

The Bracero Program: A Historical Investigation



An Introduction to the Bracero Program *from the Bracero History Archive*

The bracero program, which brought millions of Mexican guest workers to the United States, ended more than four decades ago. Current debates about immigration policy-including discussions about a new guest worker program-have put the program back in the news and made it all the more important to understand this chapter of American history. Yet while top U.S. and Mexican officials re-examine the bracero program as a possible model, most Americans know very little about the program, the nation's largest experiment with guest workers. Indeed, until very recently, this important story has been inadequately documented and studied, even by scholars.

The bracero program grew out of a series of bi-lateral agreements between Mexico and the United States that allowed millions of Mexican men to come to the United States to work on, short-term, primarily agricultural labor contracts. From 1942 to 1964, 4.6 million contracts were signed, with many individuals returning several times on different contracts, making it the largest U.S. contract labor program. An examination of the images, stories, documents and artifacts of the bracero program contributes to our understanding of the lives of migrant workers in Mexico and the United States, as well as our knowledge of, immigration, citizenship, nationalism, agriculture, labor practices, race relations, gender, sexuality, the family, visual culture, and the Cold War era.

The bracero program was created by executive order in 1942 because many growers argued that World War II would bring labor shortages to low-paying agricultural jobs. On August 4, 1942 the United States concluded a temporary intergovernmental agreement for the use of Mexican agricultural labor on United States farms (officially referred to as the Mexican Farm Labor Program), and the influx of legal temporary Mexican workers began. But the program lasted much longer than anticipated. In 1951, after nearly a decade in existence, concerns about production and the U.S. entry into the Korean conflict led Congress to formalize the Bracero Program with Public Law 78.

The bracero program was controversial in its time. Mexican nationals, desperate for work, were willing to take arduous jobs at wages scorned by most Americans. Farm workers already living in the United States worried that braceros would compete for jobs and lower wages. In theory, the bracero program had safeguards to protect both Mexican and domestic workers for example, guaranteed payment of at least the prevailing area wage received by native workers; employment for three-fourths of the contract period; adequate, sanitary, and free housing; decent meals at reasonable prices; occupational insurance at employer's expense; and free transportation back to Mexico at the end of the contract. Employers were supposed to hire braceros only in areas of certified domestic labor shortage, and were not to use them as strikebreakers. In practice, they ignored many of these rules and Mexican and native workers suffered while growers benefited from plentiful, cheap, labor. Between the 1940s and mid 1950s, farm wages dropped sharply as a percentage of manufacturing wages, a result in part of the use of braceros and undocumented laborers who lacked full rights in American society.

Activity Instructions

Historical research starts with a question about the past. However, piecing together an accurate answer to these questions is not as straightforward as it may seem. Primary sources can—and often do—conflict with one another, as do secondary sources. That said, sources can also complement one another in a way that allows for a deeper level of historical understanding. The historian’s job is to explore and evaluate all kinds of sources to construct an answer—their interpretation of the past.

Use the primary sources provided to answer the essential question: *Was the bracero program an exploitation of or an opportunity for Mexican laborers? Justify your answer with the primary sources and your analysis of them.*

Step 1:

Carefully read each document—as you read, explore and evaluate the sources. Think critically about each source separately, writing your thoughts in the margins as you read. Use the guiding questions above each primary source to help you analyze it. Make sure you identify each source to the extent you are able at the bottom of the page.

Step 2:

Now think about the sources as a whole. Weigh them against one another. Do they conflict with one another? Do they corroborate each other’s accounts? If a source is biased, how will that affect its role in your answer? Make notes (preferably in another color) in the margins and underline or highlight as you re-read to find the best way to fashion a fair answer. We recommend you use a piece of scratch paper to outline your points and the evidence you plan to make each point. Consider a four section format: introduction, evidence for, evidence against, conclusion.

Step 3:

After you have thought carefully about the documents, answer the essential question, justifying your answer with the primary sources and your analysis of them.



World War II poster by L. Helguera
Courtesy: San Diego Historical Society

What strikes you about this oral history? Why?

What part(s) of this document might help you answer the essential question? How?

What questions do you still have about this topic?

Primary Source 1:

Below is a partial transcript of an interview with Angel Guzmán Domínguez who was born in Paraíso, Tabasco, in 1924. Before joining the bracero program, he had a shoe-making business in Tabasco. He joined the bracero program in 1946, working on the railroad and in agriculture in Maryland, Philadelphia, New York, and California. His final contract was in 1956.

I was born in Paraíso, Tabasco, on October 14, 1924. My parents were poor, and there were people even poorer during the time I grew up . . . I studied, I left and went to study shoemaking .

