



SONNY MONTES

and MEXICAN AMERICAN

ACTIVISM *in* OREGON

GLENN ANTHONY MAY

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Introduction

In the mid-1970s, after a decade of intense activity and considerable accomplishment, the Chicano movement, the Mexican American struggle for civil rights and social justice, appeared to be losing steam.¹ Cesar Chavez's well-known union, the United Farm Workers, was engaged in an endless, enervating battle with the Teamsters over the right to represent agricultural laborers in contract negotiations. The New Mexican activist Reies López Tijerina, after several lengthy periods of incarceration, had lost much of his following. The Brown Berets were disbanded. The one concerted effort by Mexican Americans to create a national political party had seemingly failed, crippled by conflict between its two leaders, Corky Gonzales and José Angel Gutiérrez. While not all the signs were unfavorable and, as subsequent developments would reveal, a great deal of creative work by Chicano activists lay ahead, the energy and relentless forward movement of the mid- and late-1960s were more difficult to detect.

There were, however, exceptions to the general trend, and one could be found in Oregon's Willamette Valley, hardly a hotbed of Chicano activism up to then. There, for about four years, Celedonio Montes Jr.—Sonny Montes, as he was generally known—a former migrant farmworker from South Texas, mobilized the state's nascent Mexican American community and mounted a social movement. The movement's goal was to save the Colegio Cesar Chavez, a small, besieged, financially challenged college that catered to a largely Mexican American student body. The collective-action movement led by Montes—which featured sit-ins, protest marches, rallies, prayer vigils, and a consistently high level of Chicano support—received a plethora of media attention at the time. Sonny Montes himself became a very visible public figure.

This book tells three related stories. The first is Sonny's. It recounts the process by which a person born to a family of migrant farmworkers became the leader of a social movement. In 1966, at the age of twenty-two, Sonny Montes traveled to Oregon intending to pick the crops and somewhat by chance came into the orbit of—and went to work for—an Oregon-based War on Poverty agency

called the Valley Migrant League (VML). Providing educational opportunities, vocational training, and other services to Mexican American migrant farmworkers who came to Oregon's Upper Willamette Valley, the VML helped many of them to leave the migrant stream and settle in Oregon. Furthermore, at a time of widespread prejudice and discrimination against Mexican Americans, the organization empowered those people to solve their own problems. Due to the efforts of Montes and others, the VML was transformed from an Anglo-run agency created to serve Mexican American migrants into an organization run by and for Mexican Americans. One result of that process of empowerment was the emergence of a Mexican American political elite in the area. In the 1970s working as chief administrative officer for the Colegio and faced with a formidable combination of adversaries, Montes enlisted that elite in his campaign to keep the college alive.

A prominent theme in this first story is *asymmetry*—a problem that remains at the heart of the Mexican American experience in the United States.² Over the years, most Mexican Americans in the United States, Sonny included, have suffered disadvantages based on five human variables: skin color, ethnic background, level of income, religion, and language. What is more, lurking beneath the surface has been another reality that has set the Mexican-origin population apart: large numbers of them have resided illegally in the country. One unfortunate consequence of that reality has been a tendency on the part of many Anglos to view suspiciously all Mexican-origin people, legal and illegal alike.³

The situation that confronted Sonny and his people was historically constructed. It resulted in part from mid-nineteenth-century U.S. imperialism, which brought the region that became the states of Texas, California, New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada, and Arizona under U.S. control. One consequence of that conquest was the progressive socioeconomic decline of the Mexican population in that region.⁴ But, in truth, the system of Mexican American subordination did not reach full-blown proportions until the twentieth century. Beginning in the 1890s and continuing until the Great Depression, a massive number of Mexicans—the estimates run upward of a million—entered the United States, escaping

destitution and political disruption in their homeland and drawn northward by the opportunity to earn a better living. In that period, Mexicans found work not only in agriculture, which was expanding rapidly in the Southwest, but also in railroad construction, mining, and other industrial lines. As new immigrants flooded into the Southwest, increasing numbers of already established Mexican American families moved beyond the confines of the Southwest in search of better wages, with tens of thousands of them settling in Detroit, Chicago, and other cities in the Midwest. Although living and working conditions varied considerably from place to place, one constant was that most Mexican Americans endured many kinds of discrimination, experienced segregation in the schools, could not participate in the political process, and otherwise were subjected to second-class citizenship.⁵

Much of this book examines Sonny Montes's efforts to cope with the problem of asymmetry, both in his own life and in the lives of other Mexican Americans. Born into a family that spent much of its time following the crops, Sonny entered his adulthood believing that his future lay only in farmwork. But a serendipitous encounter with a man named Jose Garcia diverted him from that path and brought him to the VML. Taking a job with that organization in 1966, Sonny entered an extended period of addressing and wrestling with the problem of Mexican American asymmetry.

