Outstanding Senior History Thesis

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A Forgotten History:
The U.S.–Mexico Bracero Program

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A joint border and shared history tie the United States of America and the United Mexican States, formerly the Republic of Mexico, together. This shared history is rich and complex, shaped by conflict, migration, trade, and policy. The Bracero Program, which was implemented from 1942 to 1964, is a significant part of these countries' histories, one that is rarely spoken about or seldomly mentioned. The Bracero Program was an era of American history filled with trauma, exploitation, and humiliation for the Bracero workers. The Bracero Program started in the middle of a gruesome war. It forced Mexican men to cross the border to work, with both countries trading men as if they were merely cattle and humiliating these men as if they weren't human. The Bracero Program was a bilateral agreement that primarily served the interests of the governments of the United States of America, the United Mexican States, and the United States agriculture business.[1] This bilateral agreement symbolizes how these countries benefitted from the labor of hardworking men while humiliating them throughout the process, stealing their wages, and how, ultimately, these two governments abandoned these men in the face of profit.

Origins of the Bracero Agreement

On July 23, 1942, the Mexican Farm Labor Program Agreement was formalized by an exchange of notes between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Mexico and the Embassy of the United States of America in Mexico City.[2] This agreement, also known as the Emergency Farm Labor Program, and more commonly known as the Bracero Program (*Bracero* being the Spanish term for farm laborer or arm man), was active for twenty-two years, ending in 1964. The 1942 agreement between these two governments was the first of its kind, as other guest worker programs were informal and not a part of a bilateral agreement.[3] This agreement highlighted many protections for the Bracero workers but would be loosely enforced after the Second World War. Still, never before had the United States and Mexican governments come together for such an agreement, marking this event in history. This bilateral agreement was a collaborative effort for an important cause: the fight for democracy and freedom.

The Braceros (the name for the men who worked in the program) primarily worked in agriculture in the United States, though some also worked in the railroad sector. The agriculture industry, especially during a time of war, is critical for the vitality of a country. How could a

[1] For this paper, the United States of America will be referred to as the United States rather than America.

[2] *Mexican Agreement, Online Archive of California*, https://oac.cdlib.org/view?docId=hb9j49p4n9;NAAN=13030&doc.view=frames&chunk.id=div00224&toc.id=div00235&brand=oac4.

[3] Alberto García, "Regulating Bracero Migration: How National, Regional, and Local Political Considerations Shaped the Bracero Program," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 101, no. 3 (August 1, 2021): 433-60 at 436.

country afford to fight a war without resources such as food? But how could a country afford to fight a war without soldiers? With a vast number of able-bodied marching off to fight and die in battle, the United States agriculture industry was in desperate need of workers, people who were hardworking, experienced, and cheap to pay.

Business and money have always been the grease that has kept the wheel spinning; the inception of the Bracero Program is no different. The first push for cheap workers came from Texan farmers during the Spring and Summer of 1941, who petitioned for Congress to use their influence to create a program that imported workers from Mexico.[4] There was a reason that Texan farmers specifically wanted Mexican laborers: and had asked Congress to import workers from South of the United States border. American Southwest farmers had learned in the past half-century before 1942 that Mexican laborers were hard workers and considered them a cheap labor source.[5] Texan farmers were not the only ones who petitioned for Mexican workers during the summer of 1941. In July, Arizona farmers also appealed to the federal government to import workers, with California following two months later.[6] Interestingly, the United States of America was not yet officially occupied with the Second World War in the Summer of 1941, with the attack on Pearl Harbor not occurring until December of that year. Many historians have reported that the Bracero Program came to fruition as a war relief effort, but with Texas, Arizona, and California calling for the importation of workers months before the United States' involvement in the war, it is easy that perhaps this was not the case. Perhaps with the tension around the world due to the war, the United States agriculture business saw this as an opportunity to take advantage of the situation. Or the United States agriculture business merely wanted to get ahead of uncertain times if the United States government decided to go to war.

In February of 1941, though, the United States government had determined that there was adequate labor in the agricultural sector. "The supply of farm labor in the United States for planting and harvesting the 1941 crop would be adequate to maintain production..."[7] With this report, albeit with some serious logistical planning, the United States government judged that the 1941 crop was not in danger. The report mandated that there was an adequate amount of labor for harvesting that crop, though with significant difficulty. The United States government likely felt, in February 1941, that there was no considerable need to call for an importation of labor. As stated previously, during the summer of that year, Texan, Arizonian, and Californian farmers felt differently. In their appeal to Congress, the United States farmers wanted laborers who worked hard and could be paid

[4] Otey M. Scruggs, "Evolution of the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement of 1942," *Agricultural History* 34, no. 3 (1960): 140-49 at 141.

[5] Scruggs, "Evolution of," 140.

[6] Scruggs, "Evolution of," 141.

[7] Wayne D. Rasmussen, *A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Supply Program* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, 1951), *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/historyofemergen13rasm/page/n4/mode/1up, 14.

cheaply. Notably, these farmers wanted a guest worker program similar to an informal one in 1917 and actively opposed any plan that had participation by the Mexican government.

Without the Mexican government's involvement, United States farmers could run the guest worker program however they saw fit, as they did in 1917. These farmers wanted immigration restrictions to become lax, allowing them to obtain Mexican laborers themselves.[8] If the Mexican government became involved, the farmers would be unable to obtain the cheap workforce they desperately wanted. Without government regulation, it would be considerably easier for United States farmers to control and manipulate a population with few legal protections. The Mexican government's involvement in creating a guest worker program was not what the United States agriculture sector wanted; they would be unable to cheaply pay their workers if the Mexican government demanded fair pay and protections. Having workers they could pay cheaply is the primary reason that United States farmers petitioned Congress in the first place.

