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On this day

May 20, 1974

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## Decision in Allee v Medrano



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On May 20, 1974, the US Supreme Court decided against the Texas Rangers in *Allee v Medrano*, upholding a lower court's ruling that the Rangers injured strikers constitutional rights during the 1966-1967 Starr County melon strikes.

In the 1960s Tejano farmworkers in Starr County, Texas, worked in terrible conditions for wages as low as \$0.50/hour. Most lived in homes without electricity or running water and had little to no access to school or medical care. Starting in June 1966, the workers struck for better working conditions and higher wages in partnership with the United Farm Workers. Law enforcement hassled and threatened organizers and strikers from the start, as seen in this quote/these quotes from the 1974 Supreme Court decision:

The factual findings of the District Court are not challenged here. In early June, 1966, at the beginning of the organizing effort, Eugene Nelson, one of the strikers' principal leaders, stationed himself at the International Bridge in Roma, Texas, attempting to persuade laborers from Mexico to support the strike. He was taken into custody by the Starr County Sheriff, detained for four hours, questioned about the strike, and was told he was under investigation by the Federal Bureau of

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Investigation. No charges were ever filed against him. 347 F. Supp. at 612.

Screenshot from the SCOTUS decision. [Read it in full here.](#)

In October, 1966, about 25 union members and sympathizers picketed alongside the Rancho Grande Farms exhorting the laborers to join the strike; they were ordered to disperse by the sheriffs, although their picketing was peaceful. When Raymond Chandler, one of the union leaders, engaged an officer in conversation contesting the validity of the order, he was arrested under Art. 474 of the Texas Penal Code for breach of the peace. Although the maximum punishment for this offense is a \$200 fine, bond was set for Chandler at \$500. When two of Chandler's friends came to the courthouse to make bond, they were verbally abused, told they had no business there, and that, if they did not leave, they would be placed in jail themselves. 347 F. Supp. at 612-613. They left. [Footnote 4]

Later that month, when the president of the local union and others were in the courthouse under arrest, they shouted "*viva la huelga*" in support of the strike. A deputy sheriff struck the union official and held a gun at his forehead, ordering him not to repeat those words in the courthouse because it was a "respectful place." *Id.* at 613. As the strike continued through the year and the Texas Rangers were called into the local

Screenshot from the SCOTUS decision. [Read it in full here.](#)

Rangers under Capt. Alfred Y. Allee, Sr. arrived in Starr County in May 1967 to ‘protect’ that year’s harvest at the request of the county attorney, who was also on retainer for one of the biggest melon growers. In his book *Cult of Glory: The Bold and Brutal History of the Texas Rangers*, Doug Swanson describes Allee as an experienced Ranger who cared about his men’s safety and about law and order—and as a violent man with a strong hatred of Mexicans and Mexican Americans.





Capt. Alfred Y. Allee, Sr. C. 1960s. [Texas Rangers Hall of Fame and Museum digital collections.](#)

*Allee showed fierce loyalty to the men who*

*worked for him. He defended them against all critics, bought them lunch on the road, and went to funerals of their loved ones. “I mean he guarded over us men like a sitting hen,” [Joaquin] Jackson said. In hazardous encounters, Allee walked point. “If there was going to be a firefight or there was gonna be any trouble, he’d be out in front,” Jackson said. “He always said no one is going to kill one of my men without killing me first.”*

...

*To many Latinos in South Texas, Allee did little to dispel their fear and mistrust of the Rangers. José Ángel Gutiérrez recalled the captain’s confronting—and allegedly shoving—the Hispanic mayor of Crystal City at a rowdy city council meeting. “[Allee] tells him, ‘You goddamn Mexican. Tell these goddamn Mexicans to shut up,’” Gutiérrez said. “Something made Allee hate Mexicans.”*

*Swanson, Cult of Glory, 365.*

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The treatment of strikers, organizers, and their supporters under Allee was violent. Later in May 1967, he arrested Rev. Edgar Krueger of the Texas Council of Churches, and, while in custody, another Ranger held Krueger’s face just inches from a passing train. Rangers did the same to Magdaleno Dimas, a union supporter and ex-con whom Allee considered dangerous.

