

Brief History of the Bracero Program

All subsequent information was gathered from the Institute of Oral History at the University of Texas at El Paso and the Bracero Archive.

The initial recruitment, processing, and transportation of bracero laborers were supervised by Mexican labor officials in Mexico City. Later, as the program evolved, Mexican workers desiring a bracero contract passed through *centros de contratación*, or contracting centers, located in several cities throughout Mexico. While being processed, the men were interviewed numerous times by labor recruiters, medical examiners, and soldiers. Braceros were often transported in trains where they endured overcrowded compartments, objectionable food, and long travel times. Although the early phases of the program required American employers to declare their labor needs and pay for transportation costs to the United States, a shift soon occurred. In 1948, three years after the end of World War II, growers began to recruit workers directly at the US-Mexico border, which enabled them to avoid transportation expenses and government oversight.

The continued demand for labor caused large numbers of men to migrate to Mexican border cities in the hopes of securing a bracero contract. The medical exams, however, whether performed at the border or at the *centros de contratación*, remained an integral part of processing workers. Over time, these tests were increasingly conducted at Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) reception centers located in border cities. In El Paso, Texas, for example, Rio Vista was a farm that was transformed into an INS reception center where the processing of braceros took place. Those that passed through Rio Vista recalled the poor food, humiliating medical examinations, and the fumigation they underwent. The men were stripped of their clothing, organized into lines, and then fumigated with DDT, a white powder used to kill insects and germs that Mexican workers were believed to carry.

Generally, the daily life of braceros was structured around a demanding six to seven day workweek. They were contracted in twenty-six states, which meant that their individual experiences varied greatly depending on the area they were sent, the agricultural, or railroad duties they performed, the size of the workforce, and the treatment, by their employer. Some workers faced numerous difficulties while in the United States including inadequate wages, substandard living conditions, mistreatment by employers, and a longing to return home. Many also experienced blatant acts of racism. In some cases, they were verbally and physically abused by supervisors and local populations. The mechanization of farm work in the 1950s and 1960s also increased work related injuries for fieldworkers. In addition, they were vulnerable to industrial pesticides that have since been found to be extremely harmful. In spite of the adversities braceros faced, they were not powerless. If contract violations occurred, the Bracero Program allowed workers to petition Mexican consulates.

Despite the tremendous difficulties some faced, their jobs in the United States allowed them to help their loved ones during a period of great economic crisis in Mexico. Most workers, however, did not earn nearly as much money in the United States as they had expected. Even so,

many braceros were still able to send money home or return with enough of their earnings to help support their families. Although numerous braceros did return home, several others remained in the United States. Some were able to establish permanent residency or citizenship, and were eventually able to do the same for their loved ones.

The Bracero Program ended in 1964, due to intense pressure from unions, the mechanization of the agricultural industry, and public awareness of inadequate working and living conditions. Many observers of the Bracero Program continue to debate the historical importance of its merits and deficiencies. In recent years, questions over the payment of wages have become important issues, and have resulted in numerous protests in both Mexico and the United States. Braceros and their supporters estimate that over one billion dollars in wages and accrued interest is owed to them by the Mexican government. In spite of the current struggle for the recognition and money that is rightfully owed to the braceros, most of them look back upon their time as guest workers in the United States with a sense of great dignity and pride.

By examining the interviews with those directly involved with the program we can better understand how it is that so many braceros are able to maintain such a strong sense of accomplishment and honor despite all the difficulties they faced. We can also begin to explore the different effects the program had on Mexico and the United States, both individually and collectively. This in turn can lead us to question the impact the program had on relations between these two countries. By listening to the living histories presented by these men and women, we can also start to look beyond the labor and migration issues that are commonly associated with the program.