AFD Ep 408 Links and Notes - The Bracero Guest Worker Program of WW2 [Bill/Rachel] - Recording Jan 16 2022

- [Intro] When the US entered World War II at the end of 1941, American women were not the only people brought into the US workforce to replace men leaving for military service. The Emergency Farm Labor Act of 1942 significantly increased foreign agricultural worker presence in the United States during the war, drawing most heavily from Mexico, which was still experiencing economic depression and which had declared war on the Axis powers in July 1942 and needed an easy way to contribute to the Allies (and patch things up with the US, UK, and other countries after a bumpy 1930s relationship). There was a need to replace some 5 million US farm workers in short order, and this was a way of covering about 10% of that gap. It came to be known as the Bracero Program in common parlance, from the Spanish for manual farm laborer, in reference to a pair of arms – as in they were providing extra arms to help with the farm work. Our main source for this episode is the website for the Smithsonian Museum of American History's "Bittersweet Harvest" exhibit on the Bracero Program, which closed in 2017. https://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/bittersweet-harvest-bracero-program-1942-1964 https://americanhistory.si.edu/bracero/introduction If you want to learn more, *"The Bracero History Project has recorded more than 600 oral histories and has collected many objects. The website www.braceroarchive.org provides online access to this collection of oral histories, photos, documents, and objects."*
- Propaganda posters in support depicted a white arm in Uncle Sam garb holding aloft the classic Uncle Sam hat next to a brown arm holding aloft a sombrero, with bilingual captioning of "Americans All * Let's Fight for Victory."
- Supposedly it was going to be a temporary "guest worker" program as part of the war effort – in October 1942, nearly 3 months after the agreement with the Mexican government was signed, FDR reported only 3,000 Mexican guest farm workers to the press – but the Bracero program ended up remaining in place until 1964, 22 years later, when the new wave of immigration restrictions were being enacted. During that span, about 2 million Mexican men participated in these short-term contracts to work in the United States at peak times, such as the harvest season. Originally, they were concentrated in California and then some other southwestern states. By the end, only a handful of states in the American South, New England, Appalachia, and (for whatever reason) North Dakota, as well as the isolated later states of Alaska & Hawaii, had not participated in using Bracero short-term labor.
    - In addition to the exploitative but legal Bracero program guest worker admissions, there were also vastly more undocumented workers – almost immediately but especially as the program went on – partly because the extremely short-term contracts were highly disruptive to the lives of the workers and their families for not very much money and it often made more financial sense to overstay permission and keep working for a longer period, or to enter secretly in the first place. These unlawful workers were at constant risk of deportation, including by their own employers reporting them to get out of paying wages. For a comparative figure, in 1950, there were 70,000 lawful guest workers from Mexico and 500,000 deportations to Mexico. Truman signed a reform in 1951, known by those in the industry as Public Law 78, meant to contain the escalating abuses, but instead it basically just codified the situation until 1968 and even expanded the size. http://www.stateoftheunionhistory.com/2017/11/1942-franklin-d-roosevelt-bracero.html Truman speech: https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/special-message-the-congress-the-employment-agricultural-workers-from-mexico

