CHAPTER 11

Labor Tensions

Mennonite Growers, the United Farm Workers, and the Farm Labor Problem

People in Akron heard Calif[ornia] Mennonites carry guns
—Mennonite leader Guy F. Hershberger, 1974

Transforming Pacifism

In the 1930s, several hundred Mennonites fled Communist Russia through Harbin, China, and settled in the Reedley area. One of these migrants, H. P. Isaak, wrote his memoirs in 1976 and introduced the story of his flight from Communism with his troubled feelings about the recent farm labor activism of Cesar Chávez. Isaak argued that Chávez’s actions, emphasizing workers over employers, too closely resembled the values of Communist Russia; these values would only harm America.¹

The organization of California farm workers, and the subsequent strikes and boycotts, were part of a tense socio-political atmosphere in the state. Many Mennonites across the country followed the events in California and saw, not disturbing threats to America, but hopeful social protest. These differing Mennonite responses to the California farm labor tensions revealed significant fissures within American Mennonitism.

The role of Mennonites in American religious historiography is well known: Mennonites are Germanic rural agrarian pacifists. Whether one considers ethnic, economic, theological, or activist themes, this stereotype
is not without merit. The tropes almost appear settled. Mennonites are counted among the Historic Peace Churches, a designation with much significance, especially in times of war. They are largely pacifist in their ideology, with many attempting to practice it in times of war, and until the last-third of the twentieth century, they were mainly agriculturists. In the decades following World War II, the pressures of modernity were tremendous, and Mennonites largely responded by moving to cities, entering professions, and developing efficient rationalized church bureaucracies. In California, these transitions began earlier, during the 1930s, when Mennonite religious identity was increasingly influenced by the conservative evangelicalism that was gaining prominence in California—also a result of Depression-era southern migration to California.²

Having settled primarily in the San Joaquin Valley, Mennonites entered many and varied professions, as exemplified by the Eymann family of Reedley in the early 1900s, as noted in chapter 1. Naturally, many were in agribusiness. In 1951, LIFE magazine published a photo essay of a new generation of American millionaires located in the agriculturally rich San Joaquin Valley. Among those featured was Mennonite farmer, businessman, and inventor Ed Peters. Casting the story of successful Central Valley agriculturalists in the mythology of “new millionaires, who have become rich by turning the earth with their muscle and watering it as well with their sweat,” an inspiriting introduction enraptured by the rugged individual, LIFE overlooked the hydraulic history of Central Valley farming. By the end of the essay, agricultural practice was defined as “scientific” with its application of fertilizers, deep-well pumping, and “vast mechanization.”³

Although Mennonites worked hard and built large enterprises as first- or second-generation entrepreneurs and farmers in California, already in the 1930s, federal assistance was needed to bring water to the fertile yet parched earth. Peters came to California from Saskatchewan, Canada, in the 1930s when he was a boy. After a try at grapes, the Peters family switched to potatoes, where Ed Peters would make his name by 1951.⁴ Successful as a potato, grain, and cotton farmer and businessman, he ran a potato-washing and packing outfit for neighboring farmers. Later, his ambition and success led him to become president of the National Potato Council, opposing federal farm subsidies for potatoes. LIFE presented Peters as a symbol of the successful immigrant farmer to California, pictured relaxing by his pool, shirtsleeves rolled-up, eating grapes.⁵
By the 1970s, however, the mythic agrarian pacifist identity of American Mennonites had undergone significant transformation in California. Though such transformations occurred elsewhere, what drew the California experience into relief was its confluence of social, political, and economic tensions. When California farm labor politics became national in scale, due largely to a widely publicized boycott of Californian grapes handpicked by migrant labor, some Mennonites questioned their socioeconomic location in American society. The primacy of the agrarian pacifist myth as the template for American Mennonite identity also came under scrutiny.

United Farm Workers

The United Farm Workers (UFW), an agriculture labor union, formed in the 1960s under the leadership of Cesar Chávez. He was born in Arizona, where during the 1930s, his family lost their farm. His family joined with others and moved to California to pick fruit. A formative moment in this westward move occurred when, as a child, Chávez was refused service at a restaurant in Brawley, California, because they did not serve Mexicans. Later, after spending time in the barrios of San Jose, in 1962 he went to work with farm workers in Delano, just north of Bakersfield, in Kern County. In only a few years, his concern over local farm labor practices became a national phenomenon through the well-publicized grape boycott and strikes against growers. In its first decade, under the leadership of Cesar Chávez and Dolores Huerta, the UFW enjoyed several successes, including acquiring collective bargaining for agriculture laborers, signing contracts with growers, and securing better wages.

