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## From Working Arm to Wetback: The Mexican Worker and American National Identity, 1942-1964

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**FROM WORKING ARM TO WETBACK:  
THE MEXICAN WORKER AND AMERICAN NATIONAL  
IDENTITY, 1942-1964**

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master of Arts in Humanities

by

Mark Brinkman  
San Rafael, California  
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THESIS:

FROM WORKING ARM TO WETBACK:  
THE MEXICAN WORKER AND  
AMERICAN NATIONAL IDENTITY,  
1942-1964

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## Abstract

This thesis explores America's treatment of the Mexican worker in the United States between 1942 and 1964, the years in which an international guest worker agreement between the United States and Mexico informally known as the Bracero Program was in place, and one in which heightened fears of illegal immigration resulted in Operation Wetback, one of the largest deportation programs in U.S. history. The Mexican worker's experience during the bracero era brings to light core traits of American national identity, such as xenophobia and ethnocentrism, that today obstruct the United States' ability to resolve its currently conflicted relationship with the Mexican worker.

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## Introduction

The twenty-first century American West has become highly dependent on its large Hispanic population to supply the low-wage menial labor needed to support a relatively high standard of living. In California, for example, eleven million people of Hispanic or Latino origin represent almost a third of the state's thirty-four million residents, yet they earn on average well below the median income and represent fully half of the 846 thousand residents living below the poverty level.<sup>1</sup> Most are Americans of Mexican descent or have emigrated from Mexico—many illegally. An estimated seven million “unauthorized immigrants” from Mexico resided in the United States as of January 2007, over four times more than the total number of illegal immigrants from all Central and South American countries combined.<sup>2</sup> They seem to be everywhere. They wash dishes in our favorite restaurants, keep our public restrooms clean, wash our cars, change our babies' diapers, blow the leaves off of our sidewalks, and work in our fields and orchards—jobs that are vital for our material comfort, and some that are critical to our economy. Yet, as California's Proposition 187 dramatically displayed in 1994, we are angry at them for entering our country illegally and draining our already thinly-stretched social service resources such as health care and schools without carrying their

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1. U.S. Census Bureau, “Fact Sheet for a Race, Ethnic, or Ancestry Group,” under “Hispanic or Latino (of any race), California,” U.S. Census Bureau, [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/SAFFactsCharIteration?\\_event=&geo\\_id=04000US06&\\_geoContext=01000US%7C04000US06&\\_street=&\\_county=&\\_cityTown=&\\_state=04000US06&\\_zip=&\\_lang=en&\\_sse=on&ActiveGeoDiv=&\\_useEV=&pctxt=fph&pgsI=040&\\_submenuId=factsheet\\_2&ds\\_name=DEC\\_2000\\_SAFF&\\_ci\\_nbr=400&qr\\_name=DEC\\_2000\\_SAFF\\_R1040&reg=DEC\\_2000\\_SAFF\\_R1040%3A400&\\_keyword=&\\_industry=](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/SAFFactsCharIteration?_event=&geo_id=04000US06&_geoContext=01000US%7C04000US06&_street=&_county=&_cityTown=&_state=04000US06&_zip=&_lang=en&_sse=on&ActiveGeoDiv=&_useEV=&pctxt=fph&pgsI=040&_submenuId=factsheet_2&ds_name=DEC_2000_SAFF&_ci_nbr=400&qr_name=DEC_2000_SAFF_R1040&reg=DEC_2000_SAFF_R1040%3A400&_keyword=&_industry=) (accessed November 5, 2008).

2. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, *Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2007*, by Michael Hoefler, Nancy Rytina, and Bryan C. Baker. September, 2008.



fair share of the tax burden. In a desperate attempt to keep them out, we build higher and longer walls between the two nations. Signing the Secure Fence Act of 2006, President George W. Bush authorized hundreds of miles of additional fences between the two nations, proudly announcing that “this bill will help protect the American people.”<sup>3</sup> But even though the United States under the Bush administration was able to build better fences to keep out unwanted Mexicans and others attempting to enter the U.S. illegally, it failed to implement an international guest worker program that would provide a labor pool of Mexican nationals—a seemingly viable solution to a paradoxical need for someone to take jobs Americans do not want without demanding access to America’s social services.

Immigration and guest worker programs are not new issues on the American agenda; parallels can be found as recently as the mid-twentieth century. The United States experimented with a guest worker program between 1942 and 1964 through a series of evolving international agreements with Mexico that became informally known as the Bracero Program. (The term *bracero* is derived from *brazo*, the Spanish word for *arm*, and loosely translates to *working arm*.) The program began as an emergency measure during World War II to fill a gap caused by the loss of domestic workers during the booming wartime economy, was formalized at the war’s end, and then finally terminated in 1964. It has not been revived. These years also saw heightened concern over illegal immigration. A full decade of deportations peaked in 1954 with Operation Wetback, one of the largest such sweeps in U.S. history. Yet illegal immigration continued. Why are we, as a nation, still unable to resolve the issues of guest worker

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3. White House, “President Bush Signs Secure Fence Act,” The White House, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/10/20061026.html> (accessed November 18, 2008).

programs and illegal immigration over half a century later? How can we be equally angry at and threatened by a population that we have become so willingly dependent on for our comfort and economic success? Historian Manuel García y Griego suggests that an answer lies in the understanding of past experience. “The historical experience derived from the bracero era,” he contends, “is indispensable for an understanding of the current debate.”<sup>4</sup> Following García y Griego’s lead, this study will examine the experience of braceros and other Mexican workers in the United States during the bracero era, 1942 through 1964. Through that experience, it will seek to illuminate core traits of American national identity that have problematized our relationship with Mexican migrant workers both past and present. By uncovering these characteristics, we can better understand our own national self and take a necessary step toward both the resolution of our internal conflicts and improvement of our relationship with Mexican migrant workers upon whom we so clearly rely.

A time-bound study such as this always carries the risk of suggesting that history is not continuous, that something new came out of nowhere, and then left just as suddenly. That is certainly not my intent. The United States’ relationship with the Mexican worker has been evolving since well before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo drew a line between the two nations in 1848. The bracero era was immediately preceded by a concentrated effort during the 1930s to repatriate Mexicans (freeing jobs for out-of-work Anglo-American citizens) and was followed in the mid-1960s by the now iconic figure of César Chávez, whose United Farm Workers’ strikes indelibly put a face on the

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4. Manuel García y Griego, "The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers to the United States, 1942-1964: Antecedents, Operation, and Legacy," in *The Border That Joins: Mexican Migrants and U.S. Responsibility*, ed. Peter G. Brown and Henry Shue (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1983), 79.

Mexican agricultural laborer and brought his plight to America's attention. The bracero era should be seen as part of this continuous evolution.

It is also not the purpose here simply to provide a history of either the Bracero Program or Operation Wetback. Both have been fully documented elsewhere and receive at least summary treatment in almost any history of twentieth-century American immigration and labor. The most notable book-length studies are *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story* by Ernesto Galarza, himself a one-time Mexican worker in American fields, and Richard B. Craig's *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy*, which covers the many different governmental and special interest players in the international chess game that defined and redefined the program throughout the years. Operation Wetback has been well-documented by Juan Ramon García in *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954*. Although these works tell a compelling story of the Mexican agricultural worker in the United States during the bracero era, their focus has not been to uncover core traits of American national identity that have contributed to our inability to resolve this complicated relationship, as this thesis seeks to do.

The first chapter will review the bracero experience in the United States from recruitment to repatriation and will show that the men faced racial hostility and experienced a cultural dislocation directly caused by the ethnocentric attitudes of the government employees and growers who processed and employed them. The bracero experience also brings to light the trait of material self-interest among growers, a valuation of revenue over the workers' well-being found consistently in the grower-worker relationship throughout this study. Following this will be an examination of

Mexican national and Mexican-American agricultural workers in Texas during World War II, where bracero labor was banned because of the state's discriminatory practices. This chapter will argue that Texas' well intended attempt to improve the workers' substandard existence was hampered by racial prejudice and grower self-interest. The third chapter will look at America's reaction to illegal immigration and will contend that the pendulum swing between legalization and deportation, although primarily a governmental negotiating tactic, was underpinned by a conflict between widespread xenophobia and the growers' ever present desire for cheap labor. The final chapter will conclude by locating these identity traits in America's current debate over the Mexican worker and will argue that a final solution to the conflict will require a transformation of America's own national identity.<sup>5</sup>

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5. A note about terminology is in order here. "America" and "American" are terms that can encompass either, or both, the North American and South American continents. To avoid constant clarification throughout this paper, I will use these terms to refer exclusively to the United States of America and its citizens, unless otherwise specified.

## Chapter 1

### Of Braceros, Governments, and Growers: A Murky Human Picture

“We came to the United States full of hopes, full of dreams,” recalls Rutilio González-Sánchez. “We were poor people who lived from the soil. We had to leave our homes and look for opportunities; it was the best thing for us and for our families.”<sup>1</sup> Like many other Mexican nationals who came north to participate in the Bracero Program, González-Sánchez hoped to escape the extreme poverty that surrounded him by capturing a piece of the American Dream and bringing it back home to his family. After all, the lure of the American Dream did not cease at the border, and a world of financial opportunity seemed available to him, as it did to the approximately two million men who participated in the program between 1942 and 1964. They found work across the nation, but were principally contracted in California during World War II, which held about thirty-one thousand bracero contracts in 1945—sixty-three percent of the total contracts issued that year—and following the war, mostly in Texas, New Mexico, and Arkansas, where over eighty-four thousand, or seventy-nine percent, of the bracero contracts were issued in 1949.<sup>2</sup> The percentage of braceros to the overall temporary agricultural workforce fluctuated greatly by year and by crop, but could be as much as seventy-five

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1. Quoted in José-Rodolfo Jacobo, *Los Braceros: Memories of Bracero Workers 1942-1964* (San Diego: Southern Border Press, 2004), 77.

2. Deborah Cohen, "From Peasant to Worker: Migration, Masculinity, and the Making of Mexican Workers in the US," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 69 (2006): 81, <http://proquest.umi.com.ezproxy.dominican.edu/pqdweb?index=6&did=1400184521&SrchMode=3&sid=1&Fmt=6&VInst=P&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1207607187&clientId=32272&aid=1> (accessed April 7, 2008); Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 157; U.S. President's Commission on Migratory Labor, *Migratory Labor in American Agriculture: Report of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1951), 55.

percent of the temporary workforce.<sup>3</sup> The braceros were exclusively male and mostly between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. Although the United States had wished to bring whole families north, Mexico mandated single men only out of a concern that families would not return, thereby draining the economy, but that single men *would* return with enough wealth and experience to start their own farms and bolster the Mexican economy.<sup>4</sup> A few men worked on railroad projects during the war, but an overwhelming majority worked in agriculture. Following the war, one-hundred percent of the braceros worked in the fields and orchards performing stoop labor—an appropriate designation for the back-breaking work most of them were required to do.

They were prepared to work hard to earn their dream. But they were not prepared to find themselves enmeshed in a cumbersome bureaucratic process overseen by U.S. government employees who treated them at best indifferently and, at worst, with hostility. Nor were they prepared to work in the fields and orchards for employers who saw them less as human beings than as an expedient means to a more profitable financial end. The story of the braceros in the United States is, unfortunately, one of immersion into an alien world that carried a powerful ethnocentric and racial bias against them. It was also one of material self interest that valued revenue over their well-being. The braceros experienced, not the American Dream, but a cultural dislocation caused by “a

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3. Ernesto Galarza, *Strangers in Our Fields* (Washington, DC: U.S. Section, Joint United States-Mexico Trade Union Committee, 1956), 8.