The second story concerns the development of a Mexican American community in Oregon. In 1965, the year the VML began operations in Oregon's Upper Willamette Valley, only a few thousand Mexican Americans resided full-time in the state, although at least ten thousand more arrived annually during the harvest months to work as migrant farm laborers. By 1980, the state's Mexican American resident population had increased to more than 45,000 and even more explosive growth was about to occur. One impetus for that expansion was the VML, which provided migrant and seasonal farmworkers with educational and vocational tools that made it possible for them to leave the migrant stream if they chose to do so. Its adult education programs both improved English-language skills and helped many to earn high school degrees; and its vocational training programs gave people new job options. Due

in large measure to those programs and other types of assistance provided by VML personnel, large numbers of longtime migrant families opted to settle in Oregon.

But, as I have already suggested, the community development work of the VML went well beyond settlement assistance. The league also worked to give Mexican Americans a political education; these efforts became a priority after May 1967, when a new executive director, John Little, took charge. Under Little, who was both a mentor to and friend of Sonny, the VML pursued a policy of involving the people it served in the running of the organization. It hired hundreds of migrants and former migrants to administer programs, placed dozens more on the agency's board of directors, and involved many people in towns scattered around the Upper Willamette Valley in determining the institution's priorities and assessing its performance. In a sense, the VML served as a school of democracy for many of the Mexican Americans who came in contact with it, and the practical education they received there prepared them to assume positions of leadership in their emerging ethnic community. An important by-product of this political education project was the creation of a Mexican American network in Oregon. For, in addition to training a political elite, the VML was producing a closely related community, one whose shared experience with the VML provided a connective tissue. The Mexican American community in Oregon was being built on strong associational foundations.

The book's third story describes the development of a Chicano movement in Oregon. To some degree, of course, that social movement, which coalesced around the Colegio Cesar Chavez's struggle for survival in the mid-1970s, was a continuation of the second story: it could not have occurred without the earlier substantial increase in Oregon's Mexican American population and the strong bonds, created largely by the VML, among the political elite of that growing ethnic community. These conditions made it possible for Sonny Montes to launch and sustain the social movement he directed.

There is a David-versus-Goliath quality to this third story. On the one side, we find Sonny and his allies, attempting to save a college that has few students, nonfunctioning furnaces, and crippling debts.

On the other, we find two federal agencies—the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW)—and an academic accreditation organization, all sharing serious doubts about whether the tiny Chicano college should be allowed to continue its operations. Sonny and his group initially tried to reach an accommodation with those organizations, but the arrangements agreed to did not last, primarily because the college’s financial situation continued to deteriorate. The Colegio then turned to collective action and to legal remedies—approaches that wore down its adversaries and kept the college going for a while. But in the end, the school’s underlying financial weakness could not be overcome, and the Colegio quietly passed out of existence in the early 1980s.

The key objective of my examination of the protest campaign that developed around the college is simply to understand it. My effort to do so has been influenced by the analytical insights of a number of well-known students of modern social movements—among them, Sidney Tarrow, Doug McAdam, Charles Tilly, and Mario Diani. I devote particular attention to four variables that have played significant roles in modern social movements: the combination of political opportunities that helped to spawn collective action, the repertoire of collective-action techniques adopted by the participants, the ways in which protesters framed their protests, and the mobilizing structure of the movement.⁶ This discussion will, I hope, help to explain how, at a time when Mexican American activism was flagging in major Chicano population centers, the Chicano movement in Oregon was becoming more contentious, and also why the momentum of Oregon Chicano’s activists was ultimately arrested.⁷

Overview of the Book

In the text that follows, I begin by looking at Sonny’s life up to the age of twenty-two—his socialization in Weslaco, Texas, a segregated community just north of the Mexican border, and subsequently in Fort Worth and the San Joaquin Valley; his entry into the migrant worker stream (a stream that included huge numbers of Mexican Americans in that era); and his family’s asymmetric interactions with Anglos. My chief aim here is to convey a sense of what it was like

to grow up in a migrant farmworker family, living six months of the year in a home base and the other six in distant labor camps. Following the prologue, the first chapter sets the stage by discussing developments in three overlapping geographical theaters (the Upper Willamette Valley, Oregon, and the United States) in the years preceding Sonny's arrival in Oregon.