It seemed that with Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and the United States' entry into the Second World War, the United States government had taken the Southwest farmers' petition more seriously. The United States' entry into the war also increased pressure from the agriculture sector, leading the United States government to create a formal guest workers program with the Mexican government. An initial agreement was reached in Mexico City on July 23, 1942.[9] The Mexican government was represented by Ernesto Hidalgo, a Representative of the Foreign Office, and Dr. Abraham J. Navas, a Department of Labor and Social Provision Representative.[10] The United States government was represented by Joseph F. McGurk, a counselor of the American Embassy in Mexico, John O. Walker, an Assistant Administrator of the. Farm Security Administration (Department of Agriculture), and David Meeker, the Assistant Director of the Office of Agricultural War Relations (Department of Agriculture).[11] These United States officials were brought on to be part of the agreement on the Mexican government's insistence. The Mexican government requested that any representatives of the United States agencies that were "directly concerned" with this agreement head to Mexico for the agreement to be discussed further.[12] If a formal guest program were established, the Mexican government would likely require specific details in person from those most involved in the operation on the United States side of the border. The Mexican Farm Labor Program Agreement would later be revised at least once, with the final version agreed upon on April 26, 1943.[13] In total, this agreement has seven sections: General

[8] Scruggs, "Evolution of," 143.

[9] *Mexican Agreement.*

[10] *Mexican Agreement.*

[11] *Mexican Agreement.*

[12] Robert C. Jones and Pan American Union Division of Labor and Social Information, *Mexican War Workers in the United States; the Mexico-United States manpower recruiting program and operation 1942 to 1944* (Washington D.C.: Pan American Union Division of Labor and Social Information, 1945) 1.

[13] *Mexican Agreement.*

Provisions, Contracts, Admission, Transportation, Savings Fund, Numbers, and General Considerations.

The Mexican Farm Labor Program Agreement

Four main points under the General Provisions of the Bracero Agreement make up the foundation of the accord, and most are later expanded upon in the other sections of the agreement. Before the General Provisions were stated, however, a brief paragraph explained why the four main points under the General Provisions were important:

> In order to effect a satisfactory arrangement whereby Mexican agricultural labor may be made available for use in the United States and at the same time provide means whereby this labor will be adequately protected while out of Mexico, the following general provisions are suggested:[14]

Out of the two countries, it is quite clear that the United States of America holds more power and influence than the United Mexican States. Mexico, then and now, has been plagued by hard times economically and politically, never quite establishing itself as well as its northern neighbors had. Due to this and the general horrifying violence in the country, many of Mexico's poorer citizens tend to emigrate to the United States. They do so to work for a better life and to sustain themselves and their families economically in a way they would be unable to do in Mexico. Many of these immigrants are desperate, and without a better option, they end up emigrating to the United States, sometimes without proper documentation. These circumstances leave a population of immigrants vulnerable and often exploited by employers and others due to their undocumented status. This is not a recent phenomenon, but it is a cycle that has been in play for over a hundred years, with the United States agriculture business keen on taking advantage of it.

However, with the United States in a war and needing laborers to work in their fields to support said war, the government of Mexico was in a more advantageous position. With this advantage, Mexico could protect its citizens as they worked abroad. This arrangement was one that Southwest farmers did not want. The United States, for all its power, could not afford to have Mexico pull out of this agreement, not when the United States was in the middle of fighting a war. The future relationship between these two countries would depend on how well or poorly the program went. For these reasons, it was essential to define the terms of the Bracero Program thoroughly.

The first significant point under the General Provisions section of the Bracero Program was about the war occurring on the other side of the world. This bilateral agreement was created and formalized while the United States of America was actively engaged in war with the Axis powers. The agreement states that the Braceros, who were sent to the United States to work, were not to be used for military purposes.[15] Although Mexico declared war on the Axis powers in 1942, its primary effort in the war was to support the United States instead of being directly involved in the

[14] *Mexican Agreement.*

[15] *Mexican Agreement.*

fighting itself.[16] The United States of America needed labor for agricultural means, and Mexico was able to provide it. The United States was sending its soldiers to fight and die in a war, but Mexico was sending its men to heave and toil in a land known for its discrimination. A land that the Mexican people were all too familiar with. It is this same discrimination that allowed for Braceros to be humiliated and belittled during their time in the United States, with their own country even taking advantage of them.

The Mexican government was well aware of how their citizens fared in the United States when they had gone to work there previously. The First World War had the United States use an informal guest worker program for a time, and even after the war, Mexican labor was used in American fields. But these people were treated disrespectfully and discriminatorily, and word had gotten back to the Mexican government. This treatment likely brought upon the second point under the General Provisions clause. In his journal article, "Evolution of the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement of 1942," Otey Scruggs stated that Mexican nationals who previously worked in the United States had returned to Mexico and spoken of their mistreatment in the United States.[17] The word of their citizens held great weight among the people of Mexico and even their government for a time. The United States has had a comprehensive history of racial discrimination against minorities, and there have been times when southern states discriminated against Mexicans and Mexican Americans while also trying to benefit from their cheap labor.

