

Braceros in the Arkansas Delta, 1943-1964

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In 2003, an elderly Isidoro Abrego Alvarado recalled his early life: “My dreams! I would go on a cart with four wheels, sitting on a board seat, driving two mules and I would dream . . . ‘If only this cart were mine . . .’ I went to the United States. When I returned, I bought the cart.”¹ The simple desires of a farmhand in 1940s Mexico had little chance of coming true in a country where farm labor paid only a few *pesos* a week. Thus when opportunity presented itself in the form of a program to recruit Mexican labor for U.S. farms, Alvarado and many Mexicans took their chances. For both urban and rural men, the voyage to the United States offered possibilities to fulfill their dreams.

With the start of World War II, agricultural workers in the United States joined the fight, leaving the fields to become soldiers in European and Pacific theatres and places in between. The subsequent shortage of agricultural labor led to a wartime agreement between Mexico and the United States that permitted the temporary entry and employment of Mexican nationals in the United States. Following the format of a similar program during World War I, this agreement surpassed the expectations of both governments with its high enrollment. Its participants eventually became known as the *braceros*, a derivative of the Spanish word for

¹ Isidoro Abrego Alvarado, interview by Laureano Martínez, 2 June 2003, Audio file, Bracero History Archive, University of Texas-El Paso, Item #341, <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/341> (accessed 14 October 2009). Abrego Alvarado arrived in the U.S. as a *bracero* in the early 1950s.

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“arms.” These Mexican workers faced a difficult journey from their hometowns to worksites in the rural United States.

While a great majority of *bracero* workers traveled to California, Arizona, and New Mexico, where they worked jobs traditionally filled by *chicanos* and other Latinos, almost 17,000 migrated to the Arkansas Delta during the program’s peak in 1959.² In the Delta, the migrants faced a much different situation than those in the Southwest. The Delta was without a sizable Latino population and had a white population determined to maintain Jim Crow race relations. This fostered a situation in which Arkansans interacted with a group not previously encountered. At the same time, the long contract process and the distance from the homeland added to the cultural alienation felt by the workers. The distinct southern culture experienced by the Mexican workers allowed them to observe the race dynamics of the South as outsiders and, eventually, as insiders on their trips to small towns in eastern Arkansas.

The historiography of Arkansas as well as the *bracero* program has ignored this group of immigrants despite their presence and driving force of the cotton sector in the 1950s. Quite possibly, the language barrier and the itinerant nature of the workers frustrated historians. However, the work program illustrated how transnational agreements and immigration impacted Arkansas farms. Oral histories and newspapers can be used to piece together the daily life of *braceros* in the Arkansas Delta. The sources facilitate an examination of the alienating challenges in creating a home outside the homeland, interacting with local whites and African-Americans in spite of the language barrier, and experiencing the changing perceptions of Mexican nationals as the work program evolved until its end in 1964. The lasting effects of the *bracero* program carried into the twenty-first century as immigration and a growing Latino presence has reintroduced the question of foreign labor on Arkansas soil.

Concurrent with Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy towards Latin America, the U.S. State Department and the Mexican Foreign Affairs Minister finalized the labor agreement of 1942 through a series of telegrams, granting workers contracts for a maximum of ninety days.³ The U.S. Labor Department adminis-

²U.S. Congress, House Report of Continuation of Mexican Farm Labor Program with Minority Views to May 6, 1963, 88th Cong., 1st sess., 1963. H. Doc. 274.

³ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations-Diplomatic Papers* 1943, Serial Set Vol. No. 10888-6, Session Vol. No. 24, 78th Congress, 2nd session, H.Doc. 811 vol. 6, 531-586.

tered the program and in 1943 began supervising the recruitment and the placement of individuals. Unlike under previous work agreements, officials took into consideration the concerns of growers, Mexican labor ministers, and labor groups. Growers applauded the agreement, while labor groups demanded that domestic labor sources be exhausted before filling positions with *braceros*. Treaty provisions protected Mexican nationals with a minimum wage that varied from state to state and guaranteed them the same social benefits as American workers. Importantly, the agreement also prohibited any abuse of workers by foremen or others.