At night I went to the town square, to the little park, right, with my letter in hand. We had this custom of sitting on the benches, and that is where all the talk started. "Listen, guess what, I have a letter my uncle sent me from the United States." And we started to read it . . . and listen, right there we started to get really excited . . . We arrived at the [contracting] office, folks from the north, from Aguascalientes, from Zacatecas, from Hermosillo, from all over, to look for a way to leave as a bracero.

We got contracted in Querétaro, and those that got contracted in Querétaro went straight to work on trains, track work. Those that got contracted in Irapuato, Guanajuato, went to agriculture . . . They didn't give us any choice in selecting the work. That is how I got to go to Philadelphia, well actually Joppa, Maryland . . . There were times we waited four months to hear something about work. Picking beets was the hardest work for us. The fields are so big, it takes the longest because each side of a field is three fourths of a mile or one mile each side.

From Philadelphia, they sent me to New York. . . . We went to check out New York, we went to Venus [?], to Times Square, the heart of New York, all of that. We went over there in New York to that all black barrio called Harlem We got there, had a Coca-Cola, had a pastry, and some girls show up, one says they want to learn to speak Spanish, another wanted to dance *danzón* [type of dance]. . . .

. . . Close by to where we were, there was a county office, no? There were Mexican authorities, a consul representative, or other helpful folks. You could go to ask something, or also they would send us news [newspapers or newsletters]. Sometimes someone on a big motorcycle would arrive to review the camp, asked about a lot of things.

Type of source: _____

Date: _____

Author (name/occupation): _____

Audience: _____

Source: *The Bracero History Project*. University of Texas at El Paso.

<http://braceroarchive.org/>. 2011.

Write your thoughts as you read.

What strikes you about this oral history? Why?

What part(s) of this document might help you answer the essential question? How?

What questions do you still have about this topic?

Primary Source 3:

Below is a partial transcript of an interview with Arnulfo Pompa on 1/12/08 through the Bracero History Project. Arnulfo Pompa was born on August 14, 1962 in El Mirage, Arizona. He is the youngest of six children. His father and mother came from Mexico to the U.S. through the bracero program in 1947. Arnulfo attended Arizona State University part-time while working. At the time of the interview, he worked in management at Qwest Communications.

One thing about Goodyear farms: it was almost like slave labor for the people who were working there. My dad—there weren't minimum wages back then—didn't get paid a lot of money. There was this store there called Abraham's Again, this was all owned by Goodyear Farms. And that was the only grocery store we knew of. So, it was two or three miles from our house. We would drive up and shop for groceries. The arrangement they had—as long as you worked at Goodyear farms—you were allowed to charge your food if you didn't have any money. So, I remember it was always trying to catch up. My mom and dad couldn't do it. There were six kids they had to feed. We'd get to the store and I remember my mom and dad buying food. It was like a forty-eight dollar bill. I remember my dad [having to say] go ahead and charge it to my account. I don't have any money. So, I remember the next paycheck—he'd get paid every 15 days— . . . was probably two dollars. We're expected to arrive from point A when we only have two dollars for fifteen days....

We had to go [work in the fields]. At the same time, we had to do our homework Our fallback—all of us—was education. I mean that was the only way I knew of....I think if you were to see my family, Rumera's family, Rosa's, how successful we all have been...

Type of source: _____

Date: _____

Author (name/occupation): _____

Audience: _____

Source: *The Bracero History Project*. University of Texas at El Paso.

<http://braceroarchive.org/>. 2011.

Write your thoughts as you read.

What strikes you about this oral history? Why?

What part(s) of this document might help you answer the essential question? How?

What questions do you still have about this topic?

Primary Source 2:

Below is a partial transcript of an interview with Max Smallwood, Francis Smallwood, and Jim Stots on 9/25/08 through the Bracero History Project. Max Smallwood is the son of a cotton farmer in Bowman, Arkansas. In the late 1940s, Max's father hired Mexican laborers through the bracero Program.

[Max Smallwood] They went down there in a bob truck, a ton and a half truck, and picked up—down there at the border, they contracted with the Mexican officials—twenty-five Mexicans. Brought them up here and housed them on the farm in old World War I or World War II army barracks brought into this area for that purpose...from one of area forts. ...They built bunk beds out of wood and filled them with cotton seed. And that's what the braceros slept on. And they kept them here only for the cotton harvest Each group normally had one in there who was bilingual. And there was a Mexican consulate in Memphis. If they encountered any problems over here they could contact the consulate. And they could air their gripes and the consulate would act accordingly. So, there was some supervision over the braceros other than just the farmers who went after them I remember a couple of instances [where a bracero went to the consulate]. There would be somebody that wasn't satisfied with the circumstances, and they appealed to them over there. But really, I don't remember any of the consequences I think maybe in the two or three years that we had them, maybe one of the braceros might of went back to Mexico, because he was dissatisfied.

