

(Bracero History Project)

The Bracero History Project

The labor shortages of WWII gave rise to what was to become an important chapter in Mexican-American history – a temporary guest worker program often referred to as the Bracero Program. Between 1942 and 1964 the Emergency Farm Labor Program or Mexican Farm Labor Program or Bracero Program enabled millions of Mexican nationals to come to the U.S. to work on predominately agricultural labor contracts and lend "arms" to the war effort by working jobs not filled by US workers. Although the program began life as a temporary WWII measure, it soon became a fixture in the agricultural work landscape until it was allowed to terminate in 1964. Over the course of its lifetime, the Bracero Program became the largest and most significant U.S. contract labor, guest worker program of the 20th century.

“The picture within this frame of laws, agreements, and contracts was, on the whole, a murky one...and in the midst of it all, important yet insignificant, central yet marginal, the bracero himself, in apprehensive competition with five of his fellows for one job offered, often illiterate and always willing to fulfill his obligations on the trot” (Galarza, Merchants of Labor p. 86).

It is this important and central story of the bracero that we are interested in recovering, in preserving, and in presenting.

The Bracero History Project is an ambitious attempt to collect, document, exhibit, and share a complex and sometimes controversial history. Our goal is to create a national consortium of museums, universities, and cultural institutions to focus on this critical piece of history. Together we can be smarter, stronger, and more effective.

(NADEL PHOTO)

Leonard Nadel Collection National Museum of American History Division of Work and Industry

The impetus for this project was the acquisition of the Leonard Nadel Collection. This collection includes 64 captioned photographic prints and 1,730 original 35mm negatives (with corresponding photographer's original contact sheets.) The images depict the recruiting of farm laborers in central Mexico, processing of the workers in US 'reception' centers, and their work and living conditions in California. The photographs were taken during the summer of 1956 by freelance photojournalist Leonard Nadel through a grant from the Fund for the Republic. Locations include: San Mateo, Mexico; Monterrey,

Mexico; Hidalgo Texas; Gonzales, California; Chular, California; Salinas, California; Watsonville, California; Castroville, California; and Stockton, California.

Fund for the Republic, Inc. dealt with the defense of civil rights and civil liberties from 1952 through 1961. The Fund's aim was to uphold the basic principles of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights during the years of McCarthyism and its aftermath. His pictures supplemented a report on the Bracero program entitled "Strangers in Our Fields", published in 1956, by Ernesto Galarza¹. Both Nadel and Galarza were paid by the Fund for the Republic.

(Man with hoe)

Bracero History

The word "bracero" idiomatically refers to a farm hand or labor for hire. Reacting to the labor shortages of WWII, the US and Mexico negotiated an intergovernmental agreement where workers could legally come to the US on labor contracts.

(Village scene)

The bracero program was controversial in its own time. Mexican peasants, desperate for cash work, were willing to take harsh jobs at wages scorned by most Americans. Large growers pushed for the opportunity to hire an inexpensive workforce whom they assumed would be unlikely to strike. Established Mexican American farm workers already living in the U.S. worried that braceros would compete for their jobs and lower their wages.

(Workers in a field)

The bracero's presence in the U.S. had a significant effect on the business of farming and the culture of the nation. Small farmers, large growers, and farm associations alike used Mexican nationals in California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Arkansas (as well as 23 other states) to provide manpower during peak harvest and cultivation times, to depress wages for domestic workers, and to prevent the formation of unions. Between 1950 and 1960 sociologist and labor historian Ernesto Galarza estimates that in seasonal migration one out of two jobs was filled by a bracero. As one Minnesota cannery

manager succinctly explained it, corporations hired foreign workers "to hold a threat over the heads of whites and Texas Mexicans and to make them work!"

(Walking to collection point)

Potential braceros were solicited from rural areas of Mexico.

(hands)

They had to prove they were farmers (not urban workers).

(collection point)

They traveled to collection points by train, bus, and foot, and were then shipped to border processing centers.

(Bridge, muscles, DDT)

At border stations the braceros were inspected by INS agents for TB and other diseases, names checked for "undesirables", fumigated and sent across the border to be selected for specific work contracts.

(Pepsi, pay checks, bunks)

The program started off small but grew rapidly in size. Soon however questions about exploitation surfaced. Activists complained that housing was often substandard and, that despite having money deducted from their pay for food, the workers were fed poorly. Few braceros complained about discrepancies in their pay or other problems for fear that if they spoke out they would be sent back to Mexico.