In Mexico, a faltering economy and the fading of Lázaro Cardenas's progressive presidency created conditions that pushed rural workers off the land. By the time that the agreement was signed, the migration of farmhands to Mexico City had transformed that city. Receiving thousands of people a month, the city rapidly grew with shanty towns full of potential workers and their families. Among these workers, word of the agreement between the two countries quickly spread through radio and newspaper announcements as well as word of mouth. In January 1943, as the program was just getting started, applications flooded the Farm Security Administration as the two embarrassed nations scrambled to manage a crowd of 5,000 at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City hoping to fill an early contract for 1,000 jobs north of the border.⁴

The journey to Arkansas began in Mexico as thousands crowded hiring centers in cities already far from their *pueblos*, marking the beginning of alienation for the workers. Despite the Mexican government's initial reluctance to recruit outside Mexico City, hiring centers soon popped up in Guadalajara, Piedras Negras, Monterrey, and Tijuana, and eager workers flooded these cities to register and await the selection of their names by lottery. Registration required a birth certificate and a military service card, although having both of these documents did not expedite the process. Some waited only a few days, while others waited weeks. In order to accelerate the process, some potential workers, such as Saban Luna in 1959, bribed those who oversaw the lottery

⁴ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations-Diplomatic Papers*, 536-537. Ironically, the *Oficial Mayor* of the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs sighed that the Mexican government could not guarantee the balance of workers asked for by the U.S. and feared that response would be slow.

in order to get their names on the list.⁵ Hiring experts then contracted the listed men and placed them en route to a border city to complete the registration process.

For the majority of applicants, Mexican economics factored most into their decision to become a *bracero*. Poverty and necessity served as the driving forces behind their trip north.⁶ Having little to lose, Esteban Saldaña voyaged north in 1950 and “came [to the U.S.] with a blessing and a kiss.”⁷ The United States’ reasons for hiring Mexicans mattered little to the new workers. Isidoro Abrego Alvarado, a poor *campesino*, recalled seeing his compatriots leaving for the U.S. in 1942, but gave little thought as to why the U.S. needed workers. He shrugged, “They were off fighting in a war somewhere.”⁸

Upon arrival in the border towns, U.S. authorities had all men strip and hold their clothes as they walked through a white cloud of DDT, a pesticide used to *desinfectar* or “to disinfect.” Not only was the pesticide toxic, the process proved to be humiliating. Now-elderly *braceros* derided the disinfection area for treating them “like animals.”⁹ José Astorga Corral, a *bracero* in late 1955, put a light-hearted spin on the memory. He recalled with a laugh his initial thought as he emerged from the disinfecting area: “Maybe they’re trying to make us whiter.”¹⁰ The U.S. government also required all men to undergo a medical examination. The doctors vaccinated the men but often did not tell the workers with what exactly. “Who knows what it was for? It might have been for donkeys!” laughed José Ortiz Hinojosa, an Arkansas *bracero* in

⁵ Saban Luna, interview by Corina Benavides Lopez, 13 May 2006, Audio file, Bracero History Archive, University of Texas-El Paso, Item #267, <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/267> (accessed 15 October 2009).

⁶ Isidoro Abrego Alvarado, interview.

⁷ Esteban Saldaña, interview by Myrna Parra-Mantilla, 2 February 2003, Audio file, Bracero History Archive, University of Texas-El Paso, Item #49, <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/49> (accessed 14 October 2009). Saldaña worked in Blytheville, Arkansas, in 1950 and across the river in Greenville, Mississippi, the following year. Please note that all contributors to the Bracero History Archive spoke in Spanish. Thus all translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Felipe Corona Franco, interview by Violeta Dominguez, 27 June 2003, Bracero History Archive, University of Texas-El Paso, Item #105, <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/105> (accessed 14 October 2009).

¹⁰ José Astorga Corral, interview by Laureano Martínez, 17 March 2003, Audio file, Bracero History Archive, University of Texas-El Paso, Item #209, <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/209> (accessed 14 October 2009).

1958.¹¹ Blood drawing caused many to faint, while other exams raised even more alarm among the workers.¹² Complying with the medical exam requirements, the Mexican and American doctors performed rectal examinations. The physicians used this exam in order to determine if the worker had hemorrhoids, to examine the prostate, and to gather bacteria for typhoid-screening. The doctors, however, rarely informed the workers as to why they were performing this exam. The procedure left lingering traumas in the minds of the *braceros*. Interpreted as an ultimate violation of Mexican *machismo*, many workers found it difficult to narrate the procedure or to describe their shame. Abrego Alvarado refused to describe the process and trailed off: "They put on a glove and . . . through here." Astorga Corral, meanwhile, experienced bleeding after the exam.¹³

Upon completion of the medical exam, the Department of Agriculture gave each worker an identification card. During World War II, the workers were given ration booklets as well. Some of the *braceros* were given a bilingual phrase book which contained crucial phrases for basic understanding in a variety of settings, including health and hygiene.¹⁴ *Braceros* then boarded the transportation that took them to serve out their respective work contracts. Contracts explicitly prohibited workers from returning to Mexico until they had fulfilled their labor obligation. Upon the completion of their contracts, many returned to their homeland only to queue once again in the hiring centers, beginning the entire process of hiring and examination again.

