El Programa Bracero: “La experiencia de bracero nunca se te olvida”

By Jadsia Roopchand

Inspired by the history of the Bracero Program, artist Gabriela Magaña offers her perspective through rich and colorful paintings, including this one of her grandfather Eduardo Lopez. Gabriela believes that through art lives can be saved and others can be honored.1

“You never forget the bracero experience,” former bracero Aurelio Marin commented, perfectly summarizing the triumphs, tribulations, and turbulence of the highly controversial and highly impactful Mexican Farm Labor Program. Commonly known as the Bracero Program, it began in 1942 to supply able-bodied Mexican laborers to U.S. industries suffering shortages at the outset of World War II.2

In exchange for their labor, the workers received temporary legal residence for the duration of their contract. Braceros worked in almost every region of the United States, finding themselves employed in everything from railroad construction and industrial maintenance to agriculture, the largest area of employment. Of the 4.5 million braceros admitted, California received the largest number of men with Texas ranking a close second.3

For Americans, the program offered a critical source of support for the wartime economy; for Mexicans, particularly young men, it presented an opportunity to come to the United States for employment and send money home to their families in Mexico. Houstonian Victor Escalante remembers what a boost it was for his family every time his father sent money home, “We were poor, and in those days that was a lot of money...[for] ordinary expenses.”4 On the surface, the program appeared to reap rewards for the United States and Mexico, but these gains were made off the backs of men who labored tirelessly for a better life.

A bracero’s journey began at a reception center, in either the United States or Mexico, where several criteria distinguished him from the thousands of other aspirantes (hopeful men) lined up outside the facility. Were his hands calloused? Did he have his back teeth? Did he carry tuberculosis? Did he look fit for hard labor? After the man passed the examinations conducted by doctors and employers, he received his Alien Laborer’s Identification Card. Some cards only contained their names, birthdates, reception dates, and cities of origin, while others had photos of the men and detailed descriptions about their positions in the program. Several ex-braceros reported extortion by the reception officers who required them to pay a processing fee — a measure that the government agreement did not sanction.6

Before being transported to a holding facility or his place of employment, the bracero was stripped naked and sprayed with dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) — a pesticide later banned because it causes cancer and other health problems.7 From this point, braceros’ experiences differed based on the region where they worked, the type of labor required, and their employers. Regardless of the unique experiences that followed, however, this invasive reception process haunted many braceros long after the program ended.

Employers often housed braceros in barracks-style, make-shift accommodations created from chicken coops, old barns, stables, or shacks. These facilities rarely contained enough showers or bathrooms for the number of men housed within them, leading to sanitation problems and rampant illnesses in some labor areas. A typical bracero’s accommodation provided him a bed and one shelf for his belongings.10

Many of these housing units, built onsite or within driving distance to the job site, effectively isolated the men from the closest city. Although the remoteness made life monotonous, it also gave the men opportunities to bond over their shared experiences and to teach each other new trades during their time off on Sundays. Some ex-braceros recalled learning valuable skills, such as sewing, barbering, and cooking, while in the secluded camps.10

\[1\] Photo courtesy of Gabriela Magaña.

\[2\] “In the center they put you up against a wall, and the contractors came like they were coming to buy livestock.” — Isodoro Ramirez

\[3\] “900 of us lived in one barracks. ... I was there a week. ... Who is going to sleep with all those people?” — Guadalupe Mena Arizmendi

\[4\] “You never forget the bracero experience,” former bracero Aurelio Marin commented, perfectly summarizing the triumphs, tribulations, and turbulence of the highly controversial and highly impactful Mexican Farm Labor Program. Commonly known as the Bracero Program, it began in 1942 to supply able-bodied Mexican laborers to U.S. industries suffering shortages at the outset of World War II. In exchange for their labor, the workers received temporary legal residence for the duration of their contract. Braceros worked in almost every region of the United States, finding themselves employed in everything from railroad construction and industrial maintenance to agriculture, the largest area of employment. Of the 4.5 million braceros admitted, California received the largest number of men with Texas ranking a close second. For Americans, the program offered a critical source of support for the wartime economy; for Mexicans, particularly young men, it presented an opportunity to come to the United States for employment and send money home to their families in Mexico. Houstonian Victor Escalante remembers what a boost it was for his family every time his father sent money home, “We were poor, and in those days that was a lot of money...[for] ordinary expenses.” On the surface, the program appeared to reap rewards for the United States and Mexico, but these gains were made off the backs of men who labored tirelessly for a better life.