There were several Mennonite growers in California who employed migrant labor. Curious how California Mennonites were dealing with the labor-grower tensions in California in the 1960s and 1970s, along with the rise of Cesar Chávez and the UFW, two groups of Mennonites from eastern states came as observers and investigators for the larger denomination. The first came from the inter-Mennonite relief agency Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Peace Section, which advised, educated, and studied on issues of peace and government, and the second were students from the Mennonite Church school, Indiana’s Goshen College. These two groups, distinct from each other, came to California to better understand the farm labor situation and are examined respectively in the next two sections of this chapter.
The eastern visitors described their experiences in California and revealed how, despite similar religious backgrounds, not understanding California made it difficult to find common cause. That difficulty revealed cracks in their common religious heritage regarding assumptions of Mennonite identity, Anabaptist theology and religion, economic class, and race—all exacerbated by geographic distance. The fault lines between western and eastern Mennonites appeared at times both surprising and insurmountable.

The reports and diary of these eastern Mennonites are more than just a chronicles of events. As Melanie Springer Mock insightfully demonstrates in the context of male conscientious objectors during World War II: “The language of a diary therefore reflects not only the self in a certain place and time, but also the self constructed by that place and time. The diary’s language reveals, as well, the writer’s desire to use what he understands and knows as a means of representing what at the moment remains outside this realm of knowing.” In other words, such writing reveals assumptions individuals bring to group identity, and what the group expects of the individual, and a “symbolic identity” is mutually constructed.8

Enter Peace Section

The delegation of Mennonites from the MCC Peace Section, located in Indiana and Pennsylvania, was formed in spring 1974 in response to news of labor tensions in California, tensions that involved Mennonite growers. The delegates were to visit California and report on their findings. In a letter to fellow delegate Guy F. Hershberger, dated March 29, 1974, Paul Kraybill, general secretary of the Mennonite Church General Board, reflected on the delegation’s visit to California earlier that month: “The concern regarding the farm labor problem in California has been mentioned frequently in the Council and it was felt that here is an area where the brotherhood should be better informed about the issues.” Hershberger was asked to lead this assignment because of his good reputation in the church and lengthy experience on issues of peace and justice. Leaders like Hershberger and Kraybill thought it possible that the California labor problem was simply a passing event from which they could gain experience: “This is not necessarily a continuing program concern of the Council but served to stimulate thought and develop new conviction and understanding.”9
After spending a week in California in March 1974, Ted Koontz, associate executive secretary of the Peace Section, produced a summary of possible actions. He proposed that the Peace Section "not identify . . . with any organizational position in the dispute but that it seek to serve the purposes of justice and reconciliation among the various parties." Koontz also took into consideration for his report suggestions given by unnamed West Coast Mennonite leaders. He advised them to hold to four points: keep Mennonites informed of any legislative developments, place volunteers in California to help farm workers with the assistance of West Coast Mennonites, respond to requests for help from the West as opposed to moving ahead without such an indication, and lead seminars on farm issues and labor management relations. Koontz underscored the importance of waiting for the West Coast to ask for help first.10

Despite overtures made to the ideal of local control, friction developed. After the Peace Section made their report, Guy Hershberger wrote Daniel Hertzler of the Mennonite Publishing House: "I should report that all this [a seemingly pro–Cesar Chávez, UFW, and UFW boycott article in the Mennonite] is well known in the Fresno-Reedley area, as well as at Goshen and other parts of the brotherhood and that some people do not feel very happy about it. Indeed we have a real problem to remain on good terms—that is the eastern section of the church on good terms with the San Joaquin Valley section."11 The article in question, likely Robert M. Herhold’s "To be a Man," described a visit to a UFW meeting where Chávez spoke. Herhold focused his text on the religious nature of Chávez’s work, his Catholic identity, and the significance of Christianity to his nonviolent principles. Growers were described simply as sincere but misguided people struggling to cope and adjust to social change.12

Harold R. Regier, secretary for Peace and Social Concerns for Home Ministries in the General Conference Mennonite Church, also a member of the fact-finding mission to the San Joaquin Valley, reflected on the situation in California and attempted to find a way between the main factions of farmers, UFW, and the Teamsters. He suggested that justice could be found, for all sides had legitimate concerns and all sides used dubious methods to attain their goals.13