This discrimination is the reason why the Mexican government wanted to send workers to the United States with protection being promised first. As such, the Braceros working under the program would subsequently be protected under Executive Order No. 8802. This Executive Order, signed by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on June 25, 1941, declared the following:

> Now, therefore, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and the statutes, and as a prerequisite to the successful conduct of our national defense production effort, I do hereby reaffirm the policy of the United States that there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin...[18]

This Executive Order was made to benefit all who worked in the defense industry and those who worked toward the nation's defense, such as the Braceros who worked in a wartime relief effort program. This Executive Order would also enable African Americans to advance in industrial employment during the war. That, along with the President's Fair Employment Practice Committee, tight labor markets, civil rights organizations, and labor unions, would facilitate racial

[16] Scruggs, "Evolution of," 145.

[17] Scruggs, "Evolution of," 142.

[18] Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Executive Order 8802" (1941), National Archives Catalog, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/300005, para. 3.

advancement in the United States.[19] The Mexican Farm Labor Program Agreement cited this Executive Order to protect Mexican laborers from abuse or discrimination in the United States as they worked under the Bracero Program. Still, an Executive Order mandating protections for people can only last so long, especially when racism is thrown into the situation.

The disparity in wealth between the United States and Mexico likely motivated the Mexican government to seek the third point under the General Provisions clause. The Mexican economy before, during, and after the Second World War depended heavily on external forces, such as trade with the United States or reliance upon foreign companies.[20] The Mexican government could not afford all the program costs with this reliance upon foreign forces. Under the Bracero agreement, Mexicans would be guaranteed transportation, living expenses, and repatriation.[21] According to the Bracero Agreement, this point was made in concession with Article 29 of the Mexican Federal Labor Law.[22] If United States employers wanted Mexican labor, they would be obligated to pay for the Braceros' transportation to the United States and the cost of returning to Mexico. The cost of this program was not solely going to be incurred by Mexico.

The Bracero agreement also had other aspects to protect the Braceros, but these would ultimately fail. According to Ronald L. Mize and Alicia C.S. Sword, in their book *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA,* Braceros would receive their wages but find that illegal deductions were made to cover expenses for room, board, transportation, farm tools, and supplies.[23] When the agreement was being finalized, the United States and Mexican governments decided that the only legal deduction from Braceros' paychecks would be a 10% deduction saved and kept in a bank in Mexico to entice Braceros' return home.[24] But there is evidence in the form of paystubs from the Bracero History Archive that shows illegal deductions had been made against several Braceros. A paystub from 1945 shows that these illegal deductions had been made from nearly the beginning of the program.[25] The 1945 paystub shows a deduction of nearly $20, with another being $21.[26] A heavy deduction to these paychecks without explaining where the money had gone. Manuel Montes-Robles' 1964 paystub demonstrates that deductions

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[19] Andrew E. Kersten, "Jobs and Justice: Detroit, Fair Employment, and Federal Activism during the Second World War," *Michigan Historical Review* 25, no. 1 (1999): 76–101 at 76.

[20] Gurcharan Das, "Mexican Economic Growth, 1940-45: Some Lessons," *Economic and Political Weekly* 7, no. 53 (1972): 2529-40 at 2529.

[21] *Mexican Agreement.*

[22] *Mexican Agreement.*

[23] Ronald L. Mize, and Alicia C.S. Swords,

[24] *Mexican Agreement.*

[25] Ismael Nicholas Osorio and E.E. Hadden Packing Co., "Pay stub," *Bracero History Archive,* https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/802.

[26] Osorio, "Paystub."

to pay occurred until the end of the program, with meals and insurance being deducted illegally.[27] Another paystub from California in 1961 shows that nearly $25 for board is being deducted from a bracero's paycheck.[28] These paystubs prove that these deductions occurred throughout the program's time and were not an isolated incident. These Braceros were being taken advantage of throughout the twenty-two years of this program, with the two governments giving up efforts to protect these men after the Second World War concluded.

Under the General Provisions section, there is no further clarifying statement regarding living expenses. However, there is further detail on living expenses under the Transportation section of the agreement. Clause A states that the employer will pay the Braceros' transportation, living expenses, and general expenses throughout the migratory journey.[29] If United States farmers wanted additional laborers from a foreign country, then the Mexican government determined that their citizens would not incur the cost of the journey. Still, as stated earlier, this did not stop United States employers from diminishing their workers' paychecks to pay for expenses. Clause B, for lodging, states that the Mexican laborers were guaranteed satisfactory accommodations that were up to par with other lodgings for laborers.[30] The Mexican Farm Labor Program Agreement was created to treat Mexican laborers fairly by giving them fair wages and adequate treatment during their time in the United States. But this legislation means nothing to people who are only after their greed, and the Braceros are the unfortunate victims in their way.

Farm laboring is tiring and dangerous, with injuries a common norm. Clause B, under the Transportation section of the Bracero agreement, explained not only lodging but also medical services. Braceros, according to the accord, would receive medical and sanitary services equal to other agricultural workers in the same region.[31] In 2005, Isidoro Ramirez, a Bracero who worked in the 1950s, was interviewed by Steve Velásquez for the Bracero History Project and spoke extensively in Spanish about his life as a Bracero. During this interview, Ramírez talked about an instance when he was injured after he accidentally fell off of a truck.[32] Ramírez noted how he had been taken to a doctor for his injuries and called it a scrape, minimizing the extent of his injuries.[33] It is likely that Ramírez had not wanted to, during the time of the accident and in 2005, blow the situation out of proportion. If a Bracero was seriously injured or impaired, no doubt an employer

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[27] Manuel Montes Robles and Imperial Valley Farmers Association, "Pay stub," *Bracero History Archive*, https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/1120.

[28] Guadalupe Cano Quiroz and Santa Barbara Labor Association, "Bracero paycheck stub," *Bracero History Archive*, https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/810.

