

Bracero Living Histories

All subsequent information, including excerpts from interviews, was taken from the Institute of Oral History at the University of Texas at El Paso and the Bracero Archive.

While the interviews that follow are telling, they are particular to the El Paso-Juárez and New Mexico area. Each of the participants' quotes we selected fit into one of four distinct phases that emerged in telling the braceros' stories: beginnings in Mexico, entering the program in the United States, working on farms and ranches, and, reflecting upon their experiences after the program ended. We used the following themes for these phases in this presentation: Aspirantes en México, Processing Culture Shock, Vida de los Braceros, and Looking Back.

The Bracero Program was a result of the labor shortage in the United States during World War II. It was the outcome of negotiations between the United States and México for the mutual benefit of both nations. The program began in 1942, when the United States was in desperate need of workers, and many in México had great difficulty finding work. Although the war ended in 1945, the Bracero Program did not end, however, until 1964. Its structure allowed for the continued employment of low wage Mexican labor until well after the war ended. Over the twenty-two year period of its existence, 4.5 million labor contracts were offered. The accompanying border crossings represented the largest influx of Mexican migrants into the United States at the time. We use interviews with people who played different roles in the program to reveal *living histories*, in which a far more complex story exists. Today, the children and grandchildren of those involved share a living legacy of Mexican and American history.

Aspirantes en México

Many Mexican workers were encouraged to seek employment in the United States through the Bracero Program primarily because of economic opportunities. A few welcomed the chance to work in another country. Aspirants found the process to be worthwhile, but they were also overwhelmed at the thought of having to adjust to life in a foreign country.

“Y de ahí [Chihuahua, Chihuahua] nos conducieron en el ferrocarril, en furgones, donde habían embarcado concentrado de plomo...es el metal ya beneficiado...Y esos furgones los usaban para conducir el zinc, el concentrado ese y cuando lo vaciaban, lo mandaban para allá y en esos furgones nos mandaban a nosotros, ¿usted se imagina cómo llegaríamos? ¡Negros, negros, negros!, de el polvo del zinc. Duramos un día y medio para llegar aquí a Juárez, a El Paso.”

José de la Luz Mares
Bracero 1949-1953

“Empezaba la escuela en cuarto año, fue mi apá a sacarme de la escuela porque ya, ya no podía solo. Nomás yo tenía, podía ayudarle en algo. Entonces, habló con mi maestra, dijo: ‘Ay señor de Santiago, no haga eso con su hijo. Mire, su hijo va muy bien en clases.’ ‘Pues sí señorita, pero es que yo no puedo ya con la carga, es mucho, mucho, muy pesado. Pues tengo ocho de familia y, y nomás él es el mayor del, de los hombres que tengo.’ ”

Eduardo de Santiago
Bracero 1954-1959

“Y había desorden pero fuera, porque había mucha gente ahí, ahí dormían, dormían en, pues en lo que podían y sí estaba un poquito incómodo y a veces se tardaban pos cuatro o cinco días para que les fueran tocando sus turnos, pero por lo demás estaba bien.”

Álvaro Hernández
Bracero 1943-53

“Nos veníamos con la pura bendición, la bendición y el beso, eso era todo.”

Esteban Saldaña
Bracero 1949-1952

“Entonces le mandaron al representante de vía, le mandaron una nota de México, allá del Sindicato General, que le estaban pidiendo en las contrataciones, que había, entonces estaban siendo en el Distrito Federal, que le mandaron pedir gente que efectivamente fuera, que conociera el trabajo de vía [...] Nos avisó el representante por vía y nos fuimos a Chihuahua en un tren de los que venían a dejar braceros ya contratados a El Paso y regresaban vacíos. Y nos autorizaron que nos subiéramos en ese tren que iba ya vacío a México pa no pagar pasaje.”

“Pero había alrededor, así en todo el patio fuera de la contratación había regados alrededor de doce y trece mil aspirantes a braceros [...] se paraba uno así, se paraba uno y se recargaba en la barda, y así se paraban todos, y uno tras de otro, uno tras de otro, y luego empezaba [...] se venían diez o más empujando, o los que estaban ya preparados, ya para entrar [...] ¿cómo te quiero decir? Desorientaban ahí a unos diez o quince, unos salían hasta golpeados, creo hasta muertos hubo [...] y los que estaban listos para entrar ya, que iban a entrar, por allá salían rodando pobrecitos. Otros hasta muertos hubo, golpeados, lastimados de las piernas, de los brazos, onde caían rodando allá, y los otros vivales, eran los que entraban, los que venían puchando allá, a los que estaban.”

