

Lesson Three

THE BRACERO PROGRAM

A CASE STUDY OF COOPERATION

Organizing Questions

- How did the Bracero Program affect relations between the United States and Mexico?
- What were some key articles of and reactions to the Mexican Labor Work Agreement?

Introduction

The Bracero Program was created in 1942 by a joint commission of representatives from Mexico and the United States to fill a critical need for farm labor in the United States. As the United States entered World War II, many farmworkers were enlisted to fight in the war or work in the various war-related industries. As a solution to the farm labor shortage, several hundred thousand manual laborers, known as braceros (from the Spanish word *brazo* meaning arm), were recruited from Mexico and contracted to work on farms and railroads across the country, concentrating in areas such as California, the Pacific Northwest, and southwest Texas. Although the program was nationally instituted, the federal farm labor system was tailored to accommodate regional labor needs. Hence, in many cases, the braceros were put to work building railroads rather than laboring on the farms. Furthermore, while the program ended shortly after the war in the Pacific Northwest, the laborers continued to work in the Southwest until 1964. As a result of the Bracero Program, the United States witnessed great agricultural expansion and high levels of farm production throughout the country.

The program appealed to the Mexican workers because it provided economic opportunities that could not be easily found in their home country. With the Mexican Revolution of 1910 costing a countless number of peasant lives, and lack of governmental aid for farmers trying to sustain their agricultural existence, the Mexican peasants were forced to look outside their homeland for employment. Many, in fact, did not own any land in Mexico, and with the high unemployment rate, decided to head north to seek income.

Known officially as Public Law 45, the Bracero Program lasted until 1964 in some areas of the United States, and continued to influence Mexican immigration in the following years. Although some may view the program as a cooperative measure by the two countries, it was also controversial in both Mexico and the United States, with critics citing worker abuse and displacement of jobs for U.S. citizens. In fact, the Mexican workers at times revolted in protest against the working and living conditions by initiating strikes in order to have their demands for better conditions met.

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Through the activities in this lesson, students will learn about the Bracero Program from different points of view, at both the individual level and at the country level. They will be provided the opportunity to study the voices and images of the braceros, official documents, and newspaper articles from the United States. The students will then be given a writing exercise in which they express their reactions toward some of the images and/or writings they have studied.

- Objectives
- to learn about the Bracero Program and its goal of resolving a labor shortage
 - to study how perceptions and values affect the making of decisions and other actions
 - to examine the theme of cooperation in the establishment of the Bracero Program
 - to evaluate multiple perspectives on a controversial event
 - to consider the interdependence of Mexico and the United States in the context of labor migration
 - to analyze the connections between the Bracero Program and contemporary migration issues

- Materials
- Photographs, one set per group
 - Handout #1: The Bracero Program, one copy per student

Impressions

- Impression #1: Transportation, one copy per group
- Impression #2: Meals, one copy per group
- Impression #3: Lodgings, one copy per group
- Impression #4: Wages, one copy per group
- Impression #5: Health and Medical Care, one copy per group

Writing Exercises

- Writing Exercise #1: Journal Entry, one copy
- Writing Exercise #2: Letter, one copy
- Writing Exercise #3: Article, one copy
- Writing Exercise #4: Poem or Song Lyrics, one copy
- Writing Exercise #5: Essay, one copy
- Writing Exercise #6: Dialogue, one copy
- Writing Exercise #7: Story, one copy

- Time
- Overview of the Bracero Program: 15 minutes
Analysis of Impressions: one to two class periods
Writing Activity: one class period

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Teacher Preparation

1. Make a copy of every Impression for each group of students. Also prepare one set of photographs for each group.
2. Make one copy of each Writing Exercise handout.

Procedure

1. Provide to the students a brief overview of the Bracero Program and explain the factors leading to the creation of the program. Alternatively, you may want to have students read Handout #1, The Bracero Program, for a brief overview.
2. Explain to the students that they will be studying five different Impressions that contain images, articles from the Mexican Labor Work Agreements, and personal quotes regarding the bracero experience. Also inform them that they will select an individual Writing Exercise to complete after studying the Impressions. Review the different writing choices with the class.
3. Have the students divide into groups of five to six. Distribute one set of photographs and one set of Impressions to each group.



