

DE LA CRUZ, JESSIE LÓPEZ (1919–)

“I’d been trained as a child that the woman just walked behind the husband and kept quiet, no matter what the husband does. But in work I’ve been equal to men since I was a child, working alongside men, doing the same hard work and earning the same wages.” Jessie López de la Cruz. *Latinas in the United States: A Historical Encyclopedia*.

Throughout her life, Jessie López de la Cruz struggled to improve the conditions of Mexican and Mexican American farmworkers. Raised by her grandparents, her migrant worker relatives harvested crops, chopped cotton, hoed beets, picked prunes, apricots and grapes throughout California. Jesse joined them at an early age. Married at age nineteen, López de la Cruz raised a large family. In her early forties, she found her life dramatically changed when César Chávez and other farm labor organizers visited her home. She liked their objectives for higher wages, adequate housing, improved working conditions, educational opportunities, and ethnic dignity. Inspired by the civil rights movement, she joined the National Farm Workers Association (the precursor to the United Farm Workers union) in 1965. Two years later she was a union organizer. She experienced a great sense of pride as the first woman field representative in the Fresno area. She participated in collective bargaining talks with the Christian Brothers Winery. The union was a significant catalyst for her involvement in the affairs of the community. Her visibility, eloquence, and confidence made her a valuable community advocate and resource. She was appointed to a variety of boards and organizations, including the Fresno County Economic Opportunity Commission, the Central California Action Associates, and the state’s Commission on the Status of Women.