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# The Bracero Program Applied to Immigration Today

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The Bracero Program Applied to Today's Immigration

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## Introduction

Max Frisch, a Swiss author and contemporary of several guest labor programs in Europe, stated, “We asked for workers, and got men.”<sup>1</sup> With this quote, he summarizes the profound difference between the expectations of governments and the unpredictable reality of human workers. Guest labor programs allow foreign workers to enter a country with the intention of working for a brief period of time before returning to their home countries. Examples of guest worker programs could be found around the world during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, Germany had a guest worker program during the 1960s that invited foreigners from countries like Turkey to work in Germany on a temporary basis. Generally these workers are contracted as physical laborers in industries like agriculture. Although guest labor programs offer many benefits, many recipient countries fail to prepare for the ties formed by these migrant workers during their brief stay.

The United States government recognized the advantages of a guest labor program during the country’s involvement in World War II. With many men off fighting as soldiers in Europe, the United States growers needed workers to help harvest their crops and feed the nation during wartime. The Mexican and U.S. governments formed an agreement that allowed Mexican braceros to legally cross the border into the United States to work short contracts as employees of the U.S. government beginning in 1942. The United States government did not cancel this program until 1964, years after the war ended. In fact, the United States saw more braceros during each year in the 1950s than in any wartime year. During the war, the U.S. growers might have struggled to provide food for the country without the aid of the braceros. Instead, the U.S., particularly in the Southwest region,

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Martin, “Germany’s Guestworkers,” *Challenge* 24 (1981): 34-42.

experienced agricultural success, largely through the hard work of the braceros. After the war, the braceros continued to provide a cheap source of labor for growers of all sizes across the nation.

The Bracero Program was created in the United States “for the purpose of assisting in providing an adequate supply of workers for the production and harvesting of agricultural commodities.”<sup>2</sup> Under this program, Mexican workers accepted over 4.5 million contracts to work in physically challenging conditions for small salaries. Although braceros came to work on both farms and railroads, the Bracero Program focused on agricultural labor. These migrant workers came to the United States, often repeatedly, to work before returning to Mexico and continuing their lives there, sometimes with the addition of increased capital and agricultural knowledge. While the majority of participants in the Bracero Program chose to return to Mexico, some braceros decided to permanently immigrate to the United States. This decision signifies the importance of the Bracero Program in today’s discussions of immigration.

Discussions in the United States tend to describe immigration, particularly illegal immigration, as a major problem for the country; however, the Bracero Program demonstrates that at one time the United States government decided the country would greatly benefit from the labor migration of Mexican workers. The Mexican government also made the decision that migration to the United States benefited its own population. In recent years, George W. Bush’s administration strongly considered the benefits of creating

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Congress, *Public Law 45, 1943*, 29 April 1943, 1, <http://ccrh.org/comm/moses/primary/bracero.html>.

another guest labor program like the Bracero Program.<sup>3</sup> Although this consideration signifies some openness towards immigration, many people in the United States still fail to realize how much the country could benefit as a whole from temporary migrants and permanent immigrants. Additionally, the Bracero Program can reveal the problems created with programs involving migrant labor, problems that would need solutions before a similar program could be put into place.

The Bracero Program's absence from many history curricula shows that the U.S. population is not fully aware of the history of immigration in the United States. Without this information, the public of the United States cannot make well-informed decisions about current and future immigration laws. All types of people across two countries felt the effects of the Bracero Program. A study of the Bracero Program reveals the potential benefits for all parties involved, as well as conflicts and problems that often arise during guest labor programs; a study of these positive and negative repercussions supports the argument that a guest labor program could benefit the United States today.

### **Historiographical Review**

Historians have shifted their views on the Bracero Program since the first exposition was written in 1964.<sup>4</sup> The first accounts of the Bracero Program focused on the problems the braceros faced during the time of their contracts. These problems overshadowed any benefits the braceros experienced by working in the United States. The shift in opinions occurs when later historians begin to evaluate the program on a deeper level. To demonstrate this change in thinking, one historian states: "most braceros returned home

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<sup>3</sup> Darryl Fears and Michael Fletcher, "Bush Pushes Guest-Worker Program," *Washington Post*, November 29, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com>.

<sup>4</sup> Reference to Ernesto Galarza's *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story* (Charlotte: McNally & Loftin, 1964).

with positive recollections that contrast markedly with the Bracero Program's depiction as a form of 'legalized slavery,' a view as common in the 1960s as on the Internet today."<sup>5</sup>

Although the Internet users may still publish accounts of the horrors of the Bracero Program, many historians today now also view the Bracero Program in the same positive light found in the oral history of former braceros. These former participants portray the Bracero Program as a beneficial opportunity for many Mexican workers to transform their lives and expand their horizons. The effects of the Bracero Program rippled out from the direct participation of U.S. growers and Mexican braceros.

Many U.S. historians have previously researched the Bracero Program. Accounts of the Bracero Program were published as early as 1964, the year the program ended. One important record comes from Ernesto Galarza who wrote *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story*. Galarza, a contemporary of the Bracero Program and actively involved in unions, wanted to show how the Bracero Program changed to benefit the U.S. growers increasingly over time. Much of his information comes from interpretations of Department of Labor documents and U.S. congressional hearings. In his book, Galarza talks about how braceros, originally contracted to prevent a crisis situation during a time of emergency, were used by U.S. growers in almost every kind of crop. According to Galarza, U.S. growers benefited economically from the use of bracero labor because of the low wages the laborers accepted and the provision of the laborers' needs, such as food and insurance, for a deduction in their pay. The determination of need due to labor shortages came from unreliable estimates of need predicted by U.S. growers who operated without the

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Snodgrass, "Patronage and Progress: The Bracero Program from the Perspective of Mexico," Leon Fink, editor, *Workers Across the Americas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 245-266.

supervision of Department of Labor officials. Galarza's research focuses on the exploitation of the braceros by U.S. growers. Galarza finishes his book by considering possible alternatives to the use of bracero labor.<sup>6</sup> This source and other early sources reveal the problems that can occur when one group of people have too much power over another group.

