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Documenting Oregon's Latino Heritage: The Braceros in Oregon Photograph Collection

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Between 2000 and 2010, Oregon's Latino population grew by more than 63 percent, continuing a trend of rapid growth that began more than thirty years ago (Oregon, p. 7). The history of Oregon's Latino community, however, stretches back many decades, even centuries, with the first person of Mexican origin listed in the 1850 census (Gonzales-Berry, Erlinda, and Marcel Mendoza, p. 25). Over the course of the next ninety years, the Latino population gradually increased through a combination of seasonal migrant laborers and permanent settlers. The Bracero Program, established by the federal government in the early 1940s to help alleviate the nation's wartime labor shortage, brought several thousand migrant workers from Mexico to Oregon, making it one of the most significant components of the history of Oregon's Latinos in the 20th century. Fortunately, the Bracero Program in Oregon was well documented photographically. This article will discuss this significant group of photographs and how they have been used to tell the story of Oregon's Latino heritage.

National and State History of the Bracero Program

During the early 1940s, the entry of the United States into the war caused both a decrease in the national farm labor force yet and an increased need for food production. In Oregon, more than 35,000 men from farms entered the armed forces (25 percent of the more than 140,000 total). Significant increases in employment in war industries in the Portland-Vancouver area also contributed to the farm labor shortage. In order to address the national shortage, the United States began negotiations with Mexico to establish a program to enable the legalization and control of Mexican migrant workers. In August of 1942, both governments signed the Mexican Farm Labor Program, and in April, 1943, Congress passed Public Law 45, a wartime emergency labor program which sanctioned the Mexican Labor Agreement. In the state of Oregon, the Oregon State College Extension Service implemented the national program through the development of the Emergency Farm Labor Service. This state program utilized many forms of non-traditional labor that included the Victory Farm Volunteers (youth), the Women's Land Army, and the Mexican Farm Labor Program, or more commonly known as the Bracero Program (Fighters, p. 16–17).

Although it was the Emergency Farm Labor Service's policy to first recruit as much domestic labor as possible, when the availability of the local community became insufficient, the program took advantage of the Bracero Program, and migrant workers from Mexico arrived in Oregon in the summer of 1943. Notably, other groups used as farm labor included prisoners of war, Japanese evacuees secured through the War Relocation Authority, and international migrant workers. The Mexican labor force, however, was the largest of the non-domestic groups; during the years 1943 to 1946, several thousand Mexicans came each year as migrant workers (Fighters, p. 6, and p. 10). Though the federal government extended the national Bracero Program through 1965, in Oregon the program's peak years were 1943 to 1948, with some evidence of Bracero workers brought to the state in 1952 and 1958 (Gonzales-Berry, Erlinda, and Marcel Mendoza, p. 47).

Life as a migrant worker for the Mexican men that participated in the Bracero Program was challenging, due to the camp conditions and sometimes hostile community environments. The camps were meant to be temporary, so they were designed to flexibly to accommodate various sized groups of people and to be easily dismantled for winter storage. Although each camp had accommodations such as heat, laundry, and health services, the workers were usually isolated, due to a lack of transportation to venture to neighboring





Klamath County Camp

communities, and there were little few to no organized social activities (Gamboa, p. 177–178). If the Bracero workers had been able to interact with the local community, it may or may not have been welcoming. Community support for the Mexican labor forced fluctuated, as evidenced by numerous newspaper articles which sometimes stating that hiring non-locals was unpatriotic while and at other times praising the Bracero Program for the needed labor assistance. In order to promote the program and assuage the fears of the community, the Extension Service in charge of the program created printed propaganda materials and even radio shows to champion the Bracero Program.¹ It was in part due to these efforts that we now have a printed and photographic record of Braceros in Oregon.