[29] *Mexican Agreement.*

[30] *Mexican Agreement.*

[31] *Mexican Agreement.*

[32] Steve Velásquez and Isidoro Ramírez, "Isidoro Ramírez," *Bracero History Archive*, https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/142.

[33] Velásquez, Ramírez, "Isidoro Ramírez."

would want to swap him out for a more non-disabled worker and not be forced to pay hospital bills or be down a worker.

Under the Bracero agreement, repatriation was guaranteed. Repatriation is the act of returning someone to their country of origin. The Mexican Farm Labor Program Agreement stated that Bracero's employer would issue a bond equal to the worker's repatriation costs.[34] The Mexican government, much less its citizens, could not afford to repatriate their citizens after their contract ended. If the United States wanted foreign labor to work their farms, they would be responsible for returning the foreign laborers home. Inserting this stipulation in the Bracero Agreement ensured Mexican citizens were not stranded trying to return home.

Recruiting for the Bracero Program

Though signed in July, the Bracero Program did not truly begin until months later. According to Robert C. Jones, author of *Mexican War Workers in the United States: the Mexico-United States manpower recruiting program and operation 1942 to 1944*, the first Braceros arrived in California to begin working the autumn sugar beet harvest on September 29, 1942.[35] With the war, gaining as many workers as quickly as possible was necessary to minimize agricultural food loss. Had the farm business gained what it had wanted earlier, the Bracero program would have been established for nearly a year by the Fall of 1942. In all, over 4,000 Braceros were brought to the United States for the entirety of 1942, the year the program was implemented.[36] This is a considerable number when considering how little time there was between the end of September and the end of December. This is a vast number of people to recruit, process, examine, and transport across the border during a devastating war in order to put to work.

Despite their frenzy as United States farmers rushed to obtain workers, the United States government wanted a specific group to work as Braceros. The Mexican government had informed rural towns to recruit experienced agricultural laborers with families.[37] The United States and Mexican governments likely believed that married Braceros would be more eager to return home after their contract expired, decreasing the likelihood of Mexican nationals staying in the United States illegally. Experienced Braceros would be in higher demand since they could start working in the United States faster than an untrained Bracero. Local Mexican officials who recruited Braceros were told that participation in the Bracero Program was essential in the fight against the Axis powers.[38] The Mexican President of the time had even called the Bracero Program a "manly act of loyalty to country and progress."[39] The Bracero Program was Mexico's primary way of

[34] *Mexican Agreement.*

[35] Jones and Pan American Union Division, *Mexican War Workers*, 3.

[36] Jones and Pan American Union Division, *Mexican War Workers,* 3. Rasmussen, *A History,* 206.

[37] Ana Elizabeth Rosas, *Abrazando El Espíritu: Bracero Families Confront the US-Mexico Border,* 1st ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014) 21.

[38] Rosas, "Abrazando El," 21.

[39] Rosas, "Abrazando El," 21.

fighting the Axis powers, providing their men to be soldiers of the earth rather than soldiers of war.

Newspapers in the United States and Mexico supported the claim that Mexico fully supported the United States and the fight for democracy. The Bracero Program, to United States citizens and the Mexican people, was part of a war effort to defeat the Axis powers. Specifically, the United States public was informed that the Braceros were "volunteer workers."[40] A United States newspaper from 1945 made it seem as if the Mexican people had jumped at the opportunity to perform hard labor and were glad to do so in the service of another country. This view was not limited to the United States; it was also held in Mexico. "According to one pro-government newspaper, the nation was not 'simply an exporter of human labor resources.' Rather, the Bracero Program made Mexico 'a valuable ally of the democracies in the fight against the totalitarian powers.' Therefore, 'these workers must be considered not as immigrants but as Mexican citizens on a mission.'"[41] The sacrifices and hard work that Braceros were making during the war were downplayed in both United States and Mexican publications. Unlike what these newspapers claim, patriotism, democracy, and duty likely had nothing to do with the Braceros' decision to work in a foreign country.

For many Braceros, the Mexican government's recruitment and the US' idea of joining the program as a way to fight for democracy were not the reasons why Braceros went to work in the United States. The Braceros' belief in economic prosperity and trust in their community members drove their decision. Many Braceros heard about the program and working in the United States from community members, friends, and family who had previously worked in United States agriculture.[42] Ultimately, community members' experiences when working abroad held more weight for Mexican men than the Mexican government's recruitment. Even with their community members' testimonies, their experiences were not the only motivating factor that Braceros considered when applying for the program.

Throughout history, money, or economic prosperity, has always been a motivating factor. A factor to consider carefully when making a decision. Mexican workers had returned to Mexico with stories of how much money one could earn by working in the United States.[43] Since Mexico was actively recruiting family men for the program, it makes considerable sense for money to motivate potential Braceros to decide to enlist in the program. Eventually, Braceros would send

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[40] Jack Starr-Hunt, and Virginia Snow, "Mexican worker making important contribution to American war effort," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Aug. 12, 1945, https://www.newspapers.com/image/138425822/?terms=Bracero%20Program&match=1.

[41] Michael Snodgrass, "Patronage and Progress: The Bracero Program from the Perspective of Mexico," in *Workers across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History,* ed. Leon Fink, 1st ed. (New York, NY.: Oxford University Press, 2011), 245-266 at 248-249.

[42] Mize, Swords, *Consuming Mexican,* 6-7.

