

## The Bracero Program



[http://amhistory.si.edu/onthemove/themes/story\\_51\\_5.html](http://amhistory.si.edu/onthemove/themes/story_51_5.html)

How did the Bracero Program affect the lives of migrant workers?

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**Annotated Bibliography**

Akers Chacón, J. , Davis, M. , & Cardona, J. (2006). *No One is Illegal : Fighting Violence and State Repression on the U.S.-Mexico Border*. Chicago, Ill.: Haymarket Books.

This source begins with the analyzes the Bracero Program by observing that the American South and Southwest remained union-free for several decades which led to the formation of a caste system and a disposable workforce. As concordant with other sources, the exploitation of migrant workers at the hand of agricultural capitalism is chronicled in two of the chapters within this volume. The first of the chapters portrays the caste system that was created with the influx of cheap labor dominated by large grower operations throughout the Southwest, and the second chapters look into how the Bracero Program led to a Mexican population existing in abject poverty in the post-war period.

Social mobility among Mexican single migrant males is examined as they were they ones who required the fewest resources i.e. schooling, housing, and healthcare. They were expendable to the growers and could be used almost whenever and wherever needed with little or not complications. It is also mentioned that under their contracts, these men could be relocated at will by a grower, but could not however decide to leave as an individual; in addition to the mass migration of Mexicanos, this fact further eliminated the possibility of labor unions forming for many decades. It was not just a grower-worker agreement either, the government did much of the enforcing and arranging of contracts. The government transformed the agricultural sector into a system where contracts were made but labor rights were forgotten and human capital was expendable; the capitalist agricultural machine was reinforced by the government resulting in huge profits for the agricultural sector and an caste system for migrant workers. This source is a valuable, primary source as it provides direct quotations for bureaucrats at the time, data tables, as well as personal accounts of the era.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (1998). *The Latino/a Condition: A Critical Reader*. New York: New York University Press.

This source begins a little further back in time, starting with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. It describes Latinos role in the mining industry and the Gold Rush in the Southwestern United States. It describes how Mexican workers were discriminated against or even lynched because the “American” immigrants flooding the Southwest were deluded with “scientific” theories of racial miscegenation, Manifest Destiny, and the after thoughts of the Mexican-American War. This literature also mentions how some agricultural operations coerced Mexican laborers to stay in the fields by withholding pay until the following season, ensuring their year round supply of labor which was needed by some crops such as sugar. With the onset of the Depression, the forced excursion of many Mexicans is chronicled, providing instances in the South where Anglos who were out of work threatened to burn Mexican laborers out of their houses, most likely to eliminate job competition.

While the Depression lingered, Mexican immigrants soon found that any welfare they had received was cut which was one of a number of reasons for the reverse migration of workers back to Mexico; they were caught between the worst of both worlds as economic conditions in Mexico were similar. Labor conditions were poor at best, many in the agricultural industry were made to work with toxic pesticides, were subject to physical abuse, and wage withholding. As Japanese immigrant workers had been sent to internment camps, the official Bracero Program allowed for Mexican workers to the agricultural jobs but also allowed may to join the Armed Services during World War II. After the program ended in December of 1947, many undocumented workers continued to flow into the United States leading to a new bracero agreement in 1949, which entailed improvements concerning labor rights over the previous agreement. The article continues on to catalog the condition of Mexicanos from the Korean War to “Operation Wetback”. This text provides a more liberal view of Mexican-American history. It also makes some claims which should be substantiated with other sources to

ensure detailed and accurate writing if used as a source. It provides interesting information however, information which I was not mentioned in several of the other sources; secondary source.

**Mexican Immigrant Labor History.** (n.d.). *PBS*. Retrieved May 4, 2014, from <http://www.pbs.org/kpbs/theborder/history/timeline/17.html>

This source begins by describing the transition in agricultural labor from employing large numbers of Asian immigrants to Central American immigrants. It describes how at first Chinese laborers not only built the railroads, but were heavily engaged in agricultural labor but were replaced by Japanese laborers after the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed. By 1880, 55,000 Mexican workers had immigrated to the U.S. to work agricultural labor and mining jobs; by 1890 as much as 60% of the railway working force was Mexican labor. After the Mexican revolution in 1910, as conditions for Mexican citizens grew worse, more and more migrated north seeking employment which led to the first Bracero Program. The first “Bracero Program” began in response to the abuse of labor rights of Mexican workers. The Mexican government finally took action, demanding that Mexican laborers were entitled to a contract from American employers which stated rate of pay, work schedule, place of employment and so on. Before leaving for the States, a worker had to secure a contract and an American employer and this contractual labor came to be the first Bracero Program.