Chapters two to four look at Sonny, the VML, and the VML's role in community formation during the period 1966–71. Although Sonny began work with the VML as a program aide, he rose quickly through the ranks. He also underwent a process of radicalization, influenced to some extent by the culture of protest in the mid-1960s but even more by an Anglo supervisor and mentor, John Little, who had just returned from five years of community organization work in Latin America. In 1967 and 1968, Sonny played a major role in transforming the VML into a Mexican American–run organization. While continuing to work at the VML for the next three years, he became involved in a variety of Chicano causes.

The next three chapters cover the period 1971 through 1978. In 1971, Sonny Montes entered a new phase of his life, accepting a job at Mt. Angel College, a small liberal arts college in Mt. Angel, Oregon, that was experiencing financial problems. Hired to recruit minority students to the campus, he also took courses at the college and was able to earn a degree. Meanwhile, his influence on the campus grew steadily. In 1973, with the college close to bankruptcy, he brokered an arrangement by which it became a Chicano-run institution with a new name, Colegio Cesar Chavez, and in the next year, he became its chief administrative officer. After that, with the college besieged from all sides, Sonny, the college community, and its Mexican American supporters battled valiantly to keep the college in operation, mounting a long-term collective-action campaign. In 1978, despite formidable odds, the Colegio worked out an arrangement with HUD, the holder of the bulk of the school's unpaid loan notes, to pay off the debt. For the moment, it appeared to have survived.

A final chapter focuses on three developments in the thirty-plus years after Sonny left the Colegio: the closing of the college, Sonny's vocational history, and the relentless growth of Oregon's Mexican American community.

A Note about Accents and Terminology

Over the past fifty years, Mexican Americans have varied widely in their use of Spanish-language accents—particularly, in the spelling of names. On the whole, I have not included accents in the names of the people discussed in this book. There are, however, exceptions—for example, historical actors such as Reies López Tijerina and José Angel Gutiérrez, whose names have consistently been rendered with accents in the historical literature, and authors whose names appear with accent marks on the title pages of their books. I have also included accents in the names of organizations that have used them consistently and in any book titles in which they have appeared.

The terms “Mexican American” and “Chicano/a” both refer to Mexican-origin U.S. residents. But, since the second term did not come into public discourse until the mid-1960s, I have done my best to avoid using it in reference to pre-1960s lives and events. Finally, after much internal debate, I have adopted the somewhat problematic convention of using the word “Anglo” to describe the European American whites who appear in these pages.

PROLOGUE

From Weslaco to Cornelius

In the late spring of 1966, twenty-two-year-old Sonny Montes was living in Reedley, California, with his wife, Librada, and young son, Armando.¹ For the past two years, he had earned a living by assisting an elderly couple in running a thirty-five-acre farm that specialized in grape production. A formidable human presence—physically imposing at six feet tall and about 230 pounds—Sonny was an industrious, powerful, able worker. He repaired the fences, oversaw the irrigation, applied the pesticides and sulfur, prepared the fields, hauled the crops to the packing sheds, and pruned the grapevines after the grapes were picked. He also supervised the grape picking, which was done by workers supplied by a labor contractor. At the outset, a few aspects of the job had been unfamiliar to him. He had many battles with the spraying machine; its defiant starting mechanism sometimes defeated his efforts to spray the crops evenly. He also made mistakes in preparing the fields for irrigation and applying the water to them. Still, in time he mastered the techniques. Agricultural work was Sonny's *métier*, and he was good at it.

Sonny was born on May 24, 1944, in Weslaco, Texas, in the Lower Rio Grande, and that town continued to be his family's base of operations for the first ten years of his life. Weslaco was composed of two entirely separate communities, one inhabited by Anglos and the other by Mexican Americans. As in much of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, the segregation had initially been legally prescribed. In 1921, the newly created municipality of Weslaco passed an ordinance designating the area south of the railroad tracks for Anglo residences and businesses and the area north of the tracks for industry and Mexican American residences and businesses. The two side-by-side communities that emerged over the following decades had little in common but their name. South of the tracks, the streets were paved, a modern sewer system was in place, many of the houses were well constructed, and English was the spoken language. North of the tracks, roads were unpaved, there were no sewers, most of the houses were tiny and cheaply made, and Spanish was spoken almost

exclusively. According to the U.S. Census of 1950, the population of Weslaco was 7,514. Of that number, about two-fifths were Anglos, almost all of them residing south of the tracks; about three-fifths were people of Mexican descent, most of them living north of the tracks; and exactly 72 were African Americans, also living in the northern part of town. The situation that prevailed in Weslaco could be observed throughout the Lower Rio Grande Valley: Anglos were favored and dominant; brown-skinned people like Sonny were, by and large, disadvantaged and subordinate.²

As a child growing up in Weslaco, Sonny had almost no contact with Anglos, except for his teachers at the North Ward School, one of four elementary schools on the north side of town. No Anglos attended the school he went to. He had no Anglo friends, and outside of school, he rarely spoke to Anglos. While some Mexican Americans in Weslaco ventured into the Anglo part of town and a few Mexican American families even lived there, almost all of them headed by World War II veterans, the members of Sonny's family were not among them, even though his father had served in the U.S. Army late in the war. The restaurants, bakeries, hardware stores, gasoline stations, grocery stores, clothing stores, pharmacies, barber shops, and beauty parlors they patronized; the churches, schools, dances, picnics, barbecues, and baseball games they attended; the places they swam in the summer months; the cemeteries where they buried their dead—all of these were located on the Mexican American side of the tracks.