Juan Sánchez Abasta
Bracero 1942

“De bracero no podía arreglar cuando las primeras tarjetas no pude porque era menor de edad, así es que no me acuerdo exactamente en qué año ya pude arreglar yo la tarjeta de bracero [...] Nos exigía ir a arreglar tarjetas hasta la ciudad de Chihuahua y yo iba allá. Y pos a veces perdía uno muchos días porque había mucha línea y pos se acababa el dinero.”

Manuel Vásquez
Bracero 1945

“Su vestido [de los braceros], pos era muy pobre, de mezclilla, algunas chaquetitas así muy sencilla, sí. Digo, es que es gente, gente mucho muy humilde, que tiene lo mínimo para subsistir.”

Delia Montero de Tiscareño
Typist, U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service c.1945

“The train station is about a mile and a half, two miles from the bridge, so I would [...] make sure that the Mexican police in Juárez would assist me in stopping the traffic to let two or three hundred braceros cross the streets, and then they’d open the street back to traffic, and then they’d close it back out, let another two or three hundred braceros cross that particular street, we’re talking about ten, fifteen streets that braceros had to cross. So needless to say, Mexican city police were very occupied in helping me [...] I don’t think that they did that to assist me, but they did that to assist their own people ...”

Carlos Corella
Transportation official, U.S. Department of Labor 1953-55

“[...] this huge massive humanity and, and without money and food and so forth showed up over on the Mexican side [...] we were trying to find these people who had been identified by name, and all these other people yelling and trying to get across [...] pretty soon a three or four truckloads of Mexican soldiers arrived. And they got out of the trucks, and they were giving orders to line up and fix bayonets. And they got that crowd under control, this massive crowd under control in about five or ten minutes, you know. It, it was sad because all these people wanted to come across and they’re just, there wasn’t any opportunity for [th]em.”

Bob Porter
Recruitment Contractor, Doña Ana Farm Bureau 1954

Processing Culture Shock

From beginning the decision making process in Mexico to adjusting to life in the United States, the life of a bracero was difficult. The governmental procedures they underwent upon arriving in the United States were often dehumanizing. Some problems they later encountered centered on language, money, homesickness, questions of assimilation, and other issues as can be seen in the quotes below.

“[...] en El Coliseo. Que nos metieron donde meten los animales y luego nos echaron un polvo con unas máquinas a todos ahí. Y hasta adrede hacían, adrede lo hacían yo creo los mexicanos que estaban ahí, porque hasta se reían de nosotros ahí echándonos polvo ahí como los animales [...]”

“[...] que le griten recio porque tampoco no es derecho que le griten a uno. Viene uno a trabajar y luego que le griten a uno, que lo quieran humillar, pues no, pos eh. Viene uno a dejar aquí lo, viene a dejar aquí los unos por el otro, la fuerza, pa’ hacer producir este país y luego que lo traten así, que lo traten mal, pos no. Yo creo no hay derecho [...]”

José Gámez
Bracero 1942-1949

“[...] nos examinaron, para ver si encontraban algunas enfermedad venéreas o hemorroides y tuberculosis. Y ahí nos, ¡nos fumigaron! Nos dieron con un polvo, nos

sopleteaban un polvo blanco, en la cabeza y todo el cuerpo pa' fumigarnos como a los animales.”

José de la Luz Mares
Bracero 1949-1953

“Lo que sí que le voy a decir, que con licencia suya, le metían los dedos en los guantes atrás para ver si no tenía con, su estas, almorranas, todo eso, clase de, sí.”

Anastasio Montalvo Salazar
Bracero c. 1940

“‘What’s your name?’” He would give me the same name as the one I had just gotten. I would say, ‘Wait a minute, who is your wife?’ Sometimes they wouldn’t even think about it [...] ‘Well, so and so.’ I would say, ‘Who are your parents and where were you born?’ [The answers] were exactly the same [...] ‘Okay, wait a minute. They are exactly [the same]. Which is the original, and which is the one that bought the paper?’ I would notify immigration or immigration would find out, and they would ask them, you know, which was which. Sometimes they would let the original, the one that it really was, go. Sometimes they would deport both of them. That’s the risk that they would take.”

“On Sundays, you would see them all dressed up, carrying the shovel from one place to another. Most of these were undocumented workers. As long as they had that shovel—it was funny, because they’re all dressed up to go visit somebody, and then they had the shovel. As long as they had it, that was it.”