place." *Id.* at 613. As the strike continued through the year and the Texas Rangers were called into the local area, there were more serious incidents of violence. In May, 1967, some union pickets gathered in Mission, Texas, to protest the carrying of produce from the valley on the Missouri-Pacific Railroad. They were initially charged with trespass on private property; this was changed to unlawful assembly, and finally was superseded by complaints of secondary picketing. The Reverend Edgar

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Krueger and Magdalena Dimas were taken into custody by the Rangers. As a train passed, the Rangers held these two prisoners' bodies so that their faces were only inches from the train. *Id.* at 615.

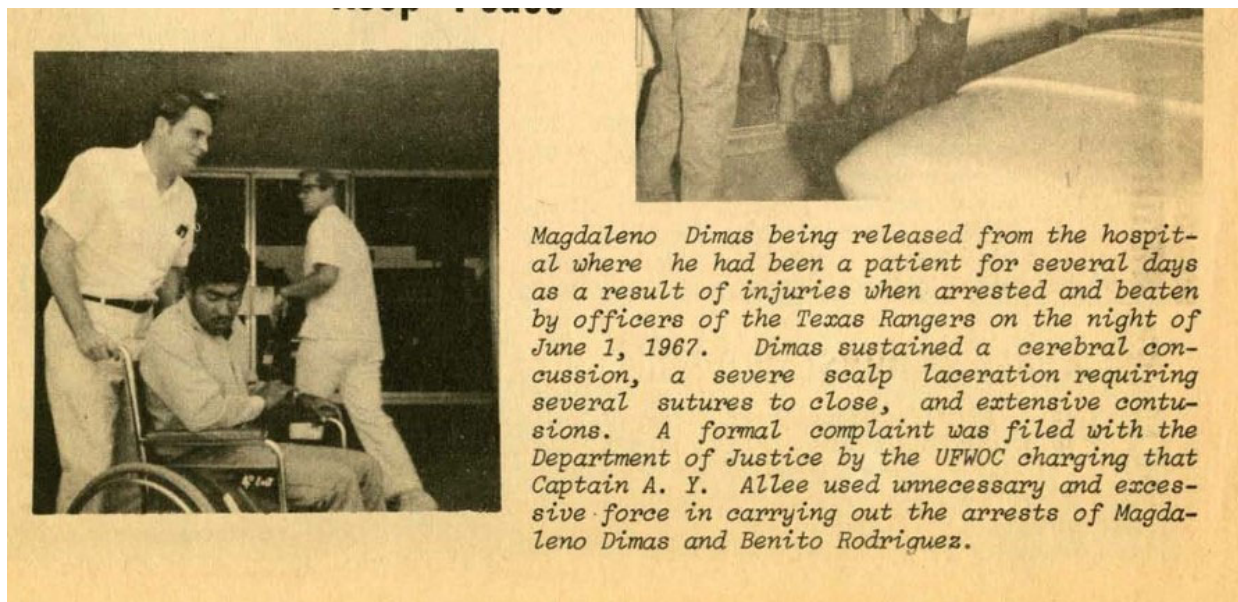
Screenshot from the SCOTUS decision. [Read it in full here.](#)

Sometime after the train incident, Rangers attempted to arrest Dimas for brandishing a gun, but they had no grounds for a warrant. Instead, they tailed other union supporters to a house where Dimas was, called a justice of the peace to fill out warrant forms so they could enter, arrested Dimas and another union member, and beat Dimas so brutally that "his spine was curved out of shape" (see SCOTUS excerpt below). Allee claimed Dimas had tripped during the arrest (Swanson, 368).