4. Cohen, “From Peasant to Worker,” 82-83; Richard B. Craig, *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 133.

rapid transition to a society which, at nearly every point, negat[ed] the values of their folk culture.”<sup>5</sup> It also, at its worst extremes, denied them their own humanity.

On paper, the agreement between the two governments seemed relatively straightforward. It stipulated that all of the braceros’ transportation and living expenses within the United States were to be paid for by their employers. Decent housing, sanitary services, and medical care were also to be supplied at no cost. Wages were to be commensurate with the prevailing wages of other agricultural workers (in order to discourage growers from replacing domestic workers with cheaper-priced braceros). A percentage of each bracero’s wages would be deposited in a special savings fund and paid out to him on repatriation to fund a new beginning for him in his homeland, ideally (in the eyes of Mexico’s government) a farm of his own.

The processes to support this agreement appeared equally clear. Anyone wishing to become a bracero would first obtain a permit (*certificado de aspirante a bracero*), free of cost from his local government, certifying that he was a citizen of good standing. Permit in hand, the aspirant would find his way to one of several migratory stations within Mexico’s border where his eligibility would be confirmed by a review of his permit by Mexican officials and an initial medical screening. Once selected, he would be transported to a recruiting station within the United States, where his immigration eligibility would again be verified, this time by U.S. officials, and he would receive another medical screening. If accepted, he could finally call himself a bracero; he would be transported to his work site, advised of the terms of his contract and the work required, and provided with living accommodations. While employed, he would be fed, housed,

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5. Carey McWilliams, *North From Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1949), 213.

and transported to and from the fields by his employer. At the termination of his contract, he would be transported back to the recruiting center where his adventure in the United States began. In short, the program appeared to be both fair and free for the bracero. In reality, however, it did not play out quite as fair or free as intended. The clarity of the program's design quickly became obscured by the complexities of managing a large-scale migration compounded by the unpredictable, and often uncontrollable, human factor. As Ernesto Galarza, one of the program's most vocal critics, points out, "the human picture within [the program's] frame of laws, agreements, and contracts was, on the whole, a murky one."<sup>6</sup>

The murkiness began before the would-be bracero even reached the border. Although perhaps not unexpected, the first obstacle he likely faced was the *mordida*, the bribe, a questionable but accepted practice thoroughly imbedded in Mexican politics of the time. In 1955, an estimated seventy-five percent of the men who obtained "free" permits from their local officials dipped immediately into their meager personal funds in hopes that the *mordida* would expedite the process. Many more, unaware of the process or denied a permit, arrived at migratory stations only to find that they needed to purchase their way into the program. All found additional palms to grease as they navigated their way through the recruitment process. Diminishing finances caused by the *mordida* could be a serious problem for the bracero hopeful, who had to support himself until selected for the program.

It did not help matters that the recruitment process moved at bureaucratic speed. The men waited on average three weeks at a migratory station before being processed,

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6. Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story: An Account of the Managed Migration of Mexican Farm Workers in California 1942-1960* (Charlotte: McNally & Loftin, 1964), 86.





Figure 1. Bracero hopefuls outside a soccer stadium in Mexico City, circa 1943 <sup>7</sup>

but many spent as much as three months or more. This often lengthy waiting period took its toll on their health. As their money disappeared, many found themselves in desperate straits, sleeping where they could find a piece of ground, begging for their food, and eliminating without the luxury of a toilet. Some died of starvation and exposure. Those who survived, unless they were extremely lucky, were often in much worse physical shape than when they first stepped out of their front doors hoping to become braceros.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately for many, the physical strain itself extinguished that hope. One bracero hopeful explained:

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7. University of California, Agricultural Personnel Management Program, Division of Agricultural and Natural Resources, "Photo Gallery," *Labor Management Decisions* 3, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 1993), [http://are.berkeley.edu/APMP/pubs/lmd/html/winterspring\\_93/gallery.html](http://are.berkeley.edu/APMP/pubs/lmd/html/winterspring_93/gallery.html) (accessed December 11, 2008).

8. Henry P. Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California* (Berkeley: School of Public Health, University of California, 1961. Reprint, NY: Arno Press, 1976), 7-11; Gilbert G. Gonzalez, *Guest Workers or Colonized Labor? Mexican Labor Migration to the United States* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006), 78.

I waited at Empalme over a month. I, and many of the other men became weak from not eating while we waited. I had to sleep on the ground. Because of sleeping on the ground, I became sick. I have just been rejected for this sickness . . . . This does not seem fair to me.<sup>9</sup>

There was something terribly out of balance with the process here, and it was damaging the health of the would-be braceros. The number of permits issued by the Mexican government was based on a projected number of men available for the program, yet the actual selection of men was based on daily labor needs established by the U.S. Department of Labor—as dictated by the growers.<sup>10</sup> There were obviously many more men than there were jobs—the law of supply and demand was in vigorous action. It was to the growers' happy advantage to have a large pool of candidates from which to select, and it is sadly ironic that Mexico's method of making supply exceed demand appeared to be of no concern to them, even though the process clearly caused visible damage to the braceros' health—men who they were about to put to hard physical work in their fields and orchards.

The bracero hopefuls who survived the screening in Mexico were still not through the recruitment gauntlet. Crossing the border into the United States, they entered what must have seemed to them a different world entirely—one that not only had no knowledge of their culture, but sometimes even failed to see them as human; they were processed as indifferently as the fruit and vegetables they might soon be harvesting. Placed in the hands of U.S. Public Health Service officials, they underwent a medical screening that was concerned less with their personal well-being than with protecting U.S. citizens out of fear that they might carry infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis or

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9. Quoted in Gonzalez, *Guest Workers*, 72-73.

10. Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 6; Galarza, *Merchants*, 81-82.

venereal disease. There they were stripped naked and herded cow-like through the screening process. Their nakedness alone was difficult for many men, who were not used to being unclothed in public. After all he had been through to get where he was, one man explained that “the thing I have disliked the most about the bracero program so far is having to strip for the medical examinations.” One public health doctor noted that “it is extremely offensive to the Mexican sense of modesty to disrobe in front of another. . . . [T]hey are almost prudish in this respect. [It is] a situation that is completely alien to many of those men.”<sup>11</sup>

The medical screenings were also alien to the men; for many, this was their first exposure to modern medical practices. The blood tests, performed without explanation, alarmed many of them. “What are they trying to do, kill me?” cried one man. “I need all the blood I have!”<sup>12</sup> But what surfaces frequently in bracero remembrances of the process was a delousing spraying they received, again without explanation, with lindane, a powerful and slowly-degrading agricultural insecticide. One man recalled that “they . . . sprayed us with some powder as if we were some kind of *lacra* [pestilence]. The powder gave us horrible headaches. . . . [It] was like the one used to disinfect or kill some sort of plague. . . . We were offended because we felt that they saw us as inferior.” Another thought that the spray was DDT, as if “we were plants or as if they were spraying a herd of cattle.”<sup>13</sup>

Indifference and a lack of concern for their confusion and fear colored the U.S. employees’ treatment of the braceros. But passive disregard sometimes turned into

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11. Quoted in Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 45.

12. *Ibid.*, 45.

13. Quoted in Jacobo, *Los Braceros*, 96, 108.



Figure 2. The delousing spray <sup>14</sup>

aggressive hostility aimed specifically at the braceros' racial and cultural heritage. One former employee commented that

everybody curses the braceros and shoves them around. . . . [M]any times the braceros are called . . . *baboso*, which . . . means something like stupid, but it is a particularly bad insult in Mexico [, or] *hijo de la chingada*, which is like "son of a bitch," but even stronger. . . . It is a very bad thing to say in Mexico, because they feel very keen about their mothers down there. . . . The braceros don't do anything about it. They just stand there and stare. After all, what can they do?<sup>15</sup>

After all, what *could* they do? Nearly penniless and miles from home and family, they had no choice other than to submit to a process that was confusing, frightening, and sometimes even inexplicably abusive.

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14. National Museum of American History, "America on the Move: Opportunity or Exploitation: The Bracero Program," [http://americanhistory.si.edu/ONTHEMOVE/themes/story\\_51\\_5.html](http://americanhistory.si.edu/ONTHEMOVE/themes/story_51_5.html) (accessed July 23, 2008).

15. Quoted in Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 49-50.

Once he had successfully passed through the recruitment screening, the bracero passed out of the hands of the United States government and became the “property of a grower,”<sup>16</sup> who whisked him off to a field to begin work. Now on the grower’s clock, he was a costly liability until he could become productive.<sup>17</sup> Cost-effective production was a game the growers played well; they often used their knowledge of the complexities of wage setting to the disadvantage of the ignorant braceros. The determination of wages was so convoluted that many braceros, when asked what their pay was, responded as one man did: “I won’t know until pay day.”<sup>18</sup>

The terms of the agreement specified that the bracero would be paid the prevailing wage, essentially the rate paid to all other agricultural workers for similar work. But it was a rate set by the growers themselves without U.S. government oversight. With this unilateral power in hand, the growers could pay pretty much what they pleased by redefining the prevailing wage to meet their needs. A 1951 President’s Commission on Migratory Labor struggled unsuccessfully to determine exactly how a prevailing wage was set, but was clear on one thing: the result was “worse than meaningless. . . . When [a] wage quotation is set by agreement among farm employers alone and with little or no regard to whether it is a sufficient wage to attract workers, it cannot very well serve as the price to equate the supply of and demand for labor.”<sup>19</sup> At the Mexican border, the growers had been assured that the supply of bracero candidates

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16. Gonzalez, *Guest Workers*, 76.

17. Galarza, *Merchants*, 84.

18. Quoted in Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 136.

19. U.S. President’s Commission, *Migratory Labor*, 60.

would comfortably exceed their demand for labor. Now, with guaranteed labor in hand, they were free to manipulate the value of that labor to their advantage.

To the growers' additional advantage was the option to pay hourly or by piece. The piece rate system was particularly problematic for many braceros, who were initially inexperienced with U.S. crops and would probably not obtain even an artificially depressed prevailing wage until they gained some experience in the fields. The growers were also free to switch between piece and hourly rates at will to further manipulate the braceros' net pay, sometimes doing so multiple times in the middle of a week.<sup>20</sup> Unexplained deductions from their gross pay for such items as health insurance and meal costs (permitted in some states) also reduced the braceros' net income.<sup>21</sup> No wonder that the bracero did not know what his pay was until he saw his paycheck.

Even if the pay rate itself was decent, the number of hours a bracero worked could prevent him from earning a viable wage. Growers often contracted a larger number of workers than required in order to assure that their crops were harvested quickly, and this often meant short shifts for many braceros.<sup>22</sup> "We only worked about four hours a day," complained one bracero. "When you work so little, you make no money. I won't even be able to get to my home in Guanajuato. I will just have to stay in Mexicali and try to get another contract."<sup>23</sup> This man, like many others, seemed easily disposable by his employer, yet was forced to go through the recruitment gauntlet one more time in order to earn enough money just to make it back home.

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20. Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 136.

21. *Ibid.*, 138-39.