- [Rachel] According to the agreement between the US and Mexico, workers were promised decent living conditions (sanitation, adequate shelter and food), and supposedly a minimum wage of 30 cents an hour, as well as protections from forced military service, and guaranteed part of wages were to be put into a private savings account in Mexico. These promises were not always upheld, as we'll discuss.
- [Bill] Every state in Mexico sent workers under the program. The Mexican government was in charge of recruiting the laborers and negotiating the terms with the US government. Many high-level Mexican officials had a low opinion for rural Mexican peasants and hoped the program might help improve the national workforce's development, as well as depositing a portion of the wages directly to personal accounts in Mexico's Agricultural Credit Bank, where they might draw upon it back home to purchase farming equipment and thus improve Mexico's farms. Workers often had to travel long distances to reach regional processing centers before they could be put on trains to the US border, but the promise of remittance money to send back to family at home was a powerful lure – not only for Mexican peasants used to farming but also for many of their rural middle class striver neighbors as well. A day's pay in the US, however low and exploitative it was by American standards, was still worth a few weeks of pay in rural Mexico. It could be expensive to travel to processing, and processing center staff often demanded bribes to issue a card to participate. At the border, US agents would strip the Mexican workers naked and spray them with DDT and give them a physical exam. Those who passed would be permitted to enter and were lined up against the wall, almost like an auction, for representatives of the grower companies. The American processing facilities had large armies of female typists to help with the record-keeping.
- Sometimes workers would try to negotiate with the growers for assurances about their working conditions and treatment but generally they were compelled to sign whatever contracts were offered and once they had signed they would be shipped (often in cattle cars) hundreds or even thousands of miles from the border, isolating them from meaningful safeguards.
- The Mexican consuls would periodically circulate monitors to participating farms, where the workers lived temporarily, but they couldn't help much.
    - *"Bracero contracts promised much but did not always deliver. Poor housing conditions, disputes over pay, discrimination, inadequate health care, and a lack of worker representation were some of the braceros' common grievances. Workers were sometimes housed in converted barns and makeshift tents with limited water, heat, and sanitary facilities. They were often transported in unsafe and poorly operated vehicles. Although the work was grueling and housing substandard, many braceros endured these conditions, hoping to make more money than they would at home."*
      https://americanhistory.si.edu/bracero/broken-promises
- American unions that had been trying to unionize agricultural workers before the war quickly became alarmed by the rapidly growing presence of low-cost foreign temporary labor in the industry. (In fact, guest worker wages were supposed to be paid on a "prevailing wage" basis, but that was a self-reported lowball calculation provided to the US government without verification, which drove out local workers from the market, allowing growers to claim necessity to hire foreign migrants.) Many of the future US farm labor unions, including those primarily representing Mexican-Americans, took a very hard line against immigration for generations as a result. United Farm Workers would be one such example. They believed that local workers could no longer get hired at all because of the growers' reliance on the cheaper foreign migrant labor. Some of the foreign workers' short-term contracts were for just a matter of weeks, but some were

actually hired for a year and a half at a time. They were often paid by quantity, not by the hour, usually an equivalent to far less than a dollar per hour.

- During the wartime phase of the program, some Braceros were hired under separate legislation to maintain railroad tracks connected to the agricultural production rather than to work directly in the fields, but this did not continue with the rest of the program after WW2 ended.
- Effects on American communities: *"The bracero program affected communities across the United States. Some towns held dances, church services in Spanish, and other social and business events for the braceros. Many braceros never returned to Mexico. Some of them developed personal relationships, married local women, and started new families in the United States. Other towns discriminated against the braceros, barring them from restaurants and movie theaters. Even some local Mexican Americans were wary of the new workers."* https://americanhistory.si.edu/bracero/in-the-us Some places only had a handful of Mexican workers while other farms employed a thousand at a time. Many communities with segregation policies against Black residents soon extended these same restrictions against Mexican workers.
    - The entire state of Texas was suspended from the program for a few years by the Mexican government due to lynchings of Mexican nationals.
- [Rachel] During the wartime phase of the program, Braceros participated in many work stoppages and strikes across the Northwest, protesting low wages. One notable strike in July 1943, in Dayton, Washington, demonstrated joint Bracero/Japanese-American labor solidarity (in addition to foreign labor, interned Japanese-Americans also supplied agricultural labor). A white woman reported an assault by an assailant who "appeared Mexican". The county officials restricted the movement of both Braceros and Japanese workers from entering the residential areas of the city, after no investigation and no questioning of any of the workers. In response, approximately 170 Mexicans and 230 Japanese struck, halting work at the Blue Mountain Cannery. After many meetings among city officials, Cannery management, and worker representatives, the restriction order was lifted.
    - Employers in the Northwest, unlike the Southwest, couldn't use deportation threats as an effective cudgel against workers. The distance and costs of deportation were much greater. Northwest employers created associations to unite farm owners and keep wages low. In response, workers banded together to protest these low wages. Mexican consuls in SLC and Portland encouraged strikes and advocated for the braceros, much more than in the Southwest.
- https://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/more.php?id=1112 About 10 percent of the wages earned by Braceros between 1942 and 1949 were withheld by US farmers and sent by US banks to Mexican banks. These forced savings often disappeared, and the Mexican government said it had no record of what happened to these forced savings.
  Several lawsuits were filed against the banks and the Mexican and US governments to recoup the forced savings. Some remain pending, but the Mexican government created a fund to compensate Braceros and their survivors with up to $3,500 if they could prove, with pay stubs, work visas, labor contracts or other documents, that they worked in the US between 1942 and 1964.
- (As Bill noted earlier) Truman's Public Law 78 tried to address illegal immigration, but didn't include sanctions against employers who knowingly hired undocumented workers. These efforts continued throughout the 1950s, with the INS repatriating 3.8 million Mexican workers who overstayed their work contracts. This program operated while American labor organizations complained that undocumented workers hurt labor efforts, and depressed wages and benefits. In 1961, Kennedy signed an extension to Public Law 78, which guaranteed that all US workers received the same benefits as the