For the *braceros* assigned to Arkansas, the long trip to the state from the border took them from a largely arid region to a humid, verdant area. As the distance from the homeland grew, a new reality emerged. Homero Lopez Ortiz described his 1954 trip to the Natural State from the McAllen, Texas, pick-up center as an interminable one. Yet, the changing environment and social landscape astounded the young Mexican. He vividly recalled the towns "with

¹¹ José Ortiz Hinojosa, unnamed interviewer, 23 May 2003, Audio file, Bracero History Archive, University of Texas-El Paso, Item #89, <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/89> (accessed 14 October 2009).

¹² Miguel Jaquez Lopez, interview by Laureano Martinez, 27 May 2003, Audio file, Bracero History Archive, University of Texas-El Paso, Item #214, <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/214> (accessed 14 October 2009).

¹³ Isidoro Abrego Alvarado, interview; José Astorga Corral, interview.

¹⁴ "Bilingual Phrase Book," Photograph of language guide owned by Bob Porter, Bracero History Archive, University of Texas-El Paso, Item #558, <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/558> (accessed 3 October 2009).



“Bilingual phrase book,” in Bracero History Archive, Item #556, <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/556> (accessed April 21, 2010).

all black people” and the city with the big river called *Piedrita Bonita* (“Pretty Little Rock”).¹⁵

Arkansas, a former slave state, contrasted greatly from the other states, including Wisconsin, California, and Arizona, that participated in the *bracero* program. Race, politics, agriculture, Civil War history, and the memory of slavery gave the state its own unique ambiance. Historically, the state’s agricultural sector in the Delta region grew a variety of plantation crops, but mostly rice and cotton, that benefited from the Mississippi River watershed’s rich soil. Thus manual labor drove the local and state agricultural sector and overall regional economy. The need for manual labor had precursors as planters before 1940 hired a number of Latinos to fill the already

¹⁵ Homero López Ortiz, Interview by Violeta Dominguez, 31 May 2002, Audio file, Bracero History Archive, University of Texas-El Paso, Item #124, <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/124> (accessed 14 October 2009).

growing demand for labor. Coinciding with the Great Migration of African-Americans to the North, the agricultural sector in the South scrambled for laborers to fill the void. Notably, the fluctuating population emerged on the 1940 census which records fifty-four "Whites Born in Mexico" in Mississippi County and twenty-eight in St. Francis County.¹⁶ Ten years later, the Census painted a different picture with zero "People Listing Mexico as Origin."¹⁷ What happened during these years? Quite possibly, many returned to Mexico in order to reregister for the *bracero* program which guaranteed greater protection and higher wages. In addition to this possibility, census takers perhaps found the population of Latinos too itinerant or impermanent to report to the state. Moreover, the rural work environment hindered attempts to collect accurate census reports as isolated farms and a lack of infrastructure made the process difficult. The isolation of the region led many workers to despise or to revel in the bucolic scene. Far from family and the homeland, workers commented on the loneliness of the Delta and its stillness. However, others made the best of it, bathing in nearby rivers like Miguel Jaquez Lopez did or going for rides on dirt roads as described by Natividad Mancinas.

The Arkansas cotton and vegetable farms that hosted the *braceros* also had a unique history. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century had witnessed a decline in small landholding and the concentration of agricultural land into fewer and fewer hands. By the 1940s, many families and corporations managed sizeable pieces of land, allowing them to take advantage of efficiencies of scale, employ the latest machinery and chemicals, and exert tremendous pressure on the labor force. Jaquez Lopez's described the vastness of the farm where he labored in Arkansas Delta in 1956: "nothing but cotton this way, or this way, or that way. As far as you could see, it was all cotton."¹⁸ The crop picked by slaves in the antebellum era and freedpeople after the Civil War now had new people to perform stoop labor. The *Arkansas Gazette*, fully comprehending

¹⁶ "Arkansas Counties in 1940: Whites Born in Mexico," Historical Census Browser, retrieved 13 October 2009 from University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/>.