22. Galarza, *Merchants*, 184.

23. Quoted in Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 143.

Growers easily adjusted the salaries of their workers using legal, if not always ethical, methods. But not all growers stopped there, and violations of work contracts were not uncommon. Payroll records were sometimes falsified—a bracero hired for a more skilled job was carried on the records at a lower-rated job, or a recorded time period did not include all actual days worked. There was also the strategy of short weighing. When piece-rate payment was calculated by overall weight, a grower could under-record the actual weight delivered by the bracero. Some growers chose not to pay at all. “We never worked fast enough for [our boss],” explained one bracero, “and he always found a reason to yell at us for picking spoiled carrots or bad cotton. At times he emptied our bags and would not pay us.”<sup>24</sup> Illegal payroll deductions for items such as tie-wires for carrots or blanket rentals were also common.<sup>25</sup> The bracero was, of course, free to file a complaint, but the grower again had the upper hand. The agreement provided for braceros to select a representative to settle disputes with the growers, but at the same time it disallowed him from specifically negotiating the often vague terms of the contract. Sometimes, a grower refused to even meet with the representative, negating any possibility of resolution. Many braceros played the only card they had—they quit. In 1942, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service reported that 268 men—about fifteen percent of the eighteen hundred newly-enrolled braceros—had deserted within the first month of the program.<sup>26</sup>

Those that stayed lived in employer-supplied housing that varied from adequate to unlivable. Although roughly twenty-five percent of all braceros in California were

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24. Quoted in Jacobo, *Los Braceros*, 84.

25. Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 139-140; Galarza, *Merchants*, 186-87.

26. Cohen, "From Peasant to Worker," 96; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 146.

housed in relatively new barrack-like units built by growers associations, the rest were housed either in camps provided by corporations, “fringe” camps, or family camps. Corporate facilities could be up to thirty years old, having earlier housed Filipinos, dust-bowl migrants, and illegal workers with little or nothing done over the years to maintain them. Fringe camps and family camps (for fewer than six braceros) were short term camps run by smaller growers. These camps were usually placed “in a thicket or willows or some other type of cover” out of direct public view and inspection oversight, and could be as cheap as a slightly remodeled chicken coop.<sup>27</sup> A U.S. Department of Labor director reported that he had “personally investigated many reports of bad housing . . . and was shocked by the conditions in which many workers were forced to live.”<sup>28</sup> Although the newer association camps showed an intent to improve overall housing conditions, as late as 1957 one third of the 700 California camps inspected were labeled unfit for habitation and were “judged to be beyond salvaging.”<sup>29</sup> When confronted with the poor quality of housing they were providing for the braceros, some growers replied that it was at least better than where they came from and, falling back onto racial stereotypes of Mexicans, contended that “they like to live like animals.”<sup>30</sup>

Enforcement of livable housing was difficult, if not impossible. For the first five years of the program, the U.S. Department of Labor’s requirements were so broadly stated as to be almost meaningless. When the department attempted to define the standards in more detail in 1956, the growers protested so loudly that they were revised

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27. Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 66-69.

28. Quoted in Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 69.

29. Galarza, *Merchants*, 195.

30. Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 74.





Figure 3. Communal living in bracero housing <sup>31</sup>

within three months. Even when there were standards, the processes in place to enforce them were at best unwieldy, involving no fewer than eight separate local, state, and federal agencies, along with Mexican consul representatives, all participating at one step or another. Inadequate staffing of qualified inspectors also challenged effective enforcement. The California State Division of Housing was able to staff only twenty-nine inspectors for over five thousand bracero camps (in addition to all the other labor camps in the state). None were known to have brought with them the specific skills needed for their jobs.<sup>32</sup>

Any discussion of bracero housing should not overlook the fact that, regardless of the quality of housing, the mere idea of same-sex group living was enough to cause a

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31. National Museum of American History, "America on the Move."

32. Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 61, 69-72.

“culture shock and a general psychological disorientation”<sup>33</sup> among the men. The braceros were simply not used to a living arrangement that required them to sleep and shower with other men, and adjustment to it was a struggle for many. “We lived in barracks and slept in bunk beds, which made it hard,” recalled one bracero. “There were no private showers; sometimes about fifty of us had to shower at once. It was difficult.”<sup>34</sup> Nakedness in front of other men was difficult for many during the recruitment process; it became no easier for them as they lived and showered together daily during their stay in the United States.

Communal living was not the only source of culture shock to the braceros. American food was a new and less appetizing experience for them. Some contracts required the employer to provide meals at a maximum daily cost to the bracero of \$1.75. The food was often prepared by non-Mexican cooks from a menu that took no consideration of the braceros’ preferences. White bread and American cheese would certainly have been questionably nourishing to men more familiar with a diet of tortillas and beans. As one historian notes, “their tastes were simple but distinctive, and as strangers in a foreign land, they harbored fears and doubts about adapting to a new diet.”<sup>35</sup> They had good reasons to have concerns about that diet; white bread and American cheese were not the only items on the menu. Growers often went to extremes to stretch the \$1.75 daily allowance as far as possible, resulting in a very unhealthy and unappetizing diet. One U.S. Department of Labor representative commented that “just

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33. Peter N. Kirstein, *Anglo Over Bracero: A History of the Mexican Worker in the United States from Roosevelt to Nixon* (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1977), 57.

34. Quoted in Jacobo, *Los Braceros*, 97.

35. Kirstein, *Anglo Over Bracero*, 57; Cohen, “Peasant,” 86; Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 94-101.

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 a special treat, maybe some hamburger." He further noted that one camp was repeatedly warned for these food violations, but "they didn't do a damn thing about it."<sup>36</sup>

Fortunately, not all braceros were fed a diet of pig parts; the selection and quality of the food varied, as did the eating facilities provided by the growers. Although some were adequate, there were those that were simply "squalid mess halls of the Wetback days . . . carried over under the pinching management of contractors and with the patronage of incurious farmers."<sup>37</sup> Even with better facilities there was always the risk of food poisoning. Cost-effective small kitchen staffs with sometimes "primitive" sanitation habits were required to feed large groups of men, and it was challenging to get freshly prepared food to all of them quickly. Lunches were particularly problematic; they had to be prepared far in advance, then taken out into the fields by the braceros, where they sat unrefrigerated until lunchtime. In 1953, one case in Merced, California was reported in newspapers nationwide when 259 braceros fell ill with food poisoning from eating lunches that had sat in the sun since dawn.<sup>38</sup>

Braceros whose contracts did not require employers to feed them were left on their own to meet their own dietary needs—and this caused a different, and arguably more jarring, culture shock to them. Simply put, these men were not prepared to shop and cook for themselves, and had little knowledge of nutritional basics. Coming from a

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36. Quoted in Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 85; Galarza, *Merchants*, 187-88.

37. Galarza, *Merchants*, 98.

38. Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 101-104.

culture that was even farther behind in the evolution of women's rights than the United States, cooking was exclusively women's work to them, and the need to feed themselves collided with and challenged their deeply felt sense of masculine identity.<sup>39</sup> When their lack of knowledge combined with the need to save as much money as possible, "the results [could] be literally fatal."<sup>40</sup> Investigating the death of a twenty-six year old worker who had been in California only six months, a state public health representative found that "during that time all he had had to eat were tomatoes, which he got from the fields where he was working, and yeast, which apparently he had heard somewhere was good for him."<sup>41</sup>

Getting to and from the field itself could be a risky proposition for the braceros, who relied on their employers for transportation. There were specific (and commonsense) regulations, such as the maximum number of men who could travel in a single vehicle, side guard rails on flat-bed trucks, and closed tail gates. But violations were frequent, sometimes with lethal results—an estimated one third of all bracero deaths in California were the result of travel accidents.<sup>42</sup> Enforcement of safety regulations was hampered by bureaucracy, as it appears all regulations in the Bracero Program were. Jurisdiction was a complicated affair, with numerous agencies becoming involved. There was also the additional problem of "disappearing witnesses."<sup>43</sup> Braceros were less likely to speak out against their employer for fear of losing their jobs.

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39. Cohen, "Peasant," 86-87; Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 82.

40. Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 83.

41. Quoted in Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 83.

42. Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 108, 117-123; Galarza, *Merchants*, 195-96.

43. Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 129-130.

The risk of a travel accident, food poisoning, starvation from an unhealthy diet, and illness from close communal living in substandard housing, all conspired against the bracero's health. Fortunately, limited health care provisions were established as part of the Bracero Program. Unfortunately, many braceros were unaware of this. Although a health insurance overview was to be provided as part of the U.S. recruitment process (without, however, an insurance policy document), a California survey estimated that four out of five men never received this overview.<sup>44</sup> Those that did were likely unaware of what was being explained to them, and here was the cause of another cultural disconnect for the braceros. Coming as they did from the poorer sections of their society, the men brought with them a health knowledge based on folk concepts. Modern western medical practices, certainly the concepts of insurance or preventative care, was foreign to them, as we have already seen with the medical screenings during recruitment.<sup>45</sup> Lack of knowledge of modern medical practices also caused either fear or distrust, preventing many men from pursuing help. As one bracero astutely noted, "the braceros who are coming to the country for the first time don't go to doctors because they don't know what to expect. The old-timers don't go to doctors because they don't trust them."<sup>46</sup> Language gaps certainly did not make communicating the complexities of symptoms and cures any easier. When a group of 705 California braceros were asked if there was a Spanish-speaking doctor in their camp, approximately one third responded that their

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44. Ibid., 236-37.

45. Ibid., 258-69.

46. Quoted in Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 253.

doctor spoke little or no Spanish. What is even more disconcerting is that almost one quarter responded that they were unaware that a doctor was available to them at all.<sup>47</sup>

There was an additional medical risk to the braceros that U.S. medical practitioners at the time were seemingly unaware of—the danger of pesticide exposure. During the bracero era, the United States became increasingly aware of the dangers of pesticides, largely because of Rachel Carson's historic and influential 1962 book *Silent Spring*. But the focus was entirely on the effects of pesticides on the fruits and vegetables themselves, and the dangers consumers faced when ingesting them at the dinner table. Environmental exposure, the direct exposure to pesticides that the braceros (and all other migrant workers) experienced in the fields, did not fully hit America's consciousness until after the program came to an end. In the fields, the exposure was sometimes literally face-to-face when pesticides were sprayed on the fruits and vegetables at the same time the braceros were working.<sup>48</sup> What is unsettling is that the effects could be clearly visible. One bracero remembered that

one of the hardest jobs was to work in the fumigated fields. It hurt our skins. . . . After working for three or four hours, our skin would break out in rashes of little red dots and we did not receive any medical attention. Sometimes they would change the crew after a week or so when it was obvious that they were allergic and getting sick. As soon as we healed, though, they sent us back to the same field. We did not have a choice.<sup>49</sup>

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47. Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 244.

48. Linda Nash, "The Fruits of Ill-Health: Pesticides and Workers' Bodies in Post-World War II California," *Osiris*, 2nd Series 19 (2004): 203-219, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0369-7827%282004%292%3A19%3C203%3ATFOIPA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-W> (accessed September 2, 2007); Galarza, *Merchants*, 196.

49. Quoted in Jacobo, *Los Braceros*, 85.

It was very clear to many braceros that the pesticides were harming them.<sup>50</sup> It was also clear to public health officials and growers, but they “drew on a racialized discourse of hygiene,”<sup>51</sup> blaming the braceros’ ignorance for their susceptibility to poisoning, not the environment.