Collection Information

During World War II, Oregon State College Extension staff took many photographs of activities associated with the Emergency Farm Labor Service. Photos, including those of the Bracero workers, were taken in all parts of the state. Most of the Bracero- images were likely taken by Fred Shideler, an Oregon State College journalism faculty member who had a special assignment as the information assistant for OSC's farm labor program in 1944 and 1945. A few of the Bracero related photographs were taken by commercial photographers, such as Bus Howdyshell of Pendleton and Maurice Hodge of Portland. The photos accompanied news releases about the program and were used in county Extension annual reports and other Extension publications. At least 102 photographs documenting various aspects of the Bracero Program in Oregon have been identified. The majority of the images depict the farming enterprise, such as harvesting and loading various types of fruits and vegetables. The collection also includes photographs showing the arrival of migrant workers, the temporary camps in which they lived, and life in the camps, including recreational activities.





Boxes of Cucumbers

The photographs remained in the Extension Service's voluminous photo files for many years. In the late 1960s and early 1970s they were transferred to the University Archives, which had been established in 1961. The Braceros in Oregon Photograph Collectionⁱⁱ is an artificial collection; the original photographs (prints and negatives) were drawn from a number of our Extension Service's related photograph collections. They include the Extension Bulletin Illustrations Photograph Collection (20), the Extension and Experiment Station Communications Photograph Collection (120), the Extension Service Photograph Collection (62), the Agriculture Photograph Collection (40), and Harriet's Collection.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Digital Collection

Like many academic libraries, the OSU Libraries selected CONTENTdm as one of its digital collection platforms, acquiring it in 2001.^{iv} After a few months of in-house experimentation with the software, University Archivist Larry Landis proposed in spring 2002 that the Braceros photographs would be ideal as the first publicly available collection—it was a relatively small group of materials with a high scholarly profile.

The proposal was approved, and building of the online Braceros in Oregon Photograph Collection commenced in the summer of 2002. Working with the Technical Services and Library Technology units, the University Archives' first steps were creating the data dictionary (metadata template) and identifying, pulling and scanning the images. The project provided Libraries' staff with an opportunity to develop workflows, standards and procedures needed for building digital collections. A graphic design student employed by the Libraries designed the collection's portal page. After nearly five months of work on the



digital collection, the site was launched in October, 2002. It was featured by parent company at the time, DiMeMa, in December, 2002. The site was enhanced in early 2003 with an extensive bibliography of Braceros sources, which included links to catalog records and other online resources. Currently, the site allows researchers to browse the entire collection, or search by keyword or county. Default advanced search is also available.

Notably, the digital collection was used in a Winter, 2003, Ethnic Studies class at OSU. Class members were asked to complete a survey on how useful the collection was to their work. Some of the most telling comments from the students, many of whom were Oregonians of Latino heritage, revealed that they were unaware of the Braceros history in their home communities.

After the launch of the digital collection in late 2002, the collection had 700 page views in 2003. This quickly increased, peaking at more than 14,000 page views in 2006. Since that time, page views have varied between 9,000 and 11,000 per year.^v



Weighing Hops

Collection Use

In addition to the 2003 Ethnic Studies class, the Braceros photographs are regularly used by a variety of OSU classes, including History, Sociology and Foreign Languages and Literatures. In 2009, a sociology undergraduate used the Braceros collection as a springboard for her extensive research on the Braceros Program and its connection to current thinking about immigration. Her work was featured in *Terra*, OSU's research magazine (Carillo).

Since the early 1980s, the Braceros photographs have been frequently used in a wide variety of scholarly publications, lectures and exhibits. Dr. Erasmo Gamboa of the University of Washington's Department of American Ethnic Studies is credited with "discovering" this treasure trove as a scholarly resource. As a graduate student at the University of Washington,



he used several of the photos in his October, 1982, *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* article, “Mexican Labor in the Pacific Northwest, 1943–1947.” Gamboa’s 1990 monograph, *Mexican Labor and World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, 1942–1947*, based on his dissertation, also included several of OSU Braceros images. In 1995, the Oregon Council for the Humanities published *Nosotros: the Hispanic people of Oregon*. Gamboa wrote the chapter on the Bracero Program which again featured OSU’s Braceros photos.