4. Give ample time for the groups to study the Impressions. Encourage them to reflect upon the varying perspectives that are brought forth by the different voices and images.
5. Once the groups have finished studying the Impressions, have each student choose one Writing Exercise to complete on his/her own. Provide students one class period to finish their chosen writing activity, or have them complete the assignment as homework.
6. After the students have completed their writing assignments, have them reconvene into groups and share their writings among themselves.
7. Have one student from each group act as a group representative and share one or two of the writing assignments of the group with the rest of the class. Allow at least one class period for procedure steps 6 and 7.



Debriefing Questions

After completing the activity, students should come away with a good grasp of the history of the Bracero Program and how it affected the relations between the United States and Mexico. Possible follow-up questions are as follows:

- Explain the economic interdependence of the United States and Mexico in the context of the Bracero Program. How does the need

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for manual labor in a country affect relations between that country and the country supplying the labor?

- What are some of the political implications that follow such a bilateral agreement between two countries? The Bracero Program officially concluded in 1964, mostly as a result of pressure exerted by religious groups and Mexican Americans who felt that the program was harmful to the workers. As a class, discuss possible reasons why the protesters felt the Bracero Program was detrimental, and consider some of the ways the U.S. Congress could have dealt with the situation.

References

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Archival Sources

Oregon State University Archives, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon.

Cooperative Extension Service Records, Washington State University Libraries, Washington State University, Pullman, Washington.

THE BRACERO PROGRAM

Overview

The Bracero Program was created in 1942 by a joint commission of representatives from Mexico and the United States to fill a critical need for farm labor in the United States. As the United States entered World War II, many farmworkers were enlisted to fight in the war or work in the various war-related industries. As a solution to the farm labor shortage, several hundred thousand manual laborers, known as braceros (from the Spanish word *brazo* meaning arm), were recruited from Mexico and contracted to work on farms and railroads across the country, concentrating in areas such as California, the Pacific Northwest, and southwest Texas. Although the program was nationally instituted, the federal farm labor system was tailored to accommodate regional labor needs. Hence, in many cases, the braceros were put to work building railroads rather than laboring on the farms. Furthermore, while the program ended shortly after the war in the Pacific Northwest, the laborers continued to work in the Southwest until 1964. As a result of the Bracero Program, the United States witnessed great agricultural expansion and high levels of farm production throughout the country.

Economic Opportunities

The program appealed to the Mexican workers because it provided economic opportunities that could not be easily found in their home country. With the Mexican Revolution of 1910 costing a countless number of peasant lives, and lack of governmental aid for farmers trying to sustain their agricultural existence, the Mexican peasants were forced to look outside their homeland for employment. Many, in fact, did not own any land in Mexico, and with the high unemployment rate, decided to head north to seek income.

Controversy

Known officially as Public Law 45, the Bracero Program lasted until 1964 in some areas of the United States, and continued to influence Mexican immigration in the following years. Although some may view the program as a cooperative measure by the two countries, it was also controversial in both Mexico and the United States, with critics citing worker abuse and displacement of jobs for U.S. citizens. In fact, the Mexican workers at times revolted in protest against the working and living conditions by initiating strikes in order to have their demands for better conditions met.

TRANSPORTATION

ARTICLE 4, Transportation—The Employer shall provide transportation at no expense to the Worker between the Reception Center and the place of employment (including 70 pounds of personal articles but not including furniture), between places of employment, and, when necessary, between lodgings and places of employment. When transporting the Worker between the Reception Center and the place of employment and between places of employment, the Employer shall also furnish food and lodgings when necessary. While the Worker is waiting for return transportation to the Reception Center or to a new place of employment, he shall be furnished subsistence at the expense of the Employer, if he is not afforded the opportunity to work during such period.