More than forty years after Galarza published his first exposition, historians began to look beyond the problems to see some of the positive impacts of the Bracero Program. For example, Deborah Cohen's *Braceros*, published in 2011, provides a vastly different perspective on the Bracero Program. Cohen asked former braceros how they interpreted their time spent working in the United States. She bases her arguments largely on interviews and informal conversations she personally conducted with former braceros through contacts living in two different locations in Mexico. She interviewed those braceros who chose to return to live in Mexico, not the laborers who relocated to the United States after their contracts finished. From these interviews, Cohen paints a more positive description of the Bracero Program than that found in Galarza's *Merchants of Labor*. While she does not completely ignore that some braceros received unfair treatment during the program's existence, she chooses to focus on the benefits most braceros received through working on this program. Cohen argues that the Bracero Program created a transnational world that allowed braceros to become more connected with the different technology of other countries.<sup>7</sup> In her book, she discusses the ways braceros fought for progress and opportunity. Cohen's work represents the shift that has taken

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<sup>6</sup> Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story* (Charlotte: McNally & Loftin, 1964). Pages 87, 98, and 129.

<sup>7</sup> Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

place in historians' views on the Bracero Program since the first interpretations. In the days following the Bracero Program, throughout the Civil Rights Movement, historians focused on the undeniably difficult situations that Mexican laborers faced in the United States and the unfulfilled promises in their contracts. Today, more recent historians have chosen to look past the exploitation found in the Bracero Program to see benefits that braceros gained through their participation. Her search for transformations in the lives of braceros as a result of their opportunities shows some of the benefits of a guest labor program.

In the past few years, historians have begun to research new questions about the Bracero Program beyond those of exploitation. Some sources, like Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz's *Labor and Legality: An Ethnography of a Mexican Immigrant Network*, try to answer how the Bracero Program impacted illegal immigration today. While discussing the end of the Bracero Program in 1964, Gomberg-Muñoz explains, "after encouraging labor migration from Mexico for the better part of a century, U.S. immigration policies slashed the number of visas allotted to Mexicans from an unlimited number to just twenty thousand per year."<sup>8</sup> She argues that this shift from interdependence between Mexican laborers and U.S. growers to the end of most legal migration created a strong incentive for the augmentation of illegal immigration to the United States from Mexico. Her research shows the connection between the Bracero Program and today's discussions of immigration in the United States.

*Beyond la Frontera: The History of Mexico-U.S. Migration* includes a chapter entitled "The Bracero Program, 1942-1964" by Michael Snodgrass. In this chapter, Snodgrass also considers the effects of the Bracero Program on Mexican culture today. He argues that the

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<sup>8</sup> Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz, *Labor and Legality: An Ethnography of a Mexican Immigrant Network* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 22-40.



Bracero Program encouraged Mexican laborers to develop a migratory culture. He concludes by saying that the return of Mexican laborers to the U.S. in the 1980s “built on a migratory culture that twenty-two years of bilateral, state-sanctioned emigration had institutionalized in Mexico’s traditional sending states.”<sup>9</sup> This author believes the Bracero Program gave Mexican laborers a better opportunity at the time to achieve their goals than the opportunities in Mexico. His evidence comes from U.S. government documents, correspondences, and Mexican newspapers. Michael Snodgrass has another chapter “Patronage and Progress: The Bracero Program from the Perspective of Mexico” published in *Workers Across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History* that also discusses the Bracero Program. In this chapter, he asks why the Mexican government promoted the Bracero Program to its population in order to achieve progress. He ends this chapter with a similar conclusion to his other work, focusing on the expansion of a migratory culture. His arguments show that the Bracero Program deserves the public’s attention.

In 2011, a chapter from *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA* by Ronald L. Mize and Alicia C.S. Swords asks why Mexican laborers chose to leave Mexico to come to the United States. This book quotes Señor Palmas, a U.S. vendor, who asks, “Why are those guys willing to leave their families, their culture, their language, everything that they’ve ever known?”<sup>10</sup> The authors find that braceros mainly left because of one of the following reasons: the failures of the Mexican Revolution, the encouragement of friends and relatives, or the opportunity to earn a salary that allows them to save for the

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Snodgrass, “The Bracero Program, 1942-1964,” Mark Overmyer-Velazquez, editor, *Beyond la Frontera: The History of Mexico-U.S. Migration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Ronald L. Mize and Alicia C. S. Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

future.<sup>11</sup> This source walks between the extremes of Galarza and Cohen. The willingness of the braceros to endure harsh conditions came from the desire to earn a better future; however, a better future came with a high cost to the braceros. Mize and Swords base their argument on a combination of previous studies by other historians and interviews with former braceros.

Parallels can be made among historians' accounts of the Bracero Program. Despite their various viewpoints, most historians agree that the Bracero Program in some way shaped Mexican immigration to the United States.<sup>12</sup> While problems certainly existed because of the Bracero Program, its benefits signify the importance of considering a guest labor program today, after making changes to correct the previous problems. Recent historians have searched through the bad publicity surrounding the Bracero Program to find ways in which Mexican and U.S. citizens benefited from the Bracero Program. This perspective needs to be broadened to discover the specific problems and explain how they could be solved if a guest labor program were to exist in the United States today. Many contemporaries of the Bracero Program believed the whole project failed; however, the Bracero Program began with a good idea that had the potential to benefit everyone. The United States growers needed a reliable workforce, and the Mexican laborers needed jobs to support themselves. The problems did not arise until the execution of the Bracero Program failed to protect the needs of everyone involved. None of the groups had both the power and the resources to ensure that no group abused the system. As a result, the U.S.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> One example can be found in *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA* by Ronald Mize and Alicia Swords. Their chapter on the Bracero Program begins with "The Bracero Program was extremely important in codifying existing migrant streams and constructing new streams to every region of the continental US," 3.

growers held all of the power without government intervention, while the Mexican braceros did not receive the promised conditions.

## The Idea

World War II swept up the U.S. nation in a wave of patriotism. Citizens sacrificed and scrimped to send needed materials, such as clothing, to the soldiers off at war. Families diligently tended victory gardens in yards across the nation. Women left their traditional place in the home to work in factories. The entire nation joined together to form a united and successful home front. Despite these efforts and many more, the U.S. government still felt pressure from U.S. farmers to provide a larger labor force to fill the gap left by the soldiers' absence. From this need arose the idea of a temporary labor agreement with Mexico.

Geographic proximity and a recent population boom made Mexico an attractive source of cheap labor to the United States and a solution to the current agricultural labor shortage. Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt, who held the president's office at the start of the Bracero Program, implemented the Good Neighbor Policy that had been designed to improve political relations between the United States and Latin American countries. As a result of the policy attempts to improve relations, trade had significantly increased between the United States and Latin America in the years leading up to the outbreak of World War II. Franklin D. Roosevelt promised that the United States would be "the neighbor who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others."<sup>13</sup> The idea of the Bracero Program formed under the sentiments expressed in the Good Neighbor Policy.

