

Bracero Workers and Programs

An Important Aspect of America's Agricultural History

By Refugio I. Rochin

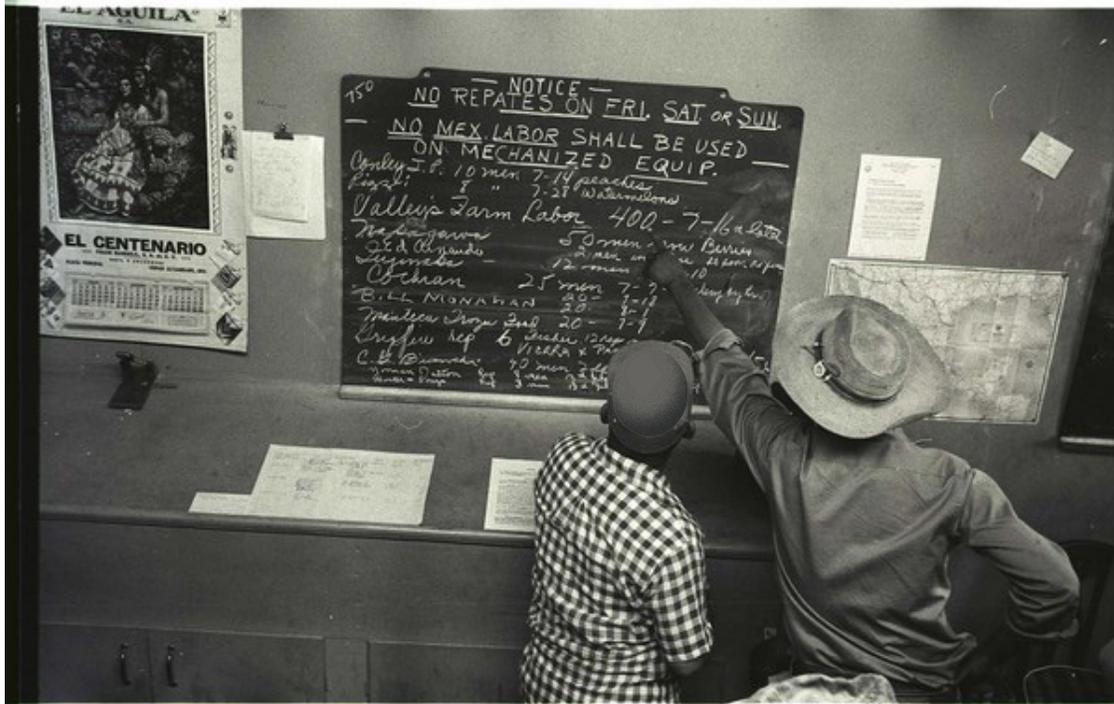


PHOTO: Two braceros have a look at a notice board in an office in Stockton, California, which shows how many braceros were needed from which growers association. The notice board reads, "No Mex labor shall be used on mechanized equip." This rule, however, was very loosely enforced and braceros often found themselves doing a variety of tasks not provided for in their contracts. L. Nadel. 1956. Accessed: Bracero History Archive, <https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/1965>.

My father Refugio Rochin was born in 1908 and immigrated to California from Mexico in 1924. My mother Juanita Rodriguez was born in 1913 in Colton California. They married in 1929. I am a proud native of San Diego, California, born in 1941.

When I was 16 years old, I worked with my father who was under contract to provide food and related provisions to bracero labor camps in San Diego County. It had been a program established between the United States and Mexico that began during WWII. Bracero workers from Mexico were a significant part of American agriculture from 1942 to the end of 1964.

Today "braceros" enrolled and employed until 1964 would be upwards of 80 years old. It is very likely that "braceros" are deceased or very old. My interest in this topic is personal. My memories and relationships with braceros have been a formative part of my life. My role was to deliver supplies of food and provisions for labor camps within the largely rural landscape of San Diego County.

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I occasionally find references to families of braceros. Some in Facebook among family posts. Most described as grandparents or first generations of family within the United States. And recently the Bonita Museum and Cultural Center developed an exhibition with attention to bracero workers, entitled: “Nuestra Frontera: 250 Years of Spanish Speaking Families at the Border,” referring to the border region of Baja California and San Diego.

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Back in the forties, fifties, and sixties, San Diego County enjoyed a population of family farms producing avocados, citrus [Valencia oranges and lemons], flowers [poinsettias], pole tomatoes, fruits, and vegetables for export and local markets. Some cattle and chicken/egg farms were labor intensive, especially the dairy and poultry farms. Growers and family farmers were producing during times of war, expanding urban areas, and for demand increasing from grocers like Piggly Wiggly, Safeway, and community MOM AND POP stores. Today that landscape is populated with shopping malls, suburban housing, tourist attractions [Legoland] and freeways. Yet, within these communities are agricultural farms and associations of growers that developed facilities for Bracero workers in San Diego county, such as housing and barracks with cafeterias. Braceros worked seasonally

to harvest and process vegetables, avocados, oranges and lemons.