All transportation between the Reception Center and the place of employment and between places of employment shall be by common carrier or other adequate transportation facilities, provided that such other transportation facilities, when used to transport the Worker, shall have sufficient and adequate fixed seats for the transportation of passengers, adequate protection against inclement weather and shall meet the same safety requirements that are applicable to common carriers.

The Employer shall not, however, be required to reimburse the Worker for return transportation and subsistence from the place of employment to the Reception Center, or to the port of entry, if the Worker fails to complete his contract for reasons attributable to the Worker, when so determined in accordance with the provisions of Article 21 of this Agreement, and in such event the Employer may deduct from the Worker's earnings the contracting fee paid by the Employer to the United States for contracting the Worker.

—from The Mexican Labor Work Agreement

"The Houston Police Department had to feed one man Wednesday because it put him in jail, and as a result it wound up serving supper to 75 more. The 75, all braceros who were being hauled in a big trailer truck to Vienna, Georgia, were stranded here all day after a policeman jailed the driver of the truck. The braceros, Mexican nationals in this country by international agreement to do farm work, spent the day on the police station lawn and driveways, hungry for food and smokes, and scurrying for shelter during the thunderous afternoon downpour. Nobody donated them lunch, but about 5:30 p.m. the jail authorities lined them up and served them a stew supper. Another truck, ordered here from another city, was expected to pick them up during the night."

—from *The Houston Post*, August 20, 1953

"It is not good when the men come in the freight cars. Many times there is no drinking water. There is no heat in the cars, and the trip lasts all night. There are no toilets in the freight cars. The men who have been [here] before take tin cans with them, and go to the toilet in them, and then throw them out the door. But many of the men have to go to the toilet by leaning out of the big sliding doors of the cars, and it is dangerous. There have been several times when we got trains with two or three men missing because they had fallen off on the way."

—employee of the Bureau of Migratory Labor,
5/11/58, excerpted from *The Bracero Program
in California*, by Henry P. Anderson (New York:
Arno Press, 1976), p. 110

"One time I remember, _____ had a bunch of [Mexican] nationals he wanted to bring in to the consul here in town, to renew their contracts. He didn't want to lose any more time than he could help, so he went out to the field where they were working, and loaded them onto the first thing he could find. They happened to be spreading fertilizer that day, and the manure spreader was the handiest thing around. So he loaded them all onto that manure spreader and brought them into downtown San Jose to see the consul."

—representative of the State Farm Placement Service, 12/18/56, excerpted from *The Bracero Program in California*, by Henry P. Anderson (New York: Arno Press, 1976), p. 118

(Photo: Braceros in line at the train station, "[P20: 790] Courtesy OSU Archives")

(Photo: Braceros on a truck, "[P120: 2789] Courtesy OSU Archives")

MEALS

ARTICLE 6, Meals—The Employer, when he maintains the necessary facilities, shall provide meals to the Worker on the same basis as he provides such facilities to domestic workers. When the Employer furnishes meals to the worker, they shall be furnished at cost, but in no event shall the charge to the Worker exceed \$1.75 for the three meals. Where an Employer does not furnish restaurant facilities, he shall furnish, when requested by the Worker preparing his own meals, necessary cooking utensils and facilities, including fuel ready for use for cooking purposes.

The Worker, within one week after his arrival at the place of employment, shall decide whether he wishes to obtain his meals at the restaurant of the Employer, when the Employer maintains that facility, or whether he desires to prepare his own meals; the Employer shall, when required to furnish subsistence, pay the Worker the same amount that he charges for subsistence, provided that when he furnishes cooking and eating utensils, when requested to do so by the Worker, he may pay such worker for subsistence 25 cents per day less than the amount he charges Workers utilizing his restaurant facilities.

In those cases in which the Employer does not provide restaurant facilities to the Worker and is required to pay subsistence to the Worker, the amount to be paid by the Employer for meals shall be determined by the Secretary of Labor and shall be based on the cost of a diet found by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Bureau of Human Nutrition) to be necessary for Workers performing arduous tasks.