Minerva Cheatum
Clerk-typist, Río Vista 1957-62

“Pecos was a little bit of a, of a, not a little bit, quite a bit, very discriminatory. So, I don’t think they had access to go everywhere, like the theater. Mexican Americans who lived there, weren’t even, before I got there, weren’t even allowed to sit on the first floor of the theater [...] But, I saw [the braceros] at Safeway buying huge, huge sacks of flour and beans, and stuff like that. The braceros, on the weekend, they would flood downtown, because they had a weekend off, and so everywhere you went, the grocery stores, the post office, they were there, buying at J. C. Penney’s or Woolworth’s or whatever, they were there. Actually, they were a boom to the Pecos community.”

Lily Gutiérrez
Clerk Typist, Trans Pecos Cotton Association 1955-85

“Yo diría que el noventa y nueve por ciento era gente [los braceros] muy buena, muy dócil, muy limpia que no había tenido oportunidad de estar, entonces se habían contaminado en el viaje que habían tenido del interior para acá [...]”

Manuel Enríquez Savignac
Private contractor-meal preparation, U.S. Department of Labor 1951-57

“When they was giving them the vaccine, the 2.4 million units, we have in that line, cots, army cots, you know, because that vaccine was given with a sixteen gauge needle, sixteen gauge needles is like [...] It’s a very thick one [...] It’s a major dose, and was

very thick, and they were fainting, fainting. They would have the cots, and we would put them over there with ammonia, reviving them, taking care of them. When they were feeling fine, they can continue.”

Pedro A. Ortega, M.D.
U.S. Public Health Service at Río Vista, 1961-64

“And then they called me to go work part time as a security guard at night [...] Then from there, I went to Public Health. I never drawn blood, and I was, my first job was to do that, to draw blood [...] There] was like a nurse there. He was the one that instruct us how to do that in the field, you know, he would do it. And you just, start doing it. How to pop up the vein and start [...] at first, yeah, I was nervous and then after a while, I, you get used to it after so many people. They used to call it *carniceros*, and they used to call it because sometimes we missed the vein [...] I can understand why they would call us names like that, but yeah, eventually you learned and you felt comfortable with it.”

Sam Sánchez
U.S. Public Health Service at Río Vista, 1959-64

“[...] they were placed through a Quonset hut, and they were asked to strip, and they were sprayed with a white powder all over their body, including their hair, facial hair, the hair on their head, and even around the low area. Some of the braceros that experienced that for the first time were embarrassed, and some thought it was kind of cute, it was a laughing matter. When they would come out of the Quonset hut, they would look at each other, and they were all white, and they’d say, ‘Well, I guess we’re gringos now.’ ”

Carlos Corella
Transportation official, U.S. Department of Labor 1953-55

Vida de los braceros

Individual experiences varied greatly depending on several factors; these included the area where they were sent, the work they completed, the size of the work camp, and the relationship with their employer. The jobs assigned to the braceros were often the most difficult and physically demanding.

“Ese era el problema porque no traíamos dinero, no traíamos nada, y ese era el problema, no, para acá aguantábamos lo que nos hicieran.”

“[El algodón] Está ya, ahí espinosa, y hay algodones que están, no abren bien y está así cerrado y tiene uno que sacar el capullo casi...Nada, nada. No aquí era una de padrastrós aquí así, los pellejitos esos en las dos manos. Y comprábamos *tape* para ponernos en los dedos, sangraban, sangraban las manos.”

Esteban Saldaña
Bracero 1949-52

“Pos sí, porque el trabajo estaba pesado, sabe que estaba pesado como le digo porque hay veces que era, el puro *field*, el puro sol...Tenía uno que aguantar, era lo más, lo que sufría uno, el clima [...]”

Gregorio Trejo
Bracero 1946-62

“[...] pos no nos pagaban mucho, nos pagaban a \$0.20 centavos la hora en ese tiempo... Y luego, como a nosotros no nos dejaban entrar en las cantinas todavía, pos nomás le oíamos la música por fuera las... Cuando había las esas, las radiolas esas que le decían uno los nicles, la nicleola [...]”

“Comiendo mal porque en veces cuando pasábamos, cuando empezamos nosotros a hacer lonche solos, no sabía yo, no sabíamos hacer lonche nosotros. Hasta después sí nos enseñamos, sí comía uno más bien porque ya sabíamos, hacer tortillas, cocer frijoles, hacer sopa de arroz, hacer galletas, todas esas cosas.”