For the healthy bracero it was not always all work and no play. But his free time was limited, and recreation often carried costs that depleted carefully saved funds. For those lucky enough not to work on Sunday, attendance at local church masses was often their only time away from camp. Although practicing their Catholicism was deeply important to many men, this too was not without risk, because the bracero was often not welcomed into the churches. One California local spoke for many when he suggested that braceros go elsewhere, simply because they were visibly different. “It would make the bracero uncomfortable, and it would make the rest of us uncomfortable,” he argued. “The braceros would be so conspicuous—the way they dress, the way they cut their hair, everything about them. . . . I think it is best for all concerned if the Nationals go their way, and we go our way.”<sup>52</sup> An alternative was to bring priests into the camps, but this idea did not go far for many growers. “If we let one of [the priests] come in,” argued one grower, “all the other denominations and sects would demand the same privilege. . . . The place would be a madhouse. They would keep the men in constant turmoil.”<sup>53</sup> The growers may also have considered a priest to be an unwelcomed witness to the condition of the workers, and an influential justice advocate for them.

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50. Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 286, 288.

51. Nash, “Fruits,” 215.

52. Quoted in Anderson, *Bracero Program*, 159.

53. *Ibid.*, 158.

At the end of their contracts, the braceros were escorted back to the border by their employers as briskly (and sometimes as dangerously) as they had first been brought from the recruitment centers. Some returned penniless, others with cash in hand. Although there are no statistics to show exactly how much money was accumulated by the braceros, it is doubtful that any were able to build a sizable savings. Some thought the experience was valuable enough to request another contract and reentered the recruitment process. Others returned home; once was enough.

In its twenty-two year existence, the Bracero Program evolved; loopholes in agreements, contracts, and regulations were found and, although frequently exploited, were also sometimes closed. Over time, the program improved, as did the braceros' overall situation. It would be false and a gross exaggeration to argue that every bracero was either egregiously abused or ignored while in the United States, and that has not been my intent. But there is a preponderance of evidence, only briefly sampled in this overview, to argue that many, if not most, were. Why? The behavior of the U.S. participants explored here points towards an answer: underpinning their actions was a deeply embedded ethnocentrism, in the sense of both a racial and cultural superiority over the braceros. The workers were reduced in U.S. eyes to little more than a commodity. Government employees passed them along through the recruitment process as if they were items on a factory conveyor belt. When the braceros understandably expressed confusion or fear, the response was either indifference or a racially- and culturally-tinged abuse. The growers, driven by material self interest and a desire to maximize revenue—at the cost of their employees' health and well-being—saw the braceros as nothing more



than “little brown men [who] could work for endless hours under sun, rain, or snow.”<sup>54</sup> For them, as for most Anglo-Americans, skin color was central to Mexican racial identity. Because that skin was dark, “it is not surprising that white Americans commonly transferred to Mexicans many of the discriminatory social patterns they had established for blacks.”<sup>55</sup> The conflation of Mexicans with blacks in growers’ minds justified to them a treatment of the braceros that echoed the slavery of blacks in the previous century. Historian Gilbert G. Gonzalez comes close to describing slavery when he contends that the braceros were “transported across borders as *indentured labor*. . . , systematically placed under employer control (as well as state control), segregated, and denied the rights to organize, to bargain for wages individually or collectively, to protest, and to freely change residence or employer.”<sup>56</sup>

The race card was obviously not played against only the contracted braceros; racial discrimination against all Mexican nationals and Mexican-Americans was inherent in Anglo-American minds during the Bracero Program. This took a particularly interesting turn in Texas during the years of World War II.

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54. Gonzalez, *Guest Workers*, 92.

55. Mark Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900-1940* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), 140.

56. Gonzalez, *Guest Workers*, 2.

## Chapter 2

### Mexican Nationals, Mexican-Americans, and the Thorny Problem of Texas

Texas carries a close relationship with Mexico, sharing about a thousand miles of border—half of the total border between the two nations. It would be reasonable to assume that Texas, a large state and significant producer of agricultural products, would have been a primary beneficiary of the Bracero Program. However, of the approximately 220 thousand braceros who entered the United States between 1943 and 1947 during the emergency wartime agreement, *none* went to Texas.<sup>1</sup> During negotiations with the United States, Mexico had stipulated that discrimination against workers was not acceptable, and grounds for exclusion. It immediately exercised its unilateral power under the agreement and refused to allow any workers to migrate to Texas, claiming prejudice there as the primary reason.<sup>2</sup> Although discrimination was not unique to Texas, in Mexico's eyes the state "symbolized all of the indignities suffered by those of Spanish heritage north of the border."<sup>3</sup> It was certainly, in the eyes of one official of the American Embassy in Mexico City, a "thorny problem."<sup>4</sup>

This did not prevent migrants from working in Texas, however. Many Mexican nationals and Mexican-Americans were already at work in the fields when the ban occurred and, without even the minimal protections of the Bracero Program, found themselves in a worse situation than the braceros. Although Texas attempted to repair

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1. Otey M. Scruggs, "Texas, Good Neighbor?" *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly*, 43, no. 2 (September 1962): 120.

2. García y Griego, "Importation," 68-69; Kirstein, *Anglo Over Bracero*, 54.

3. Scruggs, "Good Neighbor," 120.

4. Quoted in Scruggs, "Good Neighbor," 122.

relations with Mexico and alleviate the sub-poverty condition of the migrants, the state was largely unsuccessful, primarily because Anglo-American perceptions of Mexican and Mexican-American workers during this period were ambivalent and mixed.

The blacklisting of Texas in 1942 represented a watershed moment in a long history of Mexico's concern over discrimination. Article 123 of the 1917 Mexican Constitution had been specifically drafted to protect emigrant workers.<sup>5</sup> But only one year later, Mexico's Subsecretary of State for Foreign Affairs was forced to advise the United States' ambassador that "according to reports which it [the Department of Gobernación] has received, . . . Mexican laborers receive very bad treatment from their employers. . . . The United States of America do[es] not offer any guarantee against these evils."<sup>6</sup> By 1942 the situation had become intolerable. Several Mexican newspapers went so far as to equate the issue with Nazi racism. "[A] group of North Americans who despise the Mexican has become seduced by the racial ideas of Germany," one paper warned its readers. "The United States . . . feeds, sustains and cultivates this racism in its own territory against Mexicans and against Negroes."<sup>7</sup> To Mexico, no other state was worse than Texas, so all emigration there under the agreement was immediately banned.

The condition of agricultural workers was not the only catalyst for the ban; the Mexican government was concerned about the status of all Mexican nationals and Mexican-Americans, and they had as an ally in Texas a broad transnational collective of

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5. García y Griego, "Importation," 54.

6. Quoted in George C. Kiser and Martha Woody Kiser, eds., *Mexican Workers in the United States: Historical and Political Perspectives* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979), 15.

7. Quoted in Kirstein, *Anglo Over Bracero*, 54. See also Nelson Gage Copp, "Wetbacks" and *Braceros: Mexican Migrant Laborers and American Immigration Policy, 1930-1960* (PhD diss., Boston University Graduate School, 1963. Reprint, San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1971), 21.

civil rights groups who lobbied aggressively for the rights of all in the state.<sup>8</sup> But the migrant agricultural workers were among the poorest and least educated, and their situation arguably the bleakest. In 1938 a Works Projects Administration (WPA) team visited the migrant town of Crystal City and documented their findings. What they discovered there illustrates the migrant situation throughout Texas in the years that lead up to the blacklisting.

Crystal City, known as “the spinach capital of the world,” is located in southwestern Texas, about fifty miles from the border. The population at the time of the study was mostly Mexican and Mexican-American; in 1930, about seventy-eight percent of the 6,609 residents were categorized as “other races,” meaning neither white nor black.<sup>9</sup> When the WPA researchers visited in 1938 they found the city

crowded with the houses and shacks of the Mexicans in spite of the abundance of open land near by. They have no modern improvements; sewers and street lights are lacking. . . . The ramshackle houses are overcrowded, health conditions are bad and medical care is inadequate, school attendance is poor and unenforced, relief is not available to many of those who are unemployed, and the social life of the Mexicans is hedged about with economic and racial restrictions.<sup>10</sup>

Immediately obvious to the researchers was the woefully substandard living arrangements. They pointed particularly to houses supplied by the growers for the cotton pickers, calling them “extremely poor and inadequate,” with several families sharing a

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8. Thomas A. Guglielmo, "Fighting for Caucasian Rights: Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and the Transnational Struggle for Civil Rights in World War II Texas," *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2006): par. 11, <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/92.4/guglielmo.html> (accessed September 11, 2007); David G. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 130-133.

9. U.S. Works Projects Administration, *Mexican Migratory Workers in South Texas*, By Selden C. Menefee, Under the Supervision of John N. Webb, Chief, Social Research Section, Division of Research (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1941), 1-3.

10. Ibid., 41.

ten-by-sixteen-foot dirt-floored space without furniture and only a curtain to separate families. They also found fifty or more people of both genders sharing a single toilet.<sup>11</sup>

They found the migrants' economic situation to be equally poor and inadequate; the depression years had changed the landscape with competition appearing in the form of sharecroppers and tenant farmers who sought day labor.<sup>12</sup> Although the periods of total family unemployment were minimized due to the harvesting cycles of the four primary crops—spinach, cotton, sugar-beets and onions—the researchers found many of the migrants to be in dire need due to the extremely low wages they received.<sup>13</sup> Even though at least one member of a family was usually able to find work, the individual unemployment rate was high. In 1938 only one in forty workers was able to stay employed for the full year, with one in eight unemployed for six months or more. This unfortunate mix of low wages and high unemployment “had a depressing effect on family incomes,” the researchers reported. Most families could not survive the winter without difficulty.<sup>14</sup>

They also noted, not surprisingly, that the unhealthy living conditions fostered by poor housing and low income lead to a high rate of disease, particularly enteritis, diarrhea, and tuberculosis. Treatment was difficult for the migrants to obtain; beds in state institutions were rarely available to them except in advanced cases. Children in particular were susceptible to illness because of the hardships of the migrant life, which also restricted their ability to obtain a decent education. Most of the Crystal City children

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11. *Ibid.*, 34.

12. *Ibid.*, XVI.

13. *Ibid.*, XIV.

14. *Ibid.*, 15.

rarely went beyond a third- or fourth-grade education, attending a special school at the outskirts of the town that could handle “their language difficulties and . . . peculiar attendance problems.”<sup>15</sup>

Throughout their study, the WPA researchers avoided finding direct blame for the migrants’ substandard situation, attributing their condition largely to downward trends in the agricultural market and to shifts in labor demographics brought about by the depression, which drew otherwise non-migrant laborers into the market and depressed wages overall. But where they may have shied away from pointing fingers, the Texas State Employment Service was not quite so reticent. During this same period, their Farm Placement Service Division (FPSD) produced an analysis of the migratory labor problem in the state. It pointed directly to the Mexican immigrant as the source of the problem. “The genesis of all Mexican labor problems in Texas is the basic fact of *immigration* of Mexicans into the State,”<sup>16</sup> they flatly announced in the opening summary. In their eyes, historically ineffective legislation had created unstable labor conditions which permitted an onslaught of illegal immigration and the rise of labor agents—some honest, many not.<sup>17</sup> It was the labor agent who was the primary culprit of Mexican subjugation, they contended, “frighten[ing] peon workers, paying them meager wages and treating them almost as slaves.”<sup>18</sup>

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15. Ibid., 43-45.