In Hershberger’s notes, taken on the spring 1974 visit to California, he revealed important differences between the MCC and Mennonite farmers. He recorded that on a visit with Alvin Peters, a Mennonite farmer in Reedley, Peters gave the following opinions: "Sermon on mount doesn’t
work in business [...]. It must have been written 20 yrs or more after the time. Isn't meant to be obeyed.” Concerning the biblical passage of Matthew 25, where Jesus describes the path to heaven incorporating service to the poor and oppressed, “Re matt 25 and getting to heaven for having clothed the naked etc. salvation only by the blood of Xt. [Christ]—these social Problems not our job.” Hershberger noted that the place and assumptions of eastern Mennonites must be kept in check: “Peace and Soc. Concerns people must be careful not to go on the bandwagon for everyone who shouts peace[...]. This thing will have to be settled politically and the church should leave hands off matters they don’t know anything about,” and besides, “People in Akron heard Calif[...]. Mennonites carry guns[...].”14 As Hershberger observed, everyone was guilty of stereotypes and failures to understand; therefore, he attempted to treat everyone cautiously.

Hershberger concluded that while being slow to criticize when facts are unknown, MCC Peace Section acted commendably by not identifying with the farmers, UFW, or Teamsters. Hershberger also opposed any boycotts, however, for “in the case of the UFW it would be promoting a lost cause,” and it would be divisive in the Mennonite community. He recommended that “Mennonites should avoid the extravagant view that this is a communist conspiracy bent on ceding the Southwest United States to Mexico,” and “that while Chávez is a sincere idealist, with the welfare of farm workers at heart he also seems unable to achieve these goals.” He continued, “Mennonites affected by the UFW in any way should not hesitate to enter into sympathetic conversation with it in an effort to achieve understanding and reconciliation.”15 In other words, California Mennonites should reject the UFW for its unattainable idealism and reject the extravagant claim of Mexican reconquest made by some. The irony was not lost on other church leaders, as the recommendations seemed to contradict historical Mennonite appeals to idealism.

Hubert Schwartzentruber, associate secretary of the Mennonite Board of Congregational Ministries, responded, “To end war is also a lost cause but our tradition calls for us to continually promote peace. Most issues that we work at are divisive. I see us not relinquishing our effort because of the possibility of being divisive, but be redemptive as we work at them.” In fact, not supporting the boycott would simply align the church with “the system that is destroying justice.” Rather, Schwartzentruber argued, like Martin Luther King, Jr., and his efforts to keep the civil rights movement Christian, Mennonites should "surround Chávez with a new kind of justice
and power to develop the movement”—that is, take a strong position on the side of the farm worker grounded in Mennonite Christianity and expressed through joining the UFW boycott. Schwartzentruber continued, “It seems to me that to come out in strong support for the Mennonite growers would also be hazardous.”

According to Schwartzentruber’s critique, Hershberger, in his attempt to find a way through the tension, tacitly supported a justice-destroying system that would through nonparticipation in the boycott alienate Latino Mennonites. Schwartzentruber saw the churchly component of the issue as both class and race based, between rich white Mennonites and poor Latino Mennonites. The church, he argued, should make a clear decision to support workers over growers to overcome the impasse. Hershberger saw in California all sides claiming the moral high ground, employing suspect tactics at times, and argued that increased dialogue in Mennonite circles could break the deadlock.

If there was a place where California Mennonites were given a voice by an eastern-based denominational leadership, it was in these reports. During their week in California, Regier, Hershberger, and Koontz met with several individuals, including many Mennonite Brethren and General Conference farmers; Harry Kubo, president of the Nisei Farmers League; Arthur Jost, administrator of Kings View Hospital; farm workers for Mennonite farmers; the president of the Central California Farmers Association; two UFW staff persons; one Mexican-American farmer who started as a laborer; two Mexican-American students at Fresno Pacific College (FPC, now Fresno Pacific University) who had been workers; a Teamsters organizer; Mexican-American Mennonite Brethren workers; and Dr. A. W. Schlichting, a MB chiropractor who was instrumental in starting five Mexican-American Mennonite Brethren churches in the Fresno-Reedley area. Alvin Peters and Arnold Reimer, Mennonite farmers, arranged most contacts for the Peace Section.