—from The Mexican Labor Work Agreement

"The men in the camp here say they are pretty unhappy about the food. It seems that the cooks in the camp prepare a large quantity of one particular kind of food and they serve that dish every meal for three or four days straight. You can see that this saves them a lot of work, but the men don't like it much. They get quite tired of having macaroni, for example, every meal for three or four days in a row."

—bracero interview, 7/17/57, excerpted from *The Bracero Program in California*, by Henry P. Anderson (New York: Arno Press, 1976), p. 89.

"I have been in plenty of camps where just looking at the mess hall invoices were enough to make you physically sick. They would consist of things like pigs' snouts, pigs' ears, green tripe, neck bones, pigs' jowls, pigs' tails, and once in a great while for a special treat, maybe some hamburger. There was one camp which was feeding the men this kind of stuff day in and day out, where we finally took the men away from them. We gave them repeated warnings and told them to start feeding better, but they didn't do a damn thing about it."

—from a Department of Labor representative, 5/8/57, excerpted from *The Bracero Program in California*, by Henry P. Anderson (New York: Arno Press, 1976), p. 85.

(Photo: Braceros in the mess hall, reprinted from *Mexican Labor and World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest* with permission from the author, Erasmo Gamboa)

LODGINGS

ARTICLE 7, Lodgings—Except as otherwise provided in this Article, the Employer shall furnish the Worker, upon his arrival at the place of employment and throughout his entire period of employment, without cost to the Worker and subject to such standards as may be prescribed by the Secretary of Labor: (1) hygienic lodging adequate to the climatic conditions of the area of Employment; (2) beds or cots, and mattresses and blankets when necessary; (3) potable water in sufficient amounts to satisfy the needs of the Worker; (4) fuel sufficient for heating the quarters and for cooking purposes, when necessary; and (5) sanitary facilities.

If the Employer's place of employment is within approximately one hour's travel from the port of entry, the Employer may, with the consent of the Secretary of Labor, contract the Worker on a basis whereby the Worker will commute daily between the border port of entry and the place of employment, and he shall be furnished lodgings as specified herein or in lieu thereof at the expense of the Employer; and adequate daily transportation, in accordance with the standards prescribed in Article 4 of this Agreement, between the specified border port of entry and the place of employment.

If the Employer furnishes lodgings and the Worker nonetheless prefers to commute daily between the border port of entry and the place of employment, such transportation shall be at the expense of the Worker.

—from The Mexican Labor Work Agreement

"We found them living in chicken coops and all kinds of fantastic setups. . . . In my end of the county there were 110 camps. All but two or three required repairs. What we do is give them a warning and they usually promise to take care of whatever we suggest. However, ten of the 110 camps were beyond hope. They were so bad that no amount of repairs could bring them up to snuff."

—from a compliance officer of the Department of Labor, 5/8/57, excerpted from *The Bracero Program in California*, by Henry P. Anderson (New York: Arno Press, 1976), p. 71.

(Photo: Bracero camps, "Washington State University Libraries, Cooperative Extension Service Records, No. 82-079, Washington State University")

(Photo: Interior of the camps, "(P120: 2744) Courtesy OSU Archives")

WAGES

ARTICLE 8, Wages—The Employer shall pay to the Worker no less than the wage rates determined by the Secretary of Labor to be the prevailing wage rates paid to domestic workers in the area of employment for similar work at the time the work is performed. The payment of wages to the Worker shall be in the same manner as payment is made to domestic workers in the area of employment.

The pay period for the Worker shall be established at intervals no less frequent than those established for the Employer's domestic workers; provided that in no event shall the Worker be paid less frequently than biweekly. The Employer may defer the payment of not to exceed one week's earnings of the Worker, the earnings to be deferred being those accrued in the week immediately preceding the current pay period, until the final payment of wages is made to him, at which time payment shall be made of all sums due to the Worker.