[43] Mise, Swords, *Consuming Mexican,* 7.

around 80-90% of their wages back to Mexico for their families.[44] These wages were not considerably hefty and were being deducted illegally by their employers. Ronald L. Mize, author of *The Invisible Workers of the U.S.-Mexico Bracero Program: Obreros Olvidados,* stated that Mexican men in the Bracero Program barely made enough money to keep themselves and their families afloat but that agricultural work in the United States paid higher wages than in Mexico.[45] The chance of higher wages and being in debt led former Bracero, Vicente Ramírez, to join the program.[46] The Braceros understood that there were better economic opportunities in the north, unaware of all the humiliation, discrimination, and abuse they would face in their journey to the United States and in the labor fields.

Although trust in family and financial stability are the primary reasons many Braceros joined the program, they are not the only reasons. Isidoro Ramírez, a former Bracero who had minimized his injury after falling off a truck, spoke on how enlisting in the Bracero Program was an adventure or an experience someone had during that time.[47] It is likely that Ramírez is part of only a tiny percentage of people who joined the Bracero Program for an adventure, and it was perhaps not a widely felt sentiment.

Screening Recruits

After being recruited from their town, potential Braceros had to be verified. To be selected for the program, these potential Braceros underwent a rigorous screening process. Firstly, these recruits needed to obtain letters of recommendation from local authorities, submit their names to the government as potential Braceros, and arrange transportation to the nearest recruitment center.[48] This was not a cheap process for the recruits since, during the war, the only recruitment center was in Mexico City.[49] Even with these obstacles, potential Braceros trudged on, doing their best to find transportation to a recruitment center. A difficult task, indeed, according to Ana Elizabeth Rosas, in her *Abrazando el Espíritu: Bracero Families Confront the U.S.-Mexico Border*, stated that transportation costs were about 150 pesos, which would be four months of work for a family.[50] To make matters worse, the Mexican government would often move the recruitment centers, making the transportation process harder for the Braceros.[51] The location of the

[44] Mize, Swords, *Consuming Mexican,* 12.

[45] Ronald L. Mize, *The Invisible Workers of the U.S.-Mexico Bracero Program: Obreros Olvidados* (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2016), ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hanover-ebooks/reader.action?docID=4718713.

[46] Steve Velásquez and Vicente Ramírez, "Vicente Ramírez," *Bracero History Archive, https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/482*.

[47] Velásquez, Ramírez, "Isidoro Ramírez."

[48] Mize, Swords, *Consuming Mexican,* 5.

[49] Mize, Swords, *Consuming Mexican,* 7.

[50] Rosas, "Abrazando El," 22.

[51] Mize, Swords, *Consuming Mexican,* 5.

recruitment centers in Mexico was debated between the United States government and the Mexican government. Which is likely the reason why recruitment centers have moved around.

The Mexican Farm Labor Program Agreement stated that employers were responsible for transporting Braceros. Due to this, and likely wanting as many workers as quickly as possible, the U.S. government wanted the recruitment centers to be along the border to ease the cost of transportation, but the Mexican government wanted the recruitment centers to be close to central Mexico.[52] Whether recruitment centers were along the border or in central Mexico, transportation to those centers was challenging for many Braceros, and that was only the beginning of the screening process.

After arriving at the Mexican recruitment center, Braceros obtained contracts, underwent one of two medical examinations to determine their physical ability, and then headed north.[53] This vigorous selection process aimed to find men who could carry out the job's physical demands and determine if the recruits had any agricultural experience. United States farmers likely had no patience for training their workers to do the job properly, especially during the war. After the war, United States farmers likely became accustomed to efficient workers and did not care to hire green recruits. The Bracero contracts were short and temporary, favoring United States farmers more than the Mexican laborers.[54] The contracting system was imperfect, and the Braceros underwent many hoops. The contract was signed either by the grower or the grower's association, a Mexican government official, a U.S. Department of Labor representative, and the worker himself.[55] Ultimately, all of these signatures and oversight would not be enough to stop the discrimination that Braceros would face in the United States and their own government choosing economic prosperity over their citizens.

Heading to the United States

After the Braceros completed the selection process in Mexico, they were sent up north to be collected by growers. But this transportation process was difficult and would be mortifying for many Braceros. On their journey to the United States and the individual farms where they would be working, the Braceros were herded more like cattle than people by both United States and Mexico officials.[56] In hindsight, this treatment during transportation would be one of the first signs of the mistreatment of the Bracero workers.

Eleuterio Galicia Vega, a former Bracero back in 1958, was interviewed by Michael Abrams in the *Corpus Christi Caller* in 1981. In this interview, Vega recalled a time when he and other Braceros were being transported. His group was locked in the bus with armed guards because

[52] Mize, Swords, *Consuming Mexican,* 8.

[53] Garcia, "Regulating Bracero," 436.

[54] Mize, *The Invisible,* 59.

[55] Mize, Swords, *Consuming Mexican,* 11.

[56] Mize, Swords, *Consuming Mexican,* 3.