“[Durante la segunda guerra mundial] Había, nos daban un libro de estampillas. No había azúcar, no había carne, nos daban un par de zapatos por año pal trabajo, par de zapatos pal poner, pal mes, pa salir... nosotros íbamos allá a la, a El Paso, onde llegaban los trenes. Los íbamos a ver ahí cuando llegaban los que venían de allá de la guerra que venían muchos sin brazos, muchos ciegos, muchos en sillas de ruedas y mucho[s] en la caja ya.”

José Gámez
Bracero 1942-49

“Entonces, [el mayordomo] dijo: ‘Aquí está, aquí está la dirección, aquí está este cuaderno, con hojas pa que escriban a sus casas, a sus familiares, y aquí están las estampillas.’ Entonces cobraban \$0.03 centavos la estampilla a México. ‘Aquí están las estampillas [...] y ahí les voy a dejar unas plumas ahí pa que se las presten, pa que escriban.’ Y muchos no, muchos de los que iban en aquel tiempo en el 1942, cuando fui a Yucaipa, muchos, casi la mayor parte no sabían leer ni escribir.”

“[...] y ahí andamos por las calles, y detrás de nosotros iban dos de los braceros de nosotros, jóvenes. Y ahí vamos, nos parábamos en un aparador: ‘Ah, mira que baratos están los pantalones de mezclilla.’ De esos yo llevaba hasta tres, dos o tres pantalones que usaba yo pa trabajar allá en Chihuahua. ‘Mira que baratos \$2 dólares el pantalón de mezclilla y el *junper* de mezclilla, \$1.50. Ora que cobremos, hay que comprar para llevar allá pa trabajar.’”

Juan Sánchez Abasta
Bracero 1942

“Most of them came from the warmer parts of México, and they were cold. I thought they all had left, you know. At noon, I drove to the farm, and there was one fellow picking cotton over there, in short sleeve shirt and everything, he was whistling and picking away [...] ‘Hey, I told the other people to take the day off. It’s too cold to be picking cotton.’ He said, ‘This weather is not cold, it’s just right. I come from a part in Mexico where the water freezes in late September, and it doesn’t thaw out until spring.’ (laughs) [...] He was used to that, and he kept picking cotton, by next morning, he had three sacks full, right away.”

David Herrera
Mesilla Valley cotton farmer 1955-64

“I’ve had Americans saying, ‘I don’t know how Joe Apodaca gets along so well with his people. Why can’t I do that?’ I said, ‘You don’t speak Spanish, and you don’t understand them like he does.’ I’ve seen Joe Apodaca bring in thirty men to go home. They would get on the bus, and he would embrace each one [...] He was the *patrón*. If they had a sickness or some kind of problem, he would do something for them. Other Anglo farmers, some of them were good too, but they didn’t embrace their workers when they left. They just kind of [said], ‘See you, Joe.’ To me, the bracero program was a friendship program as well as an economic program.”

Richard Hancock
Labor Director, Doña Ana Farm Bureau 1950-55, 1959-61

“[...] they would start early in the morning and they would work until sundown, so it was like maybe eight hours. Sometimes, if they had to irrigate at night, they would work at night for a few hours [...] So, they [braceros] would get rid of all the leaves and then clean up because, well, like in the old days, we used to water late, you know for the alfalfa and all that. They kept the ditches pretty clean at that time [...] There were some] that did the labor in the tractors and all that. But the other ones would clean up the fields and put the fertilizer and all that was done by the ones that didn’t work in the equipment [...] When there was nothing to do, sometimes, my husband would put them to clean the barns and do stuff around the house. If the ceilings needed work or painting or something like that, they would do it. They always had something to do.”

“As a matter of fact, one of them died on our farm because he was given, what is it called, the one that picks the cotton, the cotton machine ready to go pick cotton and he had it going while he was working on it. It got his jacket and choked him [...] Like I said, those two men really worked for us. They really did.”

Cora C. Reyes
Wife of farmer, La Mesa, New México 1948-64

Looking Back

Although jobs in the United States allowed the braceros to help their families in México, many returned with less money than they had anticipated. Still, participants in the program look back on their service with great pride. Despite their contributions, current debates over withholdings and wages have emerged. These issues have not detracted from the value of their work.