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<sup>13</sup> Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "The Good Neighbor Policy," editors, Robert Holden and Eric Zolov, *Latin America and the United States: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 133-134.

In accordance with this policy, the United States government agreed to act as the official employer of the braceros to coordinate the U.S. growers with the Mexican government at the program's initiation during wartime. They were placed under the responsibility of the Department of Labor. After World War II, braceros worked directly for U.S. growers until a new agreement was signed with Mexico a few years later, at which time they returned to being employees of the U.S. government. The Department of Labor held the responsibility of coordinating the U.S. growers and determining the need for foreign labor. The agreement of the U.S. government to act as the official employer of the braceros showed their commitment, at Mexico's insistence, to support the rights of the braceros to the U.S. growers. The original Bracero Program agreement offered contracts that included additional benefits, like housing and transportation; however, the braceros were forced to depend upon the United States government to see their contracts carried out.

What did the U.S. government's policies work to protect? The policies focused on keeping Mexican workers from becoming permanent immigrants. For example, according to the agreement between the Mexican and U.S. governments, families could not follow braceros to the United States during their contracts. Only men could participate in the Bracero Program. Contracts ranged from the duration of 6 weeks to six months but could be renewed by U.S. growers up until a certain time. For most of the program's duration, the braceros could not remain in the United States for longer than a year.<sup>14</sup> With these restrictions, permanent, well-paying jobs remained in the hands of U.S. workers. The

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<sup>14</sup> Ronald L. Mize and Alicia C. S. Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 13.

Mexican laborers worked in physically challenging conditions for low wages that most U.S. citizens refused to accept.

The start of the U.S.'s involvement in World War II in December of 1941 followed the end of the Cárdenas administration in Mexico. Mexican President Manuel Avila Camacho took office in 1940 after the Cárdenas administration left office. The new president consented to negotiations with the United States to form an agreement that sent Mexican laborers to work in *el Norte*. The Mexican government had many reasons to agree to the Bracero Program. It offered a solution, though somewhat temporary, to problems in their economy, provided an opportunity to educate their working population on agricultural technology, and attempted to improve Mexico's relations with democratic world powers in the Allied forces, including the United States and its democratic allies.

At the start of the Bracero Program, Mexico was experiencing a population boom caused by an increase in birthrates, life spans, and literacy.<sup>15</sup> With their increased education and better health, Mexican laborers could remain in the work force for more years. These changes in Mexico led to a higher number of able workers, which pressured Mexico's economy to provide a higher number of jobs. In its current state, the Mexican government could not immediately produce enough jobs to compensate for the rise in its working-age population. When the economy did not quickly develop more jobs inside of Mexico, the Mexican government turned to an agreement with the United States in order to find more jobs and opportunities for its citizens. As this agreement only created temporary jobs for Mexican workers in the United States, the Mexican government could consent without concern for damaging their own developing economy. "Returning home for

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<sup>15</sup> Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 23.

planting and harvesting, braceros would contribute to U.S. labor needs and promote binational understanding without undermining their country's economic progress."<sup>16</sup> These Mexican workers would contribute to both the U.S. and Mexican economies each year. Additionally, the Bracero Program helped to promote social peace by reducing the poverty and unease created by high unemployment.

The Mexican Government referred to their participation in the Bracero Program as a major contribution to the Allied war efforts, along with its contribution as a large oil producer.<sup>17</sup> The Bracero Program benefited war efforts by aiding the U.S. in producing food supplies and preventing a labor shortage. The efforts of the Mexican government show its desire to form a closer relationship with its neighbor to the north.

In addition to showing its support for the Allied war effort, the Mexican government also hoped that the Bracero Program would increase their working population's technical knowledge. "The braceros who parlayed their stints abroad into new careers at home did so as carpenters, cargo haulers, or barbers, investing their savings into the tools of new trades."<sup>18</sup> These new skills further aided the Mexican economy. "'The idea was to progress,' Jesus Amezcua recalled, 'to buy a little parcel of land, some cows, and to make oneself a capitalist.' This, he noted, was not a simple task, and many invested their savings in land only to lose it, for they lacked 'administration skills.'"<sup>19</sup> Men like Jesus Amezcua

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<sup>16</sup> Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 27.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Snodgrass, "Patronage and Progress: The Bracero Program from the Perspective of Mexico," Leon Fink, editor, *Workers Across the Americas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 256.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Snodgrass, "Patronage and Progress: The Bracero Program from the Perspective of Mexico," Leon Fink, editor, *Workers Across the Americas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 259.

recognized the goals of their government and wanted to experience the improvements promised.

Mexican laborers who participated in the Bracero Program hoped that the involvement of the Mexican government would protect them from abuse at the hands of U.S. growers. "The Bilateral agreement guaranteed that those chosen would meet physical standards for farmwork, live in sanitary housing, have access to medical care, have paid roundtrip transportation (guaranteed under Mexican law), and be paid the prevailing wage for the crop they picked."<sup>20</sup> Instead of forming strong unions, the braceros trusted in their government's ability to ensure that these conditions were met. They hoped that this trust in their government would ensure better circumstances than the conditions received by men who illegally crossed the border without the knowledge of either government.

### **The Experience**

Many Mexican families who sent their men to the United States placed their hope in the Bracero Program, which began with a promising start. During the war years, the Mexican government maintained some control over the program and fought for good working conditions for its citizens. The United States population as a whole appreciated the Mexican laborers' assistance during the war. When the war ended, the Bracero Program continued, causing discontent among the returning U.S. domestic labor force. Although the Mexican government signed a second agreement extending the Bracero Program, it slowly lost any control over the program after the end of World War II. The changes in power gave further control to the U.S. growers who sometimes took advantage of both governments' neglect.

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<sup>20</sup> Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 22.



With the beginning of the Bracero Program in 1942, Mexican workers came to the United States to work on railroads and farms of all sizes. Who were these men, and where did they come from? Typically these young men came from rural areas of Mexico. "During the Bracero Program, Jalisco and the neighboring states of Guanajuato, Michoacán, and Zacatecas sent about 45 percent of the legal migrants north."<sup>21</sup> These areas, which were known as both agriculturally rich and economically poor, received more bracero permits from the Mexican government than any other sections of Mexico. Before the creation of the Bracero Program, these areas struggled after some agrarian reform during the Mexican Revolution created a shift from hacienda farming to subsistence farming. These areas sent the sons of small farm owners to participate in the Bracero Program when the new subsistence farmers suffered from the lack of aid from the Mexican government in developing their small farms.<sup>22</sup> The sons had few opportunities in their rural villages; as a result, a large number of men chose to migrate to find work. "During the 1950s at least 30 percent of working-age males from Jalisco labored in the United States each year."<sup>23</sup> This figure shows the importance of the Bracero Program in limiting unemployment in rural locations of Mexico, like Jalisco. Many Mexican workers had no other way to support their families than to try for a contract under the Bracero Program.