A bracero’s journey began at a reception center, in either the United States or Mexico, where several criteria distinguished him from the thousands of other aspirantes (hopeful men) lined up outside the facility. Were his hands calloused? Did he have his back teeth? Did he carry tuberculosis? Did he look fit for hard labor? After the man passed the examinations conducted by doctors and employers, he received his Alien Laborer’s Identification Card. Some cards only contained their names, birthdates, reception dates, and cities of origin, while others had photos of the men and detailed descriptions about their positions in the program. Several ex-braceros reported extortion by the reception officers who required them to pay a processing fee — a measure that the government agreement did not sanction.

Before being transported to a holding facility or his place of employment, the bracero was stripped naked and sprayed with dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) — a pesticide later banned because it causes cancer and other health problems. From this point, braceros’ experiences differed based on the region where they worked, the type of labor required, and their employers. Regardless of the unique experiences that followed, however, this invasive reception process haunted many braceros long after the program ended.

Employers often housed braceros in barracks-style, make-shift accommodations created from chicken coops, old barns, stables, or shacks. These facilities rarely contained enough showers or bathrooms for the number of men housed within them, leading to sanitation problems and rampant illnesses in some labor areas. A typical bracero’s accommodation provided him a bed and one shelf for his belongings. Although contractors were supposed to supply braceros with beds and food under their contract, some businesses charged the men for these necessities, deducting it from their wages and making it difficult for braceros to send money home.

Many of these housing units, built onsite or within driving distance to the job site, effectively isolated the men from the closest city. Although the remoteness made life monotonous, it also gave the men opportunities to bond over their shared experiences and to teach each other new trades during their time off on Sundays. Some ex-braceros recalled learning valuable skills, such as sewing, barbering, and cooking, while in the secluded camps.
Many contractors gave their workers a set amount of foodstuffs for the week, making the workers responsible for cooking their meals and distributing them equally. After working ten to fourteen hours in the field, the men returned to their camps and ate meals that rarely satisfied them. For example, in Texas authorities convicted a judge of serving braceros sub-standard meat that was intended to be used as dog food.11

**TRANSPORTE**

“They brought them in trucks and some in trains, and not passenger trains but cargo trains...like sheep.”

– Cecilio Santillano2

To keep costs down, contractors often transported braceros to and from worksites in sub-standard vehicles, the most common being a cattle car outfitted with two wooden benches. These cars sometimes held up to fifty men crammed onto the benches with all of their work equipment. Dangerous and unregulated, the vehicles were believed to have contributed to countless underreported fatal accidents.

One of the most critical and well-reported accidents happened in 1963, resulting in the deaths of twenty-eight braceros en route to their worksite. More than fifty workers were riding in a cattle car crossing a railroad track when a train hit the car, which immediately caught fire. Twenty-three braceros died on impact and five more died later from their injuries. The driver, a bracero who survived the crash, claimed that he never saw the train and that many of the deaths occurred because the men could not escape the burning vehicle. Historian Lori Flores, author of *Grounds for Dreaming*, argues that the negative publicity generated by this accident encouraged the two governments to finally terminate the Bracero Program. The U.S. government initially intended to dissolve the bracero agreement after World War II, but petitions from farmers and contractors, who benefited from the cheap labor, argued against it. After this incident, the U.S. and Mexican governments acknowledged the inhumane treatment many braceros received and ended the program the following year.13

**SALARIO Y TRABAJO**

“[The fields are] where we encountered el cortito, or what’s called the short-handled hoe. And for sure, that is where I shed my tears.”

– Jose Natividad Alva Medina14

The word bracero comes from the Spanish word brazo — meaning arm — and translates to “one who works using his arms” or “manual laborer.” Whether a bracero built railroads in the Northwest or farmed vegetables and cotton in the Midwest and South, he did backbreaking labor for a fraction of the wages American workers received. Although recruiters promised braceros the “prevailing wage” for their work, contractors often undercut them or failed to pay them at all. In 1964, when the program and contracts ended, many contractors sent their workers back to Mexico without...
When the bracero program ended, José Bernal’s children suggested that he make copies of his Alien Laborer’s Identification Card. One day, he went to file a compensation claim with the Mexican government and gave the officials his original card without hesitation. Unfortunately, the Mexican government never compensated him nor returned the card, leaving just the copies as evidence of his bracero experience.