16. Texas State Employment Service, *Origins and Problems of Texas Migratory Farm Labor: A Brief Prepared by the Farm Placement Service Division of the Texas State Employment Service* ([Austin?]: 1940), 5.

17. Ibid., 5-22.

18. Ibid., 13.

The FPSD did not stop at identifying problems, however, but took action to alleviate them. They also took advantage of the opportunity to laud their successes in their official report. To remove the labor agent from the equation and reduce illegal immigration, they had implemented greater state management of workers already resident, a “stabilization of migratory labor [that] controlled and directed migration of workers when and where and in what number needed at seasonal peaks.”<sup>19</sup> Controls had also been placed over the migrants’ housing. Beginning in 1936, housing camps had been introduced in an effort to build a permanent labor force and reduce the influx of workers from outside of the state.<sup>20</sup> By 1940, the FPSD was able to announce “a marked settling down of migratory workers in Farm Security Administration camps or in other homes close to restricted areas in which they may . . . try to evolve new work-patterns on a year-round basis.”<sup>21</sup>

The FPSD analysis is in marked contrast to the WPA study. Where the WPA researchers described the migrant’s dwellings as “extremely poor and inadequate,” this group found that the camps had produced a significant improvement in living conditions. Also, the WPA study concluded that the introduction of a year-round seasonal harvesting cycle still did not offer an adequate living wage for the migrants, but the FPSD found that through this cycle the workers were receiving “a steadier income than they had ever received,” pointing out that a group of migrants returning to the Winter Garden area, which included Crystal City, were able to deposit over \$26,000 in the local banks in

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19. Ibid., 88.

20. Ibid., 58-61.

21. Ibid., 88.



Figure 4. Happy Texas field workers



Figure 5. Crystal City children

The photo on the left from a 1946 *Saturday Evening Post* article, “Texas Cleans Up a Mess,” is in stark contrast with the photo taken by a WPA researcher of Crystal City children.<sup>22</sup>

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December 1937.<sup>23</sup> But these offsetting analyses do not completely contradict each other.

Together, they tell us that the migrants’ condition in 1940 was still egregiously substandard, but that there was at least some effort on Texas’s part to improve it.

These two analyses are also revealing on another level; they tell us something about the researchers themselves, and their ambivalent reactions towards the migrants. The WPA report’s language is necessarily detached; this was, after all, a formal government study. The overall tone of the narrative, however, is very sympathetic. Reading it, one senses the researchers struggling to maintain their detachment in the face of the poverty that surrounds them. But however sympathetic they may have been, the researchers still reveal a deeply imbedded racial bias by stereotyping and pigeonholing

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22. Lewis Nurdyke, “Texas Cleans Up a Mess,” *Saturday Evening Post*, July 27, 1946. <http://web.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.dominican.edu/ehost/detail?vid=5&hid=17&sid=0614b433-574c-4aa5-9db0-33ea6ea74d88%40sessionmgr2> (accessed June 11 2008), 59; U.S. Works Projects Administration, *Mexican Migratory Workers*, facing 33.

23. *Ibid.*, 62.



the migrants. “The Mexicans are of a different racial and cultural group from other migratory workers,” they explain, “and, partly because of language difficulties, they are less vocal in their desire for higher wages and better working and living conditions.”<sup>24</sup> In spite of their concern for the migrants, the researchers could not help indirectly blaming them for their own plight.

The FPSD study is also well-intended, if somewhat less sympathetic. They also point to the Mexican nationals as being in part to blame. Although they condemn the labor agent for the poor treatment of the workers, it is the mere fact of Mexican immigration that is the cause of Texas’s labor woes, as if the problem would evaporate if the Mexicans simply went away. And, in retrospect, their solutions reveal the FPSD to be highly controlling and paternalistic, that they saw the migrants, not as active agents in their own lives, but as children who needed to be taken care of. Thoroughly under the control of the state, the migrants were left with little, if any, choice about where to work, when to work, or where to live. The Mexican government likely saw this control of their people as inconsistent with a country that touted its foundation on individual autonomy, suggesting to them a deep-seated and intolerable hypocrisy, and an added reason to exclude Texas from the wartime agreement.

The Texas State Employment Service was not alone in attempting to address the issues that lead to the state’s exclusion. The Texas legislature, which had off-and-on defined Mexicans as white throughout its history, decided to view them as white in the spring of 1943, and passed House Concurrent Resolution Number 105, commonly called the “Caucasian Race—Equal Privileges” resolution. It was specifically drafted to prevent further discrimination against Mexican nationals and Mexican-Americans and improve

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24. Ibid., X.

the state's relationship with Mexico.<sup>25</sup> But it was little more than a statement of Texas's position on the rights of its residents, not an active step to eradicate the already existing and widespread discrimination. So, under advice and under pressure, Governor Coke R. Stevenson launched the Good Neighbor Commission of Texas (GNC) in September of that same year. Its mission was to give "attention . . . to the conditions of health, education, social exclusion and economic insecurity of Latin Americans in Texas."<sup>26</sup> But the GNC, however well intended, was ultimately unable to improve the poor conditions of the state's agricultural migrant community.

The GNC started off well enough in its first few years by focusing on the education of both the migrant children and Anglo-American residents.<sup>27</sup> In 1946, however, Executive Secretary Pauline R. Kibbe began to draw the GNC's attention to the migrant laborers' weak economic condition with the intent to strengthen it, but instead drew a backlash that quickly halted progress by the GNC and went so far as to reverse improvements that the GNC had accomplished to date in United States-Mexico relations. Kibbe had previously brought attention to the overall situation of Mexican nationals and Mexican-Americans in the state with her publication of *Latin Americans in Texas*, in which she addressed the broad issues of education, housing, and health.<sup>28</sup> When she later focused on migrant labor, she found the depressed wages for illegal immigrants to be a primary cause of all of the migrants' poor economic condition. Shining a particularly

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25. Nellie Ward Kingrea, *History of the First Ten Years of the Texas Good Neighbor Commission and Discussion of Its Major Problems* (Fort Worth, TX: Christian University Press, 1954), 26-28; Guglielmo, "Fighting for Caucasian Rights," par. 1.

26. Kingrea, *History*, 35.

27. *Ibid.*, 37-61.

28. Pauline R. Kibbe, *Latin Americans in Texas* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1946).

bright spotlight on the questionable practices of the Texas growers, she condemned them for (in her words):

acquit[ting] themselves in a manner typical of their long history [by] certify[ing] the prevailing wage rate [at] 25¢ an hour . . . [but] fail[ing] to make clear . . . that 25¢ an hour was the prevailing wage for *wetback* labor. . . . Many employers confided that they were actually paying 10 cents or 15 cents, at the most, for wetback labor.<sup>29</sup>

She went on to lobby for increased pay for the illegal workers—to get them at least the twenty-five cents per hour owed them. This did not sit well with the powerful Texas growers, and Kibbe was forced to resign from the GNC in September 1947. Hart Stilwell, a Texas writer and analyst of the situation later noted that “Mrs. Kibbe spent too much time concerning herself with the business of wages, members of the commission (one a large employer of the wetback labor) thought.”<sup>30</sup> Kibbe had stuck her finger into a hornet’s nest by implicating the influential Texas growers—one of whom was also a member of the GNC—in the migrants’ poor economic condition. Not only did Kibbe lose her job, but progress the GNC had achieved toward improving relations with Mexico was lost. Mexico, which had started to loosen immigration restrictions as the result of the GNC’s labors on its behalf, once again reinforced the ban of all braceros in the state.<sup>31</sup>

This is not to argue that the GNC was totally ineffective. It has been generally attributed with improving the condition of Mexican nationals and Mexican-Americans in the state, largely through education of its Anglo-American residents. At a minimum, it

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29. Quoted in Kingrea, *History*, 69.

30. Hart Stilwell, “The Wetback Tide,” *Common Ground* 9, no. 4 (Summer 1949): 10.

31 Kingrea, *History*, 71.

brought visibility to their situation.<sup>32</sup> But the GNC's failure to directly improve the migrants' economic status shows that its sphere of influence was severely restricted. The GNC was in thrall to the growers, who held a powerful lobby in the state and showed more interest in their bottom line than in the lives of the people who were the primary contributors to that bottom line.

Mexico's ban on sending braceros to Texas was never formally lifted. It did, however, suffer a quiet defeat in 1948 when Mexico and the United States revisited their wartime agreement. During the war years, the two nations had addressed the situation government-to-government. In 1948, this shifted to a less formal worker-to-employer model, where individual contracts between the worker and the grower were issued and the responsibility for U.S. government oversight of compliance was eliminated. This experiment in de-formalizing the governmental relationship came to an unsurprising failure in 1951, and the U.S. government was once again made responsible for assuring compliance to the agreement. But at the same time, Mexico's unilateral power to ban emigration was eliminated and the nation was reduced once again to "the familiar channels of diplomatic protest and bilateral negotiation."<sup>33</sup>

The "thorny problem" of Texas sheds light on both the situation of the Mexican nationals and Mexican-American migrant workers during the 1940s and the perceptions of the Anglo-Americans who hired them, studied them, and tried to help them. Unprotected by the Bracero Program, the migrants had little control over their own lives. If they were legal residents, they lived at or below poverty level in substandard housing

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32. Otey M. Scruggs, "Texas and the Bracero Program, 1942-1947," in *Mexican Workers in the United States: Historical and Political Perspectives*, ed. George C. Kiser and Martha Woody Kiser (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979), 95.

33. García y Griego, "Importation," 69.

and earned at best an income that barely enabled them to survive. Illegal immigrants were worse off; if they were lucky enough to find an honest labor agent (and many did not), they still often received on average *half* the customary, poverty-level wage. Although the growers had problems of their own—the years of depression and fluctuating agricultural cycles guaranteed no steady revenue—they own a large share of responsibility for the migrants’ situation. Other Anglo-Americans, like the WPA researchers, sympathized with the migrants, but still wore racial blinders, assuming that the migrants’ “natural” state contributed to their own problems. Texas’s governmental leaders also meant well. But, as the FPSD study shows, steps taken by them to improve the situation severely restricted the migrants’ choices and denied them a level of individual autonomy afforded to other Americans. Perhaps the GNC is the best sign that Texas had a conscience; although their efforts to improve the migrants’ economic situation bore no fruit, they “helped to bring out into the open a problem long in need of searching examination.”<sup>34</sup>

To a large extent, the economic situation of Texas’s migrant workers was due to a large population of illegal immigrants in the state who unwillingly provided the growers with an opportunity to drive down overall wages. The problem of illegal immigration was another open problem that not only Texas, but all states, faced during, and beyond, the war years. It was a problem that was never satisfactorily resolved during the bracero era.

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34. Scruggs, “Bracero Program,” 95.

## Chapter 3

### Invasion of the Wetbacks: The Threat of Illegal Immigration

Crossing the border illegally to work in U.S. orchards and fields earn Mexican nationals the derogatory nickname “wetback.” Originally coined in 1920 to describe Mexicans who enter by swimming across the Rio Grande River (getting their backs wet in the process), the term eventually encompassed all illegal Mexican immigrants and is still in use today. Although we will never know the total number of Mexican nationals who obtained this demeaning title during the twenty-two years of the Bracero Program, we do know that there were approximately 4.8 million deportations—a significant number, and 200 thousand more than the 4.6 million bracero contracts that were issued or renewed during the same period.<sup>1</sup> In the eyes of Assistant Commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization Willard F. Kelley, the flood of illegal immigration was “the greatest peacetime invasion . . . suffered by [this] country.”<sup>2</sup> The U.S. President’s Commission on Migratory Labor agreed in their 1951 report, calling it “virtually an invasion,” and further noted that in the previous two years alone the total number of apprehended illegal Mexicans was over four times larger than the number of “displaced Europeans” admitted to the United States during that same period.<sup>3</sup> This flood of illegal immigration was caused, in a sense, by a perfect storm of factors. Population growth in Mexico unsupported by the nation’s economic structure had dramatically increased rural poverty. When combined with economic growth on the U.S. side of the border and a shift in

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1. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 157.