The braceros interviewed by later historians refused to portray themselves as victims.<sup>24</sup> They came to the United States with a strong sense of purpose. A study

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Snodgrass, "Patronage and Progress: The Bracero Program from the Perspective of Mexico," Leon Fink, editor, *Workers Across the Americas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 245-266.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 265.

<sup>24</sup> Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

conducted in the 1940s by the U.S. government determined “that of the 303,054 braceros who migrated between 1942 and 1945, roughly 72 percent went for better salaries, 14 percent went for personal reasons, and 12 percent went in search of adventure; just under 2 percent sought the new knowledge that was the program’s public rationale.”<sup>25</sup> While many opponents of the Bracero Program feared its cultural impact in both the United States and Mexico, this study proves that the majority of braceros came to the United States for the economic benefits they could find. An early historian of Mexican immigration, Manuel Gamio explained three reasons Mexican workers would leave their homes: the unmet promises of Mexican Revolution, the potential for higher salaries, or the recommendation of friends who had previously migrated to the north.<sup>26</sup> While many Mexicans could not find work to feed their families at home, the Bracero Program gave them the opportunity to provide better lives for their families.

Most braceros came to the United States in order to change their lives at home in Mexico, not to create new lives in a new country. Many braceros hoped to be able to afford their own land in Mexico after participating in the Bracero Program.<sup>27</sup> “Eustacio Franco recollects that he saved an average of \$1,800 annually in the 1950s, working in the fields or in construction. During ten years of bracero and undocumented labor, the one-time sharecropper saved for family maintenance, then invested in dairy cows, and eventually purchased his own small ranch.”<sup>28</sup> Eustacio Franco is just one of many braceros who

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>26</sup> Ronald L. Mize and Alicia C. S. Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 6.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Snodgrass, “Patronage and Progress: The Bracero Program from the Perspective of Mexico,” Leon Fink, editor, *Workers Across the Americas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 257.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 258.

achieved their dream of owning land in Mexico through work found in the United States; however, Franco's happy ending does not match the stories of many other braceros. Another Mexican laborer explained that in Mexico, "The money one earns is usually spent day to day. There's not an opportunity to save money, to buy a house, it is just to survive."<sup>29</sup> The money Mexican laborers could earn through their participation in the Bracero Program did not amount to much by American standards, but it did allow them to save some money for the future. During this time in the United States, the agricultural workers could be paid less than the wage of 75 cents per hour. According to a report released in 1955, braceros received wages "ranging from 50 cents an hour to 87 cents" with additional benefits, such as housing, "worth at least 15 cents an hour."<sup>30</sup> These salaries may not have seemed large to United States citizens, but they provided braceros with the hope of achieving a better life in Mexico once they completed their contracts in the United States.

Although most braceros did not consider the cultural implications of crossing the border, they certainly experienced a new culture in the United States. The young braceros generally came from traditional Mexican families with clear gender roles and strong family ties. This background creates a stark contrast to life in the barracks, which most braceros experienced upon their arrival in the United States. Life in the barracks meant that braceros had to learn to take care of household chores typically done by women in Mexico. One newspaper article from 1947 talks about the dietary struggles of the braceros. U.S. growers often supplied the braceros with meals for a deduction in their paychecks. In the

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<sup>29</sup> Ronald L. Mize and Alicia C. S. Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 6.

<sup>30</sup> "Flaws Are Noted in 'Wetback' Curb," *New York Times*, August 28, 1955, accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

article, the braceros were unhappy with the food provided, so the cook had to learn to make traditional Mexican food in order to please the braceros.<sup>31</sup> By living in the United States, the braceros were exposed to a completely different culture. This exposure led to new purchases and interests by the braceros. The Bracero Program allowed migrant laborers “to provide their families with small appliances (sewing machines, dry-cell battery radios, and small electronics) and savings (no matter how meager they might have been)”<sup>32</sup> they sent home to Mexico. These purchases show not only a cultural change but also a transformation in purchasing power of braceros.

Laborers could earn more in the United States than most agricultural jobs in Mexico. This potential raised competition among Mexican workers for a spot in the program. Men wanting to participate in the Bracero Program needed to travel to a recruitment center in certain Mexican cities to gain a position. The Mexican government only handed out a limited number of bracero contracts for each region; however, many Mexican laborers continued their fathers’ tradition of crossing the border into the United States illegally in order to find work. These illegal crossings “met or exceeded bracero permits issued” during the program’s existence.<sup>33</sup> During this time, crossing the border into the United States did not pose a strong challenge to most Mexicans. According to a newspaper article in 1954, “A Mexican bent on entering the United States without legal sanction has 1,600

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<sup>31</sup> David Hellyer, “Gracias Mexicanos: Good-Neighbor Harvest in U.S.,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 8, 1947, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Ronald L. Mize and Alicia C. S. Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

<sup>33</sup> Michael Snodgrass, “Patronage and Progress: The Bracero Program from the Perspective of Mexico,” Leon Fink, editor, *Workers Across the Americas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 256.

miles of border to choose from- from Brownsville, Texas to San Diego, California.”<sup>34</sup> As a result, many illegal migrant workers came to the United States during the Bracero Program. However, these undocumented workers were continuing a tradition established by their fathers and cannot be considered a direct result of the Bracero Program.

The braceros worked difficult jobs that many U.S. citizens would not have taken. Additionally, they did these jobs for a lower wage than most U.S. citizens received. At the same time, the Bracero Program gave these men jobs and the opportunity to provide for their families. Frequently, these low wages by U.S. standards were actually higher than equivalent opportunities in Mexico. The braceros recognized the disparity of resources between the United States and Mexico. “As one bracero commented, ‘I found that I can live better and I learned something about cultivation, but I found that I can do nothing because there they (United States) have resources and here (Mexico) one has nothing.’”<sup>35</sup> The braceros learned to depend on the work in the United States to support their way of life. This dependence caused a large number of problems when the United States government ended the Bracero Program without creating any sort of comparable alternative.