The confluence of racial, religious, economic, and national identities made such ambitions to “brotherhood” difficult to achieve. According to Koontz’s report, growers (he does not distinguish between Mennonite and non-Mennonite), whether they were large or small, generally believed, “that the UFW is a part of a Communist conspiracy for world revolution or a part of a plan to reclaim the Southwest for Mexico or to form a new nation. They believe that the UFW is determined to destroy the free-enterprise system and take the land away from the farmers who
are there." Despite the swirling of conspiracies laden with the imaginative power of Communist-led reconquest, it was also common to understand migrant worker poverty as the result of their own "mismangement of money or unwillingness to work when work is available." Growers also dismissed accusations of exploitative child labor practices as misguided, because young child labor "is in keeping with Mexican culture and is seen as a good, wholesome learning experience for children."\(^{18}\) Therefore, problems of migrant labor poverty were the result of a laziness and financial mismanagement; the problem of exploitative child labor resulted from a strong family and work ethic in the laborers' culture.

Mennonite growers insisted that their quarrel was with the UFW and that their relationship with most workers was healthy. These growers leveled two significant criticisms against the UFW: it did not represent the majority of workers; and its seniority-based hiring system, the "hiring hall," took the power of hiring away from the farmer and placed it in union hands, meaning that seniority rules could split families because time spent on a particular farm counted less than time spent as a union worker. Due to their perception of the unreasonableness of the UFW and lower worker productivity within the UFW, some of the larger growers began to work with the Teamsters. Growers were also critical of the government's management of the union situation. They expected there to be laws enacted requiring secret ballots for union elections and bans on both harvest strikes and secondary boycotts.\(^{19}\)

Despite grower desire for government action, preferably federal action, in dealing with the labor situation, Mennonite growers also expected the church to reflect their concerns regarding social order and evangelical mission. One observed, "Mennonite farmers were unanimous in their view that the church should not take the side of UFW. They indicated that this action on behalf of some other denominations had split those denominations. Some felt that the church should not become involved at all, but should rather preach the gospel." The role of the church, to some farmers, was to spread information to help "counter some of the misinformation being disseminated by the UFW and its supporters." Some local churches even saw UFW as incompatible with Christianity, "They [the churches] feel that the cause of the UFW is close[d] to the New Testament gospel with its concern for the poor and oppressed."\(^{20}\)

Predictably, the responses of the UFW to similar questions by the Peace Section were quite different. Workers from the UFW denied any plot
to return the Southwest to Mexico, any connection to communism, and any attempt to start a new Mexican-American country. Rather, they saw their efforts as bringing “social changes needed for the betterment of the workers which are not always part of a typical union’s program.” This betterment was understood as advancing Mexican-American involvement in education, economics, and politics. Health care and preventive medicine were also described as germane to their program. UFW representatives claimed that worker opposition to UFW did not come from the majority who made California their permanent home, but came from transient workers. To counter some farmers’ claims, the UFW pointed to changes in the hiring hall where seniority was redefined as length of time on a particular farm, not as a union worker.21

United Farm Workers opposed a ban on harvest strikes and found the legislative climate cool toward new unions. The Teamsters were not sympathetic to the UFW and concurred with many observations made by farmers: UFW workers mismanaged money, the hiring hall divided families, and the UFW and Chávez caused an increase in the Mexican-American high school dropout rate. Although the Teamsters added a layer of complexity to the tensions, they were a minor presence in these reports, despite their claim to having increased support from workers since 1973, when many contracts between growers and the UFW expired, including about 4,000 signatures on a petition asking Teamsters to represent them.22 Meanwhile, the UFW had 50,000 dues-paying members in 1970.23 Cooperation between growers and Teamsters in 1973 strained the UFW, which called for more strikes, boycotts, and secondary boycotts, and who at times encountered violence on the fields. It was in this context, nearly a decade into the grower–UFW tensions itself, that the eastern Mennonites found themselves exploring the responses of Mennonite growers.