Sonny's parents—Celedonio Armendadez Montes and Margarita Gonzales Jasso Montes—owned a house on Los Torritos Street in the Mexican American section of Weslaco. That one-storey structure, still standing today, was modest and small, with only about 300 square feet of living space. It was divided into two rooms—the kitchen, which also served as the dining room, and the living room, which also served as the bedroom for the entire family. The Montes home had no indoor toilet: a small outhouse was located on the back lot. It also had no fixed bath or shower. When it was time to bathe, Sonny's mother heated several pots of water on the stove, poured that hot water and several more pots of cold water into a large portable metal tub, and family members took turns bathing in the tub.

Sonny Montes with his parents, Margarita and Celedonio Montes, August 2003. Photograph by Glenn Anthony May.



Sonny's days in Weslaco revolved around family, especially the many members of his father's family who lived nearby. Next to Sonny's parents, the most important person in his life was his paternal grandmother, Maria Armendadez Montes, widowed in 1948, whose house, somewhat larger than his own, was located just across Los Torritos Street. Until 1954, the year Sonny's family left Weslaco for Fort Worth, except for the months when he was following the crops, Sonny saw his grandmother every day. An accomplished cook, Maria Montes made all of her dishes from scratch. Every morning she rose early to prepare the day's tortillas, grinding the corn with *metate* (a curved grinding stone) and *mano* (hand). An extremely devout Catholic, she went to Mass daily and spent many additional hours each week at the parish church doing volunteer work. Maria Montes required all her grandchildren to attend church regularly, whether they wanted to or not. On Sundays and many other days, Sonny walked with her from Los Torritos Street to the parish church, St. Joan of Arc Catholic Church. Although the actual distance covered was no more than half a mile, the walk seemed interminable to Sonny because, from start to stop, his grandmother had a firm grip on the little finger of his left hand to insure that he would keep up with her.

For the Montes clan of Weslaco, Maria Montes's house was the central meeting point. Wedding receptions and holiday dinners were held there; at some point during each day, all the members of the family passed by the house to pay their respects and to chat.

On many evenings after dinner, most of the Monteses, parents and children alike, assembled there to listen to Maria's radio. Often they all sat outside in the dark, their attention fixed on the Spanish-language programs. Sonny's favorite was a cowboy show called *Espuelas de Plata* (Silver Spurs). Sonny still remembers the sound of jingling spurs coming from his grandmother's radio.

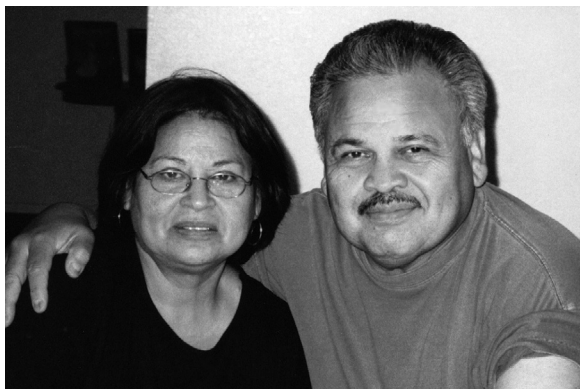
As a young child, Sonny played with his sisters Gloria and Estella (born in 1946 and 1947, respectively) and about a dozen cousins of approximately the same age who lived near his Los Torritos Street home, all of them the children of his father's brothers and sisters. The Mexican American parents of postwar Weslaco had no need to search out activities to fill their children's days, nor did they buy their children toys and games. Even if they had been able to afford them, the children didn't require them. The play activities of Sonny and his companions were organized into seasons. First, there was kite season, when the children flew homemade kites constructed out of available materials—paper sacks, sticks, string, pieces of cloth for the tails, and paste made of flour and water. Second, there was tops season, when Sonny and his playmates would endlessly spin tops, most of which were homemade. Third, there was marble season, when the kids played every known marble game and some of their own invention. On very hot days, the boy cousins would hike to one of the nearby citrus farms, climb over the fence, and swim in the nude in one of the concrete irrigation canals. None of them knew how to swim properly, but they would flail away and, by sheer persistence, manage to propel themselves from one bank to the other. In the citrus season, the boys might steal a few oranges and grapefruits from those farms.

Such were the rhythms of life in Weslaco's northern district during the period 1944–54—but for only half of each calendar year. Weslaco's Mexican American families, including Sonny's, resided in the town from November to May, hardly ever for longer stretches. During those months, most of the male heads of households found jobs in the agricultural sector, often working for local farms that produced crops of oranges, grapefruits, and tomatoes. For several years, Celedonio Montes was employed by Weslaco-based La Bonita Company, which processed and packaged fruits and vegetables. He started as a warehouse worker and later became a forklift operator.

Unfortunately, once the citrus and tomato crops had been harvested, Weslaco's Mexican Americans could find few job opportunities in the area. Faced with that reality, most of them left the Lower Rio Grande Valley for the remainder of the year and entered the migrant stream, traveling around the Southwest, and sometimes beyond, in search of farmwork.³ Those months of following the crops had very different rhythms. Summer after summer, the Monteses were transported in the back of trucks to distant locations, lived in cabins provided by the growers, and spent most of their days laboring in the fields. They picked cotton in at least half a dozen Texas communities (Lamesa, Lubbock, Waxahatchie, El Campo, Sinton, Victoria) and several places in Arkansas, harvested mint and potatoes in Indiana, and gathered onions and tomatoes in the Chicago area. Initially, Celedonio and Margarita did all the picking, but as soon as Sonny, Gloria, and Estella were able to work, they participated, too. By the age of five Sonny was performing simple tasks in the fields, and by the age of eight he was doing a full day's work, often performing the job of an adult.

As soon as there was enough light to see, the Monteses began picking in the fields. They always wore old clothes, since new ones would be ruined after only a few days. For Sonny, the standard outfit was a long shirt, trousers, and sturdy work shoes. He and every other member of the family brought hats and scarves to protect their heads and backs of their necks from the sun. Both Sonny and his father occasionally wore kneepads, especially when they were picking cotton in West Texas, where some of the cotton plants were small. They began their work standing up and focusing on the taller

*Sonny Montes and
his sister Gloria
Angulo, August
2003. Photograph by
Glenn Anthony May.*



plants, but when their backs began to ache, they got down on their knees and turned their attention to the smaller plants. Some of the workers used gloves, because the picking was often brutally hard on their hands, but the cloth gloves of those days were not very useful in harvesting the difficult-to-pick crops such as cotton and oranges. The stickers on those crops tore the pickers' gloves to shreds. Invariably, the hands of most of the pickers, gloved or ungloved, were covered with cuts.

Despite the fact that cotton was so challenging to harvest, the Montes family preferred to pick it because they could make the most money doing so. The work required the picker to grab the entire cotton boll with both hands and muscle it from the plant. Both of Sonny's parents did the harvesting. After the bolls were picked, they deposited them in twenty-foot-long white sacks that were provided for that purpose. Celedonio's sack was attached to his shoulders, and he dragged it along as he worked his way through the fields. But, strong though he was, he was not strong enough to pull both his own sack and Margarita's. When Sonny reached the age of eight and was deemed old enough to participate fully in the cotton harvest, his mother's sack was placed on his back and he was given the responsibility of dragging it along and keeping up with his mother. Once the sacks were filled, father and son pulled them to the weighing station, where they were weighed and their contents dumped onto waiting trucks. Then, the family members could take advantage of the opportunity to drink water at the only water tank in the cotton field. They usually had to take turns drinking, because the growers provided only a dipper or two for the use of the entire work crew.

By the early 1950s, Sonny's father became increasingly concerned about the family's finances—specifically, about his declining earnings during the six months they spent in Weslaco. Part of the problem was the rise of corporate farming and the attendant mechanization of agricultural operations in the region, reducing the farmers' labor needs.⁴ In addition, nature contributed to the woes of the regional workforce. In January 1950, the Rio Grande Valley was hit by an unusual winter storm remembered in the region as the "Great Freeze," an event that, in the words of a local historian, "dealt a near-death blow to the area's citrus industry."⁵ La Bonita, lacking

crops to process, closed its doors, and for several years the entire valley experienced an economic downturn. After that, Celedonio Montes and many others were left with very poor job prospects during the November-May period. Sometimes Celedonio left his family behind and traveled around the valley looking for work. At one point, having acquired a used Chevy pickup truck, he tried his hand at small business. Early in the morning, he and Sonny would set off from their Weslaco home in the truck to purchase large blocks of ice. They scraped the ice into fine pieces, poured the scraped ice into paper cups, covered it with syrup, and sold the sweetened ice concoctions (their homemade version of snow cones) to workers in the Weslaco area during their rest breaks.