Did most braceros stay for the full time on their contract? “In 1945, the Chief of Operations at Portland reported that ten percent of all braceros contracted to the Pacific Northwest were either missing or had been granted an early repatriation.”<sup>36</sup> Those braceros who went missing disappeared either to find better jobs in the United States or

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<sup>34</sup> Gladwin Hill, “Two Every Minute Across the Border,” *Times Los Angeles*, January 31, 1954, 13.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Snodgrass, “Patronage and Progress: The Bracero Program from the Perspective of Mexico,” Leon Fink, editor, *Workers Across the Americas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 256.

<sup>36</sup> Erasmo Gamboa, *Mexican Labor and World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, 1942-1947* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 380-81.

return to Mexico to reunite with their families. This northwestern area shows a significant number of braceros unwilling to endure the conditions of their contract. Cultural differences account for the refusal of many braceros to stay in the United States. For many of the participants, their bracero contract was their first journey away from home. The home held a strong role in Mexican cultures and many braceros grew up around both their immediate and extended families. For this reason, the braceros were not prepared for life among a population full of patriotism in support of the U.S. war efforts in Europe. In other cases, many braceros benefited so much from the program that they chose to return each year with a new contract.

The migrants gained new perceptions of themselves with the Bracero Program. This new perspective included a greater confidence in their abilities. Snodgrass describes the braceros' transformation as gaining "new attitudes, which ranged from greater self-reliance to less deference toward 'the political leader or the rural patron.'"<sup>37</sup> This description matches the experiences of Deborah Cohen in her interviews with former braceros. She finds many examples of braceros who returned from the United States to transform their lives in Mexico.<sup>38</sup> Although the conditions of their contracts left much to be desired, the laborers did not go home empty-handed. These laborers left with more than the small salaries they were promised for their manual labor; they left with experiences of working in a completely different environment.

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<sup>37</sup> Michael Snodgrass, "Patronage and Progress: The Bracero Program from the Perspective of Mexico," Leon Fink, editor, *Workers Across the Americas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 256.

<sup>38</sup> Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

The Bracero Program offered significant advantages to the United States population as well. U.S. growers depended upon the labor of the braceros to harvest their crops, particularly during the war years. As the majority of braceros came from agricultural areas in Mexico, U.S. growers could rely on experienced workers who did not need any sort of new training. Additionally, a large influx of Mexican laborers prevented United States workers from forming strong and influential unions, which large growers also saw as a benefit. "California growers were especially nervous that a scarcity of workers would energize a new round of union organizing."<sup>39</sup> The many benefits they experienced led growers in the United States to continue to fight for extensions to the Bracero Program.

A wide range of growers relied upon and benefited from the Bracero Program. The U.S. farmers accepting these braceros were generally located in the Southwest. California, Arizona, and Texas received the largest numbers of braceros each year of the program's existence; however, the participation in the Bracero Program was not limited to this area. In addition to the Southwest, braceros were contracted to work in the Midwest, South, and Northwest regions, altogether working in 30 different states.<sup>40</sup> The braceros worked for a wide range of farm owners from large business farms to small-scale farmers.<sup>41</sup>

U.S. growers heavily employed Mexican workers, even those outside of the Bracero Program. This practice continued after World War II ended. In 1959, a report issued by the U.S. Department of Labor reprimands a farmer for hiring braceros despite previous

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>40</sup> Ronald L. Mize and Alicia C. S. Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 3-5.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Robinson, "Taking the Fair Deal to the Fields: Truman's Commission on Migratory Labor, Public Law 78, and the Bracero Program, 1950-1952," 383, accessed through JSTOR.

warnings to “give preference in employment to United States domestic workers.”<sup>42</sup> This report indicates that at least some U.S. growers preferred to hire braceros over domestic workers. What caused these growers to favor braceros? “The availability of work, number of hours worked per day, shifting wage schedule (piece or hourly), amount of deductions, and changing pay rate all allowed the growers to pay the wages they deemed appropriate, regardless of what had been contracted.”<sup>43</sup> Unlike the braceros, the U.S. growers did not fear that someone would punish them if they did not fulfill their side of the contract. As a result, they were more willing to neglect certain requirements than the braceros and could pay braceros rates below the amount promised in their English-written contracts. The Bracero Program permitted the U.S. growers to contract an experienced labor force, which increased efficiency and reduced costs in training; however, some growers took advantage of their power and refused to pay braceros the promised amount.

Braceros’ ability to further expand the labor force available also benefited U.S. growers. According to a newspaper article from 1954, “Every Mexican knows that hundreds of thousands of his compatriots have preceded him on the route and that once he is in the United States an employer can hire him with impunity (under present laws, it must be proved that the employer knowingly harbored an illegal alien, which is difficult).”<sup>44</sup> Although the U.S. soldiers had returned to the work force by this point, U.S. growers continued to seek foreign labor to reduce costs and increase efficiency. The leniency in the laws allowed official braceros to recruit family members to come to work illegally in the

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<sup>42</sup> “Federal Stop-Order on Indio Farmer,” News from the U.S. Department of Labor, August 3, 1959, accessed through the U.S. National Archives.

<sup>43</sup> Ronald L. Mize and Alicia C. S. Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 12.

<sup>44</sup> Gladwin Hill, “Two Every Minute Across the Border,” *Times Los Angeles*, January 31, 1954, 13.



United States for the same growers. This abuse of the program contributed to the surplus of labor compared to the number of jobs in certain southwest areas with high rates of migrant workers.

During the operation of the Bracero Program, the U.S. government tried to prevent undocumented Mexican workers from coming across the border through a program called Operation Wetback. The term wetback came from the Mexican men who tried to come into the United States by swimming across the Rio Grande. In 1954, Operation Wetback focused on the deportation of undocumented Mexican workers who came from the same parts of Mexico as many of the braceros. Illegal migration of Mexican laborers continued during the Bracero Program; however, reports by the Texas Federation of Labor announced in 1955 that the agreements with Mexico “had reduced illegal crossing of the 2,000-mile Mexican border from a rate resulting in 3,000 apprehensions a day to 300 a day.”<sup>45</sup> If this statistic was historically accurate, the Bracero Program greatly reduced the number of undocumented laborers entering the United States.