—from The Mexican Labor Work Agreement

"I waited for two months in Mexico City before I was put on the Yucatan State List and permitted to go to Empalme. When I got to Empalme I waited another 15 days before they sent me to El Centro. My friends and I got our contracts on May 19. The contract states that we are supposed to get 20 cents a sack for harvesting onions. . . . When we got to the field we asked how much we were going to get, to make sure. They wouldn't tell us. After we started working we found out that we only got 15 cents a sack. They were big sacks. Working hard all day, the most I could pick was 29 sacks. This took me 11 hours. I wasn't making enough to pay for my board and insurance. All I got clear on my check was 41 cents. I am married and have two children, and I sure can't support them with 41 cents. I make more in Mexico.

. . . . We were told that since we came so far, from the south of Mexico, that we would be able to choose an employer from northern California. We were ushered into the selection barracks, where we were offered contracts to the Imperial Valley. We refused them. Then the boy who runs the selection barracks marked something on the back of our passports, that we had refused. Later, when employers from northern California would come in to select men, they would look on the back of our passports and turn us down. They kept this up for five days.

Finally, we were told that if we didn't accept employment we would be shipped back to Mexico. We were forced to accept contracts here in the Imperial Valley. We worked three days, and now we are quitting.

There are seven of us that left our jobs and are going back to Mexico. Out of these seven, I was the one who earned the most—41 cents, net. Another man made 26 cents, another one made 24 cents, and another one made 20 cents. We don't have enough money to get home."

—bracero interview, 5/22/58, excerpted from *The Bracero Program in California* by Henry P. Anderson (New York: Arno Press, 1976), p. 132

"None of the men in my camp went to work today. It is just no use working. We make no money, whether we work or don't work. . . . When we weigh in the cotton, instead of only deducting four pounds for the sack, they deduct ten pounds."

—bracero interview, 9/26/58, excerpted from *The Bracero Program in California* by Henry Anderson (New York: Arno Press, 1976), p. 146

HEALTH AND MEDICAL CARE

ARTICLE 10, Insurance—The Employer shall provide for the Worker, at the expense of the Employer, the same guarantees with respect to medical care and compensation for Personal Injury and Disease as defined in this Agreement, as may be provided in like cases for domestic agricultural workers under the applicable State law for the State in which such Worker is employed at the time such Personal Injury is sustained or such Disease.

In the absence of applicable State law, the Employer shall obtain an insurance policy to cover the payment of benefits, including medical, surgical, and other necessary care and treatment provided for in this Article. If the Employer can establish sufficient financial responsibility for the payment of such benefits to the satisfaction of the Secretary of Labor, he may assume such obligations himself as self insurer.

—from The Mexican Labor Work Agreement

"I got sick, too. I think it was the food that made me sick. I went to the doctor. He said I was lying—that I was not really sick. The receptionist was very mean, also. The doctor got very angry, and refused to give me any treatment. I said that I was going to talk to the Mexican Consul. The doctor and the receptionist said that I should not see him. Finally, the doctor gave me a shot, but he still said there was nothing wrong with me.

I told the Consul about the camp, and he went out and inspected the camp. After he was there, several things were better. The trucks were not so crowded; the dishes were washed better; the food was a little better.

About 20 days after I got to Blythe, my legs, hands, arms, and face got swollen. They felt as though pins were sticking in them. But I was afraid to go back to the doctor. He was mean and rough to all the men. Many of the men were afraid of him, and would not go to him for this reason.

When I worked, my whole body would get swollen and sore. I did not even work three days out of a week. I only made enough to pay my board. Some weeks I did not even make that much. I finally decided to go back home.

Now my legs hurt. I would like to get medical treatment, but they tell me I cannot get it here. I do not want to be sent back like this. I will be useless in Mexico now. I will not be able to help my parents on the farm. I have not told my parents that I am sick because I am so ashamed. How can I return home when I have no money at all, and I am sick besides? Don't I have any rights?

I went to the representative of the U.S. government and he was very cruel to me. Now I want to see the Mexican Consul. I will see if I have any rights."