My father was both a grocer and a wholesaler of produce from Mexico. He had business relationships with farmers and other grocers who bought his produce from Mexico, acquired in the growing community of Tijuana, Mexico. He was one of the first contractors in San Diego County who worked successfully for Sunkist growers, serving Mexican food with fresh tortillas, lots of beans and rice, and meat.

The camps served by my father often had workers from other camps seeking “sanctuary” at the Sunkist camps. He developed his wholesale business called C&R Provisions in Oceanside. He learned from personal experience as an immigrant farmworker himself (beginning at 15 years of age) the importance of home cooking and service.

When I joined my father, I was included with five others who worked with C&R Provisions. I was the junior who was anxious to drive with my new driver’s license. Clearly a relief for the regular deliverers.

The camps I went to were built of wood and appeared to be modeled like U.S. military barracks. There were barracks for 25 to 300 workers each. Relatively large camps were in Fallbrook, Vista, and Escondido California. The workers (all men) slept in bunkbeds, closely lined with boxes for personal items. Workers used open showers and did their laundry - much like soldiers of their day.

The kitchens and cafeterias of these camps were headed by a chief cook with crews of assistants for food preparation, cleaning, and washing food trays. Workers ate together in “mess-halls.” They used metal trays for food and regular glasses for drinks. The quality of food varied by camp, cooks, and staples provided by the companies. Camps that specialized in “Mexican food” kept their worker’s content. Camps that did not serve Mexican food experienced some protests and worker flight.

I learned and valued American agriculture, the systems of production, and the relationships over decades with family farmers so called Immigrant Workers or Braceros from Mexico. I also learned to recognize the symbiosis and relationships between my family heritage from Mexico and the populations of persons from diverse areas and communities.

“The Bracero”

The word BRACERO is a Spanish term meaning “manual laborer” or “one who works using his arms.” The term has a long history and the records of data and references are available online.

There is the perception of one program for braceros that began in 1942 and ended in 1964. However, there were three phases of programs and policies governing the interests, rights, and responsibilities between American farmers and Mexican workers.

The first phase, the World War II period, lasted from 1942-1947. It began when a tight labor market led to an agreement with Mexico to important workers to work in U.S. agriculture. It was implemented under the authority of the Immigration Act of 1917. Phase one was also called The Emergency Labor Supply Program. Under the agreement with Mexico, the U.S. Government paid for recruiting and transporting Mexican farmworkers to U.S. farms. From 1945 to 1950, an average of 65,000 foreign agricultural workers entered the U.S. annually.

About 85% were from Mexico. Most of these workers worked primarily in cotton, sugar beets, fruits, and vegetables.

The second phase of the Bracero Program lasted from 1948-1950. It was again authorized under the Immigration Act of 1917. Under phase two, U.S. agricultural employers, not the U.S. Government, were the contractors and paid the transportation and recruiting expenses of the Mexican workers.

The third phase was from 1950 to 1964 under new legislation, Public Law 78 (PL78). It greatly expanded the numbers from Mexico during the Korean War from 1950-1953, and contributed to a greater immigration without documentation. The expanded flow of workers from Mexico resulted in an agreement between the U.S. and Mexico with these provisions:

- Under the third phase, U.S. employers could hire Mexicans only if no domestic workers were available to fill the jobs, AND employment of the Mexicans would not adversely affect the wages and working conditions of U.S. workers.
- U.S. farm employers had to make reasonable efforts to recruit domestic workers at the same wages and working conditions offered to the Mexicans.
- U.S. farm employers were required to pay foreign workers prevailing wages for domestic workers in employment and guarantee work for a specialized portion of the workers’ contract period.
- For workers recruited under Public Law 78, U.S. employers paid for the transportation of workers from Mexico to U.S. reception centers and then to the centers’ places of work.

During the third phase [from 1950-1964] the foreign workers grew from about 204,000 in 1951 to 460,000 in 1956 [its peak] and ended with about 200,000 workers on average to 1964.

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During Phase 3, tighter procedures were authorized via USDA County and State offices for certifying and verifying need, wages, and working conditions. USDA reports indicated a decrease in PL78 workers, reflecting a change in demand by U.S. employers and farm mechanization [especially in cotton].

When the Bracero Program ended in 1964, the Immigration Act of 1917 was used to initiate the H-2 Temporary Foreign Worker Program. This Act became the major legislative procedure for admitting foreign workers.

Unlike the three phases described herein, the H-2 program was a permanent part of the U.S. Immigration law under the Immigration Act of 1917. The H-2 program had provisions for contracts and payments that were like The Bracero Programs [especially under Phase 3], but legal authorizations were for 18,000 foreign workers annually from 1965 to 1990, compared to a peak of 242,000 from 1945 to 1964.

Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986

Recognizing the complexity for H-2 worker authorization, a modification of immigration law was created by the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. It established the H-2A Program and required shorter periods in the certification process. Reforms from the H-2 to H-2A programs allowed farms to hire hundreds of thousands from Mexico, developed farming systems, and contract relationships for hiring and employing [without U.S. certification] Mexican workers.

The 1986 Act attempted to reduce the flow of illegal aliens into this country by imposing strict hiring requirements on U.S. employers. Employers who knowingly hired illegal aliens faced fines of \$250-\$10,000 for each unauthorized alien employed and possible imprisonment of up to six months. However, the law does provide a way for illegal aliens who have been living in the United States continuously since January 1, 1982, to become legal residents and U.S. citizens.

In addition to revising the H-2 Program into the H-2A Program, the law created the Special Agricultural Worker (SAW) Program. The SAW provision of the law exempted agricultural workers.

Legacy for Rural Communities

The Bracero Program officially ended Dec. 31, 1964. However, many braceros were hired and worked on farms without the contract that assured them fixed salaries, healthy conditions, room, and board. Many worked and paid Social Security in the U.S. And many worked until the end of their lives here in the U.S. while several supported families and homes in Mexico.

Undocumented foreign workers left their native countries to work in the United States because of more jobs and higher wages. More workers without documents worked in agriculture than in any other employment sector in this country. Lack of education, work experience, and language fluency did not hinder foreign workers as much in agriculture as in many other types of jobs.

The impact and importance of Bracero workers has thousands of stories. Millions of families from Braceros have settled into rural communities, developed businesses and operations vital to the populations of many states. Their labor was crucial to many fruit and vegetable farms producing commodities that required hand harvesting or labor-intensive cultivation.

Less well documented are the families and contributions of bracero descendants. Time capsules are rare. An exceptional article, published in a magazine of the Smithsonian Museum of American History, described an event used to open an exhibition of the photographic images of Leonard Nadel, who spent several years photographing bracero



PHOTO: Braceros have lunch in the Monterey Processing Center dining hall, Mexico. L. Nadel. 1956. Accessed: Bracero History Archive, <https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/1336>.

communities throughout the Southwestern U.S. and Mexico. The author of the article, Mireya Loza, was hopeful of finding images with her uncle. She did not. But she wrote this about others in the audience:

Some of the men's voices would crack or their eyes would well up with tears as they pointed at the photographs and said things like, "I worked like that." Because the meetings were large, I imagined the possibility that some of the braceros depicted in the images might be in the audience. I wanted someone in the audience to stand up and say, "That's me." It never happened but it came close.

*For the meeting in El Paso, several of Nadel's images were enlarged and placed around the room. The faces of the braceros in the photographs were almost life size. As families came in, they viewed the enlargements, and some even touched the images. It was there that an older gentleman pulled me aside and told me, "That is my brother, Santos, in that picture." He explained with sadness that his brother had passed away and he had no images of his brother. He asked for a copy of the photograph. My heart sank at the news his brother was no longer alive. But I was encouraged that at least I finally had a name to one of the men I had so often looked at. Santos was no longer another face in a sea of anonymous braceros. **

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Braceros

Author Recommended Resources

References on Bracero workers and US Farm Labor Programs

This website has titles and links to 6,204 full-text reports.

Excellent resource for study:

https://www.hathitrust.org/help_digital_library#SearchTips

Wikipedia for its definition and overview of the Bracero Programs

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bracero_program

Colonias and Chicano/a Entrepreneurs in Rural California by Refugio I. Rochín, Rogelio Saenz, Steve Hampton, and Bea Calo, Julian Samora Research Institute, Michigan State University, Research Report No. 16. December 1998

Putting names with the faces of braceros by Mireya Loza, a fellow at the National Museum of American History

Posted in Food History, From the Collections NMAH, October 28, 2009

<https://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/2009/10/putting-names-with-faces-of-braceros.html>

"Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program, 1942–1964"

In October 2009, the Smithsonian National Museum of American History opened this bilingual exhibition.

<https://americanhistory.si.edu/bracero/introduction>

Bracero History Archive

This is a project of the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, George Mason University, the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Brown University, and The Institute of Oral History at the University of Texas at El Paso.

Funding provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

<http://braceroarchive.org/about>