Historians have often painted the U.S. growers as the bad guys during the Bracero Program. The perceived benefits to growers alone indicate that they did not have the best interests of the braceros at heart. Even during the existence of the Bracero Program, newspapers published articles that “charged that many employers had been getting ‘kickbacks’ of wages from the Mexicans by threats to give them unsatisfactory ratings that would prevent their being recontracted.”<sup>46</sup> If a bracero protested any part of his treatment or living conditions in the United States, the growers could prevent that man from

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<sup>45</sup> “Flaws Are Noted in ‘Wetback’ Curb,” *New York Times*, August 28, 1955, accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>46</sup> “Flaws Are Noted in ‘Wetback’ Curb,” *New York Times*, August 28, 1955, accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

returning to work as a bracero in future seasons. Despite the involvement of both the Mexican and U.S. governments, the U.S. growers definitely held a lot of the power. In the later years of the Bracero Program, newspapers began to publish articles that claimed the U.S. growers were taking advantage of the program. In some instances, the accusations towards the growers proved to be correct. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* titled "U.S. Charges Falsifying of Bracero Pay Books" describes charges against one California grower by the U.S. government for lying about the hours worked by the braceros in his employ and paying them lower wages than promised; however, an official from the U.S. government reassured the public that corrupt growers were in the minority.<sup>47</sup> In later articles, the *Los Angeles Times* published concerns that the corruption might be more widespread.<sup>48</sup> Regardless of the specific number of abuses, these reports prove that some U.S. growers' execution of the Bracero Program did not always match the idea of the promised conditions in the official agreement.

U.S. growers, particularly in California, formed associations to create a united front when facing the U.S. government or the braceros. The grower associations made collective decisions from the number of braceros needed to the way a bracero should be treated. This group alliance gave the U.S. growers an unhealthy amount of power during the existence of the Bracero Program. Their ability to act without fear of punishment led many growers to distort a system originally designed to benefit everyone equally to a system that offered the greatest number of benefits to the U.S. growers.

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<sup>47</sup> Ruben Salazar, "U.S. Charges Falsifying of Bracero Pay Books," *Los Angeles Times*, December 7, 1962, accessed through U.S. National Archives.

<sup>48</sup> "Inquiry Widens on Job Records of Braceros," *Los Angeles Times*, January 25, 1963, accessed through U.S. National Archives.

In addition to the experiences of the growers and the laborers, the experience of the public must also be considered when interpreting the Bracero Program. Newspapers help to represent the feelings and experiences of the United States population. Most U.S. newspapers initially supported the Bracero Program. "Headlines such as 'Mexican Workers Urgently Needed in the U.S.' and 'Only Mexicans Can Save California Harvests' laid the foundation for what would soon be touted as an advantageous official policy."<sup>49</sup> Newspaper opinions shifted throughout the existence of the Bracero Program. The largest shift in public opinion came with the extension of the Bracero Program through Public Law 78 after the end of World War II and the return of the soldiers to the civilian workforce.<sup>50</sup> Originally, the U.S. and Mexican governments created the Bracero Program to solve the shortage of labor problems that World War II caused in the United States. During the war, much of America's workforce was fighting overseas and could not participate in their normal jobs. Many industries, but particularly the agricultural industry where crops must be harvested within a certain timeframe, suffered during the war. The braceros created an excellent solution to the problems of the U.S. growers; however, the return of U.S. soldiers changed the discussion of labor shortages. After the soldiers' return, newspapers began to see the Bracero Program as unnecessary and predict the end of the Bracero Program.

During World War II, the newspapers found many reasons to promote the Bracero Program. The socially conscious could rest assured that the Department of Labor and the Mexican government would protect the interest of the braceros. Without the participation of the braceros, perishable crops would spoil because of the labor shortage. The majority of popular newspapers in the United States claimed that United States growers were

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>50</sup> U.S. Congress, *Public Law 78*, 1951, 12 July 1951, <http://library.uwb.edu/>.

helping their southern neighbors by providing them with decent jobs and educating them in modern farmer practices. After the end of World War II, articles like David Hellyer's "Gracias Mexicanos: Good-Neighbor Harvest in U.S.," in 1947 predicted a quick end to the Bracero Program.<sup>51</sup> Although a few newspapers reported cases of abuse or exploitation of laborers in the Bracero Program, many other newspapers expressed overwhelmingly positive emotions throughout the program's entire existence. The negative cases were almost always described as singular cases, outliers from normal circumstances. Near the end of the Bracero Program, the *Lodi News-Sentinel* in California printed articles expressing concern for the welfare of the Mexican workers if the Bracero Program were to end.<sup>52</sup> Other headlines, like "Death Expected for Bracero Program but Not for Long: Farm Labor Shortage Will Revive Mexican Plan,"<sup>53</sup> promised a speedy return of an agreement with Mexico. These articles supported the Bracero Program and reinforced its necessity, along with its benefits, to the U.S. population.

In comparison, the Mexican newspapers did not fully support the Bracero Program. The Mexican public received more information about the specifics of braceros' working and living conditions. The newspapers saw the U.S. government and growers as powerful groups who did not respect the rights of everyone. Another difference between the U.S. and Mexican newspapers is the continued effort of Mexican newspapers to educate the

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<sup>51</sup> David Hellyer, "Gracias Mexicanos: Good-Neighbor Harvest in U.S.," *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 8, 1947, 1.

<sup>52</sup> Here are two examples: "The Bracero Program," *Lodi News-Sentinel* (1963), <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=2245&dat=19630614&id=V98zAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=RjIHAAAAIIBAJ&pg=2712,6483918>. and "Sad State of Braceros," *Lodi News-Sentinel* (1963), <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=2245&dat=19630621&id=Wd8zAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=RjIHAAAAIIBAJ&pg=2521,6708685>.

<sup>53</sup> "Death Expected for Bracero Program but Not for Long: Farm Labor Shortage Will Revive Mexican Plan, Lawmakers Say," *Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 1964, 2.

public about the Bracero Program.<sup>54</sup> A search of recent Mexican newspapers reveals that the Mexican population continues to discuss the Bracero Program. For example, one committee of the Mexican government published a report in 2008 about the petitions from families of braceros to receive more information about the men who participated in the Bracero Program between 1942 and 1964.<sup>55</sup>

### **The Problems**

The accounts of the Mexican laborers, the U.S. growers, and the populations of both U.S. and Mexico create a picture of a program that diverted from the original proposal. The experiences of many failed to match up to the full potential of the promised idea. Many problems arose from the lack of supervision from the United States and Mexican governments.

The Bracero Program's success relied on the U.S. government's ability to enforce the conditions specified in the braceros' contracts. Braceros had no means to take action against an exploitative grower without fear of serious repercussions. This reliance on the U.S. government meant that some potential benefits were not achieved. For example, despite the Mexican government's insistence to include Spanish, the contracts were frequently written only in English, and the braceros could not read the terms of their position. One newspaper stated, "While commending the Immigration Service and the United States Employment Service for their activities, the report declared that the Employment Service was 'grossly' understaffed for fulfilling its contract compliance

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<sup>54</sup> "Archivo General de la Nación México," <http://www.agn.gob.mx/>.

