

Hispanic miner tours during movie's return

Historic strike film gaining recognition

United Press International
SILVER CITY, N.M. — In 1953, a copper miner named Juan Chacon was the lead actor in a controversial movie written by an Academy Award-winner depicting an historic strike.

Chacon, a slightly built Hispanic who said he was told on the job that "the only thing the company had for Mexicans was laborers' work," said "getting the part in the film surprised me."

But it was good type-casting. The setting for both the movie and the strike was Chacon's home area in the mountainous copper country of southwestern New Mexico.

Nearly 30 years later, both Chacon and the film, "Salt of the Earth," appear to be on the verge of gaining greater recognition than during the Red Scare days when the movie was produced.

Recently retired, the 61-year-old Chacon, who seldom has been more than a day's drive from his rural home, plans to accept invitations to travel much of the world where the film is being shown anew.

The movie was made against

great odds, including violent action by vigilantes responding to rumors that the filmmakers were Communists come to take over Grant County, N.M.

"One guy had a gun on my chest," said Chacon, the soft-spoken, Spanish-accented son of a former sharecropper who died three years ago at the age of 101. The female star, Mexican actress Rosaura Revueltas, was deported before the filming was completed.

The stormy making of the movie is the subject of a recent made-for-television documentary, dedicated to Chacon, and to the film's director Herbert Biberman and screen writer Michael Wilson, both dead.

The 47-minute TV film, "A Crime to Fit the Punishment," by New York producers Stephen Mack and Barbara Moss, is scheduled for its premiere at a special May 1 event at Western New Mexico University. The showing will be sponsored by the New Mexico and New York Councils on the Humanities.

Chacon also was honored Saturday night at a retirement party thrown by members of

Local 890 of the Amalgamated United Steel Workers, where he served as president for 17 years. "Salt of the Earth," done in semi-documentary style,

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blended miners and their wives and children with professional actors to portray one of this country's lesser known, but more successful, civil rights

struggles.

It won high distinction internationally, but received only scarce commercial screening in the United States because of the movie industry's blacklisting of the principal makers of the film.

Billionaire Howard Hughes, then a moviemaker himself, wrote a congressman a lengthy letter spelling out a plan to withhold facilities to complete the film and to bar its distribution.

The movie told of the November 1949-March 1951 walkout, in which Mexican-American miners, backed by wives willing to walk the picket lines and go to jail for their cause, won an end to discrimination against them.

The lengthy walkout was the beginning of the end of a system in the mines that kept Mexican-Americans segregated in inadequate housing, toilets and pay lines, and barred their entrance to the crafts or anything but

common labor.

"We won a great victory," Chacon said. "(Before the strike) we still had outside toilets, no running water inside. Only two bedroom houses for six and seven members of a family. Very bad. In the theaters, we were allowed to go in, but had to sit on a different side (from the Anglos)."

The strike was against American Zinc, but it laid the groundwork for changing similar conditions under other companies operating in the area, including Kennecott Copper Corp.

Director Biberman was one of the "Hollywood Ten" jailed in 1947 and blacklisted by the movie industry for failing to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Other blacklisted artists, unable to find work in the movie industry at the time, participated. They included author

and screenwriter Paul Jarrico, the movie's producer, screenwriter Wilson and the late actor Will Geer.

Wilson, winner of Academy Awards for the screen plays of

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"A Place in the Sun" and "Bridge Over the River Kwai," was the screenwriter. Geer, who portrayed the union-busting

sheriff in the movie, later would finally find work in movies again and take the role of Grandpa Walton in the longrunning hit television series, "The Waltons."

The film was selected by the Academie du Cinema de Paris to receive the International Grand Prize for the best film shown in France in 1955.

Chacon garnered some critical acclaim, but he did not win the best actor award. That went posthumously to the American star James Dean.

In the United States, where "Salt of the Earth" was seen by very few people, the movie "Marty" and its star, Ernest Borgnine, were the Academy Award winners.

A Time magazine review of the film said:

"The best of the worker-players is Juan Chacon, real-life president of the local union."

Group works '9 to 5' to unionize workers

United Press International
WASHINGTON — The "9-to-5" dream of unionizing America's 20 million secretarial and clerical work force has attained little success to date, but union officials pledge a sustained campaign over several decades.

Only two groups of workers — at an insurance branch in Syracuse, N.Y., and a labor law firm in Philadelphia — have voted to join the District 925 union named for the hours of the normal workday and made famous by a movie and record featuring Dolly Parton.

One year after its creation amid widespread publicity, District 925 has attained bargaining rights for only 101 members.

"It is a lifetime campaign," said John Sweeney, president of the parent Service Employees International Union, one of the largest in the AFL-CIO with more than 600,000 members.

"It will be going on for the next 20 or 30 years," Sweeney predicted.

The Service Employees, with about 50,000 clerical workers in various other locals, embarked on the effort jointly in March, 1981, with Working Women, an independent office employees organization.

The goal was to attract office workers — especially women who comprise the vast majority of that workforce — to organized labor.

"We're not unrealistic," Sweeney said. "We see the clerical workers in the 1980s as the industrial workers were in the 1930s, government workers in the '60s and health care workers in the '70s."

Jacqueline Ruff, who headed Local 925 in Boston, which

served as a catalyst for the nationwide campaign and is now executive director of District 925, also is not discouraged.

She said her group is involved currently in various stages of trying to organize 10,000 workers. That includes, she said, working with leaders of local groups, having workers sign cards authorizing the union to represent them in collective bargaining, or requesting a formal representation election.

"It's a very long-term investment," Ruff said. "It has to be done carefully. It has to be done with a certain amount of resources. It has to be done with a certain kind of expertise."

"We can see it growing. We can see it there."

"I go into a meeting of 50 office workers who are interested in unionizing and ask how many of you have been in a union before and one person raises her hand and that was when she was working as a sales clerk in a supermarket, so you have to cover a lot of ground and prepare them for the anti-union consultants and so on."

However, the only significant election victory by District 925 during its first year came Feb. 4 when workers at the Syracuse, N.Y., group benefits branch of Equitable Life Assurance Society voted 49-40 to join the union.

"They heard about us last summer," she said. "It took them about a month to find us."

The insurance industry is one of the least unionized in the nation, and Ruff said District 925 was wary because no union had succeeded in organizing the Equitable workforce, and because the firm had an outside consultant firm which she described as "major union-busters."

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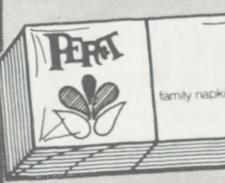
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