(Singing, movie, mass)

The Bracero Program has significance beyond agricultural history. Many historians have linked the program to settlement patterns of Latinos in the United States. While bracero workers were supposed to return to Mexico at the end of their contracts, not all did go back. Some that did return to Mexico eventually emigrated to the U.S. aided by their experience and knowledge gained as bracero workers. A significant percentage of

Mexican Americans living in the US today can trace their heritage to a relative or ancestor that experienced the Bracero Program first hand.

(Haircut, checkers, mass, reading)

While many scholars and past research has been focused on the institution and policies of the program current scholarship and our project is looking at broader themes such as citizenship and nationalism, investigating the notion of border and trans-nationalism, investigating gender family relationships and dynamics, looking at the local and regional social and cultural dynamics and the change this experience brought with them.

Luis Zamudio Villagómez was asked ...

So, could you say, being a bracero changed your life?

Answer - Yes

In any way?

Answer- Yes it changed, because the people that didn't come, looked at us, and well, Pues decían, mire 'pos ustedes que van 'pal norte siquiera traen ahí una camisita, un pantalón, nosotros aquí andamos con la ropa toda rota, y la señora echándole"

They said, well you all that go al norte at least bring a shirt, pants, all of us here go around with the clothes torn, and the lady working it / fixing it.

Yes, yes you could see the difference between those that went.

Luis Zamudio Villagómez

AA: Entonces podría decirse que el, el haber sido bracero cambió su vida...

LZ: Si.

AA: De alguna manera.

LZ: Si cambió, por que la gente que no venía, miraba yo pues que, 'pos decían "'ire, 'pos ustedes que van 'pal norte siquiera traen ahí una camisita, un pantalón, nosotros aquí andamos con la ropa toda rota, y la señora echándole"

AA: Enmendando.

LZ: Remendándolas.

AA: ¿Si, si se veia la diferencia entre los que venían?

(Goals and objectives)

As you can see we have several goals and objectives for this project, create a consortium

Townhall meetings

Oral histories

Website

Exhibition

Education opportunities

(Consortium)

Consortium - The desire of those involved in the Bracero History Project is to collaboratively collect, document, and exhibit this important chapter of American history. It is our belief that only through local contact can we reach the historical program participants and their descendants and thus truly explore the rich and complex history of the bracero program. It is our belief that only through local contact can we reach the historical program participants and their descendants and thus truly explore the rich and complex history of the bracero program. We are actively seeking partners.

Townhall Meetings

Aided by a grant from the Smithsonian Latino Initiative Pool, we will hold a series of town hall meetings this summer in cities across the nation. We are actively looking for museums and centers with which to partner. We will make an overview presentation on the bracero program to the local community, and do follow-up individual oral histories. It is critical for the success of the project that we seek a broad base of local institutions and community groups in order to reach the people involved. We hope that through these

forums we will generate interest in the history of the bracero program, opportunities to collect important artifacts, and a more complete record of this important piece of Latino history.

Have held sessions in

San Jose, CA – Mexican Heritage Plaza

Salinas, CA – Steinbeck Museum

Chicago, CA – Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum

Los Angeles, CA – La Plaza de la Cultura

5 sites in the Coachella Valley

Hope to do....

Northwest Oregon or Washington

Arizona

One or two places in CA

Mexico

Preservation and Oral Histories

As part of the Town hall meeting we create a “collection day” event where we call for people to sign up for one hour interviews and to bring in photos and objects from their time as braceros. The main focus is on collecting and preserving the stories before they are lost. Duplication, transcription, translation and providing the host institution or community with copies is the goal.

Website

We are also building a website to link the participating institutions and share the information collected between ourselves and the public at large. George Mason Univ. Center for New Media is hosting and providing infrastructure.

Exhibition

We hope to produce a traveling exhibition, *Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero History Program, 1942-1964*. The exhibition will build upon the Smithsonian collections but be enriched through the partnerships with museums around the country. The traveling show

will use the history of the bracero program to explore ongoing issues of race relations, work, agriculture, family, gender, the border, politics, and identity in the United States.

Education –

The project also has a goal to provide a “do your own history” section providing questions as well as a resource and curriculum activities for teachers. We also hope to provide a central reference point for online archives, resources, and bibliography. And we hope to partner with institutions to do a local/regional section for the travel exhibition and programs.

Conferences – Providence, RI

El Paso, TX, Nov. 10-12

OAH/NCPH – DC 2006