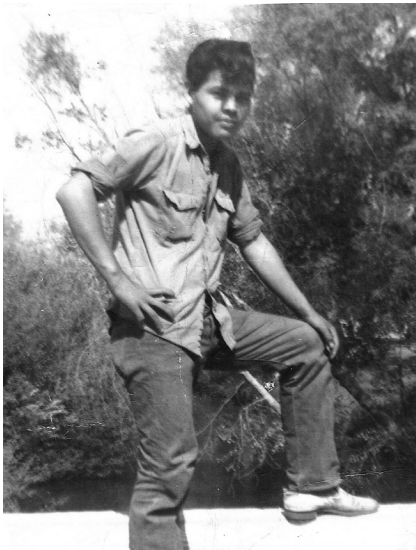
Finally, in 1954, tired of his bleak vocational prospects in Weslaco, Celedonio Sr. decided to move the family to Fort Worth, where, for the next seven years, the Monteses lived year-round. The move brought major changes in their lives. Celedonio was employed first as bricklayer's assistant, moved on to other types of construction work, and then found a job in 1959 as head of maintenance at the Fort Worth Holiday Inn.⁶ Soon afterward, Celedonio arranged for Margarita and Sonny, now a junior high school student, to work at the Holiday Inn as well. Margarita held a part-time position in the laundry room. Sonny started in the laundry room and later was promoted to a position as busboy/dishwasher in the hotel's restaurant. On weekdays, immediately after school, Sonny traveled by public transportation to his place of work, situated in the extreme western part of the city, far from the family's rented residence. On school days, he began work at 4:30 p.m. and finished at midnight. He usually worked on weekends as well.

In the late spring of 1961, the Montes family, which had now grown to seven (Lupe was born in 1955 and Diana in 1960), returned to the migrant stream. Hearing from a *compadre* that there was a lot of money to be earned in agricultural work in California, Sonny's father decided to check out the situation. At the end of May, right after the Fort Worth school year had ended, he piled the entire family into his used Chevy sedan and began driving to San Jose. The Monteses spent most of that summer in the vicinity of Morgan Hill, to the south of San Jose, where they picked cherries, strawberries, plums, apricots, and garlic. The next summer, the

Monteses returned to California, this time to Fresno County in the San Joaquin Valley, about a hundred miles southeast of where they had picked crops the previous year. They resided most of the time in Parlier, a small agricultural community southeast of Fresno, picking plums, peaches, walnuts, cotton, and several varieties of grapes.

Although the summer agricultural work in California was financially rewarding for the Monteses, there were costs. When Celedonio had made the decision to take his family to California in 1961, he had realized that the manager of the Holiday Inn would likely replace him in his absence. He assumed, though, that he would be able to find another job in Fort Worth without much difficulty, possibly with the Holiday Inn. But, whereas the hotel's manager was willing to rehire Margarita and Sonny, he made no job offer to Sonny's father. Thereafter Celedonio struggled vocationally in Fort Worth. The job he held longest was as a meat processor at the Swift and Company meatpacking plant, where he was forced to work long hours in a refrigerated building. On some days, for some unexplained reason, his skin turned a bright shade of yellow. For a man who had spent most of his life working outside under the sun, the job at Swift was akin to torture.

In the meantime, Sonny was making steady progress toward completing his high school degree. He had entered Technical



Sonny Montes, summer of 1962, in the vicinity of Sanger, California. Photograph courtesy of Sonny Montes.

High School in South Fort Worth in the fall of 1960. Although the school's name suggested that it focused on vocational education, the student body, numbering about 1,500 in the early 1960s, was composed of both vocational students and those on a traditional academic track. The students were a mix of Anglos and Mexican Americans, since unlike Weslaco and most other towns in the southern part of the state, Fort Worth did not require Mexican Americans to attend segregated schools. African Americans were not so fortunate; they were not admitted to Technical until 1964, the year after Sonny's graduation.⁷