¹⁷ "Arkansas Counties in 1950: People Listing Mexico as Origin," Historical Census Browser, retrieved 13 October 2009 from University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/>.

¹⁸ Miguel Jaquez Lopez, interview.

the irony, sardonically titled an article on the *braceros* as “New Subjects for King Cotton.”¹⁹

The *Arkansas Gazette*'s article also described the workers' cramped barracks as full of flies and stale smells, labeling them a “primitive sight.” Despite the paper's opinion, the new, modern amenities shocked some of the workers and led a local farmer to complain that his workers did not know what to do with the new equipment.²⁰ Many came from rural areas in the Mexico where few had the luxuries of running water and plumbing. However, as Juan Loza experienced, not all had the luck of a new building. Even though the agreement between the U.S. and Mexican stipulated clean facilities, some farmers simply converted existent buildings to house the *braceros*. The Arkansas farmer for whom Loza worked in late 1961 had converted half his seed shed into living quarters, forcing workers to share the space with the mice and rats that scurried across their floors at night.²¹

Perhaps the greater culture shock came in the way of Arkansas weather. Many *braceros* migrated to spend the fall harvest months in Arkansas with only sandals and short-sleeved work shirts.²² Few had brought enough clothing with them on the voyage north.²³ With the mercury dropping, workers found it necessary to purchase jackets, socks, and boots from nearby towns in order to pick cotton during its peak in October.²⁴ Furthermore, excessive rain or drought tried the workers' patience since their earnings frequently came from how much they picked and not for the hour. The delay often echoed into Mexico where the families awaited the bi-weekly or monthly check from the United States in order to buy food and other necessities.

While the weather served as a reminder of the distance between chilly Arkansas and, say, balmy Guerrero, Mexico, the

¹⁹ Ernest Valachovic, “New Subjects for King Cotton,” *Arkansas Gazette Sunday Magazine*, 14 July 1957, p. 1E.

²⁰ *Ibid.* It should be noted that even domestic workers lacked such facilities in their own homes.

²¹ Juan Loza, interview by Mireya Loza, 31 August 2005, Audio file, Bracero History Archive, University of Texas-El Paso, Item #175, <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/175> (accessed 14 October 2009).

²² See Figure 2 on page 21. “Picking cotton in Arkansas,” Photograph owned by Heriberto Cortés Cortés, Bracero History Archive, University of Texas-El Paso, Item #822, <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/822> (accessed 3 October 2009).

²³ Juan Loza, interview.

²⁴ Miguel Jaquez Lopez, interview.



Heriberto Cortes-Cortes, "Picking cotton in Arkansas," in Bracero History Archive, Item #822, <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/822> (accessed April 21, 2010).

cooking made workers homesick even more. In Mexico, as in most Latin American countries, women traditionally do most of the cooking along with much of the housework. Thus the absence of women left men to their own devices. As a staple food of Mexico, tortillas seemed the most difficult but the most desired foodstuff in the kitchen quarters. The difficult process frustrated Esteban Saldaña who gave up after wrestling with a store-bought dough mix.²⁵ Indeed, this quotidian task, normally accomplished by one Mexican woman, required two Mexican men in Arkansas. In 1953, Enrique Torres Sánchez and his brother cooperated on rolling out

²⁵ Esteban Saldaña, interview.

the dough while turning a pot upside down on the fire to cook the corn-based disc on the flat side.²⁶ Regional differences also emerged as some *braceros* from the north of Mexico admitted their dislike for the corn tortillas common to the central and southern regions of the nation, preferring bread or flour tortillas.²⁷