—bracero interview, 5/13/58, excerpted from
The Bracero Program in California, by Henry P. Anderson
(New York: Arno Press, 1976), p. 226

impression #5

"I am leaving my contract before it is over. We worked only one day a week. The food stank. I have pains in my chest and back from the cold, wet weather. I went to the doctor, but he didn't even examine me. He only gave me pills. We pay for the insurance, but what is the use of having it? It is no good. We will not be cured. We get pills for broken legs the same as we would get them for headaches. The same pills we can buy anywhere for five cents. I am going back to Mexico to get cured."

—bracero interview, 6/17/58, excerpted from
The Bracero Program in California, by Henry P. Anderson
(New York: Arno Press, 1976), p. 248

(Photo: Health inspection of braceros, reprinted from *Mexican Labor and World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest* with permission from the author, Erasmo Gamboa)

(Photo: Bracero with a nurse, "(P120: 2806). Courtesy OSU Archives")

writing exercise #1

JOURNAL ENTRY

Choose one of the Impressions. Take time to read and think about the Impression you select. Once you are ready, write a journal entry describing your reaction to the Impression. Think about some of the following questions in writing your journal entry:

- What thoughts and feelings came to you as you examined the Impression?
- What issues did this Impression raise for you?
- Immigration to the United States from Mexico is still going on in many different forms. Think about some of the connections between the Bracero Program and current immigration issues.

writing exercise #2

LETTER

Choose one of the Impressions. Take time to read and think about the Impression you select. Once you are ready, write a letter describing your reaction to the Impression. The letter can be to a friend, to a Senator, or to the editor of a newspaper. Think about some of the following questions while writing your letter:

- What thoughts and feelings came to you as you examined the Impression?
- What issues did this Impression raise for you?
- Immigration to the United States from Mexico is still going on in many different forms. Think about some of the connections between the Bracero Program and current immigration issues.

ARTICLE

Choose one of the Impressions. Take time to read and think about the Impression you select. Once you are ready, write an article describing your reaction to the Impression. The article can be for a newspaper or a magazine. Think about some of the following questions while writing your article:

- What thoughts and feelings came to you as you examined the Impression?
- What issues did this Impression raise for you?
- Immigration to the United States from Mexico is still going on in many different forms. Think about some of the connections between the Bracero Program and current immigration issues.

writing exercise #4

POEM OR SONG LYRICS

Choose one of the Impressions. Take time to read and think about the Impression you select. Once you are ready, write a poem or song lyrics describing your reaction to the Impression. Think about some of the following questions while writing your poem/song lyrics:

- What thoughts and feelings came to you as you examined the Impression?
- What issues did this Impression raise for you?
- Immigration to the United States from Mexico is still going on in many different forms. Think about some of the connections between the Bracero Program and current immigration issues.

ESSAY

Choose one of the Impressions. Take time to read and think about the Impression you select. Once you are ready, write an essay describing your reaction to the Impression. Think about the following questions while writing your essay:

- What thoughts and feelings came to you as you examined the Impression?
- What issues did this Impression raise for you?
- Immigration to the United States from Mexico is still going on in many different forms. Think about some of the connections between the Bracero Program and current immigration issues.

DIALOGUE

Choose one of the Impressions. Take time to read and think about the Impression you select. Once you are ready, write a dialogue between two people that incorporates some of your reactions to the Impression. Think about some of the following questions while writing your dialogue:

- What thoughts and feelings came to you as you examined the Impression? Were they one-sided, or ambivalent? Will the two people in the dialogue be in agreement, or presenting two different points of view?
- What issues did this Impression raise for you? How would the people in your dialogue talk about these issues?
- Immigration to the United States from Mexico is still going on in many different forms. Think about some of the connections between the Bracero Program and current immigration issues.

writing exercise #7

STORY

Choose one of the Impressions. Take time to read and think about the Impression you select. Once you are ready, write a story describing your reactions to the Impression. Think about the following questions while writing your story:

- What thoughts and feelings came to you as you examined the Impression? What are the characters in the story like, and what are they feeling?
- What issues did this Impression raise for you?
- Immigration to the United States from Mexico is still going on in many different forms. Think about some of the connections between the Bracero Program and current immigration issues.