At Technical High, Sonny was an average student—arguably, a commendable performance, given that his job at the Holiday Inn left him little time to study, and he missed several months of classes in his junior and senior years because of his family's late return from their migrant farmwork. For all three years of high school, he signed up for strictly academic classes: English, world history, U. S. history, government, biology, mathematics, and the like. He did fairly well in English, receiving a grade of B on two occasions, and performed even better in his U.S. history class, earning an A in the fall 1961 semester. (Sonny was especially interested in the U.S. Civil War, and in his limited spare time, he enjoyed reading books about it.) His worst showing was in biology; he failed the course in his first semester of high school and received grades of C and D in the following two semesters. Not once during his high school years did any of his teachers, including those who had given him good grades, ever suggest that he should consider college. The subject of college did come up in another context. Sometime in Sonny's junior or senior year, he and his fellow students were subjected to a battery of tests designed to assist them in choosing a career. Shortly afterward, Sonny met with a guidance counselor to discuss the results. The tests showed, the counselor told him, that Sonny was "not college material" and that he would be better advised to pursue a career in which he used his hands, since he had received above average scores in "finger dexterity." For many years thereafter, the words Sonny heard in that meeting remained stuck in his mind. Not college material. Finger dexterity. Not college material. One can only speculate how many other Mexican Americans in Fort Worth public high schools received a similar kind of guidance. Without

doubt, institutionalized prejudice against them was widespread. Even so, as Sonny and his family realized, the situation confronting Mexican American students in Fort Worth was markedly better than in South Texas, where segregated education for Mexican Americans was still in place. Sonny graduated from Technical High School in late May 1963, ranking 239th in a class of 498.⁸

Sonny did not see a high school diploma as a ticket to an appreciably better life. Rather, he saw a future for himself that differed very little from his past. Aware that his parents intended to return to California as soon as he had received his diploma, he planned to accompany them. When he thought about how he would earn money for the rest of his life, he imagined that he would do agricultural work. As he explained to me in an interview: “Aside from working at the Holiday Inn, that’s all I knew.”

Shortly after Sonny’s high school graduation, the Montes family left Fort Worth again for Fresno County. At the time of their departure, they assumed that they would work in California only through early fall. As the summer wore on, however, it became clear to Celedonio and Margarita Montes that there was no compelling reason to return to North Texas, and the family decided to stay. In the meantime, Sonny had become engaged to Librada Arce, born in Mexico and raised in Edinburg, Texas, whom he had met at a dance in Fresno County the previous summer. Like Sonny, she came from a family that had long followed the crops during the summer months, but the Arces had graduated from field labor to supervisory work. Librada’s brother, Horacio, was *mayordomo* on a farm in Cornelius, Oregon, a small agricultural community west of Portland, and he had taken up year-round residence in the town. During the summer and early fall months, Librada’s parents resided in Cornelius, helping Horacio run the farmer’s labor camp.

Sonny and Librada were married in Edinburg in January 1964, and, right after the wedding, the newlyweds took up residence in Parlier. Not long after that, Sonny went to work on the grape farm in Reedley, and in November 1964, Armando was born. Step by step, Sonny and Librada began to take on the trappings of a lower-middle-class existence. They bought a small house in Reedley and owned a reliable used car.

Then, out of the blue, in the late spring of 1966, Librada suggested to Sonny that they spend the coming summer in Oregon. She described the venture as an “experiment.” Sonny and she would pick crops on the farm in Cornelius where her brother Horacio Arce did supervisory work, and she, Sonny, and Armando could live in the labor camp located on the farm. Librada believed that the family could make more money over the summer in Cornelius than it could make in Reedley. An added bonus would be that they would be able to spend more time with Librada’s parents, who, as in past summers, would be living at the same labor camp. “Let’s try it,” she urged Sonny. “Let’s see how it works out.” She wasn’t suggesting that they leave California permanently: they were committing themselves to go north for only three or four months.

During their discussions about Librada’s proposed experiment, one issue Sonny and Librada wrestled with was Sonny’s existing job. Obviously he would have to quit, and doing so was risky. But, like his father, who had given up his Holiday Inn position in Fort Worth for the opportunity to make money in California, Sonny was a risk taker. He believed that he might be able to return to his job in Reedley after the summer in Oregon, because the elderly couple he worked for, the Worrels, held him in high regard. And even if that position were no longer available, he was confident that he could find some agricultural work in central California, perhaps doing piecework in the fields. Sonny agreed to his wife’s proposal.

In early June 1966, not long after the strawberry harvest had begun in Oregon’s Willamette Valley, Sonny, Librada, and Armando arrived in Cornelius, at the farm of Lloyd Duyck, the grower who employed Horacio. A small agricultural community in Washington County, Cornelius was named after Colonel T. R. Cornelius, a pioneer who had come to Oregon in 1845, participated in military campaigns against the local Native Americans, and served in the Oregon legislature. A sizable percentage of the town’s residents were, like Lloyd Duyck, people of Dutch extraction. Duyck’s neighbors included Leo van Domelen, Victor van der Zanden, Fred van de Berg, Fred Meeuwesen, William van de Coevering, and Leslie Verboort.⁹