The Western Association of Railway Executives provided participating railroad companies with “Hints on the Employment of Imported Mexican Laborers.” In addition to the instructions (left), which call for limiting cold drinking water, the hints warn against placing Mexican laborers in close proximity to the contractors’ gangs lest the braceros find out their pay is not comparable as promised. To fulfill the diet of “relatively simple” Mexican foods lacking variety, the final two pages of instructions include recipes for beans, rice, chili con carne, and huevos rancheros.

Braceros were frequently required to use el cortito, the short-handled hoe, no more than two feet long, which forced them to bend over continuously for long hours as they worked in the fields. The short-handled hoe was later outlawed.

Photos courtesy of Wikicommons.
paying them or supplying the required fare for transportation home.15

One of the best predictors of wage inequality between braceros and American workers was the region where they worked. In Texas, braceros received $0.40 per hour. For the same agricultural labor in California, workers received $1.00 per hour, and for railroad labor in the Northwest, $1.25 per hour. In both western regions, general prejudice was less prevalent than in the South.16

Agriculture represented the most common use of the Bracero Program’s labor force. Although Flores mentions that the braceros worked in almost every surviving industry during the war, the majority farmed, doing anything from growing corn to picking cotton. Growers insisted that field workers use a tool called *el cortito*, the short-handled hoe, because they believed it “made workers more careful and kept crops from being damaged.” *El cortito* required workers to bend over to make their way through a row of crops, not standing upright until they reached the end of the row. This tool gave new meaning to “back-breaking labor” and was later made illegal.17

Though some ex-braceros reflect on their experience in the United States as one of adventure and nuance, many others remember hardship and poverty. Low wages, greedy contractors, and an obligation to send money home to Mexico made it hard for some braceros to buy necessities like durable work clothes. Braceros considered denim blue jeans and leather work boots prized possessions, but few could afford these essentials on their meager salaries. Those who could not afford them toiled in the fields wearing linen pants and pueblo sandals they brought from Mexico. Historian and museum curator Mireya Loza mused that one could tell a seasoned bracero by his boots, his denim jeans, and his radio — one of the first American luxuries that a prosperous worker brought back to Mexico.18

**PREJUICIO**

“They discriminated against us and the Blacks...they removed us from white restaurants and stores...they intimidated us.”

— Alejandro Ruteaga Rivas19

Braceros faced ongoing prejudice because of cultural differences, xenophobia, and job competition. Although the U.S. government initially told braceros that their efforts were vital to the American economy — and the American people — their reception in the country often told another story. Texas was infamous for its intolerance and prejudice towards braceros, causing the Mexican government to regularly cancel contracts with the state, which reapplied several times to remain in the program. The South, still operating with a Jim Crow mindset, expelled braceros from white-only spaces and treated them as second-class citizens.

Beyond the prejudice expressed by Anglos, braceros also experienced racism from Tejanos and Mexican Americans. The mixed Tejano culture clashed with the braceros’ Mexican culture because braceros were neither Americans nor had they assimilated into Mexican American culture. As the program progressed through World War II and the rise of the Cold War, a generalized fear of foreigners caused braceros to be targeted as outsiders who did not belong in the country. At this point, any gratitude felt towards braceros for supporting the war effort and the U.S. economy in its time of need was replaced with suspicion and intolerance.20

When World War II ended and the search for employment by citizens and permanent residents began, braceros became symbolic of foreign labor, making them pariahs among fellow agricultural workers of Mexican, Mexican American, and Tejano descent. Braceros could not organize in the field, received no form of representation, lacked legal recourse, and provided contractors an endless stream of cheap labor without the risk of unionization. Some employers used braceros to break strikes and supply labor teams, often preferring Mexicans over non-braceros. A 1962 *Los Angeles Times* article reports that falsification of bracero pay books was encouraging “the employment of Mexican nationals…[and the] unemployment of domestic farm workers.”21

Contractors could choose to pay “piece labor” — a set price per unit of product farmed — or “hourly labor” — a set wage per hour worked. It served the contractors’ interests to discourage piece labor so that the workers could only make a single, set wage per day. Because the domestic workers knew the difference in earning potential within the two platforms, they lost jobs to braceros who believed that they were making a similar wage. Unfortunately, the stunted legal position of braceros allowed unscrupulous contractors to take advantage of their labor, their wages, and their working conditions.22

**LAS RELACIONES Y LA EXPERIENCIA AMERICANA**

“I always prayed that if I married this person that he could stay here...and he wouldn’t go back.”