Shortly after the law was passed which required labor to be contracted, the U.S. Border Patrol was established in 1924. Those without proper documentation were denied visas, deported, or barred from reentry. During the Second World War, under the Bracero Treaty, millions of migrant workers entered the U.S. providing labor to assist with the war effort. With the return of veterans after the war, many Mexicans were ousted from their jobs. Technological innovation such as the cotton harvester also cut the labor demand and the Emergency Farm Labor Service began to decrease the number of migrant workers allowed into the States. The program eventually ended in 1964. This source provides good numerical figures, statistics, and dates; secondary source.

**Mitchell, D. (2012).** *They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape, and the Struggle over Industrial Farming in Bracero-era California*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

This source may be used as a primary source; the author outlines the Bracero Program, its inception, the powers behind its origins, and the affects it had on Mexican migrant workers. The author pays attention to detail and gives a number of examples ranging from personal biographical information to the overarching geopolitical atmosphere that fell over the American Southwest and Mexico. The author sets his novel on the “reality” that the migrant workers faced after initially being warmly welcomed at a time when the Bracero Program was getting started; the “reality” they faced afterward would be saturated with labor rights violations, discrimination, racism, and end with the cessation of the Bracero Program and the further marginalization and disenfranchisement of a large population of Mexicanos. The author also examines the power structures Mexicanos met upon arrival such as their agribusiness employers and how their clout bought them the local police and law. He further analyzes systemic injustices brought about by the Bracero Program itself.

The author also examines the time period geographically, understanding how technologies spread and affected the jobs available, where immigration offices were located, where immigrant populations were dense, which parts of the country were used for the agriculture of what products et cetera. He builds his research off of a wealth of archival data from California bureaucratic agencies and administrators, governmental, university, and foundation databases, oral histories, and more. The narrative provided also focuses on how the Bracero Program changes the agricultural landscape of the region. Comparisons and analysis of other historians work is also included within this volume; primary source.

Mize, R. , & Swords, A. (2010). *Consuming Mexican Labor : From the Bracero Program to NAFTA*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

As the title suggests, this volume documents the history of Mexican labor in the U.S. from the perspective of Mexicanos as consumable, and even disposable, human resources. The author looks at the migrant workforce as having been readily exploitable by corporations but almost never given labor rights they were entitled to. It was a completely top down corporate power hierarchy, where the workers had no power against their employers, at least not until labor unions were formed, which took many years with mixed success and failure.

This source examines the evaluative processes employed by examiners who inspected migrant workers at authorized locations. The process was dehumanizing and humiliating for most, further reinforcing the internalization of injustice among migrant Mexicanos. Within many labor camps, conditions were said to have been akin to that of military barracks. Many were not allowed private lives and were constantly under surveillance.

He also mentions what the decision process was like for Mexicanos, the decision migrate to America in hopes of finding employment. He explores the idea that migration begets migration; many child migrants were peer-pressured into migrating themselves, enticed by paid labor and stories from peers. The author also covers what it was like to be processed through a U.S. Border Processing Center and how contracting and recontracting worked under the Bracero Program. It later discusses Bracero labor camps and provides data based on oral interviews with former Bracero workers. This source should prove suitable for setting the scene in a research narrative as it provides colorful stories and accounts from real Bracer workers of the time. This may be used as a primary source.

*Opportunity or Exploitation: The Bracero Program.* (n.d.). *National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution*. Retrieved May 3, 2014, from [http://amhistory.si.edu/onthemove/themes/story\\_51\\_5.html](http://amhistory.si.edu/onthemove/themes/story_51_5.html)

This source documents the events that transpired under the Bracero Program through a variety of images from the time providing detailed descriptions of each photo in the context of the period. It describes that how under the 22-year Bracero Program, over 4.5 million Mexican nationals were allowed to work within the U.S., some under more than one contract, and how they subsisted on the meager wages provided for the agricultural labor they performed. It mentions that the Bracero Program is what initiated the migration patterns of Mexican laborers we see today. There were however groups who felt the Bracero Program was merely a means to an end for the agricultural corporations who profited from the cheap labor; most Anglo workers would most likely be offended by the low wages if contracted to do the same labor.

The web page provides images from photographer Leonard Nadel who produced images for a picture-story exposé. The photographs provided, which were taken in 1956, accurately depict the conditions Mexican workers were subjugated to in the industrialized agriculture industry and also portray migrant culture, lifestyle, and living conditions. Many of the photos show white men commanding large numbers of Mexican immigrants through checkpoints or registration offices. One photo shows that how before migrant workers were allowed to enter the U.S., they were sprayed with DDT to ensure they would not introduce contagions into the country; the picture shows a man wearing a gas mask spraying DDT directly into the face of one of a long line of migrant workers waiting to be cleared. Another images shows an Anglo inspector checking workers' hands for callouses which showed they were accustomed to hard labor. This source is useful as the images and descriptions provided demonstrate what conditions migrant workers endure to find labor in the United States; secondary source.