Workers on Mennonite farms generally reported that they were “happy with their situation of employment” and registered opposition to UFW, especially when they desired to work and UFW desired to strike. Two Mexican-American farm workers, who were also FPC students, disagreed on their views of UFW. One who had been a UFW worker did not like Chávez, while the other, who was never a member of the UFW, did. Mexican-American Mennonites also expressed a range of opinions and varying degrees of support for the UFW, which were tied into wage and piecework preferences. The more difficulty one had collecting union benefits, the greater the dislike for the union.24
Individual workers interviewed could agree on motives: "With the exception of one person, they had no doubt that Chávez was seeking the welfare of the farm workers and that the UFW was not attempting to take over the land for Mexico." They scoffed at the idea that workers chose not to work when work existed even at too low wages. Illegal immigration created conflict for some workers, who expressed concern over the immigrants' plight and yet understood the need for higher American wages for themselves.25

These workers believed that the federal government should do more to enforce immigration laws. The report's author concluded that the worker interviews revealed two main points: first, there is no monolithic farm worker, as their opinions cover a broad range of likes and dislikes for unions and farmers; and second, though Mennonite farmers were quiet on actual worker experience, they were genuine in relating to labor. The report concluded: "I am convinced that the Mennonite farmers we spoke to sincerely want to do the right thing in this situation and that they do, in general, have good relationship with their workers. As far as we were able to determine, Mennonites have also responded in a nonviolent way in this situation."26 In the delegates' final analysis, at the risk of political equivocation due to the complexity of the issue, they thought that because they were a North American agency, they needed to work on this problem without alienating the parties involved; it was a difficult task, as the fence to sit on was thin and rickety. Furthermore, there was also the question of Mennonite identity, established along the racial/ethnic lines on which their congregations formed: "There are four MB Mexican-American churches, which have developed as missions from the MB churches in the area. Members of these churches are primarily farm workers."27

Mennonites made many attempts to understand their identity in modern America, and at mid-century, Harold Bender’s "Anabaptist Vision" dominated the discussion. His vision had three points: true practice of Christianity happens in community, the community is maintained through mutual discipleship (training and accountability), and the principle of love and nonresistance are to govern all relationships.28 Bender's vision reigned over Mennonite self-identification for much of the middle decades of the twentieth century, and it had an institutional home: Goshen College.
Student Visitors Provoke Debate

Students from Indiana’s Goshen College were the second Mennonite group to visit California from eastern states specifically to study farm labor issues. In her diary, Beth Sutter described and commented on her experiences over about thirteen days in the Fresno-Reedley area in late May and early June 1974, providing an interpretation of events from a college student’s perspective. Sutter was apparently not as supportive of and less willing to understand Mennonite farmer concerns in California as the MCC Peace Section was. Sutter’s experience in California began with a visit to a chapel service at FPC, where she began to observe not only the labor issue, but also a different Anabaptism that at first glance was notable for its informality: “It was strange. Before we went to chapel, Paul Toews suggested that we go because Anabaptism is this guy’s ‘thing.’ The [chapel] speaker was a history prof. And in his talk he said he couldn’t get through the speech without mentioning Anabaptist heritage. The audience laughed. This continued throughout the talk. Is Anabaptism here a joke, a novelty, a hobby?”

Later in the day, she received an important, albeit brief, summary of California Mennonitism. On a visit to the college library, the student delegates met, coincidently, an earlier acquaintance and had a lengthy conversation, which revealed to Sutter some of the nuances of California Mennonite thought and life steeped in conservative evangelicalism:

Alden [Ewert, public relations at FPC] talked a lot about the MB church. He told us how the MBs moved there and for a long time (until recently) had no seminaries so their preachers went to Wheaton [College], Moody Bible [Institute] etc. This produced a God and Country theology. Churches have flags, and little emphasis is placed on nonresistance in many of the churches. Alden wished the church would be more involved in social action issues. He sees the gospel as more than saved souls—he sees total need of people. He is criticized by other MB for his involvement in such issues as the Viet Nam War, questioning civil religion in the MB church, war tax issues etc.

Sutter documented more of Ewert’s thoughts on California Mennonitism, and she agreed with his criticisms and concerns about its evangelical
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nature: “Anabaptist teachings are lacking in the MB church, Alden feels. He said he thinks many of the preachers would just as soon leave it alone. Alden stays with the MB Church in hopes of keeping alive some of his and others concerns on Anabaptism and justice for the oppressed, hopefully bringing the church into a fuller awareness of its mission.”31 For the students, however, such friendly encounters with like-minded Mennonites were not typical, and various Mennonitisms clashed.