— Antonia Duran23

For some men, the Bracero Program offered an opportunity to cross the border and experience a world they never imagined. Loza mentioned that unmarried men made up a sizeable portion of the bracero population. While these men still sent money home to their families, they had the chance to wholeheartedly experience the vibrant culture of vice and excitement beyond the watchful eyes of their kin. Without obligations to wives and children, the men who had access...
to nearby towns could spend their extra money visiting nightspots and absorbing the American way of life.  

Mary Helen Cavazos, whose father was a contractor and transporter of braceros, talks about the amicable relationships her family had with them. She and her family worked alongside braceros as migrant workers and forged relationships with them. She recalls that her father likely took braceros into town on the weekends, which was common among generous contractors. Trips into town allowed braceros to experience life outside the farm and meet local men and women. Some braceros even met their wives while in the United States and filed for residency or citizenship to stay. Even though the Bracero Program represented a hard and harrowing experience for many of the men, others found a gem of an opportunity and enjoyed it for all it was worth.

**EL IMPACTO DEL PROGRAMA BRACERO**

“The program opened the door for thousands of families to come to the states. On one level it was hard for a lot of farm workers, but on another level they desired to make the sacrifice to prepare the ground for the generations like myself. . . . It was a good thing when you considered the positive byproducts of the food that it yielded, the sacrifice by one generation so the future generations could have an education and a better life.”  

– Victor Escalante

Throughout the duration of the Bracero Program, many Mexicans crossed the border with forged papers to work alongside bona fide braceros. A long reception process, competitive criteria for employment, and limited space drove workers to bypass the official Bracero Program and work under knowing contractors. This wave of immigration resulted in a movement, which began in Texas, calling for a halt to the illegal border crossings. President Dwight Eisenhower authorized Operation Wetback in 1954 to round up the unauthorized workers and send them to Mexico. Although no evidence indicates raids were conducted in Houston, the local Houston League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) Council #60 lent its support to other Texas councils that supported the deportations because they believed the program displaced American workers, kept illegals in peonage, and jeopardized LULAC’s communication with the Anglo community.

As U.S. funding dried up for implementation and enforcement, Operation Wetback met with resistance in Mexico when workers died as they tried to escape the transport ship taking them to Veracruz. Houston, a major city in the throes of forming Mexican American communities and cultivating the Chicano Movement by the 1960s, was a hub for men who had immigrated through and around the Bracero Program and chosen to stay in the United States.

The Bracero Program ended abruptly in 1964 when the U.S. and Mexican governments determined that they could not enforce the laws governing it. Doris Meissner, a senior fellow with the Migration Policy Institute, calls the abuse of workers the “central characteristic of the Bracero Program” and attributes its termination to the government’s inability to reconcile it “with civil-rights-era sensibilities about how people should be treated in a democratic society.” The abuses were not one-sided, however, as the Mexican government received over $23 million through the Bracero Program.

When ex-braceros and their families discovered how much money their government withheld, they began to feel as though the Mexican government had sold their lives and their labor while claiming to protect them and offer them economic opportunities.

Mexican American immigration patterns that began during the 1960s and 1970s have had an enormous impact on immigration reform, cultural amalgamation, and the roots of the Mexican American identity in Houston. The Bracero Program contributed to this immigration wave by providing a new source of jobs and by bringing people from many regions and cultures in Mexico. Many braceros brought their families or started families in the United States during and after their contracted labor periods, and passed down stories of their experiences to the next generation. Victor Escalante, for example, vividly recalls the bracero stories his father and uncle shared whenever the family got together. Today, other former braceros and their families living in Houston also enjoy sharing their stories of working in South Texas before returning to the city to make a life, setting down critical and invaluable roots throughout the Houston region.

Jadsia Roopchand graduated from the University of Houston in May 2017 with a bachelor of science in psychology and a bachelor of arts in English literature. She plans to pursue medicine with a focus on psychotherapy and, in her free time, enjoys studying urban history and immigration culture.