<sup>55</sup> Found in "Archivo General de la Nación México," <http://www.agn.gob.mx/>.

responsibilities in the border region.”<sup>56</sup> Many reports of the time concluded that while the U.S. government improved the situation of the braceros, it did not hold the growers to the conditions promised in the agreement. The United States government did not provide the necessary provisions to ensure that the Bracero Program was carried out as it was intended.

Many people charged the U.S. government with allowing the labor shortage to be exaggerated, either intentionally or through neglect. The Department of Labor’s system of determining the number of braceros needed relied completely upon the honesty of the U.S. growers who sent their estimates up to nine months in advance of the harvest. The number of braceros the U.S. government allowed to work each year angered domestic workers and other citizens of the United States. They feared that the large number of braceros would negatively impact the availability of work for U.S. citizens. Unions especially argued that the labor shortage did not actually exist in the United States, especially after the end of World War II. The Farm Security Administration also challenged the numbers announced by U.S. growers. Under Harry Truman in 1950, the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor in American Agriculture recommended the reduction of the use of braceros in the United States and further protection for U.S. workers.<sup>57</sup> “In a letter published Sept. 9 (of 1959), David K. Webster wrote regarding the Mexican ‘bracero’ program: ‘...to procure at taxpayers’ expense cheap foreign labor... is one of the worst

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<sup>56</sup> “Flaws Are Noted in ‘Wetback’ Curb,” *New York Times*, August 28, 1955, accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>57</sup> Robert Robinson, “Taking the Fair Deal to the Fields: Truman’s Commission on Migratory Labor, Public Law 78, and the Bracero Program, 1950-1952, 381-402, accessed through JSTOR.

disgraces of our times.”<sup>58</sup> In the opinion of union leaders at the time, the large number of braceros available to U.S. growers prevented unions from negotiating acceptable conditions for the domestic agricultural workforce. A newspaper article quotes Glenn Brockway, a regional director for the Bureau of Employment Security in the U.S. Department of Labor, who reports that the braceros working in California may be the cause of some unemployment of U.S. agricultural workers.<sup>59</sup> These sources show that the number of braceros needed was debated from 1950 until the end of the program.

Additionally, the U.S. government did not ease the transition of braceros from family life in Mexico to bracero life in the United States. Instead, they placed a focus on efficiency that belittled and in some cases humiliated braceros as they came through recruitment centers. The processing centers across the United States carried out mass examinations of the braceros that did not respect the privacy of the braceros. The Department of Labor did not have the staff available to properly monitor the conditions of the braceros once they were placed in the hands of the growers for whom they would work. Life in the barracks provided another cultural challenge the braceros had to face without the aid of the U.S. or Mexican governments’ resources.

Unfortunately, the Mexican government failed to maintain much control over the Bracero Program. The Department of Foreign Affairs in Mexico originally had special inspectors in the United States to evaluate the conditions of the braceros participating in the Bracero Program. By requiring the U.S. government to act as the official employers of the braceros, the Mexican government seemed to trust that the U.S. government would

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<sup>58</sup> Fay Bennett, “To Improve Wages of Migrants, *New York Times*, September 30, 1959, accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>59</sup> Ruben Salazar, “U.S. Charges Falsifying of Bracero Pay Books,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 7, 1962, accessed through U.S. National Archives.

protect the guest workers. By the time the U.S. government decided to end the Bracero Program, the Mexican government had no say in any decisions made. Although it eventually signed a second agreement extending the Bracero Program, the Mexican government did not hold a strong role the administration of the Bracero Program after 1947. Between the end of the first agreement and the signing of the second agreement, the program continued to run without the consent of the Mexican government. Without maintaining its control, the Mexican government could not guarantee the rights of its citizens.

Did the Bracero Program prevent U.S. workers from enjoying decent wages and good benefits? Many union leaders and their contemporaries accused the Bracero Program of this very crime. These individuals and their supporters asked Congress to end the Bracero Program in 1964. They believed the presence of the Mexican laborers negatively impacted the working conditions of domestic workers.

Union leaders argued that U.S. growers used their influence to prevent unions from earning better working conditions for the domestic laborers already in the United States. Ernesto Galarza, a union leader and historian previously discussed in the literary review, persistently expressed his doubts about the Bracero Program. Galarza worked for both the National Agricultural Workers' Union and the Joint United States-Mexico Trade Union Committee. He objected to both the treatment braceros received at the hands of U.S. growers and the effect of their presence on the strength of domestic unions. In the 1950s, the Department of Labor published sections of Galarza's "Strangers in Our Fields" with



their responses to his individual arguments.<sup>60</sup> His arguments, rejected as untrue by the Department of Labor, state that the braceros were treated as less than human while their presence caused the unemployment of domestic workers. Galarza and his supporters show a group of Americans intensely opposed to the Bracero Program. They argue that braceros prevented domestic unions from having any representation to work for improving working conditions because braceros could replace any domestic workers who chose to strike for better conditions.

Other groups in the United States also had trouble seeing the benefits of the Bracero Program. Many Mexican-Americans already living in the United States resented the influx of Mexican workers brought to the United States by the Bracero Program. Frequently, the Mexican-Americans and braceros competed for the same types of low-paying and physically strenuous jobs. As many United States citizens felt above such jobs, Mexican-Americans often resented the influx of braceros into the regions where they previously had their pick of jobs. According to a U.S. Department of Labor report, in the early 1950s in the United States, a Mexican-American family whose survival depended upon migrant farm labor “might begin their year picking vegetables in South Texas until May, then move to Arkansas to pick strawberries, to Michigan to cultivate sugar beets from June to August, and then back to Texas to pick cotton for the remainder of the year.”<sup>61</sup> These families needed many agricultural jobs in order to afford the basic necessities. The Bracero

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<sup>60</sup> “A Report on ‘Strangers in Our Fields,’” U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Employment Security, August 10, 1956, accessed through U.S. National Archives.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Robinson, “Taking the Fair Deal to the Fields: Truman’s Commission on Migratory Labor, Public Law 78, and the Bracero Program, 1950-1952, 381-402, accessed through JSTOR.

Program prevented the Mexican-Americans from forming solid unions to negotiate with the U.S. planters.

