march. Maybe there's a clue here about our banner. At a meeting, Chávez explores various ideas.

Marshall: "Why not march to Sacramento instead and put the heat on Governor Brown, Yes, someone else said, and on the way to Sacramento, the march could pass through most of the farm worker towns, then Chávez asked, why should it be a "march" at all? It will be Lent soon, a time for reflection, for penance, for asking forgiveness. Perhaps ours should be a pilgrimage, a "peregrinacion", which could arrive at Sacramento on Easter Sunday."

Gwen: And what better way to lead a pilgrimage, than with a banner? Marshall shows me a collection of photos taken during the march. A banner, looking just like ours, is leading the way.

Marshall: As we went up the valley, she kept being passed from one farmer to another to another to another. Well, this was quite a bit later in the march, 'cause here Caesar's limping pretty badly with, using that cane to hold himself.

Gwen: Ah, and this must be you... is that right?

Marshall: Yeah, right here with the clipboard

Gwen: Yeah.

Marshall: and same mustache.

Gwen: Oh! The steps of the capitol...

Marshall: Yeah, this was the arrival in Sacramento. Oh, and there she is, there's the banner.

Gwen: But is our banner the one in these photos? There's only one way to find out.

Gwen (uncovering banner): Is this the banner that led the march?



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Gwen: I'm back in San Francisco, to tell Vicki everything I've learned about the banner. Well, this has been quite an exciting story to piece together Vicki. Then I tell her that Marshall Ganz had the answer to her question.

Flashback to Marshall:

Gwen (uncovering banner): Is this the banner that led the march?

Marshall: Oh yeah...oh ...yeah that's her alright. The last time I saw her, of course, was, well, at the capitol, when we had the big rally, she was there. But then, we all went from there to Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. We had a big celebration in the church hall, lots of beer, and that's the last time I remember seeing her.

Flashforward to Vicki:

Gwen: This is indeed the banner that led the famous march in 1966.

Vicki: Wow, that's great. That's really cool! That's great that it's here. This banner was part of such a momentous occasion in union history, and in American history. That's great.

Gwen: As a special gift to the archives, I have here an oral history to go with the material history. This is a videotape of interviews with the two special people who validate the history of this banner, with Margaret Almada talking about her husband Louis, and one of Marshall Ganz, now a professor at Harvard, who had been on the march. A copy for you-

Vicki: Wow

Gwen: -and a copy for the Archives.

Vicki: Thank you.

Gwen: It validates the history of this banner.

Vicki: That's wonderful. Thank you so much. It's so important to preserve this history, for all of our benefits, and for our children's benefit.

Gwen: César Chávez led his union to many victories, but the farm workers' struggle still continues. Half of all farm worker families still earn less than the poverty level. The grueling work still results in an average lifespan of 49 years. Nevertheless, the legacy of César Chávez's life remains an inspiration, not just for farm workers, but for all Americans.

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