While many farms provided kitchen areas for individual food preparation, corporate farms had only cafeterias to serve the workers. The lack of control over their meals angered workers since the company typically deducted the weekly board cost from the workers' paychecks. Disenchantment with these cafeterias grew amongst the *braceros*. Saldaña, who worked in Arkansas during the 1950s, recalled one corporate farm where management prohibited workers from entering the kitchen to prepare their own food. Instead, management deducted the cost of the cafeteria food from the workers' paychecks, totaling a whopping \$12 a week even though workers received "a hotdog and bread" for every meal, every day.²⁸ Managers let him take over the kitchen, and he changed the menu to include eggs made to order, cereal, meat, and more.²⁹ For Felipe Corona Franco, however, one such cafeteria became a saving grace when he injured himself picking cotton. Suffering from a strained back, the young Mexican feared a return trip to Mexico and a contract cancellation when he informed the foreman of his injury. Luckily, his foreman cooperated with him and moved him to food preparation which required little heavy lifting in comparison to stoop labor. In the cafeteria, he worked by the hour and avoided the termination of his contract.³⁰ In Arkansas, the majority of the workers prepared their own meals. With weekly outings on Saturdays, their bosses took them into local towns to pick up provisions for the week. Oftentimes, these excursions afforded the only opportunity to visit towns near the farm. On these trips into the Delta towns, the interactions with locals provided a closer look into the complexities of the rural South.

Weekend visitations to the towns served as an escape to alleviate the rural isolation felt in the Delta and enabled greater con-

²⁶ Enrique Torres Sánchez, interview by Laureano Martinez, 29 May 2003, Audio file, Bracero History Archive, University of Texas-El Paso, Item #195, <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/195> (accessed 14 October 2009).

²⁷ José Ortiz Hinojosa, interview.

²⁸ Esteban Saldaña, interview.

²⁹ Esteban Saldaña, interview.

³⁰ Felipe Corona Franco, interview.

tact with the local populace. These visits involved shopping for the week's groceries or visiting the bank to send money home. Indeed, many workers encountered racial segregation for the first time in Arkansas. Segregation in the South had separated blacks and whites since the early 1890s, and the introduction of Mexican workers left all parties confused as to where the *bracero* belonged. Natividad Mancinas and Juan Loza witnessed firsthand the social divisions of Jim Crow in the late 1950s, noting the existence of "white" grocery stores and "black" ones. Some workers shopped at the same stores as their *patrones*, while others drifted towards the "black" groceries.³¹ The desire to turn a profit weakened initial hesitation on the part of white business owners to cater to the newcomers. Finally, local businessmen near West Memphis proclaimed that the "brachero [*sic*] is welcome in any store." Undoubtedly, most markets changed their policies when they saw the *bracero* come with their white bosses. Nonetheless, relationships with whites can be best described as complicated. Farmers saw the need to hire Mexican nationals as "a necessary evil," citing the lack of local help to pick his harvest.³²

Local whites on family farms in the Delta who hired *braceros* cited the Mexican's work ethic and the need for workers as the primary motivation for their employment. Oftentimes these employers compared *braceros* to those African Americans who had traditionally worked the land. A West Memphis farmer lauded the *braceros*, commenting, "You show them what you want done and they do it They don't run for the shade as soon as you turn your back."³³ When his boss asked him to work on a separate alfalfa field by himself, Esteban Saldaña found himself exhausted when his *patrón* returned at the end of the day. "You're tired?" the man asked. "Yes," nodded Saldaña. The man left but quickly returned with several hamburgers and six beers, leaving the exhausted *bracero* to unwind after a day's work.³⁴ On the last day of the work contract, some farmers invited their workers to eat dinner with them and their families. Both Saldaña and Isidoro

³¹ Natividad Mancinas, interview by Myrna Mantilla-Parra, 12 May 2003, Audio file, Bracero History Archive, University of Texas-El Paso, Item #23, <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/23> (accessed 14 October 2009); Juan Loza, interview.

³² Ernest Valachovic, "New Subjects for King Cotton."

³³ *Ibid.* For further information, see images of workers' contract extensions on the Bracero History Archive website.

³⁴ Esteban Saldaña, interview.

Abrego Alvarado recalled *fiestas* thrown on the last day of the job.³⁵ Alvarado, in particular, recounted the conviviality between the workers and this particular family, but he lamented the language barrier that reduced their communications to signs and pointing.³⁶