2. Quoted in Galarza, *Merchants*, 59.

3. U.S. President’s Commission, *Migratory Labor*, 69-70.

manpower needs towards less skilled labor, a force was created that both pushed and pulled Mexican nationals across the border.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, the Bracero Program was in large part to blame. It spread the word throughout rural Mexico that there was money to be made in the United States, bringing a far greater number of candidates to the recruiting stations than demanded by U.S. labor needs. Many men rejected during the bracero recruitment process or unable to wait any longer for acceptance simply took advantage of the border's nearby location to step across it illegally. Women and children, also lured by economic opportunities but categorically excluded from the program, had no other alternative.<sup>5</sup> But whatever the cause, just about every American agreed that it was an invasion that had to be stopped. Exactly how to go about it, however, was the question. As they searched in vain for the right answer, Americans were mixed in their sympathies to the illegal workers' situation, highlighting the ambiguous nature of the United States' relationship with the Mexican worker during the bracero era.

Where most Americans were in agreement was that the invasion carried many evils, realized, as one analyst summarized in 1956, in "displacement of American workers, depressed wages, increased racial discrimination towards Americans of Mexican ancestry, illiteracy, disease, and lawlessness."<sup>6</sup> The greatest concern was economic. Americans accused illegal workers of depressing wages for all agricultural

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4. U.S. President's Commission, *Migratory Labor*, 71-73; Stanford Law Review, "Wetbacks: Can the States Act to Curb Illegal Entry?" *Stanford Law Review* 6, no. 2 (March 1954): 294-96, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1226253> (accessed August 9, 2008); Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 148.

5. Eleanor M. Hadley, "A Critical Analysis of the Wetback Problem," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 21, no. 2 (Spring, 1956): 343-44, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1190507> (accessed April 4, 2008); Kelly Lytle Hernández, "The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration: A Cross-Border Examination of Operation Wetback, 1943 to 1954," *Western Historical Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 425; Otey M. Scruggs, "The United States, Mexico, and the Wetbacks, 1942-1947," *The Pacific Historical Review* 30, no. 2 (May 1961): 151-52, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=00308684%28196105%2930%3A2%3C149%3ATUSMAT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-H> (accessed September 2, 2007).

6. Hadley, "Critical Analysis," 344.

workers, displacing domestic workers, draining the economy, and burdening the taxpayer. Hearings held by the President's Commission in 1950 revealed that the average wage paid for picking cotton in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas just north of the border was only \$1.25 per hundredweight, almost half the \$2.45 paid in the rest of the state. Although wages tended to increase farther west, they found that this trend was reversed in the Imperial Valley of California (also just north of the border), where the same half-wage disparity was occurring. They concluded from this that the consistently lower wage received by illegal workers became the prevailing wage for all workers in areas where illegal workers predominated. "That the wetback traffic has severely depressed farm wages is unquestionable,"<sup>7</sup> they stated.

Depressed wages also displaced domestic workers. In a two year period, fully half of the sixteen thousand American agricultural workers of Mexican descent living in Hidalgo County along the Texas-Mexican border had migrated out of the state, primarily because of an inability to earn a living wage. In a 1948 telegram to President Harry Truman, the League of United Latin-American Citizens blamed the displacement on a preponderance of illegal workers, stating that it "signifies the lowering of wage standards almost to a peonage level and . . . force[s] thousands of native born and naturalized Americans to uproot their families, suspend the education of their children and migrate to other states in search of a living wage."<sup>8</sup>

In a fifty-nine page pamphlet titled *What Price Wetbacks?* produced in 1953, the American G.I. Forum of Texas, a veterans' organization made up almost entirely of Mexican-American and Spanish-speaking members, found further economic problems

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7. U.S. President's Commission, *Migratory Labor*, 78-80.

8. Quoted in Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 159.



with illegal workers. They argued that “the citizen worker spends his money in the community, pays his share of the taxes and makes a contribution to society. The wetback sends as much of his earnings as possible back to Mexico, while at the same time costing the American taxpayer millions of dollars a year in law enforcement costs.”<sup>9</sup> The illegal worker both drained the domestic economy and was a burden to the life-blood of that economy, the American taxpayer.

Americans also worried that illegal immigrants brought disease with them across the border by avoiding the health screenings required by the Bracero Program.<sup>10</sup> The American G.I. Forum expressed concern that “wetbacks are a constant danger to the health and lives of all border residents, particularly those of Mexican descent who are already suffering a tremendous toll of disease and mortality rates.”<sup>11</sup> They had cause for concern. The reported rates of tuberculosis, dysentery, syphilis, malaria, and typhoid were on average two and a half times greater in the border counties of Texas than in the state as a whole in 1950. The dysentery rate itself was almost five times greater. The President’s Commission called these figures “unfavorably high,” but found the number of infant deaths along the border even more alarming. The infant mortality rate (the number of deaths per one thousand live births) nation-wide in 1948 was 32. That rate increased to 46.2 in Texas, and in the border counties to 79.5. Along the California-Mexico border

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9. American G.I. Forum of Texas and Texas State Federation of Labor, *What Price Wetbacks?* (Austin: [Texas State Federation of Labor, 1953?]), 34.

10. U.S. President’s Commission, *Migratory Labor*, 84-85; American G.I. Forum of Texas, *What Price Wetbacks?*, 23-25.

11. American G.I. Forum of Texas, *What Price Wetbacks?*, 23.

in the Imperial Valley, the infant mortality rate was 56.2, almost double the 28.6 state-wide rate.<sup>12</sup>

Illegal immigrants were as closely associated to crime as they were to disease, making sensational newspaper headlines such this from the July 15, 1953 issue of the *San Antonio Light*: “Migrants Roaming Valley Commit High Percentage of Felonies, Burglaries, Murders: Sick Crowd Hospitals—Wave of Crime, Health Problems Follow Tide of Illegal Aliens into U.S.”<sup>13</sup> But behind the scare were some hard facts. An earlier study of illegal labor in the lower Rio Grande Valley found that in 1935, only 19.7 percent of reported crimes were perpetrated by illegal immigrants. Between 1946 and 1948, that figure steadily increased from 40.9 percent to an impressive 63.8 percent.<sup>14</sup> An indirect (and arguably more imaginative) crime risk attributed to illegal immigration touched a sensitive nerve of many Cold War Americans: the specter of communism. The American G.I. Forum alarmingly asked its readers: “Who is to say how many Communists mingle with the hordes of wetbacks wandering casually into the country across the Rio Grande? . . . How many from communist-dominated Guatemala came over masquerading as Mexicans?”<sup>15</sup>

Underpinning these arguments was a deep distaste for and fear of the illegal immigrants. Popular descriptions, largely fueled by media reports, consistently denigrated them. In addition to “wetbacks,” they were often called “aliens” or simply “illegals.” Even worse, they were not seen as individuals, but a “brown peril,” a “horde,”

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12. U.S. President’s Commission, *Migratory Labor*, 84-85.

13. Quoted in American G.I. Forum of Texas, *What Price Wetbacks?*, 28.

14. Bruce Staffel Meador, *“Wetback” Labor in the Lower Rio Grande Valley* (Master’s thesis, University of Texas, 1951. Reprint, San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1973), 57.

15. American G.I. Forum of Texas, *What Price Wetbacks?*, 30.

a “tide,” and, of course, an “invasion”.<sup>16</sup> Underpinning this was the same ethnocentric attitude and racism experienced by braceros, Mexican-Americans, and legal Mexican nationals. But the illegal immigrants received the worst condemnation. One grower spoke for many Americans when he bluntly stated that “the wetback doesn’t have any brains; they are on the mental level of a jackass. Bad breeding, you know.”<sup>17</sup> Not all Americans carried such a fiercely negative bias. But even those who were sympathetic to the immigrants’ situation reacted to them with fear. The American G.I. Forum claimed that they were “a threat to our health, our economy, our American way of life.”<sup>18</sup>

Although most Americans simply did not want illegal workers on American soil, the vote was not unanimous. Not surprisingly, the growers—who had nothing to lose and everything to gain by hiring a labor force cheaper and easier to obtain than braceros—welcomed them. They actually felt entitled to the illegal labor and “look[ed] on [the] fugitive army as an economic blessing and a vested right.”<sup>19</sup> Disdain for the slow-grinding wheels of government bureaucracy fed that sense of entitlement. An Agricultural Producers Labor Committee manager testified to the President’s Commission that “if Government red tape . . . prevent[s] us from putting under contract the help we need during the peak harvest seasons, we will use wetbacks, because we are going to harvest our crops.”<sup>20</sup> But it was not just government red tape that caused

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16. Juan Ramon García, *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 143-44; James D. Cockroft, *Outlaws in the Promised Land: Mexican Immigrant Workers and America’s Future* (NY: Grove Press, 1986), 65.

17. Quoted in Meador, “Wetback” Labor, 16.

18. American G.I. Forum of Texas, *What Price Wetbacks?*, 1.

19. Stanford Law Review, “Wetbacks,” 287.

20. Quoted in U.S. President’s Commission, *Migratory Labor*, 73.

growers to gravitate towards illegal labor. In their minds, the restrictions of the Bracero Program's contracts simply outweighed the advantages of the program, so illegal workers became the preferred labor force. Illegal workers had not even the barest of wage negotiation rights held by braceros, so wages were more easily manipulated in the growers' favor. Moreover, growers were not restricted to any of the compliance regulations outlined in the bracero contracts, such as decent housing and health care, thereby reducing their overhead costs. And when the work was completed, illegal workers were much easier to get rid of—they simply disappeared.<sup>21</sup>

Tension between anti-illegal sentiments and the growers' sense of entitlement to illegal labor complicated, and ultimately defeated, a final resolution to the problem of illegal immigration during the bracero era. Preventing Mexicans from illegally entering the United States in the first place—the most obvious solution—was effectively blocked by grower influence. Alternating attempts at legalizing them, and when that failed, deporting them, only continued a cycle of earlier, and equally inadequate, attempts to halt illegal immigration.<sup>22</sup>

The responsibility for prevention fell squarely on the shoulders of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and their Border Patrol. But their efforts were hamstrung by, as one analyst described in 1956, a "Congress splendidly indifferent to this whole situation on the southern border."<sup>23</sup> Appropriations for Border Patrol funding actually *decreased* between 1942 and 1956, weakening its ability to apprehend

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21. Stanford Law Review, "Wetbacks," 299-300; Galarza, *Merchants*, 58.

22. Carey McWilliams, "California and the Wetback," *Common Ground* 9, no. 4 (Summer 1949): 15-16; Walter Fogel, *Mexican Illegal Alien Workers in the United States* (Los Angeles: Institute of Industrial Relations, University of California, 1978), 12-13.