A selection of eleven Braceros-related images was included in the OSU Archives’ 1993 traveling exhibit, “Fighters on the Farm Front: Oregon’s Emergency Farm Labor Service, 1943–1947,” funded in part by the Oregon Council for the Humanities. Between 1993 and 1995, the exhibit was shown in twelve venues in Oregon, including many of the same communities where Bracero workers had a major presence. An online version of the exhibit was developed in 1994 (hosted by the Oregon State Archives in Salem), and was—the first web-based archival exhibit in Oregon. An updated and expanded version of this exhibit was released in the summer of 2010.^{vi}

The photos were highlighted at “Undocumented,” a conference held at OSU in 1999 focusing on Oregon’s undocumented workers. Oregon Public Broadcasting made extensive use of the photographs in its 2007 *Oregon Experience* episode, “The Braceros,”^{vii} and the authors of the 2010 book, *Mexicanos in Oregon: Their Stories Their Lives*, used eight images from the collection. Presently, a few of OSU’s Braceros images are featured in the Smithsonian Institution’s traveling exhibit, “Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program 1942–1964.”^{viii} In early 2012 the Oregon Historical Society hosted “Bittersweet Harvest” and used several of OSU’s Braceros images to supplement the exhibit. Other recent projects that have used Braceros photographs include an edition of *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America*, the American Social History Project’s HERB website,^{ix} and the Bread for the World Institute’s 2012 hunger report.


Future Plans

In 2005, the OSU Libraries established the Oregon Multicultural Archives to highlight multicultural collections already held in the OSU Libraries’ Archives, to serve as a resource linking researchers to other institutions or organizations with multicultural archival collections, and to document African American, Asian American, Latino/a and Native American communities that have contributed to the identity of the state of Oregon. As part of the Oregon Multicultural Archives’ goal to engage the community and share a part of Oregon’s diverse cultural history, we are partnering with OSU’s Center for Latino/a Studies and Engagement during this, the program’s inaugural, year.^x Collaborative outreach activities include a photographic exhibit in celebration of Latino Heritage Month, mid-September to mid-October, as well as a lecture in October describing the collection.

Conclusion

The Bracero Program of the 1940s is a small part of the larger narrative of the Latino community in Oregon, yet its impact on the state’s history is significant. Although most apparent is the program’s contributions to the success of Oregon’s agricultural industry during the war, the program was also the precursor to increased immigration of Mexicans to Oregon and a shift in their role of migrant to immigrant. Even after the Bracero Program officially ended, Mexican migrant workers continued to come to Oregon, and in the decades following the Bracero program, various services and organizations emerged to facilitate migrant workers’ permanent



settlement. For example, in the 1960s, the Valley Migrant League, 1965–1974, encouraged and assisted migrant workers through the settlement process; in the 1970s the Colegio César Chávez, 1973–1983, was established as a Chicano—serving College without Walls to provide educational opportunities otherwise not afforded to migrant workers; and in the 1980s PCUN (Píneros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste—Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United), 1985–present, was established and continues to empower migrant workers regarding their rights as farmworkers. Our hope is that our continued outreach and promotion of the Braceros in Oregon Photograph Collection not only inspires students, scholars, and historians to use the collection and further research the Bracero Program, but also inspires them to further explore the continued legacy of the Latino community in Oregon. 

ⁱ Gonzales-Berry and Mendoza analyze various newspaper articles and propaganda materials exploring the racism endured by the Mexican migrant workers.

ⁱⁱ The BOPC website: <http://oregondigital.org/digcol/bracero/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Harriet’s Collection is an extensive subject based photo collection of historic images of OSU. It was assembled by and named for Harriet Moore, OSU’s first university archivist.

^{iv} CONTENTdm had been developed at the University of Washington, and today is a product offered by OCLC.

^v Oregon State University Libraries uses Google’s Urchin web statistics analysis program.

^{vi} The 2010 version of the online “Fighters on the Farm Front” exhibit: <http://archives.library.oregonstate.edu/omeka/exhibits/show/fighters>

^{vii} <http://www.opb.org/programs/oregonexperiencearchive/braceros/>

^{viii} http://www.sites.si.edu/exhibitions/exhibits/bracero_project/main.htm

^{ix} <http://herb.ashp.cuny.edu/>

^x The mission of the OSU Center for Latino/a Studies and Engagement (CL@SE) is to promote engaged research devoted to advancing knowledge and understanding of Latino contributions and the issues surrounding the population in our state, region, and beyond.

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