The students had an early visit with Leo Miller, a General Conference Mennonite pastor in Reedley, who described the issue as “touchy.” Though there were not many farmers in his church, he arranged for visits with two (unnamed). According to Sutter’s diary, after the visit with Pastor Miller, they met with Arnold Reimer, a General Conference farmer whose fruit farm consisted of thirty acres and a packing shed. After some conversation and questions from the students, Miller asked the visitors from Indiana some questions, and the differences in these American Mennonitisms began to come through. As Beth Sutter recalled,

His questions were loaded . . . The first question was, “Why did you come to CA when its labor laws and wages are better than other states?” He said there are worse problems in Appalachia, Ohio, Georgia, and other countries. He really has to question our sincerity, he says. We explained that Alvin Peters [Mennonite farmer] had invited us and that CA was the central location of the UFW, which we wanted to study. Ruth [Sutter, another member on the student trip] said that CA was of interest to us because of the Mennonite farmers involved. Arnold asked how many people Chávez has had on our campus trying to organize us. He was getting excited, and his wife said she thought we’d talked enough, because he had a heart condition and shouldn’t get too upset. Boy, I felt terrible! Arnold took everything so personally—but why am I so shocked? Of course he’ll take it personally.”32

Perhaps even more surprising for the students was their visit with Henry Janzen, pastor of Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church. Janzen identified the problem as being primarily one between two unions, where “the Teamsters is an American union . . . whereas the United Farm Workers is social reform.”33 The pastor of Reedley Mennonite Brethren echoed many of the concerns of Mennonite farmers, as Beth Sutter notes, “Henry questions why people are concerned about CA when its farmworkers are
paid the highest wages for farmwork in the nation." Beyond differences between unions, Janzen surprised Sutter with his reflection on the religious chasm between parties in the labor issue, asking, "How can Christians talk reason, or deal with non-Christians?" In defense of Mennonite growers, Janzen pointed out that his son, who had an eighty-acre farm, often received gifts from workers who visited Mexico. Sutter commented, "We heard that story over and over at different farms." Janzen continued to defend the interethnic relations in the local Mennonite Brethren world:

After talking about the "non-Christian workers" which the MB farmers couldn’t deal with, Janzen said, "But we’re real concerned people because we have four mission churches." These churches are separate from the big 1500 member MB church, but "we even invite them into our church one Sunday night a year to give their testimonies and sing." He went on to say that these people don’t know how to budget their money, and how they could have nice houses if they wanted them. He kept saying that if the people "had a Mennonite background" they’d be successful and know how to save. As far as what Christians can do, Janzen said, "Until these people get the gospel, there’s nothing we can do." After these people "get the gospel" they’ll move up economically.

He described the boycott as, "'the most vicious tool ever implemented.' It hurts the farmer that is 'using the income on his ranch to further missions,' so when we boycott, we are 'boycotting missions.'" The meeting ended with Janzen asking each of the visitors if they were "born-again Christians." Beth Sutter was surprised to find that the issue for Mennonite Brethren leaders like Henry Janzen was not social inequity or possible oppressive labor practices on Mennonite farms, but rather who believed the gospel and how proof lay in money management skills; it was a critique that underscored the evangelical nature of much California Mennonitism.

Sutter describes several other encounters with Mennonite farmers who echoed Janzen. Attempting to understand Mennonites in this struggle, Sutter concludes: "It’s much harder for me to be identified as a Mennonite along with the Mennonites here who are exploiting and cutting down people . . . The conflict comes when I do not want to be identified with the MB growers here. 'We’re a different kind of Mennonite,' I (or we) quickly add now when we say we’re Mennonites. It just doesn’t seem like
it’s the same gospel. The things Mennonites here say about ‘the gospel’ really frustrate me, and hearing people that I should have an identity with as Christians saying these things tears me up... The things that bother me most are the racist slurs and the interpretation of the gospel.”

On a visit to the Ray Ewy farm, Sutter encountered the conspiracy theory that UFW was working to return California to Mexico and that it was inherently violent. She was especially surprised by Ewy’s conclusion that “Mexicans have to learn to laugh at themselves because ‘until they can laugh at themselves, they can never fully arrive.’ He said the Mexicans should be able to laugh at themselves like the Japs—nese [sic] did about their internment. Well they did not laugh then and they are not laughing now!”