"they were afraid we would escape," Vega said in his interview.[57] From very early on, these foreign workers were treated not with respect or decency but as cattle or criminals. This mistreatment and disrespect would only get worse for the Braceros. Once arriving in the United States, the Braceros would undergo more examinations and processing. In his interview, Isidoro Ramírez, who signed up to be a Bracero to have an adventure, spoke about how the contractors treated him and his fellow Braceros like cattle.[58]

Original transcription of the 2005 interview:

> **Steve Velásquez:** Era duro, era duro. Y, ¿le informaron las autoridades de su salario, las condiciones, la vida, transportación, cosas así en el proceso?
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> **Isidoro Ramírez:** No, tal vez me adelanto, cuando llegaba uno aquí, había en El Centro, California, el centro de repartición, ahí lo ponían a uno, lo paraban a uno por la pared y llegaban los contratistas como a ir a comprar ganado. Si a uno no le gustaba, lo quitaban y traían a otro. Y ya entonces ahí le decían a qué lugar iba a ir y qué es lo que iba a hacer. Pero no salario, ya tenían ahí el camión, el Greyhound y ya lo transportaban a uno al lugar donde iba y era todo, no había… Allí le decían a uno: "Esta compañía necesita cien o cincuenta, por tres meses o por dos meses". Y como dicen aquí: "Take it or leave it". No había otra.
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> **S.Velásquez:** Y los otros braceros, los otros que estaban esperando para el proceso, ¿estaban hablando sobre los salarios o sobre el trabajo? Ahí entre ustedes, ¿qué sabían?
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> **I. Ramírez:** Los que tenían experiencia ya que habían venido ya decían historias de que cómo habían trabajado ellos en ciertos lugares y todo, pero no tenían, nadie tenía un choice de agarrar lo que uno quería. Ahí agarraba uno lo que le daban.
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> **S. Velásquez:** So, ya supiste más o menos…
>
> **I. Ramírez:** Mi hermano y yo estábamos juntos y llegó la lista y hasta aquí y se lo trajeron a él y a mí me dejaron. A él le tocó venirse aquí a Salinas y a mí me mandaron allá a Los Ángeles, así eran el corte que había: "Necesito tanto". Y no importaba a quién partían o a quién nada, o sea, era uno un esclavo, venía uno como…[59]

Translated Transcription of the 2005 interview:

> **Steve Velásquez:** It was tough, it was tough. And did the authorities inform you of your salary, conditions, life, transportation, things like that in the process?
>
> **Isidoro Ramírez:** No, maybe I'm getting ahead of myself, when you came here, there was a distribution center in El Centro, California, where they put you, they

[57] Michael Abrams, "Bracero Program: What was it like?," *The Corpus Christi Caller*, September 27th, 1981, https://www.newspapers.com/image/757821513/?terms=Bracero%20Program&match=1.

[58] Velásquez, Ramírez, "Isidoro Ramírez."

[59] Velásquez, Ramírez, "Isidoro Ramírez."

> stopped you by the wall and the contractors [farming employers] came in like they were buying cattle. If they didn't like someone, they took him away and brought in someone else. And then [after being selected] they told him where he was going and what he was going to do. But no salary, they already had the truck, the Greyhound [bus] and they were already transporting you to the place where you were going and that was it, there was not... There they would say to you, "This company needs a hundred or fifty for three months or two months." And as they say here: "Take it or leave it." There was no other way.
>
> **S. Velásquez:** And the other braceros, the other ones that were waiting for processing, were they talking about salaries or the job? There among you, what did you know?
>
> **I. Ramírez:** Those who had experience since they had been here already were telling stories about how they worked in certain places and everything, but they didn't have, no one had a choice to take what they wanted. There you took what they gave you.
>
> **S. Velásquez:** So, you already knew more or less...
>
> **I. Ramírez:** My brother and I were together and the list arrive and they took him and they left me. He had to come here to Salinas and they sent me to Los Angeles, and that's how they cut it: "I need so much." And it didn't matter who they left or anything, I mean, you were a slave, you came as...[60]

Isidoro Ramirez and his brother were not informed of the ongoings during their processing in the United States, their salary, or where they were going. This process was likely terrifying for many Braceros, as many likely did not speak English and would not understand what was happening. For many, this was their first time in the United States, and it would be an experience full of humiliation and terror.

After arriving in the United States, Braceros would undergo a second medical examination. Crecencio of Colima, a Bracero from 1958 to 1963, was interviewed for Ronald L. Mize's *The Invisible Workers of the U.S.-Mexico Bracero Program: Obreros Olvidados.* Crecencio spoke about his experience in the United States processing center and undergoing that second medical examination:

> "They would ask for your birth certificate. Where you lived and everything else. Where are you from they would ask us. They would ask us, 'Do you have your birth certificate?' They would take our fingerprints. They would take off our clothes there. They would take off our clothes and fumigate us…"[61]

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[60] Velásquez, Ramírez, "Isidoro Ramírez." Translated by Leslie R. Redus

[61] Crecencio of Colima, quoted in Mize, Ronald L., *The Invisible Workers of the U.S.-Mexico Bracero Program: Obreros Olvidados* Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2016. ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hanover-ebooks/reader.action?docID=4718713, 100.

Crecencio of Colima, Isidoro Ramírez, and other Braceros were dehumanized in this process by United States officials. Rossy Vazquez de Bonilla, a son of a former Bracero who gave his father's story to the Bracero History Archive, detailed his father's experience in the processing center. De Bonilla spoke about how his father would minimize being stripped naked and fumigated.[62] De Bonilla's father likely downplayed this experience, minimizing the mortifying experience of having chemicals sprayed on him in 1961. These Braceros were examined thoroughly to determine their health and eligibility and then were fumigated as if they were cattle. How utterly horrifying it must be for these men to enlist to work in another country for better wages, and one of the first experiences in the United States is to be sprayed with chemicals. Still, being fumigated was not Braceros' last appalling experience during the examination process.