A few weeks later, the Rangers sought to arrest Dimas for allegedly brandishing a gun in a threatening manner, and found him by "tailing" Chandler and Moreno, also union members. Chandler was arrested with no explanation, as was Moreno, who was also assaulted by Captain Allee at the time. These two men were later charged with assisting Dimas to evade arrest, although, by Allee's own testimony, they were never told Dimas was sought by the Rangers. Indeed, because the officers had no arrest warrant or formal complaint against Dimas, they could not then arrest him, so they put in a call to a justice of the peace who arrived on the scene and filled out a warrant on forms he carried with him. The Rangers then broke into a house and arrested Dimas and Rodriguez, another union member, in a violent and brutal fashion. Dimas was hospitalized four days with a brain concussion, and X-rays revealed that he had been struck so hard on the back that his spine was curved out of shape. Rodriguez had cuts and bruises on his ear, elbow, upper arm, back, and jaw; one of his fingers was broken, and the nail torn off. *Id.* at 616-617.

Screenshot from the SCOTUS decision. [Read it in full here.](#)





Dimas in a wheelchair upon his release from the hospital. From [“Sons of Zapata: A Brief Photographic History of the Farm Workers Strike in Texas,”](#) UCSD Libraries.

Law enforcement took other public anti-union positions. The Starr County Sheriff’s Office distributed an anti-union paper. The Rangers selectively enforced the unlawful assembly laws to penalize union members and solicited baseless accusations against them from people with no knowledge of the alleged offenses, as the Supreme Court decision recounts:

During this entire period, the Starr County Sheriff’s office regularly distributed an aggressive anti-union newspaper. A deputy driving an official car would pick up the papers each week and bring them back to the Sheriff’s office; they would then be distributed by various deputies. *Id.* at 617. The District Court included copies of the paper in an appendix to its opinion; a typical headline was “Only Mexican Subversive Group Could Sympathize with Valley Farm Workers.” The views of the Texas Rangers were similarly explicit. On a number of occasions, they offered farm jobs to the union leaders, at the union demand wage, in return for an end to the strike. *Id.* at 613, 614. The Rangers told one union member that they had been called into the area to break the strike, and would not leave until they had done so. *Id.* at 613.

Among other findings of the three-judge District Court were that the defendants selectively enforced the unlawful assembly law, Art. 439 of the Texas Penal Code, treating as criminal an inoffensive union gathering, 347 F. Supp. at 613; solicited criminal complaints against appellees from persons with no knowledge of the alleged offense, *id.* at 615; and filed baseless charges against one appellee for impersonating an officer.

[Footnote 5]

Screenshot from the SCOTUS decision. [Read it in full here.](#)

Government bodies condemned the Rangers' behavior, and state senators requested that the Rangers be removed from the area. The US Commission Civil Rights concluded that the Rangers had denied farmworkers their rights. In 1972, a Texas court agreed, and the US Supreme court upheld that decision two years later. They concluded that the Rangers had deprived union members of their rights through a "prevailing pattern" of violence, intimidation, and coercion.

The three-judge District Court found that the law enforcement officials "took sides in what was essentially a labor-management controversy." *Id.* at 618. Although there was virtually no evidence of assault upon

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anyone by union people during the strike, the officials "concluded that the maintenance of law and order was inextricably bound to preventing the success of the strike." *Ibid.* Thus, these were not a series of isolated incidents, but a prevailing pattern throughout the controversy.

Screenshot from the SCOTUS decision. [Read it in full here.](#)

The Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum's biography of Allee mentions the strikebreaking but gives Allee the last word. He's quoted as claiming he "didn't mishandle any people."

In the 1960s, Allee went to the Rio Grande Valley to break up farmworkers strikes and was accused of brutality against the mostly Mexican-American farmworkers. He denied the charges. "I didn't rough anybody up", he recalled. "I don't know where that stuff was coming from. I was down there doing a job and didn't mishandle any people."

["Allee, A. Y., Sr."](#) Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum.

Accessed February 2, 2023.

And yet it is well-documented that the Texas Rangers participated in violent, illegal strikebreaking in the 1960s. [Learn more about the 1966 strike and its history from the National Parks Service.](#) Explore this blog or follow [@Refusing2Forget](#) on Twitter to learn more about the complex and often violent history of the Texas Rangers.

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