“Pues fíjese que una, pos sí le voy a decir, que una cosa, pos una cosa buena, una cosa que me trajo a mí un beneficio bueno porque mire, pos como venía a trabajar, pues vine de allá pa acá, pos decirle mire, me compraba muncha ropa pa mí, le mandaba dinero a mi familia principalmente.”

Gregorio Trejo
Bracero 1946-62

“Mire como, como bracero mis seis años fueron unos años completamente bonitos, una vida muy bonita.”

Eduardo de Santiago
Bracero 1954-59

“[...] nos trataron mal esa vez allá en el Río Vista que nos, esa vez, es en lo que se refiere el gobierno que no sabía ahí que nos echaban polvo como a los animales ahí. Porque eso no está bien... Eso no está en los derechos humanos, como humano uno que es, que lo traten así como animal. Y ahora digo, pos no sé digo, porque a nosotros nos dijeron de ese sueldo que nos pagaban que taban agarrando un dinero que nos iban a dar a nosotros después nos de... Porque si lo irán a cumplir o no lo iban a cumplir esa cosa.”

José Gámez
Bracero 1942-49

“Entonces ese dinero lo mandaban a un banco de México, Distrito Federal. Lo mandaba, se llamaba Banco del Ahorro Nacional y estaba en México. Nomás que nosotros no sabíamos, no supimos en qué calle, en qué número, en qué barrio, pero los de la compañía sí sabían y ahí era donde mandaban los \$0.10 centavos que nos quitaban de cada peso [dólar] por quincena.”

“[Un bracero es] Ah, pues, trabajadores de brazo, de trabajos pesados, por eso les dicen braceros [...] No pos, es una palabra muy común, que se le tiene que dar a todo trabajador. No, nomás a los que íbamos de aquí de braceros a Estados Unidos, hasta aquí mismo. Trabajo, trabajadores rústicos, de trabajos pesados, eso significa braceros [...] No pos, todos los que nos contratábamos era en beneficio, buscar un beneficio para su familia, de ganar un centavo más. Y en caso de no ser así, pos le buscaba uno por otro lado [...]”

Juan Sánchez Abasta
Bracero 1942

“Sí fue, para mí sí es bueno, porque oiga, pos venía uno en un peligro, ¡qué barbaridad! Cruzaba uno el río y no sabía si... tanto peligro llevaba de ahogarse [...] Y ya cuando salieron las tarjetas de bracero, pos ya venía uno y pasaba por el puente [...] ¿Cuánto pobre no está muriendo ahí en los desiertos? En donde quiera, en la nieve, de sol y todo, pos si hubiera la facilidad, porque esa gente, podía venir segura a trabajar unos dos, tres meses, y si se portaba bien, como todo el que se ha portado bien aquí, al menos pos yo lo digo por mí mismo. Pos mire, yo llegué a ser ciudadano [...]”

Manuel Vásquez
Bracero 1945

“Mexican immigration knew that they were braceros, and of course they would try to shake them down for money [...] They had to face that from the time they left their homes in Mexico, and in the United States, they were victims, they, they were, there's no other way to put it. They were victims even in their own country. The Mexican

government was callous, didn't care very much about them [...] In this country, again they were the poorest of the poor. The only people that could relate to them were people like me, and I didn't have time to relate to them."

Carlos Corella
Transportation Agent, Department of Labor 1953-55

"And these guys brought everything imaginable back to Mexico. But when this one guy came in with a windmill, in pieces, and I told him, I said, 'There's no way you can take that windmill to México. There's no way we can take it.' Well, he wasn't satisfied with that answer. The next thing I knew, and I was busy doing some other things, he had that bunch of guys helping him, and he had that windmill in parts tied up on top of the bus and they took it back to the border."

Bob Porter
Recruitment Contractor, Doña Ana Farm Bureau 1954

"They bought radios, sewing machines, bicycles, and cowboy boots. Most of them were wearing boots with jeans and, you know, a western shirt. You would look at them, and you would say, 'These are the same ones that I processed going? Now they're coming back, and look at the way they're dressed.' [...] That was what they loved: bicycles, sewing machines, and radios."

Minerva Cheatum
Clerk-typist, Río Vista 1957-62

"The first year that they came, they were kind of a little bit raw, they didn't know exactly what they were up against, but then the second time, I'd see them, they'd be a little more prepared. They knew what they were up against, and they kind of prepared a little better for what they were going to encounter here. Some of them started to understand the dollar, the currency a little better. Then some of them start picking up some of the customs of the locals, they kinda adjusted, some of them."

Raymundo Villa
Bracero Aide and Interpreter