Write your thoughts as you read.

Type of source: _____

Date: _____

Author (name/occupation): _____

Audience: _____

Source: *The Bracero History Project*. University of Texas at El Paso.
<http://braceroarchive.org/>. 2011.

What is happening in the photograph? What does that suggest to you?
Are these sources connected to one another? How so? What's the significance?
How might these sources help you answer the essential question?
What questions do you still have about this topic when you finish?

Primary Source Collection 1:

Source 1



Short-handled hoe / el cortito

Source 2



Jubilee Magazine, April 1957. Original caption: "Stoop labor"

Source 3

"That's where we encountered el cortito, or what's called the short-handled hoe. And for sure, that is where I shed my tears."
-José Natividad Alva Medina, ex-bracero

Type of source(s): _____

Date(s): _____

Author(s) (name/occupation): _____

Audience(s): _____

Source: *The Bracero History Project*. University of Texas at El Paso.
<http://braceroarchive.org/>. 2011.

Write your thoughts as you explore.

What is happening in the photograph? What does that suggest to you?
Are these sources connected to one another? How so? What's the significance?
How might these sources help you answer the essential question?
What questions do you still have about this topic when you finish?

Primary Source Collection 2:

Source 1



Processing center, Monterrey, México

Source 2

“In the yard outside, there were about twelve or thirteen thousand aspiring braceros. -Juan Sánchez Abasta, ex-bracero

Type of source(s): _____

Date(s): _____

Author(s) (name/occupation): _____

Audience(s): _____

Source: *The Bracero History Project*. University of Texas at El Paso.
<http://braceroarchive.org/>. 2011.

Write your thoughts as you explore.

What does the image and text suggest to you? Why?
What part(s) of this source might help you answer the essential question? How?
What questions do you still have about this topic when you finish?

Primary Source 4:



Mexican dryback workers come to U. S. from small, poverty-ridden villages like this

BETWEEN TWO

■ A DRYBACK IS A MAN caught between two gray fates. He lives in the dull and dismal poverty of his native Mexican countryside. Each year, seeking his ever-elusive fortune, he comes to the U.S. for a time to help

plant and harvest our crops. And here, in the land of plenty, he finds a fate no better—if not worse—than the one he left behind.

He is called *bracero*: not a wetback, who crosses the border illegal-

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WORLDS

ly, but a man who comes under a contract between his government and ours. That contract guarantees his dignity, his welfare and his right to earn a living wage.
Or so it says in the fine print.

Official checks documents of *braceros*



CONTINUED

Source: *Pagant Weekend Magazine*, April 1956

Write your thoughts as you explore.

Type of source: _____

Date: _____

Author (name/occupation): _____

Audience: _____

[illegible]

Additional Ideas & Information

Building Background Knowledge:

In addition to the activity's introduction, consider building background knowledge about the bracero program with the video or podcast at the links below.

Video: <http://www.objectofhistory.org/objects/intro/shorthandledhoe/>

Podcast: <http://americanhistory.si.edu/thinkfinity/podcast/braceroproject.mp3>

Infuse Drama:

Consider having your students take on the perspective of the people from the activity. This can be done as a whole class or in small groups. If you'd like your students to go more in depth, you could assign them to listen to the entire interview, which you can find on the Bracero History Archive (link under "Add Sources").

Build an Understanding of Interpretation:

This activity can be used to help students understand that the same primary sources can be interpreted multiple ways. To do this, have students complete the historical investigation alone or in groups and then have the individuals or groups compare their narratives with each other to discover any differences in interpretation.

Use Real People and Real Stuff:

Consider trying to find actual objects to go along with the activity—for instance, you can cut a normal hoe down to 24 inches to make a replica cortito. You may also be able to find men and women in your community who were a part of bracero program, had family members who were part of the bracero program, or interacted with braceros in some way. You could invite them to speak to your class.

Additional Resources:

The Bracero History Archive—this is where you can find the original oral histories and many more. Many of the interviews are in Spanish. Some have a synopsis of the interview that you can use, or this would be a great opportunity for Spanish speaking students to translate.

<http://historyexplorer.si.edu/resource/?key=2348>

Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program 1942-1964, an online exhibition

<http://historyexplorer.si.edu/resource/?key=2346>

A Nation of Immigrants, part of the *America on the Move* Exhibit

<http://historyexplorer.si.edu/resource/?key=165>