On a visit with Alvin Peters, they met up with a pick-up truck of his workers. Peters told Sutter, “O.K. Here I’ve got any type of Mexican you’d want—wetbacks, green carders, any type you’d want. Ask’em if they want to join the Union!” On the same occasion she noted, “Somehow Alvin got on the subject about trash. He was talking about a certain type of people that are so low they aren’t worth anything—they’re just trash! They don’t have any morals and they continually live in sin.” When challenged, Peters added, “Trash wasn’t just Mexicans, it was any low class of people.”

On a visit to Ken Reimer’s farm, Sutter found similar stereotypes: the Mexican inability to budget money and that poverty was relative. “Later in the conversation Ken said that when farmworkers become Christians, a funny thing happens—they ‘get goals and don’t want to be farmworkers anymore’. . . Mrs. Reimer said that in this area ‘you’re lucky if you can get your kids through high school having them marry a white.’”

Between the more muted and nuanced tones of the Peace Section report and the surprise and indignation in Sutter’s diary, Mennonites from the east clearly saw a different Mennonitism at work in central California. This can be attributed in part to interactions of Mennonites from different regions, but also to different denominations. California Mennonites are largely Mennonite Brethren. From their beginnings in nineteenth-century Russia, they have been more open to pietistic, evangelical, and fundamentalist theologies. The intersection of Mennonitisms—socially activist Goshen students, the inter-Mennonite MCC anchored in the east, and a population of California Mennonites largely conservative and evangelical—revealed the power of assumptions. Differing pedigrees of American Mennonitism found each other in the fields of the San Joaquin
Valley, and like long-forgotten relatives, they found each other strange. It turned out they read their Bibles differently, understood the relationship of labor and capital differently, and both found it aggravating that questions of class, race, and political views at this time trumped theology and religious practice.

Mennonite Brethren farmers were alleged to have engaged in such practices as using child and illegal immigrant labor, providing unsafe working conditions, and paying low wages. Yet, as Bob Buxman discovered, the situation was more complex, as growers resisted the allegations as caricatures and asserted that they acted more responsibly than they were given credit for. Concerning child labor, for example, they explained that they permitted parents to take their children, who were not hired directly by the farmer, with them to pick raisin grapes; they tried to avoid hiring illegal labor—though the measures allegedly taken were not always the most strenuous to ensure a legal labor force. Yet differences in perception between farmer and worker persisted. Mennonite Brethren farmers saw their priorities in proper order as Christian faith, their laborers, and farming; their laborers saw those same priorities practiced in the exact opposite order. Both, however, agreed that the Mennonite Brethren farmer was most alike the popular image of the California farmer in terms of anti-unionism.40

The MCC authors, maintaining a moderate posture in their labor politics, favorably represented Mennonite Peter Enns, who owned a large farm, as he brought to their attention a layer of tension not previously addressed—as growers and labor struggled with each other, the small farmer was being squeezed out by large corporate farms. Enns “talked very favorably about opportunities for Christian Mennonite businessmen to sit together and talk about Christian ethics in relation to their business management and labor problems.” He would like the Christian community to actually discuss what a fair wage is. Enns reiterated that many socially concerned Mennonites unfairly singled out California, and that some of the California Mennonite growers were seriously annoyed with their eastern co-religionists, especially when growers of all sizes were largely treated the same.41

On July 30, 1974, concerned Mennonites met at Goshen College for a forum on the United Farm Workers and grower issues, sponsored by the Mennonite Board of Congregational Ministries. The discussion was based on the reports of Hershberger, Koontz, and Regier; the Lupe DeLeon and
Neftali Torres report; and the report by students Beth Sutter, Ruth Sutter, and Dan Hertzler. The discussions dealt with how to categorize UFW: some claimed it was a social movement, which Mennonites could “tie into the U.F.W. with our servanthood concept providing health, educational and other services”; others said it was an ethnic identity and Chicano movement, not a union. In a peculiar understanding of ethnic identity, the forum concluded that because the UFW also existed in the eastern United States, it was not part of an ethnic identity. One participant, Dan Hertzler, even suggested, without explanation, that the problem for Mennonites was “our middle America concept of Christian faith. Mennonites tend to be supportive of the status quo.” From the appearance of these tensions, the status quo was either unknown or different for everyone.