Indeed, language differences hindered the possibility of a greater understanding between the Arkansans and the Mexicans since a majority of the *braceros* did not speak English. Despite the barrier, some land owners went to great lengths to better communicate with their workers. For example, Efraín Benitez Santana worked a young couple's farm in 1951-52. After initial difficulty in communicating with *braceros*, the couple began attending night school to gain a rudimentary understanding of Spanish.³⁷ Other efforts by land owners surprised the Mexican men. Abrego Alvarado stood slack-jawed when the owner's wife came out to pick cotton alongside the *braceros*. Although she did not speak Spanish, the two communicated with signs enough to strike up a friendship, exchanging pictures at the end of his stay.³⁸ However, the amiability and acceptance of whites depended largely on their social standing. Poor whites, who also worked in stoop labor, lamented the loss of jobs to the *bracero*. Many had already heard the call of the city, leaving rural farms for higher wages in the city or in the industrial north. Associated with this move north or into urban areas came the social prestige, which stoop labor lacked and still lacks today in some social circles. As a consequence, labor in the Delta opened the door for the Mexican national and West Indian populations who hungered for the "American dollar and working conditions over what they face at home."³⁹

³⁵ Esteban Saldaña, interview; Isidoro Abrego Alvarado, interview. While both men share similar memories of Arkansas, only Saldaña remembers the name of the closest city to the farm, Blytheville, Arkansas, making it difficult to conclude that they worked on the same farm.

³⁶ Isidoro Abrego Alvarado, interview.

³⁷ Efraín Benitez Santana, interview by Violeta Mena, 20 May 2006, Audio file, Bracero History Archive, University of Texas-El Paso, Item #341, <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/341> (accessed 14 October 2009). The worker influx created a need for Spanish classes in the region which the Education Department provided for people who wanted to communicate more with the workers. For more information, see *Arkansas Gazette*, "Bracero Influx in Arkansas Creates Bilingualism Need," 15 October 1961, p.10C.

³⁸ Isidoro Abrego Alvarado, interview.

³⁹ Ernest Valachovic, "New Subjects for King Cotton."

The tension between poor whites and *braceros* in the Delta mirrored the Mexicans' relations with African-Americans. Traditionally, most blacks in Mexico lived in Gulf Coast areas or in southern Mexican states. Most *braceros* had never encountered a white man, much less a black man. As a result, workers lacked intercultural experiences. While they might have come across indigenous groups in Mexico, regional identity and rural isolation kept these to a minimum. In the United States, positive or negative experiences with African-Americans molded the Mexicans' opinions. White land owners and employers in Arkansas proved defensive of their decision to hire Mexican workers, straying into racist stereotyping of African-Americans. An Employment Division official repudiated local African-Americans who decried the use of *bracero* labor on local farms, stating that some use the workers' presence as "an excuse to seek unemployment checks."⁴⁰ The transnational agreement required local employers to exhaust domestic labor sources in order to file for *bracero* help, yet in practice this did not happen. When black workers complained of the influx of Mexicans, land owners merely responded with "Get North."⁴¹ Race surely played a part in the preference of one group over the other, but age also entered the argument. Because the work program came during a period in which younger African-Americans drifted northward, the remaining older generation often competed with the younger *braceros*.

Nonetheless, the majority of the men recalled their interactions with the local African-American population in Arkansas with fondness. One of the pastimes in Arkansas for Natividad Mancinas involved borrowing the farmer's truck and going for rides on the rural dirt roads of the Delta: "There were a lot of blacks in the area. They would talk but we could not understand each other. They would even shake our hands!"⁴² Most of these interactions took place when *braceros* frequented the towns for provisions or other items. On a shopping trip to buy a watch, José Astorga Corral missed his ride and wandered through the town at night when he heard some music. "It was a black boogie!" he laughed. Welcoming him in, local African Americans offered him

⁴⁰ Valachovic's "New Subjects for King Cotton" also quotes a farmer as having a "bellyful of Negroes who don't show up when [he] need[s] them," illustrating a negative attitude towards African Americans.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Natividad Mancinas, interview.

drinks and taught him to dance. José left the party fascinated by black women, describing them in exuberance, “Beautiful things! Almost silvery in the light!”⁴³ Working alongside different groups of people made some reflect on Mexico’s own dealings with race. Jesus Ortiz Torres, who worked in the U.S. from 1960-1964, observed that discrimination in Mexico exceeded that in the United States due to a strict social code and regional prejudices. He lamented, “You can work and work in Mexico and go nowhere. Here your labor will at least get you a little savings.”⁴⁴

Despite the praise of the work ethic of *braceros* and the eagerness with which these Mexicans sought work in the United States, there is evidence that workers banded together to protect their own rights and protest their treatment. Esteban Saldaña narrated how he led a strike in 1952 in Arkansas for ten cents more per hour in order to offset the \$12 per week workers were required to pay for cafeteria food. But the transient status of *braceros* gave them little power to enforce their demands. When supervisors on the corporate farm denied the request, strikers quit the picket line, and Saldaña’s foreman punished him by sending him back to Mexico.⁴⁵ In general, the threat of deportation proved to be a powerful tool for employers.