braceros (which, as we discussed, was not a high bar to clear). After this, bracero employment dropped significantly, from 437,000 workers in 1959 to 186,000 in 1963. In 1963, the House of Representatives rejected an extension of the program. However, the Senate approved an extension that required U.S. workers to receive the same non-wage benefits as braceros. The House responded with a final one-year extension of the program without the non-wage benefits, and the bracero program finally ended in 1964.

- *After the 1964 termination of the bracero program, the A-TEAM, or Athletes in Temporary Employment as Agricultural Manpower, program of 1965 was meant to simultaneously deal with the resulting shortage of farmworkers and a shortage of summer jobs for teenagers. More than 18,000 17-year-old high school students were recruited to work on farms in Texas and California. Only 3,300 ever worked in the fields, and many of them quickly quit or staged strikes because of the poor working conditions, including oppressive heat and decrepit housing. The program was cancelled after the first summer.* [Wikipedia, ultimately via NPR: https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2018/07/31/634442195/when-the-u-s-government-tried-to-replace-migrant-farmworkers-with-high-schoolers]

- Some other stray observations:
    - You might have heard recently about the US investigation operation that found human traffickers in a $200 million scheme were recently bringing workers illegally into the United States to perform farm labor work under duress for literally no pay or pennies at best. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/25/us-farms-made-200m-human-smuggling-labor-trafficking-operation Some of the rates they were paying the workers were the same in nominal dollars and cents as what Bracero workers were getting paid in the 40s, 50s, and 60s without making any adjustment for inflation!
    - This history is a good illustration of why Bernie opposed guest worker legislation and then was attacked as “anti-immigrant”
    - Another side note: The Bracero program was far from the only wartime labor replacement program in agriculture. In less back-breaking roles, women and high school students were recruited, and some older men unfit for military service were assigned to help with farms, but (as Rachel said) perhaps most controversially aside from the Bracero guest worker program was the use of interned Japanese-Americans in places like Montana. Many of them had been farm workers to begin with before their internment.

Further reading:
https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/excerpts-from-the-press-conference-36
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bracero_program
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bracero_Selection_Process
https://inside.charlotte.edu/news-features/2017-08-29/atkins-library-host-traveling-exhibition-about-fdr%E2%80%99s-bracero-program
https://guides.loc.gov/latinx-civil-rights/bracero-program
https://content.ucpress.edu/chapters/12785.ch01.pdf “Bracero Recruitment in the Mexican Countryside, 1942–1947”