In his 2005 interview with Steve Velásquez, Isidoro Ramírez, who enlisted in the program for an adventure, expressed how humiliating the medical examination was, stating that the doctors did the examination in front of everyone, with no privacy.[63] Vicente Ramírez, another Bracero who worked in 1955, spoke on violating these examinations, as Braceros were forced to undergo a rectal exam.[64] How humiliating and emasculating it must have been for these men, whose only goal was to enter the United States to work, to have had to suffer these slights. By the time Vicente Ramírez began his time as a Bracero, the Mexican government likely cared little for their citizens' treatment in the United States. According to Lester D. Langley, by the mid-1950s, the Mexican government chose economic development over social justice for the lower classes.[65] This no doubt would include the Bracero program, considering the demographic of these recruits. Despite the promises of protection the Mexican government had given their citizens, the officials that made up the Mexican government during this time allowed their greed to influence them.

Life in the United States

It is indubitable that most Braceros faced some form of discrimination, humiliation, or degradation during their time in the United States. According to a United States newspaper from 1945, an interior ministry spokesman stated, "No braceros will be sent to states known for their racial discrimination... In both Texas and Arkansas, the Braceros are exploited, being paid salaries inferior to other farm laborers. For this reason, the definite exclusion of both those states from the bracero program continues."[66] This commitment to their citizens' safety would not last. Texas was

[62] Rossy Vazquez de Bonilla, "Silverio Vasquez Rojas," *Bracero History Archive*, https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/3308.

[63] Velásquez, Ramírez, "Isidoro Ramírez."

[64] Velásquez, Ramírez, "Vicente Ramírez."

[65] Lester D. Langley, *Mexico and the United States: The Fragile Relationship* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991) 48.

[66] "Mexico still says no farm help for Texas." *The Austin American*, May 6, 1945. https://www.newspapers.com/image/385750556/?terms=Bracero%20Program&match=1.

barred from employing Braceros until 1947.[67] As Braceros sent their wages home, the Mexican government likely realized allowing their citizens to work in as many states as possible would be more economically beneficial. The Bracero Program was the third-largest source of hard currency by the 1950s.[68] By allowing states known for their discrimination, like Texas, to regain the privilege of hiring Braceros, the Mexican government demonstrates that it is willing to put profit over the health and safety of some of its citizens.

The situation would not improve for Braceros. These Braceros' lives were horrifying and strange once they had arrived at the camps. Braceros lived in military-styled barracks and mess halls.[69] The living conditions that Braceros had to endure were harsh and inhumane, considering that they were used for hired workers, not soldiers, and especially considering that housing stipulations were part of the Mexican National Farm Labor Program Agreement. They lived differently than other laborers in the United States, with far more restrictions and fear. Braceros' lives were not their own; they were subjected to intense surveillance, unable to file a complaint about their treatment for fear of deportation, and unable to leave jobs due to the contracts they had signed.[70] These workers were stuck with the treatment they were facing, unable to change their circumstances. For as much as they were facing discrimination and abuse, the choice of being forcibly sent home by the termination of their contract seemed a much worse fate to workers. The process of even being chosen to be a Bracero was a long and expensive one. These men would likely return to Mexico in shame, as it would show that they could not provide for their families, a significant cultural point for Mexican men.[71] Providing financial stability was a responsibility that was primarily held by men in Mexican culture, and being unable to do so would be extremely shameful.

In Ronald L. Mize's book, *The Invisible Workers of the U.S.-Mexico Bracero Program: Obreros Olvidados,* Mize states that Braceros were proud of their work and often measured their worth by their wages.[72] Braceros inadvertently played a role in the abuse they faced at American farmers' hands by being proud of their work and basing their worth on those wages. Rather than complain and perhaps get justice, these men would continue working harder and longer hours. What were these complaints worth in the face of poverty and deprivation? Of being unable to provide for his family? These complaints did not matter one bit. Instead, Braceros shouldered their burdens and continued working.

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[67] Mize, *The Invisible,* 10.

[68] Deborah Cohen, "From Peasant to Worker: Migration, Masculinity, and the Making of Mexican Workers in the US." *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 69 (2006): 81–103 at 82.

[69] Mize, Swords, *Consuming Mexican,* 5.

[70] Mize, Swords, *Consuming Mexican,* 5.

[71] Cohen, "From Peasant," 87.

[72] Mize, *The Invisible,* 77.

The Mexican Farm Labor Program Agreement ran from 1942 until 1964. What started as a wartime relief effort soon became more prolonged than the war itself. In the words of Ronald L. Mize and Alicia C.S. Swords, authors of *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA, "*the Bracero Program was highly successful in creating a readily exploitable workforce but rarely protected the paltry rights accorded to workers."[73] The Bracero Program was created for Mexico to support the United States during its fight against the Axis powers and provide Mexican men with economic opportunities. Instead, Braceros endured humiliation, with very little money to show for their efforts, and are barely a memory in the United States. These Mexican men who toiled away in American fields to feed a population that was not theirs did not matter. Who were these men in the face of big business? In the face of profit? 4.5 million Bracero contracts were signed from 1942 to 1964, representing almost 2 million Braceros who worked in the United States.[74] These millions of men have profoundly impacted American history, working hard to feed the United States of America. History will never truly know how different the war would have been for the United States and its allies if the Mexican government had rejected the Bracero Program in 1942.

As a war-time relief effort, one should have expected the Bracero Program to have ended soon after the Second World War ended. The Bracero Program had a 22-year run, ultimately ending in 1964. The Mexican government was vehemently opposed to ending the Bracero program, likely for many reasons. Without the Bracero Program, Mexican officials would no longer be able to pocket Braceros' savings.[75] Although United States employers illegally deducted expenses from Braceros' paychecks, the official agreement stipulated that a portion would be saved and kept in a Mexican bank. Mexican officials had access to these savings, often taking it for themselves. With the termination of the Bracero Program, the Mexican government could no longer offer any external job opportunities for their unemployed citizens. The Mexican economy was no longer supported by the wages workers earned in the United States.

