The Bracero Program

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Introduction

The devastating consequences of World War II still mark our history in the United States, yet for it being one of the most taught and paramount moments in human history, there are critical consequences left ignored. One of those consequences was the creation of the "first and largest formal guest-worker program initiated by the U.S. government at the behest of the agribusiness and railroad sectors," (Mize and Swords 1). The program in reference was "The Bracero Program," also known as the Mexican Farm Labor Program, established by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Mexico in 1942 (Library of Congress). This program permitted approximately 4.6 million Mexican men and women to legally obtain short-term agricultural jobs within the United States from 1942 through 1964 (Bracero History Archive).

The onset of WWII where over 405,399 American soldiers perished resulted in a workforce shortage which led to a reduction in industrial and agricultural production. While the basis for establishing the program was to save American crops and increase the agricultural workforce, this was a two-way fallacy. Only 7 percent of the total number of contracts were filled during WWII, thus the premise of saving American crops was overstated to access an overall cheaper workforce during and far beyond the war—WWII ended far before 1964, the year the Bracero Program was terminated (Shute and Beal). This would later contribute to the future outsourcing of jobs by U.S.-based industries in order to recruit foreign workers for cheaper wages and higher profits.

The process of receiving a work visa to become a Bracero was complicated and costly. Although the Mexican government advertised the recruitment process as "free," fees were associated with every step of the process (Mize and Swords 7). For example, Braceros had to pay for transportation to travel from their hometowns to the recruitment centers which were initially located in the Federal District (now Mexico City). Consequently, if you were a Mexican living in the border state of Chihuahua, you would have to travel 903 miles to get to the main recruitment center. Not only did potential Braceros have to pay for travel, but they also had to pay a local government official for a letter that would allow them to leave their towns. Many Mexicans decided to circumvent all these issues by paying 500 pesos to be put directly onto the recruitment list.

Once selected, Braceros would arrive at U.S. processing centers where they would be connected with a job at the cost of facing humiliation and dehumanization. Before securing a job, Braceros would endure invasive medical exams and be sprayed with DDT which was used to "disinfect" them. Braceros were treated as animals, having to undress in front of hundreds of other fellow Braceros and having every inch of their body examined in order to determine whether they were fit to work in the fields. This entire process's purpose was "to find the most experienced men who would not require training in the U.S. fields," (Mize and Swords 11). An important thing to note is that people during this time period were divided on the concept of race. The Bracero Program began 24 years before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Additionally,

American society held many more racist ideologies which in turn resulted in the acceptance of the mistreatment and discrimination of the Bracero workers.

Once on the agricultural fields, Braceros faced not only arduous work conditions but dangerous housing conditions. Braceros lived in cramped quarters which lacked running water or sanitary facilities. Some of the Braceros' housing was made out of aluminum, which under the hot Arizona and Texas sun, would make sleeping and resting in there unbearable.

Not only did they face horrible living conditions, but the Braceros also faced issues with their wages. The original agreement in the Bracero Program was that Braceros would be paid a minimum wage of $.30 cents an hour, yet the United States never honored this initial agreement. At most, workers could expect to be paid $.23 cents and that was considered a lucky wage. To give some context, $.30 cents an hour in 1942 equals just $5.22 today. On top of being underpaid, Braceros also faced deductions for boarding, transportation, and food (Mize and Swords 12). Likewise, a pension program scheme that was designed to give Bracero workers incentive to go back home once the program ended in 1964 led to U.S. banking institutions like Wells Fargo taking 10% of Mexican laborers' wages to then be sent to the Mexican state for disbursement. However, when the Braceros returned to Mexico, they were not given the funds. It was thought Wells Fargo 'absconded,' or stole this money, but in fact, it was the Mexican State who never gave it to them (Shute and Beal). Despite all this, Braceros would send 80 to 90 percent of their paycheck to Mexico, leaving them with hardly anything (Mize and Swords 12). Although Braceros faced back-breaking work and mistreatment, most of the Braceros endured the conditions with the expectation of making more money than they could back in Mexico. Not only does this show the resilience of these Braceros, but more importantly it shows how although conditions here in America were terrible for them, their living situation back in Mexico was worse due to limited opportunities to provide for their families.

Although the Bracero Program ended decades ago, it left behind a lasting legacy that is still alive today. The Bracero Program spurred and institutionalized networks and labor market relationships between the U.S. and Mexico and established many of the norms of the current immigration system. This includes the perception of Mexican workers coming to the U.S. for the possibility of better employment opportunities. "The current almost total reliance by US large-scale agriculture on Mexican nationals (legal, undocumented, and contracted) can be traced back to its origins in the Bracero Program." (Mize and Swords 3). Since the Bracero Program ended, Mexican workers have continued to come to the U.S. in search of jobs. Undeniably, ending the Bracero Program on paper didn't make a difference because it didn't alter the migration behavior that was established over the course of decades–the migration patterns simply adapted. Presently, this consistent migration behavior not only involves Mexicans but also many citizens of countries in South and Central America. Many of these new migrants come to the U.S. under the assumption that they are guaranteed to find employment since Americans are always willing to employ undocumented people.