More than forty-five years have passed since the arrival of the Montes in Cornelius, and the changes that have occurred in the

interim have been substantial. Located along Oregon State Highway 8, which connects it and other towns in northwestern Oregon to the city of Portland, Cornelius has in recent years been integrated to some degree into the Portland metropolitan complex. Today much of the twenty-mile stretch of Highway 8 between Portland and Cornelius is lined on both sides with shopping malls, small factories, fast-food restaurants, and other business establishments that serve the needs of the growing suburban communities of Beaverton and Hillsboro. Back in 1966, a person traveling to Cornelius by car from downtown Portland would have seen, on both sides of Highway 8, a succession of cultivated fields and little else. In 2008, according to an official head count, the population of Cornelius was 10,955; forty-two years earlier, it had 1,460 residents.¹⁰

One of the leading farmers in Washington County, Oregon, Lloyd Duyck had about 850 acres under cultivation; his fields yielded large crops of strawberries, raspberries, boysenberries, cucumbers, bush beans, and yellow beans. Duyck paid a decent wage, dealt fairly with his workers, and provided them with above-average housing. His labor camp, which was adjacent to one of his largest cultivated fields, had twenty-six cabins, capable of housing 110 people. Sonny, Librada, and Armando were assigned one of the cabins. Another was occupied by Librada's parents, who were then too old to work in the fields but made their money by other means. Librada's mother was in charge of cleaning the labor camp and assigning the housing units to the migrant families who worked there. She also sold soda pop, candy, and other items to the laborers. Librada's father used to go to the local slaughterhouses during the week to buy fresh meat, which he would then sell to the camp's residents on Saturday, when the workers were paid. Librada's brother, Horacio, assisted Duyck in running the farm and supervised the work in the fields.¹¹

A few weeks after Sonny and Librada had arrived in Cornelius, a group of strangers paid an evening visit to the labor camp.¹² They introduced themselves to the camp's residents as employees of the Valley Migrant League, a nonprofit organization created for the explicit purpose of serving the needs of migrant and seasonal farmworkers in Oregon's Upper Willamette Valley. Funded by the Office of Economic Opportunity, the VML was a component of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty program. The leader of

the VML delegation was Jose Garcia, the director of the VML's office (or "opportunity center," the term used by the organization) in the neighboring town of Hillsboro. Garcia explained that he and his co-workers wanted to make a presentation about the VML's programs.

Some of the farmworkers decided to hear what the VML employees had to say. In an open area on the grounds of the labor camp, they gathered in a circle around Garcia and his companions. Sonny spotted the meeting from a distance, was curious about what was going on, and walked over to see and hear for himself. Garcia told the camp's residents that the VML offered a range of free services and programs to migrant and seasonal farmworkers. He talked about adult education classes, which were offered in spoken English (for migrants who had limited English-language skills), basic education (for those with adequate spoken English who had little formal schooling), and GED preparation (to enable migrants to earn a General Equivalency Diploma). Vocational training programs were also available to adults who were interested in learning new ways of earning a living and perhaps leaving the migrant stream. The VML offered stipends to people enrolling in adult education and vocational training classes to compensate them for income lost when they were in school. During the summers, children of migrant families could attend summer school classes and child-care programs. The opportunity centers also offered job counseling and assisted families in getting housing and health care.

Sonny had never heard about the VML before. He listened intently to the presentation, and at one point he asked a question. At the end of the meeting, Garcia approached him and struck up a conversation. Learning that Sonny was a farmworker and that he had not thought about doing anything else in life, Garcia inquired if Sonny would consider applying for a job as a program aide for the VML. Sonny asked Garcia to describe the job, and, after hearing the description, he said that he was not interested. "It sounded too complicated," he recalls. Besides, the pay was only \$300 a month, "which wasn't a bad salary in those days, but it really wasn't that much, because we could make more in the fields." Undeterred, Garcia urged Sonny to give some more thought to the matter and said that he would return to discuss the job possibility with Sonny again.

About a week later, Garcia reappeared and renewed his request. When Sonny again expressed reservations, Garcia did his best to respond. He was both persuasive and persistent, and after a long discussion, Sonny came up with a formula that would allow him to take the position: he would pick crops in the fields from sunrise to noon, return to the camp to shower and change his clothes, and then report for duty with the VML, working from about 1:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. By holding both jobs, he would have a chance to find out if the VML work appealed to him without sacrificing any income. Garcia had no objections to Sonny's proposal—the program aides did much of their work in the evenings, because most of the farmworkers could not go to the opportunity centers or attend meetings at the labor camps until they had finished working for the day. The two men reached an agreement. Sonny Montes became a foot soldier in the War on Poverty in late June 1966.