

LIFE OF A BRACERO

The Bracero Program began in 1942 as a wartime emergency agreement between both United States and Mexican governments to resolve a severe labor shortage, but after World War II American agribusiness, satisfied with a steady farm labor supply, successfully lobbied to extend the program until 1964. A series of labor strikes during the 1930s, including the Ventura County citrus strike in 1941 left growers with fears of future strikes and a dwindling labor supply. During this period the Mexican government was facing financial troubles and reasoned that if braceros left they would return home with more money, new skills, and modern technology that would lift their families out of poverty and contribute to Mexico's economic development.

The recruitment process first began in Mexico City then expanded throughout the interior of Mexico. At the recruitment center, braceros were screened by authorities asking them to show proof of field work experience, which included showing their calloused hands.



Once chosen, braceros were transported in poorly ventilated freight trains to hiring centers in border towns. Once they arrived at the hiring centers, braceros were submitted to physical and medical examinations. If they passed, they would be offered a contract, but not before being submitted to a final inspection and sprayed with DDT en masse. The final stop for braceros in the hiring process was travel to labor camps where they would be living and the farms where they would be working.



Working conditions were deplorable for braceros as well, their days were long and the equipment was not created with the health of the bracero in mind. The short-handled hoe (el cortito) was the primary tool of the bracero. Its short length required the bracero to be bent for long periods of time and resulted in debilitating pain. The contract further stipulated that money would be deducted for health insurance and 10% of their wages would be deposited in a savings account in a Mexican bank, but to this day they

have not received this money. Sundays was their day of rest and leisure. Some braceros took a trip to town, others attended church services, and others watched a movie at a local theater. If they could not travel, a local priest held religious services at the campsite. Most leisure activities would take place inside the camp such as playing cards, writing letters, listening to the radio, and playing sports.

In Ventura County, the Bracero Program made a significant impact in the local economy and the growth of Mexican American communities. Of the 5 million braceros imported to the United States at least 20% were contracted to work in Ventura County. There were at least 30 county employers that contracted braceros. The peak year of bracero labor was in 1958 when approximately 6,140 braceros arrived in Ventura County. Ventura County employed more braceros than any other county in the state. The Ventura County Citrus Growers Committee (VCCGC) was the county's primary contractor of braceros in charge of recruitment, work assignment, transportation, housing and establishing a flat wage rate for the entire industry. At least 25 bracero camps were located throughout the county. There were camps in Piru, Fillmore, Santa Paula, Ventura, Saticoy, Moorpark, Simi Valley, Camarillo, Somis and Oxnard (including Buena Vista Labor Camp considered the largest bracero

camp in the nation). Some of these camps were managed by local Mexican American families.

During this period Mexican Americans also opened small businesses that catered to braceros. One camp manager claimed that braceros spent 3 million dollars in the city of Oxnard. But because braceros received no wage increases between 1947 and 1959, Mexican American workers were often discriminated thus creating intra-ethnic tensions. In 1958, Cesar E. Chavez arrived in Oxnard to help domestic workers by establishing an office of the Community Service Organization. Chavez found that

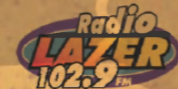



the Bracero Program was the main cause of wage depression, unemployment for domestic workers, and an obstacle to unionization. By 1960, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee, (later merged with the National Farm Workers Association to form the United

Farm Workers of American), arrived in Ventura County to organize farm workers and to fight against the Bracero program which officially ended December 31, 1964. After the Bracero Program, Ventura County growers experimented with high school and college students but lasted only two weeks, so they lured ex-braceros back by granting them permanent resident status

(green cards) and offering them family housing, better wages and benefits. Many ex-braceros were encouraged to return to Ventura County to work in agriculture, to live in company housing and to bring their families and settle down and send their children to local public schools.

FOCUS: 
THE BRACEROS
 OF VENTURA COUNTY



 Channel Islands

One University Drive
 Camarillo, CA 93012
 805 437-8400
 www.csuci.edu



Channel Islands
 CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY