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U.S HISTORY: THE CONSTANT RELIANCE ON IMMIGRANT LABOR FROM ASIAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY TO MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE BRACERO PROGRAM

Moises Gonzalez

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ASIAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY TO
MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE BRACERO PROGRAM

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
History

by
Moises Gonzalez

May 2023

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ABSTRACT

During the late 19th and early 20th century, as the United States implemented stricter immigration laws, there was a gradual shift from Asian migrant labor to Mexican migrant Labor. The Bracero Program, which was established in 1942 at the request of U.S agribusinesses, best exemplified this development in the U.S. Throughout the duration of this guest work program, it demonstrated the discriminatory and exploitative nature of U.S agribusinesses. Yet, few studies have emphasized the thoughts of former braceros. Therefore, this proposed thesis will shed light on a more positive outlook of the Bracero Program where former braceros would persevere through the many challenges that they faced in the U.S. In doing so, they hoped to provide a more sustainable life for themselves and their families either in Mexico or the United States. Additionally, as the Salinas Valley Tragedy of 1963 further demonstrated the abhorrent conditions for braceros, U.S politicians also began to showcase their discontent with the Bracero Program. Thus, this factor played a part in the Bracero Program's inevitable termination. In their final remarks, former braceros continued to express a more positive outlook on their experiences in the Bracero Program as they illustrated how they persevered and successfully made more money to help provide for their families.

DEDICATION

To my friends and my family,

Who have instilled in me both the values of

Determination and perseverance

In order for me to complete my master's program.

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LITURATURE REVIEW

With the Bracero Program being implemented in the 1940s, the state of the field regarding this topic in United States history has often been depicted as a period of racial discrimination and labor exploitation.¹ For instance, while the United States did not outright support an influx of foreign immigrants entering the country, with the United States declaration of war against Japan and the other Axis Powers in 1941, it created the necessity for a huge influx of foreign laborers to replace the many Americans that went off to fight in World War II.² Therefore, from the very beginning, The Bracero Program was quickly fixed on the idea of a temporary guest work program where braceros would complete their contracts, ranging a couple of weeks or months, and return home.³ However, as evident by some bracero testimonials, many braceros chose to migrant permanently to the United States. Scholars have also theorized that the Bracero Program further precipitated the influx of more migrants going past the Bracero Program and into the twenty-first century.⁴

¹ Ronald L. Mize. 2016. *The Invisible Workers of the U.S.–Mexico Bracero Program : Obreros Olvidados*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 19.

² Mize, L. Ronald, and Alicia C.S. Swords. *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA*. (Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 3.

³ Mario Jimenez Sifuentez. "INTRODUCTION." In *Of Forests and Fields: Mexican Labor in the Pacific Northwest*. Rutgers University Press, 2016, 11.

⁴ Douglas S. Massey and Zai Liang. "The Long-Term Consequences of a Temporary Worker Program: The US Bracero Experience." *Population Research and Policy Review* 8, no. 3 (1989): 200.

In Don Mitchell's book, *They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape and the struggle over Industrial Farming in Bracero-Era California*, it demonstrated the importance of California's agricultural economy where growers had a shortage of labor hands at their disposal.⁵ Thus, the Bracero Program, which allowed the immigration of certain Mexican nationals, was the logical choice given its distance to the United States. With the influx of these migrant workers to the United States, California's farming fields took a drastic turn since they would have to be structured to accommodate for the large incoming labor force. As Mexican nationals adjusted to the appalling conditions that they lived under while fulfilling their bracero contracts, employers constantly undermined and took advantage of the braceros inability to read English or do anything about their circumstances in the U.S, cheating them of their wages.⁶ This study's primary concern highlighted the methods that growers used to exploit Mexican nationals and braceros. While at the same time, it illustrated the events that led to the Bracero Program and the various factors that led to its inevitable demise in the mid-1960s. Historian Devra Weber emphasized that the Bracero Program "charted the course for California agriculture and was early embedded in land value, taxes, and profits and especially in the treatment and payment of

⁵ Don Mitchell. 2012. *They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape, and the Struggle over Industrial Farming in Bracero-Era California*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 29. Accessed September 11, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

workers.”⁷ To put it bluntly, “farming in California was a business, not a way of life.”⁸ Thus, it implied that growers created an environment that served their interests, mainly being about production and profit. And with the massive influx of Mexican nationals to California farms, similar to the products that they would be responsible for picking or packing, they were also viewed as suitable commodities. This would be the intricate system for which California growers would come to control and dominate braceros, Mexican Americans, and immigrants.

Erasmus Gamboa’s book *Mexican Labor and World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest* emphasized how wages for incoming Mexican migrants were desirable compared to those in their own country. However, in terms of American standards, they were deplorable at best, ranging from around seventy-five cents in some cases.⁹ Yet, while braceros had a specific agreement guaranteeing them a job for a set wage, undocumented Mexican workers faced an even more hopeless situation because given their lack of influence, their wages were even more undercut than braceros.¹⁰ However, given their undocumented status and not being bound by a worker’s contract, these migrant workers frequently moved

⁷ Ibid., 33.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Erasmus Gamboa. *Mexican Labor and World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, 1942-1947*. University of Washington Press, 2000, 83.

¹⁰ Mitchell, 155.

from job to job, hoping to acquire the best wage possible. Thus, with the various influences happening around U.S agribusiness growing fields, there became a greater demand for higher wages for labor hands. Still, in explaining the measures undertaken by U.S growers on their newly acquired labor force, it further demonstrated the exploitive nature of agricultural capitalism since the growers' main concern was to gain as much profit from braceros.

On the other hand, Erasmo Gamboa's other book *Bracero Railroaders: The Forgotten World War II Story of Mexican Workers in the U.S West* illustrated how Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals contributed to the United States railroad industry during the initial phase (1942-1947) of the Bracero Program. Yet, this book also did a magnificent job in demonstrating the United States reliance on immigration labor because as the United States also faced an impending labor crisis during World War I, they relied heavily on Mexican nationals to make up for labor shortages while enduring excruciating work conditions.¹¹ Furthermore, in the wake of massive anti-immigration legislation like the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which was based on the "desirability" of certain ethnic groups migrating to the U.S over others, it was alarming and hypocritical because by the time of the United States entry in World War II, the U.S government willingly allowed entry to thousands of Mexican nationals into the country.¹² Therefore, a couple of general conclusions can be drawn from these

¹¹ Gamboa, 18.

¹² Ibid., 48-49.

events. First, United States employers and officials only welcomed thousands of Mexican nationals across the Mexico-U.S border to gain employees at a low cost. Next, as the United States turned to this source of cheap labor, other ethnic groups chose to not work in either railroads or agriculture to avoid being stigmatized.¹³ Therefore, this paved the way for predominantly Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants to become the most exploited and “desirable” labor force available. Within a few decades, even with the mounting number of laws against unwanted migration, the United States implementation of migrant labor programs in the twentieth century revealed that in many cases, they have willingly and drastically changed how they dealt with Asian and Mexican nationals, only showing favoritism when they saw fit.

With the bracero agreement finalized between the United States and Mexico in the 1940s, the first wave of braceros made their way to the United States.¹⁴ Yet, because of the great necessity of both United States and Mexico, they also agreed to cooperate to fend off the Axis powers at all costs. This was important because at least during the first years of the Bracero Program, The United States and Mexico actively established their cooperation with one another as the U.S aided Mexico by improving their railroad system.¹⁵ Moreover, by allowing Mexican nationals to work in the United States, they directly contributed

¹³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴ Ibid., 61.

¹⁵ Ibid., 42-43.

towards the war effort abroad. For instance, when contracted braceros arrived for their departure, Mexican officials tried to lift their spirits. They wrote Spanish slogans in chalk near railroad cars, with many of them stating: “Soldados” or “Trabajamos Para la Victoria de la Democracias.” In English, these phrases translated roughly to “Soldiers” and “We work for the victory of democracy.”¹⁶ As aforementioned, with both the United States and Mexican governments firmly adamant in working together at the onset of World War II, this sense of cooperation influenced the way that they propagated the Bracero Program. Rather than call braceros workers or laborers, by calling them “soldiers,” they not only reinforced their collaboration with one another, but they also understood that it was important for the braceros to feel encouraged, remain calm, and comfortable until they arrived in the United States. Furthermore, there was also an element of disillusionment because while the U.S government wanted these laborers for their own benefit, these slogans never delved more into the critical problem for braceros. The critical problem that braceros faced was that they desperately needed this source of income for themselves and their families. Likewise, even the Mexican government expected many of these laborers to return home with valuable skills to contribute to Mexican society in the long run.¹⁷ At the same time, the Mexican government benefited from the currency exchange where the exchange rate was much higher when someone converted

¹⁶ Ibid., 73.

¹⁷ Ibid., 66-67.

U.S dollars to Mexican Pesos.¹⁸ Overall, as each country had their own goals, these mottos successfully steered away from the human element, only benefiting the U.S and Mexican economies.¹⁹

Once Mexican nationals came into the United States, similar to the working and living conditions of the agricultural workers, braceros soon discovered the dangers and harsh conditions of being contracted to work in the U.S. Ironically, while the joint agreement between the United States and Mexico outlined clear and specific guidelines for braceros treatment, the Mexican government was completely mistaken because there was no actual feasible way that they could enforce these rules in the U.S.²⁰ If anything, this clause seemed to be nothing more than a courtesy between these two countries as even with the inclusion of Mexican inspectors allowed at work sites, there would be major issues regarding the mistreatment of braceros in the U.S for the duration of the Bracero Program. This was a fate that was shared by Mexican Americans and braceros alike, demonstrating just how complicated the issues of race and bigotry really were.

Juan Ramon Garcia's book *Operation Wetback* focused on the many factors that drove Mexican migration north across Mexico's border with the United States in the mid-twentieth century, which ran almost concurrently with

¹⁸ John. C. Elac. *Employment of Mexican Workers in U.S. Agriculture, 1900-1960*. (California: University of California, Los Angeles), 1961), 100.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

the Bracero Program during its two-decade implementation from the 1940s to the 1960s. As aforementioned, with many United States citizens enlisting in the military or changing to higher paying jobs at the onset of World War II, a huge labor gap needed to be filled. In particular, this book illustrated how Mexico's agricultural economy did not favor any better as with the lack of rainfall, they did not have enough water for their crops. Likewise, Mexico only had 7 to 10 percent of arable land.²¹ For instance, in comparison to Iowa in the U.S, which produced over 605,000 bushels of corn, Mexico's agricultural sector produced only one-fifth of that output.²² The landscape, drastically effecting Mexico's own agricultural output, created a void that drove Mexican nationals northward, regardless of legal or "illegal" entry.²³ Moreover, with domestic workers also leaving agricultural jobs, Mexican nationals, who found U.S wages more appealing than wages in Mexico, willingly replaced these workers as U.S agribusinesses also needed to hire more people. Thus, these factors not only created the foundation for the inevitable deportation of over 1 million Mexican nationals in 1954, but they also exposed the many socioeconomic factors found in Mexico that enabled this migration to occur in the first place. Likewise, the element of duality also played a pivotal role because while the Mexican government focused on industrializing, its agricultural sector lagged, demonstrated by the overwhelming figure between

²¹ Juan R. Garcia, *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954*. (London: Greenwood Press, 1980), 3-4.

²² *Ibid.*, 5.

²³ *Ibid.*, 3.

Mexico and the United States in corn production. In doing so, the inability of the Mexican government to stabilize its own economy made a profound impact on Mexicans to leave their country as it contradicted Mexico's overall message of improvement and modernization.²⁴ This book did an excellent job at providing context for transnational migration between Mexico and the United States as Mexican nationals were in need of better paying jobs to uplift their living standards in Mexico, a pivotal point of my own thesis.

Even though the Bracero Program proved a legitimate way for Mexican nationals to enter the United States for work, many bracero hopefuls did not get accepted into the program due to other factors including being too young, too old, having health issues, or being a woman.²⁵ Therefore, given both impoverished conditions and the strict regulations that prohibited the entry of Mexican nationals, these barriers also drove the Mexican population to the United States, with or without proper documentation. When this operation concluded, Herbert Brownell, U.S Attorney General, declared that it "had been a success" because it led to "the apprehension and deportation of over one million people, mostly Mexican nationals during 1954."²⁶ Albert Quillon, a U.S Border Patrol inspector, utilized planes, trucks, and buses to quickly apprehend as many Mexican

²⁴ Kelly Lytle. Hernandez. 2006. "The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration: A Cross-Border Examination of Operation Wetback, 1943 to 1954." *Western Historical Quarterly* 37 (4): 425.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 421.

nationals as possible. They would be processed and taken to the border within the same day. From there, they would be handed to Mexican officials on the other side. These tactics of repeated roundups of undocumented Mexicans became the blueprint for Operation Wetback, culminating in over 827,000 deportations in 1953 alone.²⁷ However, while both U.S Border Patrol officials and Attorney General Herbert Brownell deemed Operation Wetback a success, given the number of deportations calculated by 1954, it served as only a temporary solution to a prolonged issue that went back decades. By believing that the coerced removal of Mexican nationals would suppress further migration across the border, both country officials completely overlooked their own domestic issues. For instance, in the United States, U.S agribusinesses favored cheap and available labor, hoping to keep wages as low as possible.²⁸ On the other hand, given the severity of Mexico's impoverished economy during the twentieth century and the lack of initiative to combat these socioeconomic problems facing the nation, Mexicans, as aforesaid, had no other choice and more incentive to come to the United States. In reality, Mexico faced a humanitarian crisis as it lacked logical means to fight the real problem: poverty, being delusional in the process. By 1954, when U.S immigration officials conducted these raids on Mexican nationals, they projected Mexicans as sub-human because of the ease in which they processed and removed them, sadly equating them to cattle. In the

²⁷ Ibid., 441.

²⁸ Garcia, 26-29.

end, Operation Wetback temporarily put a halt to massive undocumented entry in the U.S because with the rise in bracero employment, apprehensions of undocumented people dramatically decreased.²⁹ Yet, with new regulations enforced for the employment of braceros, employers continued to hire undocumented workers, proving that there was a correlation between both U.S agribusiness owners and undocumented workers.³⁰

To conclude, by incorporating these excellent secondary sources like Erasmo Gamboa's book *Bracero Railroaders* into my own thesis on the Bracero program, many companies saw the benefit of employing Mexican nationals to make up labor shortages.³¹ Therefore, given United States legislators rhetoric of "desirability" of certain ethnic people over others, it was quite astonishing that while braceros in both the agricultural and railroad sectors of the United States would face bigotry within the U.S, braceros challenged certain tropes and the meaning of migration legislation in the U.S. In particular, this historical narrative served as the background as to why the United States needed foreign labor to begin with. At the same time, even when braceros were finally employed in the United States, they had to contend with nativism, being similar to the agricultural sector of the Bracero Program. Likewise, this book further illustrated the collaboration between both United States and Mexico where Mexico being

²⁹ Ibid., 234.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Gamboa, 64.

completely aware of the racism in the United States against Mexican Americans, tried to outline specific guidelines for the Bracero Program.³² Yet, in implementing certain safeguards, the Mexican government failed miserably, demonstrating how the initial bracero agreement was nothing more than a sign of goodwill between governments.

Operation Wetback demonstrated the impoverished conditions that Mexicans had to deal with in Mexico, with both the wages and lack of sustainability playing a pivotal part in their migration.³³ Therefore, this book further emphasized the necessity of Mexicans to seek employment in the United States, hoping to uplift or sustain their living standards. While mostly relegated to the background of my own thesis, this work will be vital because it will explain the main reason for Mexican migration northward, also establishing how “illegal” immigration ran concurrently with the Bracero Program. *They Saved the Crops* established how U.S agribusinesses wanted a cheap labor force. Furthermore, the Bracero Program had drastically altered their model in the state of California as with the influx of braceros, they had to restructure their system. This work will provide the background and context on the U.S agribusinesses’ main goal: production. With the main goal being production, U.S agribusinesses were devoid of any empathy towards its employees.³⁴ With this in mind, it implied the

³² Ibid., 66-68.

³³ Garcia, 3.

³⁴ Mitchell, 33.

discriminatory aspect of agricultural labor where braceros were seen as an expendable work force. Overall, these secondary sources emphasized important themes of necessity and exploitation, which will be vital in my own thesis.

While Gamboa's book did an excellent job at providing a completely different historical narrative with the inclusion of the railroad laborers, it reinforced similar themes that could be found in other studies regarding the Bracero Program, dealing with the abuses that braceros went through. Likewise, apart from a couple of letters from braceros or their wives exchanging communications with one another in this book, there never seemed to be much of an effort to incorporate former braceros own thoughts about what they went through during the Bracero Program, with many of their own experiences being regulated to the background in favor of either U.S or Mexican officials own testimonies.

Therefore, while not trying to be over critical of Gamboa's book, his work was devoid of any real former bracero experiences, being similar to other books. In joining the scholarship regarding the Bracero Program, American ethnic studies, and the everlasting effects of migrant and exploitive labor, with the aid of more personal accounts from former braceros like their oral histories, this problem can finally be corrected. In combining these sources with my own thesis, it will be of paramount importance to explore the different perspectives from former braceros.

On the other hand, Ana Rosas' book *Abrazando El Espiritu* was another exceptional piece of scholarship that revealed what Mexican nationals dealt with

in Mexico. Particularly, this book also emphasized the necessity of *aspirantes* where Mexican nationals would leave their families behind to be able to provide for them in the near future.³⁵ For instance, as many braceros earned U.S currency, they willingly did not spend their money in the United States, holding it until either they were able to send it by mail or return personally to their families in Mexico.³⁶ Additionally, with the family unit of particular importance in Mexico, the Mexican government also made it an objective to broadcast the recruitment of braceros to families. In doing so, they expected to have an influx of braceros to contract since *aspirantes* would have the support of their families to migrate to the United States.³⁷ Likewise, by highlighting the families of *aspirantes*, it further demonstrated the difficulties of transnational migration because braceros would find themselves in new surroundings, under heavy supervision, and exploitation by U.S agribusinesses.³⁸ In terms of its depth, it was a compelling book that was distinct to other studies on the Bracero Program because they primarily focused on the overbearing perspective of both U.S policymakers and U.S agribusinesses. For the purposes of my own thesis, it will be important to emphasize the necessity that Mexican families faced in Mexico, which led bracero hopefuls to immigrate to the United States.

³⁵ Dr. Ana Elizabeth Rosas. 2014. *Abrazando El Espíritu : Bracero Families Confront the US-Mexico Border*. American Crossroads. Oakland, Calif: University of California Press, 216.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

Oral histories will play a big part in my thesis on the Bracero Program. By hearing from these personal accounts, it helps to put a new perspective on the Bracero Program. While multiple sources have undoubtedly been written and acknowledged the countless wrongdoings by U.S, Mexican officials, and employers, my thesis will allow for former braceros to tell their side of the story. At the same time, even under these excruciating work conditions, by incorporating oral histories, it will hopefully give a more aspiring American ethnic history where these people came to the U.S to improve their lives. Additionally, in a transnational context, with many of these men persevering through hardships dealt to them in the U.S and seeing the benefits of working in the U.S, they found their own form of success. Success, while seemingly perceived to be unattainable, given the circumstances that braceros found themselves in, has many interpretations. The most obvious form of success for braceros was the money that they made in the United States. For instance, while Mexicans would earn roughly twenty pesos a day in Mexico, in the United States, they could earn roughly two dollars, demonstrating the great disparity in wages.³⁹ Success was also equated to sustainability as many braceros implied that the wages earned in the United States was the only way to provide for their families in Mexico.⁴⁰ Mexican nationals would also protest horrible wages. And while it was common

³⁹ Garcia, 7. Mexico's currency lagged behind the United States in terms of being able to purchase goods.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 12.

to threaten deportation, employers gave into the workers' demands because they realized that it was not in their best interest to replace them.⁴¹ For some braceros, the United States become home to them, and they decided to stay. While it is far-fetched to say that this is success, from both their point of view and their families, the sacrifices that they made paved the way for their family to hopefully have a better life in the United States as many of the same opportunities in the U.S were not available in Mexico.⁴² Other braceros would void their contracts and return to Mexico, unable to tolerate the discrimination that they endured in the United States. While this offers a less hopeful historical narrative, these experiences, regardless of location that they settled in, still exemplified success because they were able to make do with what had transpired in their own life. Furthermore, this inferred that they preferred to return to their native Mexico. This will be my contribution to the ongoing conversation regarding the Bracero Program.

⁴¹ Gamboa, 77.

⁴² Rosas, 221-222. Maritza Duran's cousins successfully completed high school and would later enroll in college.

STATEMENT OF METHODOLOGY

In most of the scholarship revolving around the Bracero Program, historians have primarily focused on the nationalistic aspect of the Bracero Program, utilizing written statements by both U.S and Mexican officials. While these statements are vital to analyzing and understanding the Bracero Program, there are gaps in the historiography of the Bracero Program, most notably the experience from people that lived and worked at various times during the program's duration. Thus, this thesis will shift focus on the individuals themselves, making it more of a social history where their own stories and experiences matter. Additionally, to attain the various individual perspectives on the Bracero Program, it will utilize the braceros' own oral histories. Given the different format of oral histories compared to written material, it will also allow for a unique and intricate form of analysis where the individuals' conscious state and words play a part in unraveling the Bracero Program. Furthermore, given that a part of this thesis will predominantly focus on Mexican nationals who are native Spanish speakers, for the purposes of this work, their oral histories will be transcribed and translated into English, hoping to keep it as clear and authentic while avoiding any misinterpretations.

Likewise, given the severity of historiography about the Bracero Program that described the horrendous working conditions involving primarily Mexican migrant laborers in the United States and the racism displayed by agribusiness employers, it is imperative that in looking at the evidence, this thesis remains as

impartial as possible, striking a balance between other Bracero Program studies while still demonstrating the bigoted treatment on display during the program's inception. While some statements may be seen as a form of judgement, which is a red flag indicating bias, every piece of evidence will be written as it was stated. A key component towards this approach is the use of language. Therefore, to further keep it balanced, my own work will emphasize and give preference to words such as undocumented workers and Mexican nationals, avoiding any negative connotations when referring to people of predominantly Mexican decent. On the other hand, while primary sources and other documents will certainly use more derogatory language like alien, wetback, and immigrant, to refer to people of a different ethnicity in the United States, this terminology will only be used to emphasize the bigotry displayed in the U.S during the twentieth century. Overall, this thesis hopes to illuminate the braceros' goals for coming to the United States in the first place.

CHAPTER ONE

THE LATE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY IN THE UNITED STATES: A CENTURY OF IMMIGRATION REFORM AND EXCLUSION

Introduction

In 1942, the United States and Mexican government reached a bilateral agreement that would allow Mexican nationals to come to the U.S as guest workers.⁴³ Prior to this deal being signed, some Mexican politicians had concerns about the program. For instance, Miguel Aleman, Secretary of the Mexican government, proclaimed that “the rightful place for Mexican labor was at home.”⁴⁴ Aside from the reservation echoed by this Mexican politician, the Mexican government eventually sided with the United States, understanding how this agreement would benefit the Mexican government.⁴⁵ Similarly, U.S agribusinesses, who had pushed for such a program throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s, finally got what they wanted.⁴⁶ Even as the Mexican government formally agreed to allow the United States to hire Mexican workers, given their reservations about how this would affect the people that migrated to the United States, they had specific laws outlining how braceros were to be

⁴³ Ronald L. Mize. 2016. *The Invisible Workers of the U.S.–Mexico Bracero Program : Obreros Olvidados*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 209. The Bracero Agreement was signed in August 1943, with revisions made in April the following year.

⁴⁴ Garcia, 22-23.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Mitchell, 25-26.

treated when they arrived in the United States.⁴⁷ By implementing these specific guidelines for the employment of braceros, the Mexican government was also fully well aware of the discrimination, exclusion, and xenophobic attitudes that United States citizens had against foreign immigrants, one of the most prominent examples being the state of Texas.⁴⁸

While these two countries realized the vast potential of this agreement, being enthusiastic about the future cooperation with one another, hopeful Mexican nationals (often referred to as *aspirantes*), had their own motives seeking employment in the Bracero Program. Don Andre from Guanajuato was anxious at signing up for the Bracero Program once word got out, stating, “Well there was a lot of poverty, much poverty, and one had to leave out of necessity, not because of pleasure, for necessity, so that one could progress a little, right. And because with family one had to help my mother and brothers, there were nine siblings in my family... well, that is why we would go over there as Braceros.”⁴⁹ By linking the immigration of Mexicans such as Don Andre across the United States with the interests of both U.S legislators and agribusiness owners, it revealed that similar to the dependency of U.S agribusinesses to make

⁴⁷ Erasmo Gamboa. *Bracero Railroaders: The Forgotten World War II Story of Mexican Workers in the U.S West*, (University of Washington Press, 2016), 49-50.

⁴⁸ Otey M. Scruggs “Texas and the Bracero Program, 1942-1947.” *Pacific Historical Review* 32, no. 3 (1963): 254.

⁴⁹ Mize, L. Ronald, and Alicia C.S. Swords. *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA*. (Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 3-5. Testimony from Don Andre from Guanajuato.

as much profits as possible, the same could be said about Mexican nationals. Their dependency on making more money for their families was the main driving force behind their migration to the United States in the first place. For instance, in comparison to Mexico where they faced underemployment, they were satisfied with earning the meager wages that they did in the U.S, ranging to about fifty dollars in some cases.⁵⁰ Most importantly, while braceros have usually been cast to the side, Don Andre's testimony proved just how important their immigration to the United States was because the impoverished conditions of the Mexican government forced them to find better opportunities elsewhere.

While the testimony of one bracero is informative, as he outlined his own purpose for being contracted in the Bracero Program, there is still a level of ambiguity surrounding the bracero workers' experiences and daily activities when they came to work in the U.S. Additionally, the same could be said about Mexican immigrants, who did not get contracted into the Bracero Program and willingly risked their own lives to cross the U.S-Mexican Border "illegally," in search of the same work opportunities.⁵¹ While there were periods during the 20th century where "illegal" Mexican immigration was seen as less of a nuisance, during the Bracero Program, opinions on Mexican immigration gradually changed as U.S legislators began to worry about the huge influx of "illegal" Mexican

⁵⁰ Mize, 76. Don Andre stated that he earned this amount working as a Bracero in California, during the chile harvest.

⁵¹ Garcia, 36.

immigrants coming to the United States. This culminated with the implementation of Operation Wetback, which saw the detainment and deportation of large numbers of Mexican nationals back to Mexico in 1954.⁵² This will be another important avenue to explore since it will emphasize the racism against Mexican nationals. Furthermore, in combining braceros' individual accounts with the various documents and testimonies from legislators that influenced the program, this thesis will shed light on the braceros' lives during their contractual period in the United States, particularly in the state of California.⁵³

Throughout the state of the field regarding the Bracero Program and the larger field of American Ethnic Studies, many historians emphasized how the Bracero Program had a neocolonialism aspect to it as, once the bilateral agreement was finalized, United States agribusinesses actually influenced how the Bracero Program would be administered, with financial gain taking precedence over everything else. Indeed, historians have heavily regarded the Bracero Program as degrading to Mexican nationals, as racist attitudes were prevalent.⁵⁴ Other historians stressed how absurd the working and living conditions were for Mexican nationals, leaving them to be heavily exploited in the

⁵² Kelly Lytle Hernandez. 2006. "The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration: A Cross-Border Examination of Operation Wetback, 1943 to 1954." *Western Historical Quarterly* 37 (4): 422-423.

⁵³ Mize, 27.

⁵⁴ Thomas M. Leonard, Buchenau, Jürgen, Longley, Rodney, and Mount, Graeme. *Encyclopedia of U. S. - Latin American Relations*. Washington DC: CQ Press, 2012, 97.

process.⁵⁵ While the degradation of braceros and Mexican nationals has rightfully been documented and thoroughly analyzed by many scholars, there have been few studies that demonstrated the perseverance exhibited by both braceros and undocumented workers. This is an alternative, more hopeful historical narrative that proclaims how braceros actually sought to improve their lives.⁵⁶ Therefore, this proposed thesis will be adhering to a more social history involving former braceros.

The prelude to this thesis on the Bracero Program will emphasize how the themes of exclusion, political, social, and economic deprivation against Asian immigrants led to a shift from Asian migrant labor to Mexican migrant labor. For instance, during the late 19th and early 20th century, the United States implemented anti-immigration legislation against Asian nationals, prevented them from coming and settling in the U.S.⁵⁷ Therefore, even though Asian nationals also contributed to U.S agribusinesses, due to restrictive immigration legislation, U.S agribusinesses gradually shifted from Asian migrant labor to Mexican migrant labor. While this thesis will not be a comparative study between Asian

⁵⁵ Mize, 170. The housing situations of Braceros varied, some were good and others were horrible.

⁵⁶ Ana Rosas. *Abrazando El Espiritu: Bracero Families Confront the U.S-Mexican Border*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2014, 51.

⁵⁷ Kathleen R. Arnold, ed. 2011. *Anti-Immigration in the United States: a Historical Encyclopedia [2 Volumes] : A Historical Encyclopedia*. Westport: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 301-302. Accessed September 15, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central. While there had been other anti-immigration legislation enacted before, the National Origins Act of 1924 further exacerbated the situation as it only allowed two percent of entrants in the U.S per nationality.

and Mexican immigrants in the United States, this inferred that, historically throughout the 20th century, the United States has never had a consistent immigration policy. This was further exemplified by the Bracero Program where Mexicans were both sought after and exploited against in the U.S.⁵⁸ However, before beginning the study on the Bracero Program, it will be important to analyze how this gradual shift occurred. From there, the succeeding chapters of this thesis will chart the course of the Bracero Program, Operation Wetback, and the many Mexican nationals that came to the United States in the 20th century. Throughout their many trials and tribulations, braceros exemplified Mexican solidarity and success as the Bracero Program allowed them to make more money and aspire for a better life.

Chapter 1 of this thesis on the Bracero Program will outline the conditions that predated the program's implementation where due to the increased amount of anti-immigration laws passed during the late 1800s and early 1900s, it excluded ethnic minorities from different parts of the world.⁵⁹ In particular, as will become apparent in the forthcoming chapter, Asian immigrants from China and Japan were severely affected, and the United States was left with a labor shortage throughout the 20th century. Therefore, to make up for these labor shortages, the U.S government gradually shifted towards Mexican nationals for

⁵⁸ Mitchell, 33. This demonstrated how there was a duality in hiring the Braceros, in which U.S agribusiness owners needed them in order to profit from their labor.

⁵⁹ Mae Ngai. *Impossible Subjects*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 17-18.

specific labor needs.⁶⁰ The larger scope of this thesis will also begin to tease out values that were fundamental to Mexican migration to the United States during the 20th century such as necessity and perseverance. These same values continued to play a major factor during the Bracero Program.

In the 19th century, the United States passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers to the United States for up to ten years.⁶¹ It was later extended by the Geary Act.⁶² When the forty seventh Congress of the United States enacted this law, this was the first piece of U.S legislation that specifically banned people based on the criteria of race.⁶³ Apart from the clear xenophobic attitudes that this law exemplified, by only focusing on Chinese laborers, this law further emphasized the nativism that existed in the United States as both U.S legislators and unions wanted to protect the interests of domestic workers in the United States.⁶⁴ Overall, this law was the foundation of anti-immigration legislation against ethnic minorities.

⁶⁰ Natalia Molina. *Fit to be Citizens?* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 60-61.

⁶¹ Loc.gov. U.S. Congress. U.S. Statutes at Large, Volume 22 -1883, 47th Congress. United States, - 1883, 1881. Periodical. Accessed on October 1, 2022. [https://www.loc.gov/item/llsl-v22/Acts_of_the_Forty-Seventh_Congress_of_the_United_States_\(loc.gov\)](https://www.loc.gov/item/llsl-v22/Acts_of_the_Forty-Seventh_Congress_of_the_United_States_(loc.gov))

⁶² "THE GEARY ACT.: FULL TEXT OF THE LAW UNDER WHICH CHINESE ARE DEPORTED." 1893. *Los Angeles Times* (1886-1922), Sep 11, 8. <http://libproxy.lib.csusb.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/geary-act/docview/163606530/se-2>.

⁶³ Erika, Lee. *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943*. (London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 13.

⁶⁴ Vernon M. Briggs. *Immigration Policy and the American Labor Force*. (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 26-27.

During the 20th century, stricter anti-immigration legislation would be enacted. Aside from the aforementioned Geary Act, The Gentlemen's Agreement of 1908 served as a prominent successor to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 as these xenophobic attitudes would be transferred to Japanese immigrants, albeit with a couple of notable key differences. For instance, while the Chinese Exclusion Act outright prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers by any means, this new immigration legislation only targeted new incoming Japanese immigrants. Japanese nationals already inside the U.S and their families could still be issued U.S passports, effectively allowing them to leave and re-enter the country.⁶⁵ Additionally, given their newfound legal status in the U.S, they could also choose to reunite with their extended family as this law still allowed for Japanese nationals to bring over their relatives from Japan.⁶⁶

The Gentlemen's agreement of 1908 prominently demonstrated the continuation of anti-Asian sentiment in the United States at the beginning of the 20th century. Additionally, even though this law explicitly targeted Japanese immigrants, given the key regulations implemented in the law, there was a clear distinction in the way Japanese nationals were perceived compared to Chinese nationals in the U.S, with President Roosevelt expressing that Japanese people

⁶⁵ Erika Lee. *The Making of Asian America: A History*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 129-130.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

were higher in status compared to Chinese people.⁶⁷ Furthermore, with favoritism clearly displayed towards Japanese people over Chinese people, the United States effectively began to create a racial hierarchy, where white people remained at the top in comparison to those of Asian descent. On the other hand, even though both Chinese people and Japanese people were ethnically Asian, during this time, Japanese people were considered higher on the racial hierarchy than Chinese people.

Likewise, both U.S politicians and scholars continued to illustrate their favoritism and inconsistent rhetoric when referring to Japanese people. For instance, President Roosevelt reaffirmed his claims about the Japanese people's higher status while he addressed congress in 1906, supporting, in principle, the idea that Japanese people should gain naturalization.⁶⁸ Additionally, in historian and eugenicist Lothrop Stoddard's book *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy*, the author was impressed by the Japanese peoples' ability to adapt to what he called "white ideas and methods." Likewise, as Japanese people adopted western ideals, he further emphasized that this presented itself with three dangers against western nations including military confrontation, economic expansion, and immigration.⁶⁹ These claims implied Japanese

⁶⁷ Michael P. Cullinane. *The Gentlemen's' Agreement - Exclusion by Class*. "Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration, and Diaspora." Volume 32, (2014): 139-161.

⁶⁸ Katherine Benton-Cohen. 2018. *Inventing the Immigration Problem: The Dillingham Commission and Its Legacy*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 50.

⁶⁹ Lee. *The Making of Asian America: A History*, 129-130.

superiority over other Asian people. However, As argued through Stoddard's work, it also illustrated the United States' anxieties over Japan's rival to U.S hegemony. Even as Japanese people incorporated western ideals, there was both an element of contradiction and duality to U.S rhetoric because even as U.S politicians and scholars were impressed by Japanese modernization efforts, they could not get over their xenophobic attitudes, constantly referring to them as the "yellow peril."⁷⁰ Overall, this allowed for the continuation of anti-immigration legislation into the 20th century as the U.S government was worsening its approach towards foreign immigration, prohibiting other ethnic minorities from settling in the United States.

For the next couple decades, more anti-immigration legislation would be introduced in the United States. For instance, in 1917, another immigration law was passed in the United States. This law added a new provision for newly arriving immigrants to the U.S, requiring them to pass a literacy test before being allowed to enter the U.S.⁷¹ In implementing this new legislation, the United States government set out to further halt immigration to the United States. In the process, U.S legislators also revealed their exclusionary and nativist attitudes toward foreign migration as they wished to protect the interests of the United States. The exclusionary aspect of this legislation was clear because people that could not pass the literacy test would be restricted from entering the United

⁷⁰ Ibid., 129.

⁷¹ Ngai, 19.

States. Furthermore, nativism, which grew from the fears and anxieties directed toward foreign cultures, was also prevalent because enforcing a literacy test to enter the U.S was another way to further determine if people were capable of assimilating into American society.⁷² In attempting to halt further immigration to the United States, the literacy tests emphasized how the United States also became increasingly aware and strict toward the huge influx of immigrants coming from different parts of the world.

The Immigration Act of 1917 added other regulations that would deter immigrants from entering the United States. For instance, this law further singled out Asian immigrants, establishing an “Asiatic Barred Zone” where it prohibited all immigrants coming from any Asian country.⁷³ Aside from this new development, the Immigration Act of 1917 was not just excluding people based on a particular ethnicity, but it hoped to exclude the type of person that would attempt to immigrate to the United States.⁷⁴ This inferred that this form of anti-immigration legislation was aimed at parts of the world where they were deemed undesirable, being codified in the language that was used in the law.⁷⁵ In section

⁷² Matthew Ward. “They Say Bad Things Come in Threes: How Economic, Political and Cultural Shifts Facilitated Contemporary Anti-immigration Activism in the United States.”(Journal of Historical Sociology: Volume 27 Issue 2, 2014), 263-292.

⁷³ Briggs, 38. This new provision did not apply to Japan because the Gentlemen Agreement of 1908 had already set their rules and regulations.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Loc.gov. United States, and United States Bureau Of Immigration. Immigration laws. Act of February 5, 1917; and acts approved ; October 19, 1918; May 10, 1920; June 5, 1920; December 26, 1920, and May 19, 1921, as amended, and Act May 26, 1922. Rules of May 1, 1917. Washington, Govt. print. off, 1922. Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/22019016/>. [Image 6 of](#)

three of the Immigration Act of 1917, it specifically outlined that “the following classes of aliens shall be excluded from admission into the United States: All idiots, imbeciles, feebleminded persons, epileptics, insane persons; persons who have had one or more attacks of insanity at anytime previously; persons of constitutional psychopathic inferiority;”⁷⁶ By this time, Given the highly derogatory language used in the law, U.S legislation took a dramatic shift towards not just profiling and excluding people based on race but also on their physical and mental characteristics, as a variety of distinctly inferior characteristics would be enough to prohibit someone’s entry into the United States. By referring to ethnic minorities as “aliens,” this use of language also demonstrated a sub-human element where the people classified under this criteria, were prematurely categorized within the American racial hierarchy. Overall, this legislation would be an introduction towards even more anti-immigration legislation in the coming years.

[Immigration laws. Act of February 5, 1917; and acts approved October 16, 1918; October 19, 1918; May 10, 1920; June 5, 1920; December 26, 1920, and May 19, 1921, as amended, and Act May 26, 1922. Rules of May 1, 1917. | Library of Congress \(loc.gov\)](#)

⁷⁶ Loc.gov. United States, and United States Bureau Of Immigration. Immigration laws. Act of February 5, 1917; and acts approved ; October 19, 1918; May 10, 1920; June 5, 1920; December 26, 1920, and May 19, 1921, as amended, and Act May 26, 1922. Rules of May 1, 1917. Washington, Govt. print. off, 1922. Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/22019016/>. [Image 6 of Immigration laws. Act of February 5, 1917; and acts approved October 16, 1918; October 19, 1918; May 10, 1920; June 5, 1920; December 26, 1920, and May 19, 1921, as amended, and Act May 26, 1922. Rules of May 1, 1917. | Library of Congress \(loc.gov\)](#)

During the 1920s, the same exclusionary and highly discriminatory attitudes that had previously led to new legislation against incoming immigrants, particularly targeting Asian nationals, southern, and eastern Europeans, continued to escalate. U.S legislators enacted more anti-immigration legislation, with the implementation of newer immigration laws in 1921 and 1924. For instance, the immigration act of 1921 (known as the Emergency Quota Act) limited the number of immigrants migrating from both southern and eastern Europe. To accomplish this, the United States set a fixed number of entries based on the number of nationalities already in the country.⁷⁷

In just three years, the United States government would further prohibit the entry of immigrants when they passed the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 (or the National Origins Act). This law was a symbolic successor to the previous immigration legislation of 1921 because instead of just limiting immigrants to three percent of those living in the country according to the 1890 census based on national origin, this law narrowed the figure to two percent. In implementing these measures, the central theme was to further restrict immigration from Asia and southern and eastern Europe.⁷⁸ In particular, this conclusion can be drawn upon because while southern and eastern Europe were restricted to only allowing roughly about 3,000-5,000 immigrants, western European nations like Great Britain were allowed to admit 65,000 immigrants into the United States. To

⁷⁷ Arnold, 176. It set a quota for only 3 percent of immigrants based on the 1910 U.S Census.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 301-302.

make matters worse, Asian countries like China, India, and Japan were further reduced to only 100 entrants each.⁷⁹ Aside from the limited number of entrants allowed depending on the country of origin, countries located in the western hemisphere were exempt from the quota requirement. However, it did begin to enforce the use of legal documents from another country, including passports and visas. This particular requirement made the migration of Mexican nationals to the United States more difficult.⁸⁰

The late 1910s and 1920s represented a dramatic shift in United States anti-immigration legislation. Rather than just exclude immigrants from just one part of the world, as the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Gentlemen's Agreement had done to Asian immigrants, these new stricter laws prohibited other immigrants coming from different regions of the world. For instance, while these new laws still included Asian countries, they now focused their attention at halting immigrants coming from southern and eastern Europe. In stopping these migration pools from these parts of Europe, the rhetoric employed by these laws continued to demonstrate a favoritism of one race over another, primarily allowing entry to white Anglo Saxons from western Europe.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Ngai, 28-29. The statistics of 3,000 and 5,000 reflect both Italy and Russia individually.

⁸⁰ Arnold, 302.

⁸¹ V. N. Parrillo. (2008). Eugenics. In *Encyclopedia of social problems* (Vol. 1, pp. 338-340). While the themes of exclusionary and bigotry were a huge part of this law, the use of the words "unfit races" demonstrated a key part of the American Eugenics Movement, which hoped to eliminate certain people from the United States, tying racism to eugenics.

The shift to Mexican Labor in the United States

Even with all these new restrictions added to the United States immigration system in the 20th century, such changes overlooked and failed to halt immigration coming from Mexico as these new laws barely affected any countries in the western hemisphere.⁸² For instance, with Mexico experiencing political turmoil in 1911, it caused many Mexican nationals to leave Mexico in search of better living conditions and job opportunities.⁸³ Likewise, the reason that the United States did not perceive Mexican nationals as a problem was because they provided a cheap source of labor. As some U.S officials and agribusinesses observed the situation, they stated that “these immigrants were neither a cultural threat nor an economic threat.”⁸⁴ While these attitudes towards Mexicans demonstrated a leniency in immigration regulation in comparison to other countries, these minor changes only went so far because they looked at the influx of Mexican immigrants as both a source of labor and economic revenue, a position previously reserved by Asian immigrants.⁸⁵ During World War I, U.S agribusinesses desperately needed workers, looking to Mexican nationals to fill

⁸² Arnold, 302.

⁸³ Briggs, 38.

⁸⁴ Molina, 60.

⁸⁵ Lee. *The Making of Asian America: A History*, 74-75. Asian immigrants worked in agriculture in the 19th-20th centuries.

these vacant spots.⁸⁶ By the 1920s, Mexican nationals were the primary labor force that contributed to the agricultural sector in the United States southwest.⁸⁷

Therefore, slowly but surely, this period represented a drastic shift in migration pools as Mexican nationals would flock to the United States with minimal restrictions, being at first seen as “birds of passage.”⁸⁸ In the process, while restricting the migration of predominantly Asian countries, the United States experienced a labor shortage, where, as aforesaid, it looked to Mexican nationals to fill this position.⁸⁹ In doing so, as seen in the 1910s and 1920s, U.S. agribusinesses demonstrated their reliance on foreign labor. From these observations seen throughout the early 20th century, the need to acquire cheap manual labor in the U.S would always be necessary. Therefore, the phenomenon known as the revolving door of labor in the United States had been complete, transitioning from Asian immigrants to Mexican immigrants.⁹⁰ As Mexican nationals would take the primary spot as agricultural laborers in the U.S, xenophobic attitudes towards Mexican nationals persisted, exemplifying that they

⁸⁶ D.S. Massey. *Racial Formation in Theory and Practice: The Case of Mexicans in the United States*. *Race Soc Probl* 1, 12–26 (2009).

⁸⁷ Manuel G. Gonzales. *Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 124. Filipinos were the only rivals to Mexican labor. However, by the 1930s, Mexicans had outnumbered Filipinos ten to one in agricultural camps in California.

⁸⁸ Molina, 75.

⁸⁹ Lee, 180. While Asian immigrants had played a huge role as farmworkers in the United States, they were gradually displaced by Mexican immigrants in the 1920s and 1930s.

⁹⁰ Gamboa, 4. Here, it explained how Mexican immigrants had become the preferred choice of cheap and accessible labor.

were seen as inferior and nothing more than an expendable labor force. Yet, as the United States entered World War II by the end of 1941, they would again require an influx of cheap labor, with Mexican nationals more than capable of providing this labor. Therefore, moving forward, the themes of reliance and necessity would drive both U.S agribusinesses and Mexican nationals, spanning the next two decades.⁹¹

⁹¹ Mize, and Swords, 3-5.

CHAPTER TWO

WORLD WAR II: LABOR SHORTAGES IN THE UNITED STATES AND THE CALL FOR A JOINT U.S-MEXICAN BILATERAL LABOR AGREEMENT

Chapter 2 of this thesis will move forward from chapter one's observations of U.S anti-immigration legislation. Due to the highly restrictive nature of immigration in the 20th century targeting Asian immigrants, U.S agribusinesses were in desperate need of laborers to make up for labor shortages in the lead up to World War II.⁹² Therefore, the Bracero Program was enacted between the United States and Mexico in 1942, allowing Mexican nationals to be temporarily contracted in the U.S.⁹³ This demonstrated the revolving door of foreign labor in the United States as U.S agribusinesses' shifted from Asian immigrant labor in the 19th century to Mexican immigrant labor in the 20th century, being a pivotal point emphasized in Chapter I. Chapter 2 will also focus on the bracero agreement, bracero contracts, incorporate individual bracero recruitment experiences, briefly illustrate the interpretations and reactions from both politicians and U.S agribusiness at the beginning of the Bracero Program, and tease out what braceros' faced while they were employed in the Bracero Program. The larger scope of this thesis on the Bracero Program will further argue that the themes of necessity and perseverance were prominently reflected by individual bracero experiences.

⁹² Mitchell, 24.

⁹³ Mize, and Swords, 3.

In 1941, with the United States' entry into World War II and a decrease in the domestic work force, the U.S looked to Mexico for a labor force.⁹⁴ U.S agribusinesses also welcomed this approach because they hoped to reap the profits from acquiring a cheap and readily available work force.⁹⁵ Aside from this heavily capitalist perspective of U.S agribusinesses, which emphasized their revenue over everything else, Mexican nationals' own points of view has been often overlooked. Therefore, this thesis' main goal will shed light on their thoughts on the Bracero Program.

Additionally, this thesis will also emphasize bracero workers' successes as many of these laborers came to the United States to have more employment opportunities and earn more money for their families.⁹⁶ For instance, in Mexico, wages were deplorable, ranging from 3-6 Mexican pesos in most regions.⁹⁷ When the Bracero Program was announced in Mexico, many *campesinos* (Mexican agricultural workers) were anxious about joining the Bracero Program where they would take chances, selling their things just to be able to afford their

⁹⁴ Mize, 209. With labor shortages, the United States and Mexico formally agreed to the Bracero Program, signed in 1942.

⁹⁵ Mitchell, 2. It emphasized the interests of big agribusiness owners, in which profit mattered above all. As will become apparent in later chapters, this would prove important because these growers would exploit laborers.

⁹⁶ Nelson G. Copp. "Wetbacks and Braceros: Mexican Migrant Laborers and American Immigration Policy, 1930-1960 Dissertation. (Boston University Graduate School, 1963), 3.

⁹⁷ Garcia, 9-10. These statistics demonstrate how low Mexicans earned in the 1940s and early 1950s. Extraordinarily, as Mexicans worked closer to the northern border, the higher their wages were, being around 11 Mexican pesos.

trips to the recruitment centers.⁹⁸ Sal Galaviz, the son of former Bracero worker Celedonio Galaviz, documented his father's experience working as a bracero, first in Texas and later in California. In particular, he described that his father, who had massive economic problems in Mexico, had to borrow money in order to come to the U.S. It was here that, given his stature of six feet, his father would be put to pick both lemons and oranges. From his father's experiences, Sal also remembered that his father told him, "I don't have a lot of money to leave you, but what I do have is a land where you can do anything you want."⁹⁹ Sal's testimony on his father vividly demonstrated the dire conditions that Mexicans continued to face in Mexico where there was a limited amount of opportunities.¹⁰⁰ Likewise, his testimony demonstrated perseverance because his father tried to achieve a better standard of living for himself, making many sacrifices.¹⁰¹ Moreover, this was further emphasized with the message that Celedonio gave to his son because while his journey had led him through many trials and tribulations, he understood that he was finally in a better place for himself and his family.

⁹⁸ Mireya Loza. 2016. *Defiant Braceros: How Migrant Workers Fought for Racial, Sexual, and Political Freedom*, 1-2, The David J. Weber Series in the New Borderlands History. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

⁹⁹ Sal Galviz, "The Promised Land." The Bracero History Archive, Accessed September 19, 2022. [The Promised land · Bracero History Archive \(braceroarchive.org\)](https://braceroarchive.org)

¹⁰⁰ Garcia, 3.

¹⁰¹ Mize, 2. Another Bracero worker, senior Palmas, who worked as a tortilla vendor, also emphasized similar desires to come to the United States for more opportunities than Mexico had at the time.

Likewise, Jose Carmona, who was contracted in the Bracero Program in 1950, also reflected the impoverished conditions that he faced in Mexico, leading him to eventually seek recruitment in the Bracero Program. From his time working in the United States as a bracero, he recalled that he worked for about a year and a half as a bracero in California, working six days a week. He detailed his desire to earn more money in the United States rather than in Mexico as Mexicans could only expect to earn five to six pesos. As he put it, “Braceros made two times more than Mexicans in Mexico.”¹⁰² Overall, he genuinely had a positive outlook on the Bracero Program.¹⁰³ From Mr. Carmona’s testimony, he also demonstrated the dire need of Mexicans to improve their own livelihood. This was clarified when he specified the horrible wages that Mexicans earned in Mexico. Since Mr. Carmona voluntarily left his home decades ago in search of better job opportunities, this illustrated the determination of Mexican nationals as he wanted to make the most out his time in the Bracero Program, with monetary gain clearly being his main goal.

The Bracero Agreement, Bracero Contracts, Recruitment Experiences, and the Journey to the U.S.

With the mounting pressure from U.S agribusinesses to implement a guest worker plan and ensure a stable work force, the United States moved forward

¹⁰² “Jose Carmona,” Bracero History Archive, accessed November 19, 2022, <https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/3294>.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

with its plan to acquire Mexican labor with the bracero agreement.¹⁰⁴ In the initial stages of this formal agreement, while the Mexican government had its reservations about allowing Mexican nationals to migrate to the United States, they nevertheless implemented specific guidelines that were aimed at safeguarding their own citizens from racial prejudice and giving them adequate conditions while they completed their bracero contracts. The bracero agreement stated:

It is understood that Mexicans contracted to work in the United States shall not be engaged in any military service. Mexicans entering the United States shall not suffer discriminatory acts of any kind in accordance with Executive order No 8802 ordered issued at the White House June 25, 1941. Mexicans entering the United States under this understanding shall enjoy the guarantees of transportation, living expenses, repatriation established in article 29 of the Mexican federal labor law.¹⁰⁵

While these safeguards were implemented both in good faith and were the only way that the Mexican government would agree to the Bracero Program, they were delusional as even with these provisions in place, there was no feasible way to implement them. Even though U.S agribusinesses were responsible for providing “adequate” services to braceros, they implemented minimal effort to care for braceros when they first arrived in the United States. This example alluded toward the exclusionary, discriminatory, and xenophobic attitudes of U.S agribusinesses as the bracero agreement proved to be worthless.¹⁰⁶ For

¹⁰⁴ Mitchell, 29.

¹⁰⁵ Mize, 209.

¹⁰⁶ Gamboa, 92-93. A U.S grower commented that Mexicans deserve nothing more.

instance, braceros frequently dealt with uncomfortable living quarters and terrible food in their work camps.¹⁰⁷

Aside from the bracero Agreement between the United States and Mexico, bracero contracts also served as another formal agreement between the proposed employee and the employer. The bracero contract detailed standard things such as their names, contract ID number, marital status, duration of their employment, location of workplace, and where they were to be returned upon the completion of their contract.¹⁰⁸ While the bracero contracts mostly reestablished what had already been agreed upon by both governments, the part of each individual contract where it set the charges for their meals was quite intriguing because it established the amount that each bracero could be deducted for employee meals. For instance, braceros had the choice of cooking for themselves or being charged for food. If braceros chose the food offered by U.S agribusinesses, they were charged one dollar and seventy-five cents.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, the bracero contract also stated that all braceros had to be paid the “prevailing wage.”¹¹⁰ Therefore, similar to domestic employees, braceros needed

¹⁰⁷ Mitchell, 255.

¹⁰⁸ Mize, 204-207.

¹⁰⁹ Henry Anderson. *The Bracero Program in California*. (New York: ARNO Press, 1976), 80.

¹¹⁰ Richard B. Craig. *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 44-45. Braceros had to be paid the “prevailing wage” in the location that they were employed, with piece rates varying.

to be paid the same amount of money, guaranteed in their contracts.¹¹¹ Wages rates would vary depending on where braceros were hired. For instance, braceros working in the Pacific Northwest region would be underpaid at sixty cents an hour.¹¹² In comparison, braceros contracted to work in California earned more for their labor. While it was difficult to establish a mean wage rate, in some cases, braceros made five to six dollars a day in California. When taking into account pay subtractions, their hourly pay came out to seventy-six to eighty-five cents.¹¹³

While all these rules and regulations seemed to protect and ensure Mexican nationals a great and fair deal in the United States, such elements again only seemed to serve as a symbolic deed of goodwill between two nations, with the average worker caught in the middle. However, braceros exemplified a dependance on earning U.S wages while also illustrating solidarity and individual strength to succeed in attaining this goal. For instance, they traveled to the United States to help support their families back home in Mexico where their first challenge came when Mexican nationals lined up at recruitment centers, hoping

¹¹¹ Samuel Liss. "The Concept and Determination of Prevailing Wages in Agriculture during World War II." *Agricultural History* 24, no. 1 (1950): 7. "Prevailing wages" were meant to regulate employees to a standard pay rate, with other contributing factors like demand also playing a role in the rate that employees were paid.

¹¹² Gamboa, 87.

¹¹³ Mitchell, 217.

to get contracted in the Bracero Program.¹¹⁴ Jose Maria Gonzalez, an *aspirante* (hopeful recruit) stated:

I became a bracero because I had few resources and I was of a humble class. My parents were old and I had to do something to give them food and take them to the doctor when they got sick. We lived in an adobe house. The floor was of dirt; the house had no doors. Since my parents could no longer work, at the age of fourteen I decided to become a bracero along with my brother.¹¹⁵

Faced with limited opportunities and severely impoverished conditions in Mexico, Mr. Gonzalez's testimony illustrated that his main reason for joining the Bracero Program was solely based on necessity where he hoped to aid and improve the life of his family.

Older Mexicans Illustrated the Difficulties of Migrating to the United States

Mexican politicians promoted the Bracero program as a symbol of unity and prosperity. For instance, the Mexican government was instrumental in creating a utopian narrative within the context of the Bracero Program as Mexican nationals were told to migrate to the United States, in hopes of modernizing and improving their social and economic conditions.¹¹⁶ Avila Camacho, a prominent advocate of the Bracero Program, uttered these same

¹¹⁴ Rosas, 24-25. With these thoughts of better paid opportunities in the United States in the minds of Mexicans, this general observation was also not lost on Mexican officials as they would promote the program on the values of energy, money, and time.

¹¹⁵ Gilbert G. Gonzalez. *Guest Workers or Colonized Labor? Mexican Labor Migration to the United States*. (London: Paradigm Publishers, 2013), 112-113, (Mr. Gonzalez's direct testimony)

¹¹⁶ Rosas, 20.

values. He emphasized that the Bracero Program “improved the character of the [Mexican] people, advancing Mexico’s social and technological development.”¹¹⁷ Mr. Camacho hoped to see and establish Mexico as a modern state, full of industrial improvements. However, his statements also inferred a prejudice undertone since he mentioned that Mexican’s needed to better their character. Therefore, this highlighted the inferiority complex that continued to persist in Mexico as its own government stigmatized its own citizens. With that in mind, it was the characteristics of perceived inferiority, necessity, and progression that would influence Mexico to approve the Bracero Program.

In contrast, older Mexicans quickly warned younger Mexicans of the dangers of going to the U.S in search of these opportunities. For instance, with their own experiences influencing their point of views regarding the recruitment of braceros, older Mexicans illustrated that the Mexican government knew about the highly discriminatory treatment of laboring in the United States, choosing to deceive this younger generation of Mexicans with limited life opportunities and minimal education. For people that chose to participate in the program, older Mexicans informed *aspirantes* that if they were to make the most out of their voluntary migration to the United States, they would have to be both patient and smart to transform their sacrifices into settlement with their families.¹¹⁸ In retrospective, older Mexicans emphasized their experience, criticizing the

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 19.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 28.

Mexican government for unjustly lying to their citizens about the racism prevalent in the U.S. For instance, they understood the racial discrimination that was affiliated with migrating to the United States as prior to the bracero agreement, Mexican nationals contended with derogatory language and marginalization. This led to unwarranted attitudes claiming that Mexicans were filthy, spread viruses, and were prone to theft.¹¹⁹ By labelling Mexican nationals this way, U.S citizens exemplified their prejudice attitudes, making it clear that Mexicans would not be accepted in the United States.

Furthermore, aside from the hostility that older Mexicans warned younger Mexicans about in the U.S, older Mexicans also emphasized the lack of opportunities that were offered in Mexico. Therefore, such evidence revealed the necessity and desire of *aspirantes* to find better opportunities in the U.S. These were the preset goals that *aspirantes* would carry with them when they were being recruited in the Bracero Program.¹²⁰ Overall, the advice that they got from older Mexicans illustrating solidarity from one generation to another, allowing them to move forward in their journey to the United States while making critical decisions that would impact their lives for better or worse.

The Recruitment Experience

As *aspirantes* made their way to recruitment centers, everything changed. Their attitudes completely shifted as they realized how stringent and unfair the

¹¹⁹ Copp, 19.

¹²⁰ Rosas, 19-20.

rules and regulations were going to be when they went to the recruitment centers.¹²¹ For instance, many *aspirantes* risked everything just to travel to the recruitment centers as *aspirantes* would take out loans, putting their houses as collateral just to afford the trip to the recruitment centers.¹²² At the same time, *aspirantes* had to bribe officials in order to be in line for a contract. This inferred how corrupt Mexican officials were as they took advantage of these desperate men for their own financial gain. If they got past the recruitment centers, *aspirantes* had to endure more long lines and humiliating examinations at reception centers.¹²³

As aforementioned, many *aspirantes* tried to get contracted in the Bracero Program, emphasizing the need to provide for their families as the reason for seeking a contract in the Bracero Program. For instance, Conrado Cardenas, a former bracero, illustrated how excruciating his trip to a bracero recruitment center was. He recalled that “the needs were so great that many died on the way but that didn’t stop the struggle to come to the United States where there was work.”¹²⁴ Mr. Cardenas reinforced the themes of perseverance and necessity as his testimony revealed the desperation that he felt, wanting to be contracted into the Bracero Program. Furthermore, his testimony also emphasized his aspiration

¹²¹ Mize, and Sword, 7-10.

¹²² Gonzalez, 62.

¹²³ Deborah Cohen. *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico*. University of North Carolina Press, 2011, 102.

¹²⁴ Gonzalez, 112-113. (Testimony from Conrado Cardenas)

to finally have more job opportunities that were frequently unavailable in Mexico.¹²⁵

In comparison with Mr. Cardenas' own experience at the bracero recruitment center, Jose Maria Gonzalez further detailed the difficulties that he and other braceros encountered on their way to the recruitment centers. He stated that,

It was very difficult at the recruiting station because we came from long distances and when we got there we suffered a lot, such as not having a place to sleep and food to eat when we ran out of money, getting a contract brought a lot of suffering. Many had no money to last a month or fifteen days, and they suffered very much. Those who had the resources got off okay. But if they came without enough money then [sic] they were sure to suffer.¹²⁶

Mr. Gonzalez further detailed the dangerous aspect of traveling to the recruitment centers as many *aspirantes* did not have enough money or food. Therefore, due to the lack of money, it exposed the impoverished conditions that he and other Mexican citizens had. Likewise, since it took a month at times to get past the recruitment centers, it stressed the perseverance of many Mexican nationals to not quit in their goal to be contracted in the Bracero Program, seeing it through to the very end. Therefore, this inferred a pivotal and dire moment for *aspirantes* since sometimes the journey for braceros was a no-win situation, given the state of their finances at home and the time it took to be contracted.

¹²⁵ Garcia, 4.

¹²⁶ Gonzalez, 112-113. (Testimony from Jose Maria Gonzalez)

Another key, albeit, often overlooked aspect of bracero recruiting was *mordidas* (literally meaning taking a bite). *Mordidas* essentially meant that Mexican officials would take bribes from *aspirantes*. *Aspirantes* did this in order to have a higher chance at being contracted in the Bracero Program.¹²⁷ For instance, Elias Magaña, who was a former bracero contracted in 1960-1961, recalled that “he had to pay in order to get recruited as a bracero.”¹²⁸ In particular, this aspect of the recruitment process was confusing because as Mr. Magaña clarified, all he knew was that this was necessary to being recruited. Therefore, from the experience of Mr. Magaña, there was a sense of ambiguity regarding how he was taken advantage of. He simply brushed it off as something that he had to do.¹²⁹ Furthermore, this process implied the cruel and corruptive nature of the Mexican government because Mexican officials would often ask for *mordidas* from *aspirantes* to supposedly give them a higher chance at recruitment.¹³⁰ Therefore, it proved that for one, Mr. Magaña could have been naïve and unaware of the highly corruptive process involving bribes in Mexico at

¹²⁷ Briggs, 99.

¹²⁸ Elias Magaña, “*Bracero History Archive*,” accessed September 28, 2022, <https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/3279>.

¹²⁹ Mize, 92. Other than directly being asked for money from Mexican officials, elites were involved with the Mexican government would charge aspirantes to get on a list. This list symbolized a mordida bribe as these elites were essentially charging for a bracero contract.

¹³⁰ Gonzalez, 68. While not specifically calling it a bribe, Mr. Magaña’s testimony heavily infers that he was bribed by Mexican officials, commonly known as a mordida. The mordida exemplified the corrupt nature of the Mexican society as Mexican officials would gladly accept a bribe from Mexican hopefuls (*aspirantes*), who themselves were hoping to be recruited in the Bracero Program.

the time. On the other hand, he could have also been keenly aware of the process, having migrated many times as a bracero, and was willing to use this method to his advantage.¹³¹ Thus, this stressed how this was a no-win situation in some cases because since many braceros already faced impoverished conditions and debt in order to make it to the recruitment centers, they were further taken advantage of by Mexican officials. In doing so, this exemplified the perils of transnational migration from Mexico to the United States.

Former braceros also expressed that their journey to the recruitment centers was a frustrating process as U.S agribusinesses exemplified their biases when contracting braceros. Sotero O. Cervantes stated:

Our stay at the recruiting center was more difficult than trying to get there because we stayed there in the big crowd of people and the contractors were very strict. They selected you as if you were an animal. Depending on the rancher and his requirements, they chose you on the basis of your capacity to work: tomato, onion, chili, potato, and all those things; they wanted a certain capacity in the men for each kind of work.¹³²

In contrast, Rafael Luna Anaya also shared his unique experience, illustrating more qualifications that U.S agribusinesses looked for in a worker while being examined at recruitment and reception centers. Mr. Anaya stated:

[The process of becoming a bracero] was difficult in the sense that we had to undergo examinations; it was hard to undergo a general checkup and it was embarrassing; one had to forget not having clothes on. One had to undergo the exam no matter what,

¹³¹ Elias Magaña, "Bracero History Archive," *Bracero History Archive*, accessed September 28, 2022, <https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/3279>.

¹³² Gonzalez, 112-113. (Sotero O. Cervantes' direct testimony)

because they didn't want infected people under any circumstances; they only wanted healthy people in good condition for work.¹³³

Such testimonies demonstrated how competitive the bracero recruitment process was as *aspirantes* willingly endured humiliating examinations to get contracted in the Bracero Program.¹³⁴ U.S employers also checked for favorable qualities to fill up their ranks, including a bracero's build and their muscle tone.¹³⁵ Mexican nationals had to have these specific characteristics to have a higher chance at being contracted in the Bracero Program. Therefore, U.S employers prominently stigmatized contracted braceros because they viewed them more adept at performing this type of manual labor.

Another key aspect of recruitment involved recruiters checking the hands of *aspirantes*. U.S agribusiness recruiters did this in order to see who was better suited to being contracted in the Bracero Program. For instance, Jorge Colima, who went through this excruciating and rigorous process, said that "they would check your hands, how they looked, and if some had calluses on their hands, 'oh come here.' But if your hands were clean they would say 'no, you are a secretary.' And I, ever since I was young I worked in the fields, I had huge balls of Calluses."¹³⁶ Mr. Colima's testimony further shed light on the exclusionary

¹³³ Gonzalez, 112-113. (Rafael Luna Anaya's direct testimony)

¹³⁴ Mize, and Swords, 10.

¹³⁵ Gonzalez, 71.

¹³⁶ Mize, 100-101.

qualities of the Bracero Program where multiple factors played a part in an *aspirante* being contracted in the Bracero Program. Furthermore, one mishap, such as an *aspirantes* hands being too soft, was enough to have this person be rejected from the program. Overall, in doing so, it gave a realistic view of the trauma that Mexicans endured as they went through this process.¹³⁷

The Initial Interpretations and Reactions from Politicians and U.S Agribusinesses

From 1942 through 1947, the Bracero Program was characterized as a period of goodwill and extensive cooperation between the United States and Mexico. Both nations described this program as a joint fight for the ideals of democracy.¹³⁸ For instance, when braceros reached California, parties (*fiestas*) and programs were staged in order to welcome the newly arriving Mexican nationals where U.S officials emphasized a tone of both happiness and enthusiasm. Additionally, the U.S government referred to braceros as *soldados* (soldiers) that came to the United States during the 1940s and used other slogans, including *la Victoria de las democracias* (victory of the democracies) and *Viva America* (America Lives). These ideals gave a sense of pan-Americanism where both the United States and Mexico were destined to prosper, promoting unity amongst these two nations.¹³⁹ While the shift in rhetoric that

¹³⁷ Gonzalez, 59. Twenty person of Aspirantes reporting for the initial phase of recruiting were rejected.

¹³⁸ Gamboa, 73. While this happened as part of the Bracero railroad program in conjunction with the agricultural program, it can be inferred that similar rhetoric was used to influence and attract Mexicans as they journeyed to the United States.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 73.

proclaimed braceros as soldiers also ingrained a perception of harmony and cooperation amongst the U.S and Mexico, it more importantly characterized Mexican nationals as a vital part of America's war effort where they were performing a sense of duty to themselves and their fellow countrymen.¹⁴⁰

On the other hand, U.S agribusinesses also showcased their preference for bracero workers. During the first year of the Bracero Program, the initial plan was to allow 50,000 Mexican nationals to work in the United States. However, within a year, this quota was been raised to 75,000 Mexican nationals.¹⁴¹

According to U.S agribusinesses, braceros exemplified a distinct type of Mexican, proclaiming that braceros were excellent workers that finished their workday without fail in comparison to domestic workers.¹⁴² These observations also reflected the symbolic cooperation between the United States and Mexico because due the necessity to contract labor outside the United States, the Mexican government was more than happy to oblige, allowing more people to be formally contracted in the Bracero Program. Moreover, U.S agribusinesses demonstrated their partiality to employing braceros because by characterizing braceros as hard workers in comparison to domestic workers, they suggested that Mexican nationals alone were best suited for this type of labor. Therefore,

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 75.

¹⁴¹ Elac, 43. Additionally, while the Mexican government did raise the quota by 25, 000 people in 1943, this allowed for over 219,000 workers to brought to the U.S, contracted in 24 states.

¹⁴² Gonzalez, 90.

they capitalized on the bilateral agreement between the United States and Mexico, continuing to demand for the employment of braceros.

When braceros finally arrived to begin working in the United States, the truly horrid practices of U.S agribusinesses would be apparent to the brave people that participated in the Bracero Program at different times throughout its duration. While the bracero agreement guaranteed that braceros would be paid similarly to domestic workers, in some circumstances, workers dealt with unreliable pay as the wage rate changed on a daily basis. In other instances, U.S agribusinesses would also charge braceros for things not mentioned in their contracts, including blankets.¹⁴³ From these astute observations, it demonstrated the corrupt nature of U.S agribusinesses as they would unethically charge braceros unnecessary expenses or lower bracero wages to achieve better profits. This further exemplified how illogical the bilateral agreement between the U.S and Mexico was because there was no feasible way for Mexico to guarantee that their regulations in the bracero agreement would be met.

¹⁴³ Mize, 16.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PERILS OF MIGRATING TO THE U.S

Chapter 3 of this thesis will shed light on the various living and working conditions that braceros experienced as many Mexican nationals found themselves in precarious situations while working in the agricultural fields of California, which also included insufficient wages and unethical business practices by U.S agribusinesses. Furthermore, when braceros' own testimonies are utilized for this thesis, they demonstrate the distinction between braceros' own perspectives as they had something unique to say about their own individual experiences. Therefore, throughout this chapter, there was an element of duality present. Moreover, in the larger scheme of this thesis on the Bracero Program, by showcasing the experiences of different braceros, it will continue to highlight why Mexicans chose to partake in the Bracero Program, which included the need to make more money and aspire for a better life while being employed in the U.S.

Braceros emphasized the dilemma of transnational migration across the U.S-Mexican border where their earnings were barely enough to help support their families in Mexico. For instance, a former bracero from Henry Anderson's book *Harvest of Loneliness*, stated:

When we came here, we think that we may be lucky and return to Mexico with a few hundred dollars American. But most of us are only able to make enough to sustain our families while we are away. Our families are so large, you know. And we are not allowed to stay here long enough to make enough money to do the things that we had planned. I know many braceros who have been to your country many times, but I do not know any of them who

have been able to make enough money, or keep it long enough to do what they had planned.¹⁴⁴

Likewise, Elias Magaña also recalled a similar experience as his earnings in the Bracero Program were also used to provide for his family. For instance, he gave a hypothetical scenario where, if he had a hundred dollars from his paycheck, he would send eighty dollars back to Mexico and only keep twenty dollars for himself. With whatever money he kept to himself, it was only enough for his basic essentials. When asked if at any time when he was in the U.S as a bracero was, he able to save any money, he replied, “No! because it was only a short period of time.”¹⁴⁵ Therefore, Mr. Magaña’s testimony reinforced the previous claims by the other bracero where their earnings were only able to help their family for a brief moment. At the same time, he demonstrated both necessity and determination because by emphasizing the importance of sending U.S currency to his family, he implied that migrating to U.S was the only way to provide for his family in Mexico. This further inferred the failures of the Mexican government as there was a lack opportunities available back in Mexico.¹⁴⁶ While Mexican nationals risked everything to come and work in the U.S for better opportunities, such testimonies also emphasized the irony, intricacies, and perils

¹⁴⁴ Gonzalez, 112-113. Direct testimony from a former bracero.

¹⁴⁵ Elias Magaña,” *Bracero History Archive*, accessed September 28, 2022, <https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/3279>.

¹⁴⁶ Gonzalez, 112-113. Jose Maria Gonzalez described the abhorrent conditions in Mexico that encouraged him to join the Bracero Program.

of transnational migration from Mexico to the United States because while braceros aspired to progress and to earn more money through this program, their experiences demonstrated that their impoverished conditions in Mexico were difficult to overcome.

U.S Agribusinesses' Cruel and Unfair Business Practices

Aside from the many challenges faced by braceros during the various stages of the recruitment in Mexico, once braceros made their way to their camp locations in the U.S, they further discovered the difficulties of migrating to the United States as U.S officials and other keen observers commonly described how braceros were consistently taken advantage of. As aforementioned, braceros needed to be paid the “prevailing wage” in the area that they were employed, making no less than thirty cents an hour.¹⁴⁷ However, this aspect of the Bracero Program was irrelevant as U.S agribusinesses failed to adequately pay their bracero employees in the first place.¹⁴⁸ For instance, a U.S compliance officer stated, “I found it to be quite a common practice for the growers to work their Nationals for, say, 12 hours a day, and pay them for only 8.”¹⁴⁹ The U.S compliance officers testimony reflected the carelessness displayed by U.S agribusiness to properly pay their bracero employees. Likewise, since the U.S

¹⁴⁷ Craig, 44-45.

¹⁴⁸ Mitchell, 90.

¹⁴⁹ Anderson, 146.

Compliance officer specified that this was a “common” issue with multiple growers, this also exemplified that this was a widespread issue in the Bracero Program, with U.S Compliance Officers only able to do their best to enforce proper regulation in the Bracero Program.

Remarkably, Elias Magana provided a counternarrative to what scholars and activists had said about the discrepancies in bracero pay because he completely denied that his employers had tampered with his pay. While Mr. Magana implied that he did not believe there were any discrepancies in the amount of money he was paid weekly, he and other braceros would hear that their “were deductions from their pay all the time” while working in the camp.¹⁵⁰ Therefore, his testimony inferred the difficulties of migrating to work in the United States because while Mr. Magana might have brushed off these accusations about his wages, it also implied how Mr. Magana took them lightly, never taking a second to actually calculate his earnings and deductions. This was problematic given how vague their contracts were.¹⁵¹ Additionally, there was also an element of duality to these wage discrepancies because Mr. Magana would constantly hear about unknown deductions in his pay. Therefore, there was a bit of uncertainty since Mr. Magana could never be sure of how he was being taken

¹⁵⁰ Elias Magaña,” *Bracero History Archive*, accessed September 28, 2022, <https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/3279>.

¹⁵¹ Mize, 204-207. Bracero contracts stated that Braceros had to be paid the “prevailing wage” in the area. While they were given rates on what braceros would be picking in the agricultural fields, these rates were unreliable as they could change when the U.S agribusiness deemed it necessary.

advantage of. Overall, his testimony was very insightful as it demonstrated how braceros dealt with unjust manipulations by U.S agribusinesses.

These remarks explained how difficult it was to enforce the regulations of the Bracero Program. While the guaranteed rights of braceros, found in article 29 of the bracero agreement, was part of the bilateral agreement between the United States and Mexican governments, this agreement was simply an arrangement of good foreign relations between two independent nations where both nations agreed to cooperate with one another.¹⁵² For instance, while both countries initially agreed to these demands, the United States understood that it could not hold up its own end of the agreement, as domestic employees were not allotted any of the requests made in the bracero agreement.¹⁵³ Therefore, these circumstances allowed for U.S agribusinesses to take full advantage of braceros.

The Working and Living Conditions as Described by Activists and Scholars

Ted Le Berton, a prominent opponent of the Bracero Program, demonstrated the grueling labor that braceros performed for an entire day. He stated that,

Twelve hundred and twenty Mexican men had eaten and washed up after picking tomatoes for twelve hours, much of the time in the broiling sun. these imported braceros looking tired, perhaps too tired to talk, for they were quiet as deaf mutes as they sprawled on the ground outside a row of raw ugly, oblong barracks, covered over with blistering and peeling tarpaper, in which they would sleep... most were homesick.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Ibid., 209.

¹⁵³ Craig, 45.

¹⁵⁴ Gonzalez, 34-35.

Ted Le Berton's remarks emphasized the horrid working and living conditions that were imposed on braceros on a daily basis where they spent the majority of the day working, leaving them with barely anytime for rest or leisure activities. In fact, he vividly described how once they finished their workday, sleeping was all they would do. Ted Le Berton was also quick to point out the mood and tone in the camp at the end of the day as a deep silence came upon the camp site. Of course, this was the logical conclusion after braceros had endured a long day of tiring and backbreaking labor, illustrating a sense of empathy for the braceros that went through it.

Henry Anderson gave a more vivid account of bracero living conditions. According to Mr. Anderson in his book, *The Bracero Program of California*, he recalled that,

Some bracero housing is basically as sound as an army barrack, or even a civilian motel. Some bracero housing is decidedly substandard. The remainder makes up a continuum between these extremes. Despite this great diversity, a crude typology may be suggested which, it is believed, embraces most bracero camps, we shall consider the following categories: Association camps; corporation camps; fringe camps; and family camps.¹⁵⁵

Mr. Anderson explained that the living spaces chosen for braceros varied greatly, adding to the complexity of this guest worker program. Likewise, in comparison with Ted Le Berton's own observations on bracero housing, when

¹⁵⁵ Anderson, 66.

Mr. Anderson used “crude” to describe the housing quarters of braceros, he further implied that while housing quarters varied in the work camp, these distinctions did not provide the most satisfactory living spaces for braceros.

In some cases, U.S agribusinesses improved living conditions in the labor camps. Mr. Anderson also stated that U.S agribusinesses “built entirely new sleeping, dining, and sanitary facilities, some of this new construction is cheap and temporary in character, but as the State Division of Housing observes ‘concrete block and steel frame structures are becoming increasingly common since they provide the greatest ease of maintenance.’”¹⁵⁶ These observations also clarified how bracero living conditions were different for everyone employed at different work locations. Mr. Anderson further implied that U.S agribusinesses actually did some much needed, albeit provisional, improvements to bracero living quarters. Likewise, he was also quick to point out that U.S agribusinesses’ utilized better materials to give braceros better housing during their contractual period.¹⁵⁷ However, since Mr. Anderson described these improvements as “temporary,” it illustrated that even as these improvements were being made, the main priority of U.S agribusinesses was to make a profit, putting over their responsibility to make adequate housing improvements.¹⁵⁸ Overall, his testimony

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 66-67.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 66.

¹⁵⁸ Mitchell, 33.

emphasized the intricacies of the Bracero Program as some braceros would be subjected to horrible living conditions while others would get better housing.

Aside from these astute observations about the distinctions between different housing arrangements in labor camps, when braceros experienced terrible housing conditions, there was no feasible way to get better housing arrangements. Mr. Anderson also gave a very detailed account of the many steps taken to report a housing violation in the Bracero Program, demonstrating the bracero agreement's incompetence to properly enforce U.S. agribusinesses to comply with the law. He stated:

The department of labor representative, usually greatly overburdened with routine duties, avoids time-consuming joint investigations whenever possible. Consequently, employers' braceros are almost never withdrawn for housing violations or for any other reason. If a Department of Labor representative is conscientious, upon noting a violation, he will 'bring the violation to the attention of the violating party and request that... corrective measures be taken.' If he commands the respect of the employer, the recommended action may be taken in due time. Even under the best of conditions, it may take months or even years for a violation of housing regulations to be corrected. Under less than optimum conditions, they may never be corrected at all.¹⁵⁹

Mr. Anderson's remarks exposed the fundamental causes that were responsible for the lack of initiative to get U.S. agribusinesses to cooperate with the Bracero Program, which also held them liable for ensuring adequate housing for bracero employees.¹⁶⁰ He further exemplified how ineffective the Bracero

¹⁵⁹ Anderson, 71.

¹⁶⁰ Mize, 209. This was clearly highlighted in the bracero agreement.

Program's bureaucratic measures of compliance were as employees of the United States Labor Department could not keep up with the surge in housing complaints and violations. U.S Labor Department employees also recklessly disregarded these violations, preferring not to perform their job duties effectively and follow up on these issues. Furthermore, even when U.S Labor Department employees properly followed up on these housing violations, there was very little that they could do because it would take a while for the precise measures to be taken against U.S agribusiness incompliance, being upwards of a couple months or more. Even worse, with many bracero contracts being no more than a couple of weeks, this meant that throughout their contractual periods, many braceros lived in deplorable conditions where they were powerless to do anything about them.¹⁶¹ With the assurance that there was a minimal chance of consequences for U.S agribusinesses, it inferred that they took a lack of initiative to fix any housing conditions for braceros. Therefore, as demonstrated by all these factors during the Bracero Program, there was a continuous endless cycle of awful living conditions, proving the fallacy of the bilateral bracero agreement as nothing more than a symbolic act of goodwill between the U.S and Mexico.

Working Conditions from the Perspective of Braceros

When it came to the work conditions of braceros, multiple braceros demonstrated their diverse experiences in the work camps. For instance, Pablo

¹⁶¹ Anderson, 66-67.

C. Flores illustrated his subpar working conditions in the Bracero Program. As part of his daily workday routine, he would “wake up at six in the morning, eat breakfast at seven, and go to work at eight, not returning from the fields until four or five in the afternoon.”¹⁶² After that, he “bathed and got ready to eat dinner. That was the life of a bracero.”¹⁶³ Mr. Flores’ vague answer was a sign of both perseverance and necessity because under his strict schedule, he did his best to abide by the rules of his agribusiness employer. By doing well during his contractual period, he would have better assurance of continued employment in the Bracero Program.¹⁶⁴ Therefore, he would continue to make more money to support his family back in Mexico.

In comparison, Antonio Nuno, another bracero that spent ten years with the Bracero Program, had an extraordinary work experience as a bracero where his employment in the Bracero Program also illustrated the corrupt nature of U.S agribusinesses. For instance, rather than being hired as a picker in the fields, Mr. Nuno said that he worked “distributing sprinklers in the morning and driving

¹⁶² Interview with Pablo C. Flores by Alejandra Díaz, 2008, "Interview no. 1343," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso. November 11, 2022. [1343 Pablo Flores.MP3 \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Mize, 59. Braceros accepted their conditions because they wanted to be stay contracted in the program and avoid being deported back to Mexico. However, in other cases, this worked in the favor of braceros because they continued to work and make more money, avoiding the tedious recruitment process.

tractors in the afternoon.”¹⁶⁵ Mr. Nuno’s employment in the Bracero Program presented a specific dilemma for U.S agribusinesses since the bracero agreement specifically prohibited braceros from engaging in other types of labor other than menial agricultural positions such as picking or sorting.¹⁶⁶ By violating the regulations of the bracero agreement, U.S agribusinesses exemplified their carelessness, believing that they did not need to follow these rules. Therefore, they deliberately took advantage of braceros, continuing to run their agribusiness on their own terms.

Alfredo Angulo Castro provided another unique historical narrative as he was hired to sort bales of hay and as an irrigator. In particular, he describing his irrigator position as beneficial because he “worked less, rested more, and was paid better.”¹⁶⁷ For instance, he said that “forty dollars was the highest paycheck that he earned.”¹⁶⁸ Yet, his hours also fluctuated because at first, he worked for “twelve hours and later twenty-four hours.”¹⁶⁹ In comparison to picking positions, irrigators were employed to provide water to the many crops in an agricultural

¹⁶⁵ Interview with Antonio Nuño by Annette Shreibati, 2009, "Interview no. 1233," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso. November 11, 2022. [1233 Antonio Nuno.mp3 \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

¹⁶⁶ Mize, 101-102.

¹⁶⁷ Interview with Alfredo Angulo Castro by Anaís Acosta, 2006, "Interview no. 1321," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso. November 11, 2022. [1321 Alfredo Angulo C..mp3 \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

field.¹⁷⁰ Thus, while he needed to move around the fields to provide sufficient water to the crops, given his statements about his job position, he probably did not have to do as much rigorous stoop labor, which would cause harm to his lower back. This was further inferred when taking into account the rapid and repetitive nature of picking, which had braceros fill up their boxes with produce for a better wage.¹⁷¹ In theory, he could have benefited from his position as he would have been less fatigued than other braceros that he worked with. However, his job position further demonstrated the carelessness of U.S agribusinesses as braceros were not supposed to be employed in different labor positions.¹⁷² In terms of his wage rate, he also provided a detailed description that demonstrated how he was paid better than other braceros. For instance, since he was not employed as a picker, his earnings were more consistent because pickers could constantly see diminishing returns in their earnings.¹⁷³ Furthermore, he also worked more hours than most braceros. This was another factor that allowed him to earn more money than other braceros.¹⁷⁴ Overall, due

¹⁷⁰ Mize, 63.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 68.

¹⁷² Mize, and Swords, 11.

¹⁷³ Mize, 68. Some braceros such as Don Francisco were paid meager wages as they had fill up boxes in order to make over a dollar a day.

¹⁷⁴ Interview with Alfredo Angulo Castro by Anaís Acosta, 2006, "Interview no. 1321," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso. November 11, 2022. Mr. Castro would sometimes work between twelve to twenty-four hours, more than most braceros. [1321 Alfredo Angulo C..mp3 \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

to these factors, Mr. Castro reflected a positive outlook on his experience in the Bracero Program.

Living Conditions from the Perspective of Braceros

Former braceros also detailed the living conditions that they lived in, providing a more realistic point of observation since they lived in these conditions. For instance, Rafael Cortez, who worked as a bracero in both California and Arizona throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, detailed the horrible living conditions that he endured during his tenure as a bracero. He recalled that “there were fifty beds next to each other.”¹⁷⁵ Likewise, as the weather patterns varied from hot to cold, he remembered that they did not have ventilators in some living quarters while other living quarters did have them. Under the extreme heat, they had to “sleep with the door open.”¹⁷⁶ Mr. Cortez’s remarks illustrated the unbearable living arrangements that braceros had where multiple people were housed together. Likewise, with the lack of sufficient ventilation in Mr. Cortez’s living quarters, this demonstrated the cruelty of U.S agribusinesses as they spent minimal money to provide satisfactory housing for braceros, with only a couple of housing units having ventilation units.

In comparison, another former bracero Roberto Garcia Estrada, who worked in California and other states from 1959 until the end of the Bracero

¹⁷⁵ Araceli Esparza and Rafael Cortez, “Rafael Cortez,” Bracero History Archive, accessed November 28, 2022, <https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/261>.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

Program in 1964, detailed his own housing arrangements in the Bracero Program. He recalled that “in the barracks we slept, maybe, in one barrack one hundred people. There were four barracks. Can you imagine the crowd of people, with everyone having company?”¹⁷⁷ Mr. Estrada’s testimony demonstrated his perseverance and resilient attitude to continue to live under these horrible conditions as he was forced to live and sleep beside other braceros. As he emphasized the “crowd of people” that were put in a single barrack, this further demonstrated that U.S agribusinesses’ took minimal care of braceros.

Likewise, Pablo C. Flores also described the uncomfortable conditions that he dealt with in the Bracero Program. When it came to his living quarters, he recalled that “everyone had a small room, sometimes two people per room, one bed on top and one on the bottom. [It] was not really good there.”¹⁷⁸ Regarding his living conditions, they differentiated from other braceros because he essentially depicted a bunk bed scenario, with one bed on top and the other on the bottom. And given the nature of his living arrangements, he suggested that it was very cramped where he was housed as he emphasized that they were not ideal at all, having minimal space for himself. Overall, this demonstrated the

¹⁷⁷ Veronica Cortez and Roberto Estrada García, “Roberto García Estrada,” Bracero History Archive, accessed November 28, 2022, <https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/396>.

¹⁷⁸ Interview with Pablo C. Flores by Alejandra Díaz, 2008, "Interview no. 1343," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso. November 11, 2022. [1343 Pablo Flores.MP3 \(sharepoint.com\)](https://sharepoint.com)

horrendousness of the bracero system as employers cut corners to save money, while they subjected braceros to uncomfortable living conditions.

The Food Offered to Braceros

In the camp sites, some braceros had a positive attitude of the food they were offered. For instance, Pablo C. Flores emphasized that they were fed “meat, potatoes, and in the morning, eggs, pancakes.”¹⁷⁹ Generally, he had no complaints about his meals, further stating that “they gave us good food.”¹⁸⁰ Even though braceros were unfamiliar with some food items like pancakes, Mr. Flores illustrated his open-mindedness to try different food since these food items were not typical of a Mexican national’s diet.¹⁸¹ Therefore, in some circumstances, even though it was unbeknownst to them, certain U.S agribusinesses’ would take better care of braceros as their food was sufficient to meet the expectations that braceros had.

Alfredo Angulo Castro provided a distinct opinion on the food that he was given. He detailed that in the morning, he “was fed eggs, sausages, bacon. At noon, he had stew.”¹⁸² He was displeased with his food options due to the lack of Mexican cuisine, as the tortilla was widely unavailable. Likewise, the idea of

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Anderson, 97.

¹⁸² Interview with Alfredo Angulo Castro by Anaís Acosta, 2006, "Interview no. 1321," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso. November 11, 2022. [1321 Alfredo Angulo C..mp3 \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

dissatisfaction goes well beyond having a dislike for a particular food choice. With him being a Mexican national contracted in the Bracero Program, this provided a specific dilemma because this implied that he was accustomed to a different diet altogether in Mexico.¹⁸³ Therefore, this exemplified a culture clash as Mr. Castro's values and tastes were challenged by cultural distinctions in the United States.

On the other hand, Elias Magana's testimony also gave a more positive perspective of the food that he was given while contracted in the Bracero Program. For instance, in terms of meals for braceros, he felt that they were satisfactory because they were "served oatmeal, white bread, eggs, for breakfast."¹⁸⁴ For lunch, he had tacos, not mentioning anything about dinner.¹⁸⁵ Mr. Magana's remarks further highlighted the diverse cuisine that braceros had at different work camps in California. Additionally, since Mr. Magana mentioned that he was fed tacos, which contain a tortilla, this further demonstrated that some U.S agribusinesses would accommodate their braceros better as the tortilla was an important food item for Mexican nationals.¹⁸⁶ Overall, Mr. Magana's remarks

¹⁸³ Anderson, 97. Mr. Anderson illustrated that Tortillas, Chiles, and beans were the most eaten food items by a Mexican national's diet.

¹⁸⁴ "Elias Magaña," *Bracero History Archive*, accessed September 28, 2022, <https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/3279>.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Anderson, 97.

also demonstrated his open-mindedness to eat the food he was given, proving how diverse and subjective his personal tastes were.

Leisure Time and Activities by Braceros

With a braceros strict work schedule, it implied that they had minimal time off. However, under these circumstances, braceros demonstrated a positive attitude as these brief moments allowed them the freedom to find enjoyment in their off time. For instance, Antonio Nuno said that throughout his time as a bracero, he would “go watch movies at a theater for entertainment.”¹⁸⁷ Additionally, Mr. Nuno also stated that rather than send money through the mail, he “would go see his family personally every fifteen days.”¹⁸⁸ Rafael Cortez also detailed that he and other braceros would “go to drive-in movie theaters.”¹⁸⁹ Alfredo Angulo Castro detailed that his leisure time brought a much needed escape from his rigorous work schedule in the Bracero Program as he explained that he would “go from one work camp to another to visit family members, friends, [and] go to church.”¹⁹⁰ Yet, he emphasized that this was every once in a

¹⁸⁷ Interview with Antonio Nuño by Annette Shreibati, 2009, "Interview no. 1233," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso. November 11, 2022. [1233 Antonio Nuno.mp3 \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Araceli Esparza and Rafael Cortez, “Rafael Cortez,” Bracero History Archive, accessed November 28, 2022, <https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/261>.

¹⁹⁰ Interview with Alfredo Angulo Castro by Anaís Acosta, 2006, "Interview no. 1321," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso. November 11, 2022. [1321 Alfredo Angulo C..mp3 \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

while, as with his rigorous work schedule of twenty-four hours, he spent most of his time resting.¹⁹¹

Such testimonies about the leisure time of braceros reflected the themes of resilience and control by U.S agribusinesses as these men would find solace in being able to have more freedom than ever allowed in the camp site. However, In the particular case of Mr. Castro, he implied that it was difficult to balance his leisure time with his own chores.¹⁹² Therefore, while he was allowed some time off, he also demonstrated the control factor that U.S agribusinesses had over braceros. For instance, throughout a braceros' stay in the U.S, they were supposed to fulfill their contractual obligations, which were to work for a preset amount of time and eventually leave. This established that braceros were seen as nothing more than expendable labor on a roster, filling job positions that were not occupied by domestic workers. Moreover, this further demonstrated the difficulties of working in the Bracero Program.

The living conditions of braceros inferred the lack of care, responsibility, and cooperation with the rules and regulations of the bracero agreement. For instance, activists noted that, after a long workday, many braceros could expect to return to tents, chicken coops, barns or other sorts of improvised form of house structures.¹⁹³ Aside from the lack of caution displayed by U.S

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid. If Mr. Castro was not working, he was either resting or doing his own laundry.

¹⁹³ Mize, 108.

agribusinesses, these forms of inadequate housing further demonstrated how expendable braceros truly were since they could easily be fired and replaced. In another astute observation, U.S agribusiness owners also claimed that “braceros deserved nothing better than their own homes in Mexico.”¹⁹⁴ From this one statement, it further revealed the inequality of braceros as they were regularly separated from U.S growers, who possessed better housing.¹⁹⁵ Likewise. This also demonstrated the lack of empathy for braceros by U.S agribusinesses because with their knowledge of the impoverished conditions of Mexican housing, U.S agribusiness owners had no shame about expressing their racist undertones, perceiving Mexicans as inferior. Overall, these were some of the conditions that braceros looked forward to in the United States. However, as implied by the aforementioned braceros employed at various times during the Bracero Program’s implementation, their determination to make the most of their employment as braceros emphasized solidarity, highlighting a general understanding amongst themselves of the precarious situations that they faced.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 107-109

CHAPTER FOUR

POST WAR BRACEROS, THE URGENCY OF CHEAP MIGRANT LABOR, AND OPERATION WETBACK

Chapter 4 of this thesis will focus on U.S immigration officials' efforts to halt the employment of wetback labor. For instance, by 1954, the United States government launched a campaign to coercively remove undocumented Mexican workers from the United States named Operation Wetback.¹⁹⁶ This chapter will also focus on the passage of Public Law 78, allowing for the Bracero Program to continue in the 1950s. This was similar to the original bracero agreement between the United States and Mexican governments in 1942 and expiring in 1947. For a brief period after 1947, braceros were directly hired by U.S agribusinesses, with Mexico not agreeing with this approach.¹⁹⁷ Therefore, with the passage of Public Law 78 in 1951, it set forth a new criteria for the employment of braceros, which held U.S agribusinesses accountable for providing for braceros when they employed them. This law also fined U.S agribusinesses that hired undocumented workers while also barring them from being able to employ braceros if they were caught.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ Mize, and Swords, 35.

¹⁹⁷ Craig, 52-54. From 1948-1951, U.S agribusinesses could directly contract braceros. They also had more control over a bracero piece rate earnings, which was on top of a non-specified hourly wage.

¹⁹⁸ James F. Creagan. "Public Law 78: A Tangle of Domestic and International Relations." *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 7, no. 4 (1965): 542.

Additionally, as many Mexican nationals were unable to be contracted under the Bracero Program, they decided to migrate to the United States as undocumented workers instead.¹⁹⁹ Therefore, this chapter will reveal how correlated bracero and undocumented labor was as Mexican nationals continued to find themselves in precarious situations in the U.S. This further enhanced the level of intrigue and had an element of duality because they detailed their own unique experiences. In the larger scheme of this thesis, while focusing on Mexican nationals continued efforts to move across the U.S-Mexican border, it will further argue that given their unique experiences, they continued to illustrate their perseverance in the face of unfeasible odds. Moreover, their reason for transnational migration to the United States reflected their need to make more income for themselves and their families.

Operation Wetback

In 1954, Operation Wetback was implemented to coercively remove wetbacks (undocumented Mexican nationals) from the United States, demonstrating the nativism that persisted in the U.S. It was thought that undocumented workers “plagued the labor front in the United States, and in 1954, it was obvious that the most drastic action would have any effect upon the questions posed by their presence.”²⁰⁰ Likewise, U.S immigration officials

¹⁹⁹ Garcia, 36-37.

²⁰⁰ Copp, 40.

carefully planned and coordinated how they would succeed in eliminating undocumented workers, hence the name Operation Wetback.²⁰¹ Therefore, from these early observations, it described a campaign that was devoid of any compassion for immigrants because with careful planning, they quickly rounded up people and deported them back to Mexico.²⁰² Furthermore, with the statement on the negative effects of undocumented labor in the United States, which used language such as “plagued” to describe undocumented workers, it revealed the nativism that continued in the U.S as it was believed that undocumented workers were taking agricultural jobs from domestic workers. Likewise, with the mentioned notion of “drastic action,” which was in direct relation to Operation Wetback, it also implied that the forceful removal of undocumented workers was necessary to not only halt “illegal” immigration, but to also vigorously protect American interests.

U.S Attorney General Herbert Brownell was the mastermind behind Operation Wetback where his policies clearly outlined both his exclusionary and prejudiced views towards Mexican nationals.²⁰³ For instance, while his proposal for the forceful removal of Mexican undocumented immigrants did not gain much attention in U.S Congress during the early 1950s, where he viciously labelled Mexican nationals as “illegal aliens,” he still suggested the initial plan to Charles

²⁰¹ Hernandez, 421-422.

²⁰² Mize, and Swords, 26.

²⁰³ Craig, 127-128.

Wilson, who was the U.S Secretary of Defense. Attorney General Brownell proposed the use of both U.S troops and planes to carry out this massive round up and elimination of undocumented immigrants.²⁰⁴ Additionally, during the initial planning phases of Operation Wetback, there was also a clear correlation with U.S xenophobic attitudes because when Attorney General Brownell toured the state of California, he stated that the issue of “illegal” immigration was a “shocking and unsettling issue.” He also emphasized that another way to deal with the issue of “illegal” Mexican immigration was to simply shoot them on sight. In doing so, this would prevent more immigrants from attempting to cross the U.S-Mexican border “illegally.”²⁰⁵ Therefore, Attorney General Brownell’s remarks suggested that he had a clear disdain for “illegal” Mexican immigrants as he emphasized the use of unjustified and unorthodox tactics to stop Mexican migrants from entering the United States. Furthermore, with the implementation of brute force where he proposed that a good alternative would be to literally shoot “illegal” immigrants without warning, this also revealed the inconsistency and unethical side to his campaign to halt “illegal” immigration as there was no empathy shown to “illegal” immigrants. For instance, as Attorney General Brownell probably realized that this campaign would be difficult given the amount of manpower required for such an endeavor, he would have to resort to the most

²⁰⁴ Garcia, 169.

²⁰⁵ Mize, and Swords, 26.

vile and desperate means to accomplish his goal.²⁰⁶ Under this hypothetical scenario, his methods were heavily embedded with both hate and fear in mind as immigrant lives were degraded in the process.

When the campaign to put an end to “illegal” Mexican immigration officially started in the summer of 1954, the state of California proved critical because the first round up of “illegal” immigrants would begin there. For instance, detainees from both the San Francisco regional detention center and roadblock inspections were captured. In total, 28 buses, which had over a thousand migrants, were sent to the State of Arizona. From there, they would be sent near the U.S-Mexican border for deportation. Additionally, California agricultural fields also became primary targets for the apprehension of undocumented Mexican workers by U.S immigration officials.²⁰⁷ Within the first week of Operation Wetback, the Immigration Naturalization Services (INS) reported that over 10,000 immigrants had been apprehended and arrested. U.S immigration officials also used similar methods in both Los Angeles and the Central Valley, which involved apprehending immigrants in the streets and conducting raids.²⁰⁸ Furthermore, when U.S immigration officials and local law enforcement conducted a specific raid in Los Angeles, which led to the detainment and arrest of over 4,000 people,

²⁰⁶ Garcia,169.

²⁰⁷ Mize, and Swords, 26.

²⁰⁸ Mitchell, 244-245.

the majority, sixty-four percent of these immigrants, were employed in other jobs besides agriculture.²⁰⁹

Throughout the first few weeks of Operation Wetback in California, U.S immigration officials were willing and able to use devious tactics to attain the best results possible.²¹⁰ For instance, given the substantially huge amount of people apprehended by these raids and roadblocks, both legal residents and U.S citizens were detained and arrested, leading to many families being divided in the process. As things came to a conclusion in the state of California, it was reported that an additional 21,000 immigrants had been apprehended and deported. In total, by the end of June 1954, the INS established that 540,000 immigrants had either been deported or voluntarily left the state.²¹¹ Additionally, as the INS was responsible for reporting the number of deportations, given the vague nature of these statements, it inferred that they gave these considerably high numbers to U.S media outlets in order to demonstrate that their plan to stifle “illegal” immigration was working.²¹²

Moreover, there was also a counterpoint to the deportation figures reported by the INS because the number of people detained, arrested, and

²⁰⁹ Mize, and Swords, 26.

²¹⁰ Ibid. Many Mexican nationals, regardless of illegal or legal status were rounded up together, proving that U.S immigration authorities would go to any length to remove Mexican nationals from the U.S.

²¹¹ Mitchell, 244-245.

²¹² Anna Ochoa O’Leary, ed. *Undocumented Immigrants in the United States: an Encyclopedia of Their Experience* [2 Volumes]. Westport: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2014, 544-545.

eventually deported in the state of California alone did not add up, even with the voluntary exit of immigrants.²¹³ For instance, this implied that at the very least more than 16,000 immigrants would have needed to cross the U.S-Mexican border daily during June 1954, making up this number. Therefore, based on these astute statements, this further clarified that the number of deportations and voluntary exits served to appease nativist groups in the United States. Yet, in reality, they were most likely fictitious figures.²¹⁴

Operation Wetback further demonstrated the incoherent and racist nature of this campaign where thirty to forty percent of the immigrants apprehended in California were actually unemployed.²¹⁵ Therefore, given this statistic, it only helped broaden the scope of anti-immigration discourse at the time. Rather than just implying a nativist mentality, it established that Operation Wetback was implemented due to the bitter hatred that U.S immigration officials had for Mexican nationals. This was further demonstrated when both legal Mexican residents and U.S citizens of Mexican decent were also detained, demonstrating how their individual phenotypes proved to be a deciding factor into whether they

²¹³ Mitchell, 244-245.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 245. Juan Ramon Garcia, wetback historian, contested the incoherent number of removals in "Operation Wetback," calling it "highly questionable." This would require 16,000 migrants on average to leave the U.S daily.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

belonged in the U.S or not.²¹⁶ Therefore, these factors all played a prominent role in demonstrating the corrosive nature of Operation Wetback.

Unsurprisingly, when Operation Wetback came to an end, there was an uptick in Mexican nationals being contracted as braceros. Seventy-two percent of braceros were contracted between 1955-1964.²¹⁷ Therefore, once again there was an inconsistency with the nativism that persisted towards Mexican immigrants. Regardless of whether Mexican nationals immigrated “illegally” or were contracted through the Bracero Program, the aforementioned figure demonstrated the United States’ reliance on foreign labor. This was something that would continue when the Bracero Program ended in 1964.

The Introduction and Implementation of Public Law 78

While Operation Wetback demonstrated the corrosive nature of U.S immigration policy in 1954 where “illegal” immigrants were detained and deported back to Mexico, Public Law 78, enacted in 1951, illustrated the U.S government’s reliance on foreign labor because it allowed U.S agribusinesses to continue to employ braceros for their labor needs.²¹⁸ With the Korean conflict looming, which meant that young men would have to once again be sent off to fight, this further spurred anxieties that there would be another labor shortage in the United

²¹⁶ O’Leary, 544.

²¹⁷ Mize, and Swords, 33.

²¹⁸ Gonzalez, 96. The U.S had to renegotiate and apply new measures to the Bracero Program of 1942.

States.²¹⁹ From these events in the early 1950s, it exemplified that similar to the events in the initial bracero agreement during World War II in a time of crisis, the United States would look for an alternative labor source to solve its labor shortage problem. Likewise, U.S agribusinesses added to these worries because even before the initial bracero agreement in the 1940s, they “wanted to be able to directly recruit Mexican nationals, with government subsidy and perhaps government support for housing, but without ‘interference’ from either the U.S or Mexican government.”²²⁰ Therefore, during the 1950s, such evidence demonstrated the need of a cheap labor force to add to U.S agricultural production. Additionally, even though these comments by U.S agribusinesses were years prior to the 1950s renegotiation of the bracero agreement, the theme of reliance continued to resonate as there was always a need for migrant labor in the U.S during the 20th century. Furthermore, they also welcomed the chance to employ an abundance of cheap labor as it benefited their profits and production output.²²¹ With the lack of supervision for migrant workers in the United States, it implied that regardless of the provisions set in the original bracero agreement of 1942, U.S agribusinesses were keen on employing migrant workers, regardless of legal or “illegal” status in the United States. Therefore, the status of Mexican

²¹⁹ Elac, 22-23.

²²⁰ Mitchell, 26.

²²¹ Ibid., 32.

nationals in the United States was just another mishap that characterized the Bracero Program, with violations continuing in the 1950s.²²²

As aforementioned, with the resurgence of paranoia involving undocumented workers in the agricultural sector of the United States in the 1950s, the Bracero Program was reimplemented in 1951. These changes came in the form of Public Law 78, which hoped to prevent “illegal” immigration (undocumented immigrants from Mexico were commonly referred to as wetbacks) to the United States. Furthermore, at the end of the original Bracero Program in 1947, in order to appease the Mexican government and continue the program, the United States implemented this law since the system of employer contracts with individual Mexican nationals was considered unacceptable by the Mexican Government.²²³ Thus, a U.S commission set new recommendations for the Bracero Program, with many of these key changes being applied to Public Law 78. The law:

Required employers who desired braceros to pay a fee in order to cover the costs of the program. Mexican workers were to be restricted to areas where domestic workers were not available, they should not adversely affect wages and working conditions of domestic workers, and efforts should be made to attract domestics. Employers who hired illegal entrants were to be excluded from the program. Braceros who had been working for these employers should be transferred and wetbacks be deported.²²⁴

²²² Gonzalez, 34.

²²³ Elac, 22.

²²⁴ Creagan, 542.

While these comments largely suggested a nativist element where the U.S commission pushed U.S agribusinesses to hire more domestic employees, there was a huge contention between what the United States federal government wanted and what U.S agribusinesses wanted. For instance, with the U.S government imposing restrictions on U.S agribusinesses, such as a fee for the employment and care of braceros, the initial intention might have been to prevent “illegal” employment.²²⁵ Yet, these measures actually had the opposite effect as from a business standpoint, U.S agribusinesses wanted a cheap abundant labor force. For instance, with these restrictions in place, many U.S agribusinesses were angry that they had to limit the number of braceros contracted. This would induce them to return to hiring wetbacks.²²⁶ Therefore, this implied that they were willing and able to search for an alternative labor force, namely “illegal” immigrants if necessary.²²⁷ Furthermore, given the new fees, it also inferred that this new version of the Bracero Program was unsustainable for U.S agribusinesses due to the new costs levied on them. Overall, while the number of “illegal” migrant workers was difficult to track, these restrictions further

²²⁵ Craig, 95. When Public Law 78 was finally passed, President Truman was unsettled by the lack of legislation against U.S agribusinesses that employed “illegal” immigrants. He proposed a fine of upwards of \$2000 dollars and jail time for U.S agribusinesses. Both measures were excluded.

²²⁶ Copp, 47. In 1958, U.S agribusiness were denied a request to contract more braceros on the basis that they were not required because the United States faced a severe decline in the employment of domestic workers. This was in direct correlation with Public Law 78 because the law favored the employment of domestic workers over braceros.

exacerbated the wetback problem in the United States, exemplified by the huge roundup of “illegal” immigrants in 1954 known as Operation Wetback.

While Public Law 78 established that U.S agribusinesses were not permitted to tamper with employee wages, allowing for a competitive labor force where domestic workers would be willing and available to participate in agricultural labor, this was a huge miscalculation because in reality, domestic workers had little to no intention about working in the U.S agricultural sector, knowing about the cruel working conditions and deplorable wages.²²⁸ For instance, many domestic workers, who did choose to work in agriculture jobs, did not spend a lot of time in a single place, preferring to move around.²²⁹ In moving from area to area, this allowed for them to have better control of their wages as even with the work that they did have, they found it difficult to make a living.²³⁰ In other cases, they left agriculture jobs altogether, choosing to change to factory or industrial jobs that paid better.²³¹ Therefore, from these external factors that U.S agribusinesses were unable to foresee or control, there was a displacement of domestic workers as domestic workers hoped to continue to improve their own livelihood in the United States. Furthermore, with these terrible wages seemingly

²²⁸ Mitchell, 10.

²²⁹ Ibid., 10-11. About fifty-three percent of domestic workers would stay in a particular area for work for two months. Within six months, only about five percent of the same domestic workers could be found in the same area. Thus, this emphasized how domestic workers also chased the highest wage possible.

²³⁰ Ibid., 6.

²³¹ Mize, 20.

discouraging domestic workers from partaking in agriculture jobs, there was a case that could be made for a shortage or lack of available workers in this sector of the United States economy. However, as repeatedly implied by the aforementioned remarks about wages, this was largely due to U.S agribusinesses, who wished to keep their wages as low as possible. Overall, this came down to U.S agribusinesses and the way they managed their employees.²³²

Ernesto Galarza and Carey McWilliams, two prominent anti-bracero activists, also implied that Public Law 78 would do the opposite of attract domestic workers and lead to the decline of wages for agriculture workers in general. When referring to braceros and the program, Mr. McWilliam's said that they "are not only used to keep farm wages down but are a source of 'controlled 'or 'stand-by' labor in the event of a strike."²³³ Likewise, Mr. Galarza also claimed that "the need for braceros was 'artificially induced by the refusal of big corporate farms to pay high enough wages for the American worker."²³⁴ With the reapplication of the Bracero Program via the passage of Public Law 78, domestic workers could expect their rates and hours to decline.²³⁵ Therefore, as these two

²³² Mitchell, 10. Miguel N. Benitez, a domestic agricultural worker in the United States, stated the unethical business practices of big U.S agribusiness owners where they would frequently undercut their employees pay by limiting the hours that they worked.

²³³ Gonzalez, 96.

²³⁴ Ibid., 97.

²³⁵ Ibid.

prominent activists firmly attested to the mediocre business practices of U.S agribusinesses, their comments reflected U.S agribusinesses' willingness to keep wages low while they successfully replaced domestic workers with Mexican nationals.

Mexican Nationals Coming from Mexico

The necessity of Mexican nationals in Mexico demonstrated the main reason for the constant influx of Mexican immigrants to the United States throughout the early 20th century. Even before the implementation of the Bracero Program in 1942, between 1910 and 1928, Mexican nationals flocked to the United States where even though the wages were meager by domestic standards, they could expect to get paid on average two Mexican pesos per U.S dollar. In localizing their pay to a specific region of the United States like California for instance, Mexican nationals would get two U.S dollars per four pesos in Mexico in 1910. By 1928, this gradually increased to three U.S dollars and sixty-five cents per seven pesos and thirty cents.²³⁶ Therefore, during the 20th century, the notion of necessity was predominantly the most significant push factor that generated Mexicans' curiosity to venture to the United States in search of better opportunities to provide for themselves and their families.²³⁷

²³⁶ Elac, 90-91.

²³⁷ Copp, 30. In the 1950s after the implementation of Public Law 78, "illegal" Mexican nationals continued to immigrate to the United States. It was apparent that Public Law 78 failed to halt "illegal" immigration.

Additionally, Mexico's agricultural economy was another factor that led to the influx of Mexican immigrants to the United States as it did not have enough arable land for crop production.²³⁸ For instance, the Mexican government faced a food shortage problem, having minimal resources to feed its growing population.²³⁹ With the lack of available farmland, there was also a surplus of workers, with labor positions declining. Therefore, this led to multiple problems for Mexico, including poverty, starvation, and massive immigration in the 20th century.²⁴⁰ This trend continued where in the early 1940s to 1950, the United States saw an influx of 250,000 to one million Mexican immigrants.²⁴¹

With one million Mexican immigrants immigrating to United States during the 1940s, it gave the consensus that the Bracero Program gave rise to "illegal" Mexican immigration. There were a couple of reasons for this development. As the first wave of Mexican nationals made their way to the recruitment centers in 1942 where they would be contracted in the Bracero Program, this news made its way to other Mexicans who also hoped to gain the same opportunities. However, it was a difficult task to make it past both the recruitment and reception centers. For instance, it was reported that twenty percent of *aspirantes* were

²³⁸ Garcia, 3-4. With the lack of rainfall, Mexico's agricultural production severely declined, with only 7-10 percent of their land being arable.

²³⁹ Ibid., 4-5. Mexico's population rose by thirty percent between 1940 and 1950.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 9-10.

²⁴¹ Copp, 34.

rejected from recruitment centers. At the same time, another seven to ten percent of *aspirantes* never made it past the border reception centers.²⁴² Therefore, this proved that it was very difficult for Mexican nationals to be contracted in the Bracero Program, with no more than one in ten applicants obtaining a contract.²⁴³ Taking into account the pull factor that was the Bracero Program by the mid-20th century, this intrigued Mexican nationals because they realized that they could finally do something about their impoverished conditions in Mexico. Likewise, with the bureaucratic nature of the Bracero Program, which omitted the majority of *aspirantes* from being contracted, it not only alienated these people from the prospects of better work opportunities in the U.S, but it further encouraged them to seek alternative ways into the United States. Regardless of legal or “illegal” status, Mexican nationals freely risked their own lives to come in search of the same opportunities as braceros had done. Therefore, this illustrated the perseverance that they had as Mexican nationals came to the U.S in droves.²⁴⁴

Mexican Nationals’ Experiences in the United States

Mexican nationals continued to demonstrate the element of duality as they exemplified different characteristics when they migrated to the U.S. For instance,

²⁴² Gonzalez, 58-59.

²⁴³ Garcia, 36. Manuel Calderon, the Director General of Migratory Workers Affairs in the Department of Foreign Relations from 1947 to 1960, gave this astute statistic of the Bracero contractual.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 38.

some Mexican migrants demonstrated their determination. In crossing the border, they defied the long and tiring journey to the U.S-Mexican border and made it to the United States, suggesting that it was possible for many Mexican migrants to come to the U.S. Refugio Sandoval, an undocumented immigrant interviewed by the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1953, said that he had crossed the United States-Mexican border five times. Additionally, as he detailed his multiple border crossings to the U.S, he also stressed that once he had past the border patrols at a certain point, he realized that the rest of the way to the United States was much easier.²⁴⁵ Mr. Sandoval's remarks emphasized the lack of security that he encountered at the U.S-Mexican border where he was able to cross the United States-Mexican border five times. At the same time, the journey to the United States became much easier when he reached a certain point. Therefore, this demonstrated the ease of entry into the United States because if he made it to the U.S multiple times, then it suggested that other people also had the same luck coming to the U.S as immigrants.²⁴⁶ Overall, Mr. Sandoval's perspective established how, in theory, there could indeed be a huge influx of Mexican nationals coming over to the United States, given the border's ease of access and incursion.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 145.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 116. In taking into account Mr. Sandoval's statements, it is also important to note that due to the lack of border patrol officers stationed on the U.S-Mexican border, being reduced to merely 700-400 men at times in the 1950s, this made crossing to the United States much easier as Mr. Sandoval has suggested.

At the same time, Refugio Sandoval demonstrated the need to improve his life. He also illustrated the impoverished conditions in Mexico.²⁴⁷ In crossing the border, he defied his circumstances in Mexico in search of better opportunities in the U.S. From Mr. Sandoval's interview with *the San Francisco Chronicle*, he further revealed the harsh reality of migrating to the United States from Mexico where his main purpose was to also provide for his family back home in Mexico. This was the simplest and most genuine reason for his transnational migration to the U.S.

Pablo C. Flores was a former bracero that immigrated to the United States as an undocumented worker in the late 1950s where he also emphasized the ease of entry into the United States by crossing the U.S-Mexican border "illegally." When asked about how he made it across the United States-Mexican border, he stated that in his experience, "it was relatively easy at that time, with fences, people would even come through the border in a car."²⁴⁸ Mr. Flores reverberated similar remarks as Refugio Sandoval because he also found it relatively easy to cross "illegally." This inferred that there was a lack of security personnel at the U.S-Mexican border, with only a couple of fences to guard entry into the United States. Likewise, with the lack of barriers to prohibit "illegal"

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 145.

²⁴⁸ Interview with Pablo C. Flores by Alejandra Díaz, 2008, "Interview no. 1343," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso. November 11, 2022. [1343 Pablo Flores.MP3 \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

immigration, this made the trip much easier because he specifically said that it was possible to drive a car with people to the United States.

While putting Mr. Flores' thoughts into perspective where these events transpired more than sixty years ago, his testimony also implied the disillusionment and continued militarization of the U.S-Mexican border. For instance, as Mr. Flores emphasized that these events happened in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it demonstrated that massive deportation campaigns such as Operation Wetback, which happened prior to his own migration to the United States, did not work as initially intended. This massive campaign to deport undocumented workers in 1954 only came from paranoia and xenophobic attitudes towards undocumented Mexican workers, serving as a temporary solution.²⁴⁹ Mr. Flores further exemplified the ease of entry into the United States, illustrating that Mexican migrants continued to cross "illegally" well after Operation Wetback concluded. However, Mr. Flores also implied that the ease of "illegally" crossing the U.S-Mexican border was only applicable during the 1950s and 1960s.²⁵⁰ In doing so, he showcased how gradually the United States-Mexican border became more militarized and, in some cases, impenetrable.²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ O'Leary, 544-545.

²⁵⁰ Interview with Pablo C. Flores by Alejandra Díaz, 2008, "Interview no. 1343," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso. November 11, 2022. [1343 Pablo Flores.MP3 \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

²⁵¹ Sarah Bohn and Todd Pugatch. "U.S. Border Enforcement and Mexican Immigrant Location Choice." *Demography* 52, no. 5 (2015): 1544. In particular, this work established that with the increased allocation of resources to prevent unwanted Mexican immigration to the United States, which included a more border patrolmen, Mexican immigration to the United States decreased from 80 to 58 percent from 1980 to 2010, particularly when pertaining to the U.S' southern border states.

Additionally, there were other features that exemplified the diverse nature of individual braceros or undocumented laborers' experiences. Some braceros briefly mentioned the danger of being an undocumented worker. For instance, U.S immigration officials would round up and deport Mexican nationals back to Mexico. Pedro Dominguez Castillo, a former bracero who worked in California in 1958, gave explicit details about the dilemma of working alongside undocumented workers. He stated that U.S immigration officials "rounded them up and asked them for their papers."²⁵² This was done to him and other men regardless of documented or undocumented status. Eventually, they let him go since they were able to figure out that he did have proper identification and documentation. On the other hand, the other men that did not have proper identification and documentation were deported.²⁵³

Mr. Castillo's testimony demonstrated the risk of being associated with undocumented labor as he was frantically searched by U.S immigration officials for his legal documents. He prominently demonstrated how both braceros and undocumented workers could be in danger of being deported from the United States as it was up to the discretion of the U.S immigration officials searching them. Additionally, he also exemplified how powerless Mexican nationals were in the face of U.S immigration officials. As Mr. Castillo further detailed the actions of

²⁵² Interview with Pedro Domínguez Castillo by Mireya Loza, 2008, "Interview no. 1434," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso. November 11, 2022. [1434 Pedro Dominguez Castillo.mp3 \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

²⁵³ Ibid.

U.S immigration officials in the labor camps where he worked, it also implied another key point of U.S immigration. It exposed the swift nature of deporting “illegal” immigrants from the U.S as they would quickly move Mexican nationals from one area to another.²⁵⁴

Antonio H. Perez Herrera exemplified that it was more satisfying working as an undocumented worker than as a bracero, illustrating the immoral nature of U.S agribusinesses. For instance, he found distinct job opportunities when he returned to the United States as an undocumented worker. Upon his return, he worked in jobs such as washing floors or cleaning dishes.²⁵⁵ When comparing his two experiences as both a bracero and undocumented worker, he emphasized that he was “paid much better” as an undocumented worker than as a bracero.²⁵⁶ Therefore, Mr. Herrera’s testimony further demonstrated the corrupt nature of U.S agribusinesses because for the duration of the Bracero Program, braceros were heavily deprived of making better earnings for themselves and their families. Additionally, as Mr. Herrera found himself having many different occupations upon his return to the United States, his experiences further emphasized the persistent need for immigrant labor in the U.S.

²⁵⁴ Mize, and Swords, 34.

²⁵⁵ Interview with Antonio H. Pérez Herrera by Marina Kalashnikova, 2008, "Interview no. 1366," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso. November 11, 2022. [1366 Antonio V. Perez.MP3 \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

Overall, “illegal” immigration to the United States contradicted U.S immigration officials’ methods and goals because Mexican nationals would continue to make their way towards and past the U.S-Mexican border.²⁵⁷ In comparing and contrasting the multiple narratives of former braceros and undocumented workers, such testimonies exemplified the intricacies of migration to the United States. From the remarks from both braceros and Mexican immigrants (wetbacks), they demonstrated how the idea of legal or “illegal” Mexican labor was interconnected because their status barely mattered. For instance, braceros would also find themselves in other precarious situations while working alongside undocumented workers.²⁵⁸ Therefore, they too could face the danger of deportation from the United States.

²⁵⁷ Interview with Pablo C. Flores by Alejandra Díaz, 2008, "Interview no. 1343," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso. November 11, 2022. [1343 Pablo Flores.MP3 \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

²⁵⁸ Interview with Pedro Domínguez Castillo by Mireya Loza, 2008, "Interview no. 1434," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso. November 11, 2022. [1434 Pedro Dominguez Castillo.mp3 \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

CHAPTER FIVE

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SALINAS VALLEY TRAGEDY AND THE OFFICIAL END OF THE BRACERO PROGRAM

Chapter 5 of this thesis will focus on the final years of the Bracero Program in the 1960s. The Salinas Valley tragedy of 1963, also referred to as the Chualar bus accident of 1963, exemplified the uncomfortable and inhumane conditions that Mexican nationals were regularly exposed to. Additionally, it will argue that given the harsh reality uncovered by this disaster, it played a part in the eventual demise of the Bracero Program, rallying activists in protest against the Bracero Program, U.S agribusinesses, and their unethical business practices.²⁵⁹ In the federal level, U.S congressmen also began to demonstrate their discontent with the frequent and unrelenting nature of U.S agribusiness lobbyists, which continued to push for the extension of Public Law 78. Therefore, these factors illustrated that in both the local and federal levels, the Bracero Program had lost its staying power, with U.S Congress extending the program one final time until December 31, 1964.²⁶⁰ The Bracero Program's termination had everlasting effects on the Mexican nationals that participated in it. For instance, while the Bracero Program had many critics, in their final statements, former braceros expressed a positive outlook on their individual experiences. They not only provided an essential piece and counter narrative to the history of

²⁵⁹ Lori A. Flores. "Slow and Sudden Deaths: Reflecting on the Chualar Tragedy of 1963 and the Persisting Traumas of the Bracero Program." *Diálogo* 19, no. 2 (2016): 79.

²⁶⁰ Craig, 195.

the Bracero Program, but they also illustrated how they benefited from their experiences, being able to successfully make more money to help support their families back in Mexico. In other circumstances, some braceros were able to successfully attain U.S legal status, paving the way for them to establish themselves in the United States.²⁶¹ Furthermore, this proved that there were more opportunities in the U.S, and that they had grown more accustomed to the lifestyle in the U.S. Generally, in tying this to the entirety of this thesis, their final statements reverberated back to the themes of necessity and progress where they emphasized that they were at peace with what had transpired throughout their time in the Bracero Program.

During the Bracero Program's final years, there was still deliberate pushback by U.S agribusinesses, which allowed for the Bracero Program to continue.²⁶² There was this push and pull effect that involved both supporters and opponents of the Bracero Program. In the case of its supporters, which mainly involved U.S agribusinesses, they attested that due to the coerced deportation of "illegal" Mexican immigrants in Operation Wetback, braceros were needed much more than ever. This was their main argument, and it led to Public Law 78 being renewed almost every year, for nearly a decade during the mid-1950s and early 1960s.²⁶³ Therefore, this implied that U.S agribusinesses heavily relied on

²⁶¹ "Jose Carmona," Bracero History Archive, accessed November 11, 2022, <https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/3294>.

²⁶² Flores, 127.

²⁶³ Craig, 136-137.

Mexican national labor, continuously pleading U.S Congress for Public Law 78's renewal. However, in 1963, the Salinas Valley tragedy would change all of that.

The Salinas Valley tragedy of 1963 helped pave the way for the termination of the Bracero Program because with the deaths of over two dozen people, the public outcry exacerbated anti-bracero discourse. With the severity of the accident, unions, religious groups, and Mexican American activists united to condemn U.S agribusinesses for this tragedy.²⁶⁴ This accident occurred on September 17, 1963, when a Southern Pacific Train crashed into a farm labor bus at a crossing located in Chualar. According to the *Desert Sun* on September 18, 1963, a day after the crash, "22 of the victims were killed outright and six died later while being treated at hospitals in Salinas."²⁶⁵ In total, thirty-one contracted braceros and one domestic worker were killed, and it was also responsible for injuring another twenty-two braceros and three domestic workers. Remarkably, the bus driver of the bus did not get injured by the accident.²⁶⁶

Therefore, given how predominantly braceros were treated prior to the Chualar bus crash, being crowded in a single bus together, this event highlighted the vile nature of U.S agribusinesses as they willingly subjected their employees to abhorrent conditions, not guaranteeing them adequate transportation. In this context, they were akin to being hauled from field to field as if they were animals

²⁶⁴ Flores, 79.

²⁶⁵ "Bus-Train Crash Kills 28 Braceros" *Desert Sun*. September 18, 1963, 1. [Desert Sun 18 September 1963 — California Digital Newspaper Collection \(ucr.edu\)](#)

²⁶⁶ Mitchell, 315.

and not people. Additionally, while there had been other past incidents regarding bracero workers in the past, no other incident had been this notorious and gruesome, leading to so much death. This was the sad and unfortunate update shared by the Highway Patrol. The Highway Patrol stated that the accident was “the biggest single fatal vehicle accident of any kind in the history of California.”²⁶⁷ Overall, this accident finally brought much needed attention to the exploitation of braceros because in the wake of this tragedy, the United States federal government stepped in to investigate the accident firsthand, further proving its significance as it drew national attention.²⁶⁸ As the negativity surrounding this tragedy mounted in both the local and national spheres, there were fears that this would prompt the end of the Bracero Program once and for all.²⁶⁹ Therefore, given its notoriety, it exemplified how this tragedy played a key part in the program’s termination.

Furthermore, even after the aforementioned Salinas Valley tragedy of 1963, California Governor Edmund Brown demonstrated his apathy for the accident. In a call to Mexican President Adolfo Lopez, he stated, “we will make every effort to determine the cause of the tragedy and take every step to prevent

²⁶⁷ “Bus-Train Crash Kills 28 Braceros” *Desert Sun*. September 18, 1963, 1. [Desert Sun 18 September 1963 — California Digital Newspaper Collection \(ucr.edu\)](#)

²⁶⁸ Mitchell, 315.

²⁶⁹ Flores, 131. U.S agribusiness and politicians feared of the consequences surrounding the Chualar bus accident as this surely upset Mexico, calling for the abrupt end of the Bracero Program.

such accidents in the future.”²⁷⁰ In particular, from the quick response of California Governor Edmund Brown to Mexican President Adolfo Lopez, he implied that he was anxious about the Chualar bus accident as he wanted to reassure the Mexican President that this would never happen in the future. Additionally, given the huge media frenzy that followed this accident, it clarified that Governor Brown had an urgency to get in front of the story as he wished to avoid as much public scrutiny as possible. Overall, the Governor’s comments were about saving himself from the public outcry of the Chualar bus accident. Thus, by almost completely negating the severity of the accident, Governor Brown’s remarks came off as unsympathetic, continuing to establish how braceros were viewed as expendable labor.

U.S agribusinesses illustrated their incoherent rhetoric regarding the Chualar bus accident as similar accidents happened to braceros in the 1950s and 1960s. In addressing the Chualar bus accident, U.S agribusinesses’ commented that this accident could have transpired at any time and at any place with no connection to the Bracero Program.²⁷¹ These comments illustrated how illogical U.S agribusinesses were because since braceros’ worked for U.S agribusinesses, they should have provided better transportation for them.²⁷² For instance, from the early 1950s to the early 1960s, there had been more than

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Anderson, 108. In an astute observation, Mr. Anderson illustrated that “approximately one-third of all bracero deaths result from accidents involving one or more motor accidents.”

twelve hundred reported transportation accidents, with almost three thousand workers injured and a minimum of one hundred and fifty-nine people had died.²⁷³ Therefore, this demonstrated that transportation accidents during the Bracero Program happened on a regular basis. This further provided evidence that U.S agribusinesses failed to accommodate their bracero work force on the most basic level. Due to the frequency that these transportation accidents happened during the Bracero Program in the 1950s until the early 1960s, this exposed that not only were U.S agribusinesses keenly aware of past accidents, but they outright refused to take any sort of responsibility for these tragedies, preferring to withhold the details of these events if possible.²⁷⁴ However, given the increased media attention and scale of the accident, the scrutiny and negative attention focused on supporters of the Bracero Program was unavoidable. This proved that the Chualar bus accident did indeed have an impact on ending the Bracero Program as Congress voted to end it in 1963, with no excessive lobbying for an extension able to deter the Bracero Program's termination.²⁷⁵

When the final congressional debate regarding the Bracero Program in fall 1963 ended with the termination of the Bracero Program, it reverberated many

²⁷³ Mitchell, 315.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Flores, 132. While agribusinesses lobbied to extend the Bracero Program to 1965, their efforts ultimately failed as the U.S House of Representatives voted to end it in 1963, by a vote of 174 against and 158 in favor of extension. Additionally, the U.S Senate only granted a one-year extension until December 31, 1964.

key issues that had long been wrong with Public Law 78 to begin with as U.S politicians came to the conclusion that it actually harmed the United States, in small and intricate ways.²⁷⁶ For instance, the report from the House Committee on Agriculture of 1963 stated that it disadvantaged domestic workers because American citizens that worked in agriculture jobs faced poverty. Public Law 78 was also responsible for hurting free enterprise as the Bracero Program was a heavily government regulated program. It also damaged small family farms because the Bracero Program only benefited big U.S agribusinesses who could afford the costs associated with employing braceros. Additionally, U.S agribusinesses also had the advantage of subsidization. The report further elaborated and critiqued the domestic issue facing the U.S agricultural sector since the ratio of bracero and domestic employees was unfair and unbalanced. Additionally, ever since the implementation Public Law 78 in the 1950s, this law did not solve the problem of “illegal” immigration to the U.S.²⁷⁷

The House Committees on Agriculture of 1963 gave some precise, albeit delusional remarks regarding the Bracero Program. For instance, as the Bracero Program was meant to be a government regulated program that provided a labor force during a time of labor shortages and crisis, the House Committee of Agriculture reverberated critiques of what had already been known for years about the Bracero Program. It was well known that U.S agribusinesses preferred

²⁷⁶ Craig, 192.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 192-193.

and exploited cheap labor.²⁷⁸ With the United States government also providing U.S agribusinesses with more incentives, these problems fell on the United States government because they empowered U.S agribusinesses by giving them these enticements in the first place. In other circumstances, they failed to properly enforce the rules set in Public Law 78, regarding the employment of domestic workers over braceros or immigrant workers. The incoherence of the House Committee report of Agriculture of 1963 was further highlighted when it also expressed its concern over the “illegal” immigration problem that persisted in the United States in the 1960s. While it declared the practices of U.S agribusinesses as unethical, they equated the “wetback problem” as the main culprit behind uneven domestic employees in U.S agriculture, ignoring the craftiness of U.S agribusinesses to hire immigrant labor. Additionally, from an international standpoint, it also failed to comprehend the unstable and impoverished conditions in Mexico, which led to the high influx of Mexican immigrants coming to the United States.²⁷⁹ Likewise, to further concur with the comments on the issue of domestic workers, their rhetoric mainly reflected how it affected the domestic work force of the U.S, with their main concern being that they barely made enough money working agriculture jobs.

In the end, the U.S Congress had no more support for the Bracero Program as the House Committee of Agriculture of 1963 agreed to a final one-

²⁷⁸ Gonzalez, 96-97.

²⁷⁹ Garcia, 5.

year extension of the program. This allowed for the Bracero Program to officially end on December 31, 1964.²⁸⁰ John Fogarty, a U.S Representative from the state of Rhode Island, stated that “In the 23 years that I have been a member of this Congress I have never been lobbied by so many high-handed, brazen lobbyists as I have in the past 3 or 4 weeks in [sic] behalf of the extension of Public Law 78.” Likewise, Representative Melvin Laird of Wisconsin stated, “I am going to support this 1-year extension with the understanding that the program will be terminated.”²⁸¹ These two testimonies exemplified how the Bracero Program had lost support from Congress as by the 1960s, it had largely served its purpose. In particular, John Fogarty displayed his disapproval with U.S agribusinesses’ tactics to constantly seek the renewal of Public Law 78. In reality, this sort of repeated barrage of reminders not only expressed the cunning of U.S agribusinesses to protect their interests, but it also revealed the anxiety that persisted, since they were in fear of losing the privilege to employ a cheap labor force. In conclusion, as stated by both these congressmen, the decision to finally end the Bracero Program was made relatively easy because by 1963, the support for Public Law 78 wavered.²⁸²

²⁸⁰ "Termination of Bracero Program Called Final: Roosevelt Says Congress Will Oppose any Renewal Or Disguised Continuation BRACERO PROGRAM." 1964. *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), Nov 15, 2. <http://libproxy.lib.csusb.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/termination-bracero-program-called-final/docview/155061715/se-2>.

²⁸¹ Craig, 194.

²⁸² Mitchell, 384.

With the abrupt conclusion of the Bracero Program at the end of 1964, apart from the aforementioned one-year extension and remarks by U.S congressmen had regarding the program, local activists also demonstrated a profound gratitude for its termination as the *Los Angeles Sentinel* further exposed and reverberated the many exploits done against braceros by U.S agribusinesses. It further detailed their inferior wages and horrible housing conditions.²⁸³ According to Mervyn M. Dymally, an assemblymember, and Edward Quevedo, the president of MAPA, both activists pledged to fight against any lobbying efforts to further extend Public Law 78.²⁸⁴ Therefore, as *the Los Angeles Sentinel* had made public the many offenses made against braceros, it not only further scrutinized the abhorrent business practices of U.S agriculture, but it also gave a rather empathetic undertone for why the program needed to end. Additionally, with the resounding support from more local groups in California, by 1964, the Bracero Program garnered an all-around bad reputation, sealing its fate once and for all.

A Very Brief Epilogue

However, in the case of former braceros, the end of their individual contractual period meant something completely different. Bracero testimonies

²⁸³ Meriwether, L. M. "Minorities Unite to Whip Initiative, Bracero Program." *Los Angeles Sentinel* (1934-), Jun 18, 1964. 1-2.
<http://libproxy.lib.csusb.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/minorities-unite-whip-initiative-bracero-program/docview/564707607/se-2>.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 2. There was also panic that U.S agribusinesses had the influence to extend it another five years.

emphasized themes of necessity, determination, and hopes of a better life. Former braceros also displayed a more positive outlook of their bracero experience. In particular, when Jose Carmona was asked about his final thoughts on being a bracero, he said that “he had a genuine positive experience as it allowed him to be able to buy a home in Mexico.”²⁸⁵ Additionally, upon his eventual return to the U.S where he settled and became a U.S citizen, he implied that the years of his impoverished conditions in Mexico was over as a new chapter in his life was starting in the U.S. He also outlined that being in the U.S put his life in a new perspective because things were better than he had previously known in Mexico, crediting his participation in the Bracero Program with allowing him to aspire for better living standards.²⁸⁶

Mr. Carmona’s final remarks emphasized how some braceros came to see their experiences in a different light since they were able to effectively change their lives after the end of the Bracero Program. Generally, in the particular case of Mr. Carmona, he equated his success with the improvement of his living standards. Likewise, another key part of his success was explained by his sheer determination to continuously be contracted as a bracero because he came to the United States nine times, helping him improve his livelihood in the long run.²⁸⁷ Overall, Mr. Carmona’s testimony demonstrated that while the history of

²⁸⁵ “Jose Carmona,” Bracero History Archive, accessed November 11, 2022, <https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/3294>.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

the Bracero Program was rightfully shrouded with the discrimination and exploitation of cheap labor, this was only part of the historical narrative of the Bracero Program. While Mr. Carmona's testimony was just one small part of a more hopeful bracero historical narrative, it nevertheless proved that some braceros had a more successful and positive outlook of the Bracero Program in the end.

In comparison, duality continued to play a role in bracero experiences as other braceros recalled the impoverished conditions that motivated them to seek employment in the Bracero Program. Cipriano Romero, who was contracted in the Bracero Program in 1956, reflected this aspect when he shared his bracero experience. In his final remarks, he stated that "when their contracts ended, they would return to Mexico to suffer."²⁸⁸ He was later asked if being a bracero changed his life. He said that his time as a bracero helped him a lot because he would return to Mexico with some money. His wife was also responsible for saving money that he sent her. When referring to the job opportunities in Mexico, he stated that it had little to offer in terms of consumer spending since "the jobs there were only good enough to buy food and clothing. There was not enough to buy other things because everyone was very poor."²⁸⁹ In further stressing the recurring theme of necessity, Mr. Romero emphasized the impoverished

²⁸⁸ Interview with Cipriano Romero by Ariana Ornelas, 2010, "Interview no. 1470," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso. November 11, 2022. [1470 Cipriano Romero.mp3 \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

conditions that he faced in Mexico, making his decision to come to the United States a simple one. For instance, he exemplified the correlation between progress and consumerism as he implied the inability to attain more goods due to a lack of money or jobs available in Mexico. Therefore, by participating in the Bracero Program, He implied that he succeeded since he was able to earn more capital in the United States than in Mexico.

Francisco Gallardo Gonzalez, who worked in California as a bracero in 1954, emphasized a key difference between the United States and Mexico in his testimony. For instance, he said that “there are many people in Mexico that would like to a be a bracero today and working in the United States.”²⁹⁰ He was also asked whether being a bracero changed his life. He responded, stating, “This was the interesting thing about being in the United States. I was able to be part of a system that made it more comfortable to earn money.” He also reflected how difficult it was to live in Mexico when there was no work. Overall, he had a positive experience as a bracero.²⁹¹ Mr. Gonzalez also reflected a more optimistic view of what it meant to be a bracero as he linked it to his ability to have more opportunities than in Mexico. Therefore, he continued to emphasize the necessity that Mexican nationals had. He further reiterated on these assertions when he claimed that many Mexicans would happily come to the

²⁹⁰ Interview with Francisco Gallardo González by Marina Kalashnikova, 2008, "Interview no. 1346," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso. November 11, 2022. [1346 Francisco G. Gonzalez.MP3 \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

²⁹¹ Ibid.

United States for more work opportunities. In retrospective, Mr. Gonzalez not only demonstrated the necessity that many Mexican nationals faced when he was contracted in the Bracero Program in the 1950s, but he also revealed how the impoverished conditions in Mexico continued in future decades. Generally, when he mentioned how much easier it was to make a living in the U.S, he also had a more hopeful attitude because throughout all the hardships that he experienced, he had endured and prospered at the end of his time as a bracero. These final bracero testimonies reflected that throughout the various challenges that these individuals faced in the Bracero Program, they persevered and succeeded in their goal of making the most of their time in the Bracero Program, bringing a great conclusion to their experiences.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Bracero Program was a bilateral agreement between the United States and Mexico in 1942, which allowed for the legal migration of Mexican nationals to work in the United States on a temporary basis.²⁹² Aside from a couple of brief mentions, some historians have largely focused their own work on the influences of both politicians and U.S agribusinesses, with less attention being paid to the experiences of former braceros themselves. For instance, this specific problem was exemplified in studies such as Don Mitchell's book *They Saved the Crops* where the main focus was the influence of U.S agribusinesses during the Bracero Program's duration.

Additionally, while these studies were still correct in emphasizing the horrible living conditions and exploitative working conditions, they were still inclusive to only just one perspective. However, as scholarship on the Bracero Program has progressed, the inclusion of braceros own intentions for participating in the program has also gradually increased in recent studies, most notably being highlighted by Ana Rosas' book *Abrazando El Espiritu*. This study heavily emphasized the concepts of necessity and improvement for braceros.²⁹³ Therefore, my own thesis also focused and highlighted the experiences of former braceros, proving that the Bracero Program was far more intricate than the

²⁹² Mize, and Swords, 3.

²⁹³ Rosas, 34-35. As demonstrated throughout Dr. Rosas work, Jose Ramirez, a former bracero, stated that he wanted to escape the impoverished conditions in Mexico. Furthermore, with the money he earned in the U.S, he aspired to improve his own life in Mexico.

external forces that created and influenced its development for over two decades. Braceros also made keenly aware in their own testimonies that their intentions for transnational migration to the United States were based on the notions of necessity, perseverance, and aspirations of a better life.

In the beginning of this thesis, with the exclusion of other immigrants, predominantly Chinese and Japanese immigrants, U.S agribusinesses gradually turned to Mexican migrant laborers to offset labor shortages before World War II.²⁹⁴ In particular, the work of historian Erika Lee was fundamental to the start of this thesis because she vividly explained the many reasons why and how the United States chose to exclude Asians from migration, being based on both the United States government's nativist hysteria and xenophobic attitudes of inferiority.²⁹⁵ Furthermore, the United States government halted Asian migration to the U.S with the implementation of many anti-immigration laws including the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the National Origins Act of 1924.²⁹⁶ Therefore, it laid the groundwork for the Bracero Program to come to fruition in 1942, demonstrating the U.S' reliance on foreign labor in the process.

While both the United States and Mexican governments along with U.S agribusiness had their own agenda in implementing the Bracero Program, hopeful Mexican recruits (*aspirantes*) were excited by the news and prepared to

²⁹⁴ Elac, 9.

²⁹⁵ Lee. *The Making of Asian America: A History*, 89-90.

²⁹⁶ Arnold, 176.

make their way to the bracero recruitment centers.²⁹⁷ While some detractors might be critical over the focus on individual bracero histories as opposed to other important aspects of the Bracero Program, this approach allowed this thesis to excel as it wished to narrow its concentration on the quality of former braceros' testimonies. Furthermore, during specific parts of this thesis, this was further demonstrated when it began to tease many important concepts of this thesis, which included the necessity of individual braceros and their determination to be contracted in the Bracero Program.

With many scholars also condemning the abhorrent working and living conditions of braceros, this emphasized the difficulties of transnational migration for these Mexican migrant laborers. On the other hand, some ideas were challenged by the testimonies of former braceros because they disagreed with some of the allegations of scholars against U.S agribusinesses, having a more positive viewpoint on things like the food given to them.²⁹⁸ Likewise, there was not much that could be done about their working or living conditions when they were employed in the United States. This exemplified the perseverance of former braceros to endure these conditions as this was something that their experiences in their native Mexico had prepared them for, with the majority of them illustrating that they came from an agrarian background. While at the same time, other

²⁹⁷ Rosas, 24.

²⁹⁸ Interview with Pablo C. Flores by Alejandra Díaz, 2008, "Interview no. 1343," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso. November 11, 2022. [1343 Pablo Flores.MP3 \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

former braceros did acknowledge the horrific conditions that they endured during their contractual period.²⁹⁹ Therefore, there was a balance between former braceros that had a positive outlook on their experiences while other former braceros had a more antagonistic approach towards their experiences, where they revealed their mistreatment. This also proved the importance of the individual bracero experience in my thesis because it disclosed how intricate the Bracero Program really was. For instance, while some braceros could agree with one another on some aspects of their experiences, there was always a new layer of analysis where no bracero experience was truly the same.

While Operation Wetback might often be considered a separate topic altogether as it involved the coerced deportation of “illegal” Mexican immigrants (often referred to as wetbacks) instead of legally contracted braceros, this event transpired in the mid-1950s, during the most prominent years of the Bracero Program. Therefore, it proved vital for inclusion in my thesis because it further explained the xenophobic attitudes and nativism surrounding Mexican migrant labor as opposed to domestic workers in the United States. This was a crucial concept with the renegotiation and implementation of Public Law 78 a couple of years prior to Operation Wetback, which was supposed to promote domestic employment in the United States.³⁰⁰ Additionally, many testimonies coming from

²⁹⁹ Araceli Esparza and Rafael Cortez, “Rafael Cortez,” Bracero History Archive, accessed November 28, 2022, <https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/261>.

³⁰⁰ Creagan, 542.

former braceros and undocumented workers also demonstrated the central themes of this thesis such as necessity and perseverance, further proving the correlation between the two statuses as they strived towards similar goals. Overall, Operation Wetback represented the inconsistent and incoherent nature of U.S policy because while many Mexican migrants would be deported due to this campaign, there would be an increase in bracero employment, proving the U.S' reliance on foreign labor.³⁰¹

The Salinas Valley tragedy of 1963 represented not only the abhorrent conditions for braceros and other people that were killed or injured in the tragedy, but it also signified the end of the Bracero Program. With the bad publicity that this tragedy garnered, it only added to the mounting pressure on U.S politicians to end the Bracero Program altogether.³⁰² For instance, it was decided at a second committee hearing in September 1963, around the same time that the Salinas Valley accident happened, that the expiration date for the Bracero Program would be on December 31, 1964, with no exceptions this time. Therefore, with the added scrutiny of the Salinas Valley tragedy, U.S agribusinesses were finally powerless and unable to lobby for an extension of the Bracero Program.³⁰³ At the same time, U.S politicians' voiced their opposition for the continuation of the Bracero Program, largely based on the notion that it

³⁰¹ Garcia, 226.

³⁰² Flores, 128.

³⁰³ Craig, 194.

deprived U.S citizens of work opportunities in U.S agriculture.³⁰⁴ Therefore, this demonstrated how the aforementioned central theme of nativism persisted at the end of the Bracero Program, also playing a part in its inevitable undoing. The last section of this thesis had to do with the final remarks from former braceros, Jose Carmona, Cipriano Romero, and Francisco Gallardo Gonzalez, where they tied the themes of necessity, perseverance, and ultimately their own success to the Bracero Program.³⁰⁵ In conducting this thesis on the Bracero Program, by emphasizing these aforementioned themes one final time, it not only refocused its attention on the individual bracero experience, but it also brought the journeys of these former braceros to a satisfying conclusion.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ "Jose Carmona," *Bracero History Archive*, accessed November 11, 2022, <https://braceroarchive.org/items/show/3294>.

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