Bibliography

Mize, Ronald L., and Alicia C. S. Swords. “[Part I Introduction].” *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA*, University of Toronto Press, 2011, pp. 1–2. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/j.ctt2ttpgc.8. Accessed 4 Oct. 2022.

Mize, Ronald L., And Alicia C. S. Swords. “The Bracero Program, 1942–1964.” Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA, University of Toronto Press, 2011, pp. 3–24. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/j.ctt2ttpgc.9. Accessed 4 Oct. 2022.

Library of Congress. “Research Guides: A Latinx Resource Guide: Civil Rights Cases and Events in the United States: 1942: Bracero Program.” Library of Congress Research Guides, 16 August 2022, https://guides.loc.gov/latinx-civil-rights/bracero-program. Accessed 5 October 2022.

Bracero History Archive. “Teaching · Bracero History Archive.” Bracero History Archive, https://braceroarchive.org/teaching. Accessed 5 October 2022.

Shute, Lindsey Lusher, and Hannah Beal. “Braceros: The Controversial History of US-Mexico Farm Worker Programs with Dr. Matthew Garcia.” National Young Farmers Coalition, 21 March 2019, https://www.youngfarmers.org/2019/03/braceros-the-controversial-history-of-us-mexico-farm-worker-programs-with-dr-matthew-garcia/. Accessed 5 October 2022.

Objectives

Students will be able to use their knowledge to independently…

- Analyze photographs and oral histories as primary sources
- Consider the role of Mexicans in World War II as an important part of the war effort
- Explore intersections of immigration and labor
- Compare the historical and contemporary ways in which people of Mexican descent have contributed to the United States.

Essential Questions

- What does the Bracero program have to do with segregation? Do you think that farm workers still live segregated lives now?
- What benefit did the Bracero program have on America? How do Mexicans and Mexican Americans continue to contribute to the US today?
- What can photos help us understand about how Latinos lived and worked in the past, and how they were treated by others?
- Was the Bracero Program a violation of human rights?

Activities

Activity 1: Bracero Program Crash Course
Activity 2: Analyzing Photographs of Braceros

Assessments

Class participation

UbD Template and Lesson Plan

- Bracero Program Lesson Plan.docx

Other Lesson Plan/Activities

- Chris and Jardinu Lesson Plan
    - Lesson plan created by two students from the UConn LLAS 2012: Latinos in Connecticut: Writing for the Community class.
- https://www.unco.edu/colorado-oral-history-migratory-labor-project/pdf/Bracero_Program_PowerPoint.pdf
    - Powerpoint created by the University of Northern Colorado with an overview history of the Bracero Program
- Extra Activities:
    - https://shec.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/1379
        - In this activity students write original corridos (a type of Mexican folk song) based on the oral histories of braceros. Before writing their own corridos, students learn about the formulas and themes of corridos and analyze a World War II-era corrido. This lesson works best if students have basic background information on the bracero program.

- https://braceroarchive.org/teaching

Complementary Sources

- Relevant scholarship
  - Mize, Ronald L., And Alicia C. S. Swords. Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA. University of Toronto Press, 2011. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/j.ctt2ttpgc. Accessed 4 Oct. 2022.
  - Snodgrass, Michael. Beyond la Frontera: the History of Mexico-U.S. Migration: The Bracero Program, 1942–1964. Edited by Mark Overmyer-Velazquez. Oxford University Press, 2011. Alexander Street, https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cdocument%7C3233544.

- Oral Histories And Photographs
  - https://braceroarchive.org/items/browse (oral histories)
    - They also have images (photographs of braceros and paystubs) as well as first-hand accounts from primarily children of braceros who are recounting what their father told them.

- Film
  - "Harvest of Loneliness: The Bracero Program." *Films On Demand*, Films Media Group, 2010, fod.infobase.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?wID=98088&xtid=43712. Accessed 6 Oct. 2022.
    - A documentary that interviews Braceros about their experiences working in the U.S.
  - Harvest of Shame (1960)
  - Malik, Sana, and Ingrid Holmquist, directors. A Farmworker Who Sees His Family Only Once a Year. 2020. An Intimate Look at a Farmworker's Divided Life, in "Guanajuato Norte", https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-documentary/an-intimate-look-at-a-farmworkers-divided-life-in-guanajuato-norte. Accessed 14 November 2022.
    - A contemporary look at what it is like to be a farm worker in Connecticut.

- Music (corridos)
  - https://shec.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/1335
  - Corrido del bracero

- Museums
  - Museum of Sonoma County
    - https://museumsc.org/bracero-program/

- Art
  - https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/braceros-86956

- Websites
    - https://braceroarchive.org/
    - https://guides.loc.gov/latinx-civil-rights/bracero-program