Also in the United States, many soldiers resented the Mexican population in general for being unsupportive towards the Allied war effort early in the program. The migrant workers represented a population who for the most part felt no connection to a far off war in Europe. Instead, the braceros remembered the history of the recent revolution in their own country and the violence it had caused. Recent immigrants from Mexico continued to identify more with their Mexican homeland than with the United States. As a result, many Mexicans chose not to participate in the U.S. war efforts during World War II. A subculture known as the chicano culture developed in the United States and Mexico. Chicanos wore zoot suits made of excessive material and banded together against U.S. soldiers. These suits furthered the distance between Mexicans unconcerned by the war in Europe and the U.S. citizens practicing sacrifice to donate as much as possible to the cause.<sup>62</sup> The differences in culture caused further problems for the Bracero Program.

The separation of families caused other problems for the Bracero Program. Families left behind in Mexico were forced to adapt to a new way of life as their husbands, brothers, sons, and fathers worked to build a better future in the United States.

“When interviewed, former braceros’ wives and widows are typically first to admit that a husband’s vices abroad often determined a family’s ability to benefit. Guadalupe Gonzalez’s husband, for example, took a liking to cards and left his earnings at the gambling tables that flourished in bracero labor camps. Women back home, meanwhile, fed their kids by cleaning homes, vending food, and (when possible) moving back to their parents’ house. ‘All

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<sup>62</sup> For more information about the chicano culture and war tensions see the following source: Richard Griswold del Castillo, “The Los Angeles ‘Zoot Suit Riots’ Revisited: Mexican and Latin American Perspectives,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 16.2 (Summer 2000): 367-391.

that time he was struggling up there,' Maria Rodriguez recalled, 'we were struggling down here as well.'"<sup>63</sup>

Families in Mexico lived each day hoping their sacrifices would bring a better future. The importance of family in traditional Mexican culture helped to make the Bracero Program a feasible option to improve Mexico's economy. Undoubtedly, many braceros spent the majority of their earnings in the United States; however, the importance of family in Mexico's culture led many other braceros to send the majority of their earning home to their families in Mexico thus benefiting its economy. A new guest labor program would need to consider the needs of the families of the workers in any agreement created.

Families also experienced the Bracero Program in another way. Several historians, like Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz, argue that the Bracero Program furthered a migratory culture in Mexico.<sup>64</sup> Most braceros heard about work in the United States from other family members and friends. The positive experiences of these trusted elders caused the next generation of Mexicans laborers to form a migratory lifestyle. With the end of the Bracero Program, Mexican laborers had adapted to a way of life that they no longer had the means to carry out. The invention of a new guest labor program would solve this difficulty among the families of braceros.

The Catholic Church opposed the Bracero Program because many officials believed the Bracero Program would harm family values. Additionally, Protestantism, not Catholicism, was the primary religion in the United States at the time. Officially, the Catholic Church condemned migration because it caused the separation of Mexican

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<sup>63</sup> Michael Snodgrass, "Patronage and Progress: The Bracero Program from the Persepctive of Mexico," Leon Fink, editor, *Workers Across the Americas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 257. This interview took place in May 2007.

<sup>64</sup> Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz, *Labor and Legality: An Ethnography of a Mexican Immigrant Network* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 22-40.

families. However, this view did not extend throughout all levels of the Church. For example, “at the parish level, priests offered blessings to departing migrants.”<sup>65</sup> Mexican priests traveled to the United States in order to aid the braceros, and the churches benefited from the money sent home by the absent workers. The Catholic Church helps to place the role of braceros culturally rather than solely as members of the labor force. The official and unofficial stances of the Catholic Church show concern for the braceros as people, not just how they will impact one economy or another. The concerns of the Catholic Church could be alleviated if the U.S. and Mexican government considered the effects of a program on the people as well as the economy.

Northern plantation owners in Mexico also harbored ill feelings towards the Bracero Program. They saw the Bracero Program as a threat because it offered Mexican farm laborers higher wages than those generally found in Mexico. The threat pressured Mexican plantation owners to find new ways to maintain their workforce. This same threat also possessed the potential to be a benefit for Mexican laborers; Mexican plantation owners raised wages of their workers in order to compete with U.S. farmers. Any future program would need to consider the effects of a guest labor program on the businesses in the Mexican economy.

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<sup>65</sup> Michael Snodgrass, “The Bracero Program, 1942-1964,” Mark Overmyer-Velazquez, editor, *Beyond la Frontera: The History of Mexico-U.S. Migration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

## Conclusion

The initial benefits become more apparent after comparing the intentions of the Bracero Program with the reality. At the onset of the program, both sides saw the potential for many positive gains. Mexican workers had the opportunity to come to the United States to earn a living during times of trial in their own country and learn the technology of a different nation. U.S. growers gained a larger, more experienced workforce to harvest their crops, which reduced training expenses and benefited the U.S. economy. The U.S. and Mexican governments worked to improve their relationship. Despite all the benefits, many people worked together to end the Bracero Program.

Accusations certainly came both during and after the Bracero Program, yet men continued to migrate from Mexico to the United States to work. According to a Mexican man quoted in a newspaper article from 2007, "People go to America to make their Mexican dream come true."<sup>66</sup> This quote by a Mexican farmer in the present day relates to the lives of many braceros during the 1940s and 1950s. They achieved their dream of owning their own land or simply supporting their own families through their participation in the Bracero Program. The United States with the stronger economy had the resources to benefit their neighbor to the south. The Bracero Program held potential to be a program that allowed U.S. growers to find the laborers they needed to do agricultural work that many U.S. citizens refused to do. In return, the growers offered higher wages than the braceros could expect to find in Mexico.

Immigration today presents many dangers, particularly to those people who cannot legally enter the country due to the extensive legal process or lack of resources and decide

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<sup>66</sup> Peter S. Goodman, "'People Do Really Want to Stay' in Mexico," *The Washington Post* (2007), 19.

to resort to alternative methods. Many Mexicans die each year trying to come to the United States. Whether they plan on staying permanently or temporarily, the U.S. economy could benefit from both the jobs they work and the jobs they create through supplying for their needs or businesses they begin. People in the United States have a misconception that immigrants take away from natural-born citizens. Research on the Bracero Program proves that immigrants have been contributing to the U.S. for many years. The Bracero Program shows that a guest labor program could be successful if certain problems were eliminated.

The power of the U.S. growers could be limited with increased supervision by the U.S. government and the Mexican government. Strict laws and closer observation would potentially eliminate the concerns of domestic workers and human rights groups. The Mexican and U.S. governments should allocate further resources to monitor the working conditions of the braceros and the actual need for foreign workers. Additionally, joint unions should be created between U.S. and Mexican workers. By working together, these groups can look out for their own rights, in addition to the support they could receive from their governments. Changes such as these could eliminate the major problems found in the Bracero Program and create a new guest labor agreement that more equally distributed the benefits.

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