23. Hadley, "Critical Analysis," 348.

immigrants as they crossed the border. In 1952 alone, Congress cut the INS budget by \$1,319, 000—the exact amount that had been requested for improved immigration control.<sup>24</sup> But to accuse Congress of simple indifference provides only a partial answer. Congress's decreased support for border enforcement was largely the result of lobbying efforts by growers whose relationship with the Border Patrol was at best adversarial. Growers strongly resisted all efforts by the Patrol to block their use of illegal labor, going so far as to hide workers and to set up two-way radio systems to alert workers and each other of the Patrol's approach. They also vehemently opposed the Patrol's authority to search their property for illegal workers, claiming that this was an invasion of privacy rights. The American G.I. Forum cried that the growers were not playing fair, complaining that "the Border Patrol has been subjected to a continual harassment campaign. Demagogic opponents of immigration law enforcement can almost always get a response by denouncing the Border Patrol as a 'Gestapo' or as 'pistol-packing border patrolmen'."<sup>25</sup> But in spite of these complaints, and because of the growers' political prowess, effective prevention was never achieved.

If prevention was not the answer, then perhaps legalizing or deporting the illegal workers was. Between 1947 and 1954, U.S. policy swung like a pendulum between these two solutions, neither of which was successful. Much of this was due to disagreements between the U.S. and Mexican governments about what to do with the immigrants, and who was responsible to do it. As we have seen, implementation of the Bracero Program in 1942 actually stimulated illegal immigration. By 1946 the United States and Mexico were at odds; Mexico complained that the United States was not doing enough to prevent

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24. Ibid., 348-49; Stanford Law Review, "Wetbacks," 288; Galarza, *Merchants*, 61.

25. American G.I. Forum of Texas, *What Price Wetbacks?*, 14; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 153.

a serious drain on their labor pool, while the United States asserted that Mexico was not living up to its promise to restrict emigration.<sup>26</sup> An agreement was finally reached on March 10, 1947 to “dry out” the wetbacks by legalizing their status and bringing them under the umbrella of the Bracero Program. The drying out process in theory required the illegal immigrant to officially leave the United States, then request legal entry.<sup>27</sup> In practice, however, it was rather ludicrous. As Ernesto Galarza describes it, “the illegals were instructed to touch a toe to Mexican soil, making sure to retract it speedily to avoid contact with a Mexican policeman. This fulfilled the technical requirement of legal entry.”<sup>28</sup> By April, 1947, centers were opened for the drying out process, but turnout was disappointing, and the illegal flow continued.<sup>29</sup>

Almost immediately, the United States turned to deportation. A series of sweeps in California through June apprehended over eleven hundred workers. Parallel efforts in Texas during these months resulted in over eleven *thousand* apprehensions.<sup>30</sup> Deportations continued throughout 1947 and into 1948, culminating in an October, 1948 raid in El Paso, Texas, where four thousand workers were apprehended in a single sweep. Then, in an interesting twist back to legalization, the district immigration director in El Paso, Grover C. Willmoth, “told his inspectors to let the bars down” on October 13 and a flood of immigrants began crossing the border, where they were placed under technical arrest, paroled to the U.S. Employment Service, and then dealt out to waiting employers.

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26. Scruggs, “Wetbacks,” 157-58.

27. García y Griego, “Importation,” 81; Galarza, *Merchants*, 63-67.

28. Galarza, *Merchants*, 67.

29. Scruggs, “Wetback,” 161.

30. Julian Samora, *Los Mojados: The Wetback Story* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971), 50-51.



Figure 6. The drying-out process <sup>31</sup>

This was purely an act of retribution against the Mexican government; the United States claimed that Mexico had violated an agreement by demanding unreasonable wages before allowing their workers to cross the border. Ten days later Mexico accepted the United States' formal apology.<sup>32</sup>

Still the illegal flow continued. By 1949 Mexico had become desperate about its depleted labor pool, and declared a national emergency. Its own enforcement efforts were strengthened, and the Mexican military announced in July, 1949, that all illegal emigration had stopped. True or not, it did nothing to stop the pendulum swing back to deportations on the U.S. side of the border, which were occurring at an average of three to four thousand workers a month in California, and probably more aggressively in

31. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 154.

32. Stilwell, "Wetback Tide," 3; García y Griego, "Importation," 82.

Texas.<sup>33</sup> On August 1, 1949, possibly in recognition of Mexico's active attempts to halt further emigration, the two governments again agreed to dry out the illegal workers. This agreement included a clause that denied certification to employers who continued to use illegal labor. It had some positive effect. The following year nearly 100 thousand workers converted to legal bracero status, while only twenty thousand new braceros entered the program. Still, it did not stop the deportations. That same year, over 458 thousand workers were apprehended.<sup>34</sup>

July 12, 1951 brought about the passage of Public Law 78, which formalized the original 1942 wartime agreement between the two governments. Public Law 78 included yet another drying out opportunity in a clause that permitted the U.S. secretary of labor to recruit illegal immigrants who had been resident in the United States for at least five years. Unfortunately, it was difficult—if not impossible—to prove that an immigrant had *not* met the residency requirement. As a result, Public Law 78 effectively stimulated the immigration flow by providing a fast-track for illegal immigrants to become braceros almost the minute they crossed the border.<sup>35</sup>

Throughout all of this Mexico continued to express concern about the treatment of its people, particularly the consistently manipulated prevailing wage that was hardly any wage at all. The United States, in a “powerful and insulting response”<sup>36</sup> to Mexico's concern, opened the border to all who wished to cross on January 15, 1954, insuring an

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33. Hernández, "Crimes and Consequences," 434-35; McWilliams, "California and the Wetback," 18.

34. García y Griego, "Importation," 82; Cockroft, *Outlaws*, 73; Fogel, *Mexican Illegal Alien Workers*, 14.

35. García y Griego, "Importation," 82; Cockroft, *Outlaws*, 71.

36. Cockroft, *Outlaws*, 76.



even larger labor pool and lower prevailing wage. After making its point, the United States closed the border two weeks later.<sup>37</sup>

Still the deportations continued, as did the public outcry against the wetback invasion. On June 17, 1954, the United States launched its most ambitious deportation effort to date, Operation Wetback, described by one historian as “the greatest maximum peacetime offensive against a highly exploited, unorganized and unstructured ‘invading force’ of Mexican migrants,” wherein the Border Patrol was “assisted by federal, state, county, and municipal authorities—including railroad police officers, custom officials, the FBI, and the Army and Navy—and supported by aircraft, watercraft, automobiles, radio units, special task forces, and, perhaps most important of all, public sentiment.”<sup>38</sup> Operation Wetback showed immediate success, apprehending an average of three thousand illegal workers a day and approximately 170 thousand by the end of the first three months. In total over one million illegal immigrants were apprehended in 1954—mostly as the result of Operation Wetback.<sup>39</sup> INS Commissioner Joseph Swing happily reported in his 1955 report that “the so-called ‘wetback’ problem no longer exists. . . . The border has been secured.”<sup>40</sup>

What some historians have called the “wetback decade”<sup>41</sup>—1944 to 1954—ended with Operation Wetback, as did the government bickering. For the remaining ten years of the Bracero Program, the number of apprehensions steadily decreased while bracero

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37. Ibid., 76; Galarza, *Merchants*, 66-67.

38. Samora, *Los Mojados*, 52.

39. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 156.

40. Quoted in García, *Operation Wetback*, 225.

41. Hadley, “Critical Analysis,” 334; García, *Operation Wetback*, 235.

contracts increased. In 1964, the final year of the program, 177 thousand new and renewed bracero contracts were offset by only forty-eight thousand apprehensions.<sup>42</sup>

This transition to a predominantly bracero and domestic labor force impacted the workers in both positive and negative ways. On the one hand, the rise in bracero contracts following the operation shows that growers had finally come around to accepting, if not wholeheartedly embracing, the Bracero Program. So, at least most workers were provided with minimal protections. On the other hand, the growers had been so successful in driving down the prevailing wage that by 1954 no agricultural worker, domestic or immigrant, was earning much of a salary. There may have been fewer illegal workers, but the difference between legal and illegal was difficult to see on payday. More important, the growers' perceptions about their workers went unchanged. Ernesto Galarza notes that, "since many thousands of *braceros* were only 'dried out' Wetbacks, their employers continued to deal with them confident of their docility."<sup>43</sup>

One thing that neither Operation Wetback nor all the other U.S. immigration strategies could achieve was a final answer to the problem of illegal immigration. Mexican nationals continued to flow illegally into the United States as they always had, albeit in fewer numbers after 1954. The real losers in the game of legalization and deportation were these people, and it is a sad commentary on U.S. perceptions of illegal immigration that the workers themselves hardly appeared in the debate. In their concern over the impact of illegal immigration on *their* lives, Americans easily overlooked the extreme hardships that drove a Mexican national to cross the border illegally, and the difficulties he or she encountered trying to earn a living while remaining isolated from

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42. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 157.

43. Galarza, *Merchants*, 70-71.

the surrounding community and outside of the law. When illegal immigrants did appear in the discussion, “they were described in terms that were stereotypic and negative,” as Operation Wetback historian Juan Ramon García eloquently argues. “Rather than acknowledge them as human beings with dreams, hopes, aspirations, and needs, most people in this country chose to malign them and to shroud them with names and labels that reeked of derision, racism, and denigration.”<sup>44</sup> One of the few groups that did see the humanity of the immigrants was the American G.I. Forum. To give credit where credit is due, with all their concern about the negative impact of illegal immigration on American citizens in *What Price Wetbacks?*, they also displayed great sympathy for the immigrants, describing them throughout the pamphlet as hard-working, self-motivated, and independent individuals. Ironically, these are the same characteristics that most Americans admired and considered the core of America’s exceptional national identity (and still do today).<sup>45</sup> Why Americans were unable to see these virtues in the illegal workers during the bracero era remains a paradox.

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44. García, *Operation Wetback*, 231.

45. *Ibid.*, 231.

## Chapter 4

### The Immutability of American National Identity

During the bracero era, it made little difference whether people of Mexican descent were in the United States as legal residents, braceros, or illegal immigrants. They were a single ethnic group, and white America's reaction to their presence was much the same: ethnocentric, in the sense that they were expected to leave their cultural heritage at the border; xenophobic, in that these brown people from south of the border brought crime and disease with them; and ultimately racist, that their color somehow made them deserving of discriminatory treatment to the point that their basic human needs were of less value than economic revenue. This lack of differentiation did not escape one man who had been both a bracero and illegal worker numerous times: "The new ones without any experience have the illusion of the [bracero] contract, but not me. When you come as a bracero it passes the same as when you come as a Wetback."<sup>1</sup>

He also understood what caused Americans to treat him like a wetback regardless of his status: "I do not speak the idiom and . . . I am very brown."<sup>2</sup> He did not look or act like an American of European descent. A firm belief (and fear) that he and his countrymen and -women could not or would not ever fully assimilate into the American mainstream culture as defined by its white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant majority underlay Americans' ethnocentrism and xenophobia. This drive to protect cultural purity from invading others was not new; it had been inherent in American identity "since the

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1. Quoted in Galarza, *Strangers in Our Fields*, 18.

2. *Ibid.*, 18.

pilgrims first arrived.”<sup>3</sup> It continues to this day in the anti-immigration argument that assumes that no one who enters the United States from below the border can assimilate, and should therefore leave or—better yet—not cross the border in the first place.