The beginning and end of the Bracero program started with the United States. "The bill to terminate [the Bracero Program] unilaterally–Mexico had no say in the matter– passed by a mere seventeen votes..."[76] The Bracero Program started as a wartime relief effort, with the Mexican government eager to provide support to their northern neighbors in their fight against fascism but continued on the insistence of the American agriculture industry and the Mexican government. Yet despite protests, the United States Congress held all of the power to terminate this program, even though the United States first went to the Mexican government to plead for labor. The United States had no qualms to terminate the program without Mexico's input, likely uncaring how this would affect diplomatic relations between these neighboring countries.

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[73] Mize, Swords, *Consuming Mexican,* 3.

[74] Mize, Swords, *Consuming Mexican,* 3.

[75] Snodgrass, "Patronage and Progress," 247.

[76] Snodgrass, "Patronage and Progress," 261.

The Braceros' work for the United States, specifically during the war, was critical. A letter from the American Fruit Growers, Inc., in California, states, "Had the Mexican Nationals not been available during the past year, a large percentage of the crops in which we are heavily interested would never have been harvested, creating an unnecessary loss."[77] Though they were more than essential and were recognized by employers as crucial, the Bracero program is seldom mentioned in American history books when the Second World War is taught. It is even less known that the Braceros were treated inhumanely. How shameful it is that these men had made a considerable impact on our war effort, and their sacrifice is unmentioned.

For many, the decision of creating the Bracero Program and keeping it alive for twenty-two years is another dark stain in American and Mexican history. U.S. Representative John Fogarty, D-R. I. stated that the Bracero Program was a "slave labor program" and believed that the program was harmful to U.S.-Mexico relations.[78] Fogarty is not the only person who believes that the Bracero Program is akin to slavery. Isidoro Ramírez, the Bracero who signed up for an adventure, stated this in his 2005 interview:

Original Transcription of the 2005 interview:

Steve Velásquez: Brasero, pero, ¿para usted qué significa el trabajo del bracero?
La vida del bracero.
Isidoro Ramírez: La vida del bracero es un, se va a ser esclavo, no Choice. Ahí no había…
SV: Sus recuerdos acerca del trabajo del bracero, el haber trabajado como un bracero, ¿son positivos o negativos?
IR: Negativos, eso es ser uno un esclavo.[79]

Translated Transcription of the 2005 interview:

Steve Velásquez: Bracero, what, what does the work of a bracero mean to you? The life of a bracero.
Isidoro Ramírez: The life of a bracero is, is like being a slave, no Choice. There was no...
SV: Are your memories about bracero work, having worked as a bracero, were they positive or negative?
IR: Negative, that's what it's like being a slave.[80]

Isidoro Ramírez has no positive memories of working in the United States as a Bracero. To him, the life of a Bracero was akin to that of a slave, a modern-day enslaved person, where a worker was not given choices. This sentiment was shared by Audómaro Zepeda, another Bracero who worked in the late 1950s, who said, "Nos trataron mal como esclavos... (They treated us badly like

[77] Jones and Pan American Union Division, *Mexican War Workers,* 25.

[78] "Bracero Program's End Hurts Mexico," *San Angelo Standard-Times,* May 31, 1963. https://www.newspapers.com/image/788214806/?terms=Bracero%20Program&match=1.

[79] Velásquez, Ramírez, "Isidoro Ramírez."

[80] Velásquez, Ramírez, "Isidoro Ramírez." Translated by Leslie R. Redus

slaves)."[81] The Bracero Program was implemented with measures meant to ensure the life and prosperity of Mexican men while they worked abroad. But instead, the Mexican and American governments became complacent in the face of abuse that Mexican nationals faced on American soil.

Even with the negatives that came from the Bracero Program, one must acknowledge the legacy it has left behind. After the Bracero Program shut down, its influence was still visible through migration patterns that Braceros established for their younger family and friends to use to establish themselves in the United States.[82] Current migratory patterns from Mexico to the United States (and vice versa) are decades old because Braceros created them so their community members could find job stability and housing.

For Isidoro Ramírez, the most crucial part of the Bracero Program that needs to be known is that it shouldn't happen again.[83] The United States of America may not acknowledge the work that the Braceros had done, and Mexico may not acknowledge their failure in protecting their citizens, but this does not diminish the contribution of nearly two million men. It is vital to acknowledge the work and sacrifice accomplished by these men, as they played a significant role in supporting the United States during a global war and significantly contributed to the two countries' economies in the years after. The work Braceros and their families have done afterward, contributing to the Bracero History Archive and sharing their stories, allows others to acknowledge their sacrifice. The United States government and the Mexican government both failed horribly in ensuring the protection of these workers. These men were underpaid, exploited, examined like cattle, subject to abuse and discrimination, and swept off to the side by both their country and the country they worked for. Braceros' life and work in the United States was not out of a sense of patriotism or duty for democracy but one of economic opportunity to ensure their family's survival. The Bracero Program benefitted the Mexican government and the American agriculture industry, leaving the Braceros in the dust. The bilateral agreement of 1942 was a failure, unable to instill the promises that were written in the agreement or the Braceros' contracts, ultimately showing the greed, ineptitude, and cavalier attitudes of two North American countries.

[81] Mireya Loza and Audómaro G. Zepeda, "Audómaro G. Zepeda," *Bracero History Archive,* https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/159.

[82] Garcia, "Regulating Bracero," 433.

[83] Velásquez, Ramírez, "Isidoro Ramírez."

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