In the 1950s, opposition to the *bracero* program increased. The illegal migration of Mexican workers provoked a backlash that made little distinction between legal and illegal migrant workers. For each legal guest worker admitted to the United States, authorities arrested two illegal workers.⁴⁶ Esteban Saldaña worked as both a legal and an illegal worker and preferred the former method because of the guarantee of housing and food.⁴⁷ With the end of the Korean War, many workers felt unwelcome as labor groups pressured the Eisenhower administration to end the guest worker pro-

⁴³ José Astorga Corral, interview. Astorga Corral’s exclamation of “Beautiful things!” is a translation of “¡Cosas chulas!” which literally translates as “beautiful, precious objects” and is often used to refer to women in Mexican culture.

⁴⁴ Jesus Ortiz Torres, interview by Myrna Garcia, 31 August 2005, Audio file, Bracero History Archive, University of Texas-El Paso, Item #182, <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/182> (accessed 14 October 2009).

⁴⁵ Esteban Saldaña, interview. When this failed, Saldaña returned to Mexico but managed to arrange his family’s papers, bringing his family to the U.S. This is something that only a small percentage of *braceros* did in the 1940s and 1950s. Miguel Jaquez Lopez also had a similar experience with his own cafeteria.

⁴⁶ Philip Martin, “Mexican Workers and U.S. Agriculture: The Revolving Door,” *International Migration Review* 36 (Winter 2002): 1129.

⁴⁷ Esteban Saldaña, interview.

gram. Moreover, the pejoratively-titled "Operation Wetback" in 1954 trained the spotlight on illegals and led to a round-up and deportation of almost one million. While some argued that illegal immigrants infringed on the *braceros*' territory of labor, political reasons also influenced the decision to gather them. In 1951 and 1952, strikes led by illegal aliens against large-scale farmers fanned the flames of growing negative public opinion.⁴⁸ Caught in the middle, *braceros* sympathized for their fellow countrymen's political voice, but presented themselves as a safer alternative for large corporate farms.

Two factors contributed to the fall in *bracero* hires starting in the 1950s. First, technological elements crept slowly into Arkansas agricultural fields. Machines, such as the Rust cotton picker, moved in and did the job of twenty men, lessening the need for *braceros*. Many family farmers could not afford such farm implements, but the picker quickly gained a following among corporate farmers, the largest employers of guest workers.⁴⁹ Second, the empowering of agribusiness through federal agricultural grants pushed poor whites and blacks off their land. Consequently, the domestic labor surplus provided larger farms with the needed hands. The competition for few jobs led to the inevitable drop in salaries, driving migration of both whites and blacks to cities.⁵⁰ Indeed, the need for foreign labor fell considerably over a three year period as reflected by congressional records. In 1959, Arkansas *braceros* labored for 84,689 man months. Three years later, Arkansas hosted almost 12,410 *braceros*, or 18,664 man months of labor.⁵¹

Despite the changing conditions, farmers still called for *braceros*. Arkansas farmers flooded J. William Fulbright's Senate office with letters supporting an extension. In early 1963, Fulbright circulated a bill that continued the *bracero* program until December 31, 1963. Fulbright called for a phasing out of the work program, giving farmers enough time to seek out new employees. Harvey Adams of the Agricultural Council argued in favor of the bill, noting

⁴⁸ L. O. Hansen, "The Political and Socioeconomic Context of Legal and Illegal Mexican Migration to the United States (1942-1984)," *International Migration Review* 26 (Winter 2001): 98.

⁴⁹ Donald Holley, "The Second Great Emancipation: The Rust Cotton Picker and How It Changed Arkansas," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 52 (Spring 1993): 43-77.