California’s Proposition 187 is a prime example of this cultural protectivism. The 1994 initiative prevented state and local governments from providing non-emergency health care, social services, and public education to any undocumented resident, and guaranteed enforcement by requiring the reporting of “suspected illegal aliens”<sup>4</sup> to both the state Attorney General and the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. Granted, Proposition 187 on one level attempted to address a financial crisis in the state caused by rising illegal immigration and a decrease in defense industry business. Governor Pete Wilson (campaigning for reelection) was able to argue that ten percent of the states’ budget the previous year had been spent on services to illegal immigrants.<sup>5</sup> There was more behind Proposition 187 than money, however. As one legal analyst argues, “it is difficult to refute the claim that the ethnicity of the stereotypical undocumented immigrant played at least some role in the passage of Proposition 187.”<sup>6</sup> In language that recalls the dehumanizing rhetoric used against illegal immigrants during the bracero era,

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3. Heather Schwartz, "Historical Memory and the Importance of the Bracero Project in the Struggles of *Trabajadores Migrantes* Today," *Qualitative Studies in Education* 15, no. 1 (Jan/Feb 2002): 75, <http://web.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.dominican.edu/ehost/results?vid=3&hid=3&sid=e70a29ec1f094d43957e98580196694c%40sessionmgr8> (accessed September 11, 2007).

4. California, *California Ballot Pamphlet: General Election. November 8, 1994* (Sacramento: n.p., 1994), 50.

5. Philip L. Martin, “Economic Integration and Migration: The Case of NAFTA,” *UCLA Journal of International Law and Foreign Affairs* 3 (Fall 1998), [http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.dominican.edu/us/lnacademic/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21\\_T5115383326&format=GNBFI&sort=BOOLEAN&startDocNo=26&resultsUrlKey=29\\_T5115383329&cisb=22\\_T5115383328&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=165640&docNo=27](http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.dominican.edu/us/lnacademic/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21_T5115383326&format=GNBFI&sort=BOOLEAN&startDocNo=26&resultsUrlKey=29_T5115383329&cisb=22_T5115383328&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=165640&docNo=27) (accessed November 13, 2008).

6. Kevin R. Johnson, “Symposium on Immigration Policy: An Essay on Immigration Politics, Popular Democracy, and California’s Proposition 187: The Political Relevance and Legal Irrelevance of Race,” *Washington Law Review* 70 (July 1995), <http://www.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.dominican.edu/us/lnacademic/search/homesubmitForm.do> (accessed November 17, 2008).

the “Argument in Favor of Proposition 187” in the ballot pamphlet claimed that “Proposition 187 will be the first giant stride in ultimately ending the ILLEGAL ALIEN invasion.”<sup>7</sup> But cultural protectivism reached new heights with Proposition 187 when its proponents argued that illegal immigrants would not stop at simply diluting U.S. culture, but would eventually take over California in a sort of ethnic coup. In a letter to the *New York Times* in October 1994, Proposition 187’s media director for Southern California Linda R. Hayes argued that steadily increasing illegal immigration into the state was driving the states’ legal (and implicitly white) residents away and dangerously altering population demographics. “If these trends continued,” she warned, “a Mexico-controlled California could vote to establish Spanish as the sole language of California, 10 million more English-speaking Californians could flee, and there could be a statewide vote to leave the Union and annex California to Mexico.”<sup>8</sup> Proposition 187 passed with fifty-nine percent of the vote. Not surprisingly, it was racially distributed, with sixty-seven percent of whites, but only twenty-three percent of Latinos, voting in favor of the proposition. The rhetoric of cultural protectivism had been highly persuasive.

Proposition 187 was not an isolated state cause. It inspired other states to introduce similar legislation, which eventually grew to affect legal immigrants as well—as in the bracero era, the line between legal and illegal had blurred until everyone with brown skin was suspect. By 1997, the U.S. House of Representatives, inspired by Proposition 187’s success, was considering legislation that “would deny sixty kinds of federal assistance to legal immigrants, including health programs, Social Security,

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7. California, *Ballot Pamphlet*, 54.

8. Linda R. Hayes, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, October 15, 1994. Hayes seems be overlooking the fact that California from its inception has been a bi-lingual state. Article XI Section 21 of the state’s 1849 Constitution requires that “all laws, decrees, regulations, and provisions, which from their nature require publication, shall be published in English and Spanish.”

Supplementary Security Income, disability payments, housing assistance, childhood immunizations, subsidized school lunches, job training, and aid to the homeless.”<sup>9</sup>

What is noticeably different in the current anti-immigrant argument represented by Proposition 187 from that of the bracero era is the group being targeted. Americans are no longer concerned that immigrant men steal jobs. (A 2008 Gallup Poll found that only fifteen percent of Americans believe that immigrants take jobs away from domestic workers.<sup>10</sup>) Today, “the new menace is immigrant women who are portrayed as idle, welfare-dependent mothers and inordinate breeders of dependents.”<sup>11</sup> Women and reproduction have become the problem, and the solution is to eliminate social services and education as a disincentive for them to emigrate to the United States and produce babies. By shifting Americans’ attention from production to reproduction, today’s immigration reform debate neatly sidesteps impacting “the lucrative and highly profitable relationship between employers and workers,”<sup>12</sup> to the undoubted relief of growers and other employers of immigrant labor.

Xenophobia also underpins today’s debate over the border. Supporters of stronger border controls contend that immigrants lack the moral fiber of Americans, suggesting that they enter the United States specifically to harm Americans. Arguing in favor of the Secure Fence Act of 2006 that authorized hundreds of miles of additional

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9. Leo R. Chavez, “Immigration Reform and Nativism: The Nationalist Response to the Transnationalist Challenge,” in *Immigrants Out! The New Nativism and the Anti-Immigrant Impulse in the United States*, ed. Juan F. Perea, 61-77 (NY: New York University Press, 1997), 65.

10. PollingReport.Com, “Immigration,” <http://www.pollingreport.com/immigration.htm> (accessed November 10, 2008).

11. Grace Chang, *Disposable Domestics: Immigrant Women Workers in the Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), 5.

12. Chavez, “Immigration Reform,” 70.



Figure 7. The border fence under construction, November, 2006 <sup>13</sup>

fences along the U.S.-Mexico border, Senator Patrick Leahy provided an impressive list of criminal activities attributable to illegal immigrants that included “gang violence, drug trafficking, murders, rapes, . . . sex offenses, burglary, larceny, robbery, criminal trespass, weapons violations, narcotics violations, aggravated assault, shoplifting, fraud, and resisting arrest.”<sup>14</sup> This list must have been in President George W. Bush’s mind when he signed the act into law on October 26, 2006 with the specific intent to “protect the American people.” What was probably *not* on Bush’s mind was that he was also protecting Americans from the very people who contribute to the U.S. economy at its most basic level performing jobs that Americans no longer want.

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13. Minuteman Civil Defense Corps, Minuteman Blog Central, <http://minutemanhq.com/b2/index.php/national/2006/> (accessed December 11, 2008).

14. U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record*, 109th Cong., 2nd sess., 2006. Vol.152, no. 125, [http://web.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.dominican.edu/congcomp/document?\\_m=383550ff435bec6ace949f853013f29f&\\_docnum=2&wchp=dGLbVtz zSkSA&\\_md5=0af1ed3f4e07c9912acb5b23e087ca55](http://web.lexisnexis.com.ezproxy.dominican.edu/congcomp/document?_m=383550ff435bec6ace949f853013f29f&_docnum=2&wchp=dGLbVtz zSkSA&_md5=0af1ed3f4e07c9912acb5b23e087ca55) (accessed November 18, 2008).



The one job that Americans are understandably least inclined towards is agricultural stoop labor, so one would think that the United States and Mexico would have reached a satisfactory international guest worker program by the beginning of the twenty-first century. But this is not the case. Although efforts began immediately following termination of the Bracero Program and continued through the George W. Bush administration, none have been successful.<sup>15</sup> This has not stopped Mexican nationals from doing the work for us, however. They perform agricultural labor today under the H-2A visa program which—over forty years later—looks remarkably similar to the Bracero Program. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), in a 2007 study of the H-2 programs in the United States, found worker abuse and program violations that echo those of the bracero era almost word for word. Reading their introductory argument, one is likely to forget that they are *not* talking about the Bracero Program:

These workers . . . are systematically exploited and abused. Unlike U.S. citizens, guestworkers do not enjoy the most fundamental protection of a competitive labor market—the ability to change jobs if they are mistreated. Instead, they are bound to the employers who “import” them. If guestworkers complain about abuses, they face deportation, blacklisting or other retaliation.

Federal law and U.S. Department of Labor regulations provide some basic protections to H-2 guestworkers—but they exist mainly on paper. Government enforcement of their rights is almost non-existent.<sup>16</sup>

Chief among the bracero-like abuses that the SPLC found were an employer-manipulated prevailing wage and a variety of contract violations that result in workers receiving less than the mandated minimum wage,<sup>17</sup> proving the remarkable ability of growers to continuously obtain an effective bottom line at the expense of their workers’ well-being.

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15. Gonzalez, *Guest Workers*, 145-67.

16. Mary Bauer, *Close to Slavery: Guestworker Programs in the United States* ([Montgomery, AL?]: Southern Poverty Law Center, [2007?]), 1.

17. *Ibid.*, 18-24.

Unlike the Bracero Program, however, women also work in fields under H-2A visas, and they are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment. A 1993 study found that over ninety percent of farmworker women in California faced harassment on the job.<sup>18</sup>

If the H-2 program shows that Americans have learned anything from the Bracero Program, it is that what works in agriculture works in other low-skill jobs as well. The H-2A program has a companion program, H-2B, that covers guest workers in non-agricultural labor. Sadly, however, although many more workers are employed through the H-2B program than H-2A (eighty-nine thousand to thirty-two thousand in 2005<sup>19</sup>), legal protections for H-2B workers are even weaker than those for H-2A.<sup>20</sup>

With only minor variations in expression, the traits of ethnocentrism, xenophobia, racial prejudice, and material self-interest have continued unaltered in American national identity since the bracero era. These traits obstructed the implementation of a humane guest worker program then and obstruct one now. They continue to undermine any effective solution to illegal immigration and have prevented the fair treatment of all people of Mexican descent working and living in the United States, including Mexican-Americans. If the United States continues to look toward the Mexican worker for its material comfort and economic success, then we must begin by reevaluating our national identity and recognize that we are the obstacle to the resolution of our own problems. Fortunately, there is hope that this is happening, and it is appropriate to end this study where it began: with the bracero.

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18. Ibid., 35.

19. Ibid., 1.

20. Ibid., 8.

One of the stipulations of the original bracero agreement was that ten percent of the bracero's pay would be held in trust and returned to him on repatriation to Mexico. Many braceros who participated in the early years of the program never received payment from that fund and have been unsuccessful in subsequent years to obtain it through legal means. However, a 2008 class action settlement, pending final court approval in February, 2009, will provide a one-time reimbursement of thirty-eight thousand pesos to every bracero (or surviving spouse or child) who can prove he worked in the Bracero Program between January 1, 1942 and December 31, 1946.<sup>21</sup> Although the challenge to provide proof is significant, it is not impossible. It is a start towards better treatment of the Mexican worker in the United States, and perhaps a sign that American national identity is not impervious to change for the better.

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21. Bracero Lawsuit Settlement, [http://www.casobracero.com/index\\_en.htm](http://www.casobracero.com/index_en.htm) (accessed December 7, 2008).

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