

Joaquin Valley during the following year. It was led by two extraordinary people: César Chávez and Dolores Huerta.

Despite his rejection of the term *Chicano*, César Chávez (1927-1993) remains the single most important representative of the movimiento; indeed, he is the preeminent figure in the history of Mexican Americans.¹⁰ A legend in his own lifetime, it is difficult to separate fact from fiction in relating the outlines of his long and productive career. César Estrada Chávez was born on March 31, 1927, on a small family farm near Yuma, Arizona. During the Depression, his grandfather lost the property, and the Chávez family, forced to move, was reduced to working as migratory farm laborers. For the next few years, they traveled up and down the agricultural valleys of California eking out a living. Education for the Chávez children was sporadic, given their nomadic existence, and young César was forced to abandon his studies altogether after the eighth grade. During World War II, the teenager, short on career options, enlisted in the Navy and served in the Pacific. Upon his release in 1946, armed with greater self-confidence, the young veteran returned to the fields, joining the ill-fated NFLU.

Eventually, Chávez settled down with his wife Helen and their growing family in San Jose, California, where he continued to do farm work. It was here in the Bay Area that he met and was influenced by Fred Ross, who recruited him into the Community Service Organization in 1952. Hardworking and dedicated, Chávez made his way up the organizational ladder very swiftly, becoming CSO regional director in 1958. In this capacity, he attempted to steer the association toward advocacy of the rights of farmworkers. He met fierce resistance among members who preferred to focus attention on urban and middle-class concerns. Exasperated, Chávez quit the CSO in 1961 and took his family to Delano, his wife's hometown. Using his life savings, he initiated a new union, the Farm Workers Association—known later as the National Farm Workers Association and, later still, the United Farm Workers—which was founded in Fresno on September 30, 1962.

Because the UFW always focused on the family unit, women came to play prominent roles in union activities. Among them, Helen Chávez and Jessie López de la Cruz stand out.¹¹ From the very outset, though, César Chávez's most trusted lieutenant, often considered cofounder of the union, was Dolores Huerta. Although eclipsed by Chávez throughout most of her life, Huerta remains in many ways, as her biographer Richard A. García has argued, a better symbol of Chicanismo than her friend and mentor.¹²

Dolores Fernández Huerta was born in Dawson, New Mexico, in 1930. Her parents divorced when she was five; and her mother, the seminal force in her life, took the family to the west coast. Unlike Chávez, Dolores emerged from a middle-class background. Her mother, who started off as a waitress and cannery worker,