⁵⁰ See Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

⁵¹ U.S. Congress. House Report of Continuation of Mexican Farm Labor Program with Minority Views to 6 May 1963. 88th Cong., 1st sess., 1963. H. Doc. 274.;

that the 4,770 Mexican nationals in Arkansas at the time of the vote would have been “a pretty sizeable work force to stop all at once.”⁵² Other administrative officials wrote more desperate letters, such as Arkansas Department of Labor official J. L. Bland, who surprisingly described the labor shortage to Fulbright as “acute.”⁵³ Meanwhile, labor groups and the scientific community protested any such extension. Articles such as “Wetbacks Bring Insects” filled scientific journals, stirring the fears of farmers that hidden beetles in the clothes of the *braceros* endangered domestic crops.⁵⁴

In the eyes of the U.S. Department of Labor, the *braceros* imperiled U.S. workers far more than a beetle, reflecting the changing opinion on the official level. Thus the Department prohibited the importation of Mexican labor to the state of Arkansas on April 7, 1964. Despite another extension, the Department pointed to preferential hiring practices involving *braceros*, insisting that land owners were passing over U.S. citizens to hire migrants. Meanwhile, Tracy Murrell of the regional Bureau of Employment Security in Dallas, Texas, also criticized the use of guest workers. While labor laws required a minimum wage of \$.60 per hour for both domestic and foreign labor, Murrell argued that Mexicans were often paid below that rate. He cited one strawberry farm that paid its primarily Mexican workforce only \$.40 per hour.⁵⁵

Arkansas farmers’ partiality for Mexican labor continued in the cotton sector as thousands of Mexicans picked while many Arkansans went unemployed.⁵⁶ Bland defended the use of Mexican workers, submitting a proposal to the regional office in Dallas on behalf of Arkansas farmers that would have overturned the U.S. Department of Labor’s decision to end the program in Arkansas. The proposal stipulated that domestic workers came first in the hiring process, guaranteed them further protections, and demanded that they be paid higher wages than the *braceros*.⁵⁷ Ultimately, Bland’s

⁵² Harvey R. Adams to J. William Fulbright, West Memphis, 21 June 1963. J. William Fulbright Papers, University of Arkansas Special Collections.

⁵³ J. L. Bland, Letter to J. William Fulbright, 31 July 1963, Fulbright Papers.

⁵⁴ “Wetbacks Bring Insects,” *The Science News-Letter* 68 (10 December 1955): 372.

⁵⁵ Ernest Valachovic, “U.S. Says Mexicans Can’t Be Imported to Arkansas Farms,” *Arkansas Gazette*, 7 April 1964, p. 1B.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Leland DuVall, “State Farmers Offer New Bracero Plan,” *Arkansas Gazette*, 11 April 1964.

proposal went nowhere, and the *bracero* program ended in the Natural State.

The waves of *braceros* that came to Arkansas during World War II and the postwar era only hinted to the future rise in the Latino population in the state. Many *braceros* eventually brought their families to the U.S. through legal means while others simply returned to Mexico. While the politics and the economics changed over the decades for migrant workers, the employment choices remained limited in Arkansas. The family farm is disappearing in the shadow of larger corporate farms, and the rural population continues to move to urban centers. Technology has also abated the need for a large stoop labor force. But immigrants still come into the U.S. or migrate from region to region for peak harvest times, oftentimes with family in tow. More importantly, though, the agricultural processing sector has emerged as one of the largest employers of Mexican labor in Arkansas. Tyson and Pilgrim's Pride poultry plants scattered throughout the state have provided employment for tens of thousands of migrants from Mexico and Central America. Importantly, the cultural alienation that the *braceros* faced and felt during their time in Arkansas has waned in present times due to technology, transportation, and the diffusion of Mexican *supermercados* and radio stations throughout the state.⁵⁸

Braceros arrived in Arkansas to fill the vacancies left by the military enlistment of agricultural workers during World War II. These Mexican workers experienced cultural alienation on several levels. From simple cooking to language obstacles to new cultural interactions, each challenge only highlighted the distance from their homeland. Arkansas *braceros* thus observed through newcomer's eyes the character of the South along with the race dynamics of eastern Arkansas and the changing opinion towards them. While exchanges with different cultural groups in the region can be characterized as respectful, perception of the workers depended greatly on the economic status and the occupation of the person involved. The dissolution of the agreement between the two North American nations did not truly end the exchange of labor as the U.S. and Mexican economies became increasingly in-

⁵⁸ By the late twentieth century, however, northwest and west central Arkansas had a high concentration Latinos. Lured by the agricultural sector, the majority of them work in large chicken processing plants. For more information, see Steve Striffler, *Chicken: The Dangerous Transformation of America's Favorite Food* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

terdependent. While the image of Mexican workers in Arkansas has changed over the course of the last century, the Latino's purpose has remained static and true to the meaning of *bracero*: a pair of arms.