Anabaptist Visions Clash

The Goshen students came from a liberal arts college in Indiana that in its leadership was known for melding Mennonite identity and social activism. Through the late 1940s and 1950s, there was questioning in some Mennonite circles about what the “peace witness” should consist of. For much of American Mennonite experience, pacifism was characterized as a reluctance to perform military service and a mandate to live peacefully, to themselves, to be “still in the land” as some put it. Yet, after World War II, the discussion turned increasingly toward a more active, politically engaged, and less quiet “peace witness.” This conversation was happening as the civil rights movement was growing, and the nonviolent example set by the Baptist Martin Luther King, Jr., and Roman Catholic Chávez were particularly persuasive. Within the Mennonite Church, the denomination to which Goshen College belonged, the shift to a socially active peace witness was well under way.

The Anabaptist vision, described earlier, was a religious call for Mennonites to be peaceful followers of Jesus, living in community accountable to each other. J. Lawrence Burkholder articulated another important “vision” in the late 1950s. Burkholder argued for a view of justice whereby Mennonites became engaged with society and therefore needed to make some necessary concessions for the larger ideal of justice. In 1960, after a very cool reception by Goshen College leaders, he left to teach at Harvard Divinity School. Burkholder returned to Goshen in 1971 to become its president, signifying an important shift in the school’s identity, and he
was president in 1974 when issues in California led to student visits and conferences held on campus. He described Mennonites who were not social activists and draft resisters as part of a “drift into comfortable membership in American society.”

Although the tensions in California were often framed in singular terms in these reports, they reflected a degree of antipathy between regional Mennonitisms defined by rurality and urbanization and between religiosities progressive and conservative evangelical, exacerbated by geographic distance and economic convictions. In a gathering of General Conference Mennonite farmers, they thought the solution to labor problems resided with lawmakers and that the church could offer more than the overly simplistic three-choice set of siding with workers, siding with farmers, or neutrality. At the very least, some farmers suggested, the church could offer reconciliation and “simply present the facts.”

The MCC Peace Section also noted that despite attitudes attributed to Alvin Peters, his workers opposed the union and felt that negotiating with the farmer directly was advantageous. In other words, although real differences existed between the perceptions of Peters and those of his workers, both sides considered their arrangement workable and mutually agreeable. Some California Mennonite hosts and workers expressed interest in having a meeting of informal discussions with Mennonite farmers. The Mennonite Brethren were in a unique situation to facilitate this, because they possessed a sizable population of both workers and farmers.

By the mid-1970s, it was clear, demonstrated through this convulsive issue, that American Mennonitism was a plurality. It always had been, but in the early 1970s, assumptions regarding “peace” and “justice” were made that simply assumed something to be solid when in actuality it was fluid. In fact, the fissures were more than theological; they were racial, economic, and geographic. Rural and urban cultures formed to exacerbate existing fault lines in a small set of denominations already prone to schism. Moreover, an amalgam of conservative politics and evangelicalism, which emerged as a considerable force in Ronald Reagan’s California, appealed to many Golden State Mennonites. Eastern Mennonites, working from an intellectual milieu energized by Burkholder and the recent success of John Howard Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus* (1972), found their western co-religionists unrecognizable.

In central California, eastern-based Mennonites scrambled to map out the scope of American Mennonitism through the language of a liberal-
protestant social activism available to them, refracted through a particular Anabaptist lens. What they found to their surprise, however, was that the map was already creased along the folds of race, labor-intensive capitalist agriculture, and conservative evangelical religion.

The reaction of eastern Mennonites to California is as instructive as the California Mennonite response to labor issues. As the opening quote to this chapter indicates, there was a perception that Mennonites in California were qualitatively different than Mennonites elsewhere. The reflection of some eastern Mennonites to the distinctive Mennonite experience and culture in California implies a divergence from historical norms; this was the case when California Mennonites sided with large economic interests against labor. In California, the Mennonite story is dominated more by a Russian Mennonite past than the Swiss-German one that forms much Mennonite church history. In the Russian context, Mennonites had much experience over centuries as wealthy landowners hiring Russian peasants to work for them and, in some cases, had been targets of peasant resistance and a Communist government.48

Moreover, Mennonites from eastern states had a longer tradition of coupling a perceived bucolic agrarianism with Mennonite values than with industrialized capitalist agriculture, which was the practice in California.49 The family farm may still have been the more common agricultural arrangement in Indiana at this time; if not, it was certainly part of the recent past. California would have seemed like a different world to such observers. A culture of political conservatism and evangelical fundamentalism embraced by California Mennonites startled those from Pennsylvania and Indiana just as they in turn irritated some of their co-religionists by the Pacific.50