A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS

THE REALITIES OF LIFE AND LABOR
Mexican Braceros: Crossing the Border

TEACHER BACKGROUND
Smithsonian Museum of American History: Exhibit “America on the Move”
http://americanhistory.si.edu/ONTHEMOVE/themes/story_51_5.html


Los Braceros: http://www.farmworkers.org/benglish.html

AIM
To understand the living and the labor conditions of braceros during and after World War II.

Students will use documents to explore the experience of braceros during and after World War II.

Optional Background Discussion
Where does your food come from?
This is an important discussion to have in an urban school: Suffice it to say that even though students do not actually believe that the grocery store is the origin of their food, they do not spend a great deal of time thinking about agriculture.

VOCABULARY
Migrant worker
Bracero Program

Bracero means “strong arm” in Spanish; it is a name for a Mexican migrant worker.

Introduce the activity by explaining that the bracero program was an agreement between the United States and Mexico to allow Mexican agricultural workers to work in the United States. The program was created in 1942, due to a shortage of farm workers as sixteen million Americans joined the armed forces during World War II. By the mid 1950s, they had become central to the agricultural economy of the U.S. The program was ended in 1964 as undocumented immigrants replaced braceros and mechanization reduced the overall need for agricultural workers. Tell students they will be looking at documents that illustrate the experience of bracero workers.

Ask students why they think the program continued after the war, despite the return of the soldiers to the civilian workforce.

Brainstorm: What’s it like to be a migrant farm worker?
Invite students to come up with list of words that might characterize the life of a migrant worker.

Document workshop: Tell the students they will play the role of inspectors from the United
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States Department of Labor. Their job is to investigate conditions in the bracero program. You may want to have students generate a list of questions related work hours, living conditions, wages and hours.

After investigating the various documents, students should write a summary of their findings, together with recommendations for improvement. Each essay should:

• describe the bracero program
• describe conditions for bracero workers and compare their housing conditions in Mexico and the U.S.
• make a recommendation on how the program should be reformed.

Your essay must refer to the documents.

Document analysis:
Use the National Archives document analysis worksheets:

Add these questions:
1. What does the document tell you about the experience of a worker in the bracero program?
2. What changes would you make to the bracero program based on the information you have learned from this document?
3. Why do you think growers insisted on the short-handled hoe?

DOCUMENTS
A: Excerpt from bracero Program Agreement
B: Photograph of bracero being fumigated with DDT
C: The Short-Handled Hoe
D: Bracero housing
E: Oral history of a bracero

EXTENSION
In the 1960s, after the bracero program ended, many migrant farm workers fought to be represented by a union. Learn more about their struggles at:

The La Causa Exhibit, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University
http://www.reuther.wayne.edu/exhibits/fw/thecause.html

Farm worker Movement Documentation Project
http://www.farmworkermovement.org/index.php
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Bracero program agreement: http://are.berkeley.edu/APMP/pubs/agworkvisa/braceroagreement42.html
Excerpt: Agricultural Personnel Management Program
August 4, 1942

The Official Bracero Agreement
August 4, 1942

For the temporary migration of Mexican agricultural workers to the United States.
As revised April 26, 1943, by an exchange of notes between the American embassy in Mexico City and the Mexican Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

General Provisions

1) It is understood that Mexicans contracting to work in the United States shall not be engaged in any military service.

2) Mexicans entering the United States as result of this understanding shall not suffer discriminatory acts of any kind in accordance with the Executive Order No. 8802 issued at the White House June 25, 1941.

3) Mexicans entering the United States under this understanding shall enjoy the guarantees of transportation, living expenses and repatriation established in Article 29 of the Mexican Federal Labor Law as follows: . . .

I. Transportation and subsistence expenses for the worker, and his family, if such is the case, and all other expenses which originate from point of origin to border points and compliance of immigration requirements, or for any other similar concept, shall be paid exclusively by the employer or the contractual parties.

II. The worker shall be paid in full the salary agreed upon, from which no deduction shall be made in any amount for any of the concepts mentioned in the above sub-paragraph. . .

4) Mexicans entering the United States under this understanding shall not be employed to displace other workers, or for the purpose of reducing rates of pay previously established. . .

At the expiration of the contract under this understanding, and if the same is not renewed, the authorities of the United States shall consider illegal, from an immigration point of view, the continued stay of the worker in the territory of the United States, exception made of cases of physical impossibility.
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Bracero workers being fumigated with DDT, in Houston, Texas, 1956. DDT was banned in 1972 as a toxic chemical and a probable carcinogen. Photograph by Leonard Nadel.

Nadel described the photograph with this caption: “Much in the same manner and feeling used in handling livestock, upon crossing over the bridge from Mexico at Hidalgo, Texas, the men are herded into groups of 100 through a makeshift booth [and] sprayed with DDT.”

(Smithsonian Museum of American History)
http://americanhistory.si.edu/ONTHEMOVE/collection/object_441.html
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The Short-Handled Hoe

“The hardest work would be thinning and hoeing with a short-handled hoe. The fields would be about half a mile long. You would be bending and stooping all day. Sometimes you would have hard ground and by the time you got home, your hands would be full of calluses. And you’d have a backache.”—Roberto Acuna, migrant worker, interviewed by Studs Terkel. “Working” (New York, 1974), p.10.

“Working in the fields,” 1956. Photograph by Leonard Nadel, the Smithsonian Institution.

http://americanhistory.si.edu/ONTHEMOVE/collection/object_1122.html
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Bracero housing

“The Mexican workers will be furnished without cost to them with hygienic lodgings, adequate to the physical conditions of the region of a type used by a common laborer of the region and the medical and sanitary services enjoyed also without cost to them will be identical with those furnished to the other agricultural workers in the regions where they may lend their services.”
—The Bracero Agreement

Photograph by Leonard Nadel.

Note from the photographer: “This is housing provided by a Texan farmer for 200 braceros in this long building, with the beds made out of stretched canvas, upper and lower. Such close living conditions make for high incidences of respiratory illnesses among the braceros.”

http://americanhistory.si.edu/ONTHEMOVE/collection/object_1113.html
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Bracero worker’s homes in Mexico

Photograph by Leonard Nadel.

Note from photographer: “This is one of the two rooms for a family of nine people living in San Mateo — about 20 miles south of Mexico City. The other room serves as a kitchen, work room, and storeroom. When work is available in the village, a Mexican laborer may earn about 10 pesos per day. Because of this, the wage earner of the family here wants to get to work as a farm laborer in the U.S. where he may earn much more working from 4 weeks to 6 months.”

http://americanhistory.si.edu/ONTHEMOVE/collection/object_1106.html
UNIT III, LESSON 2
FOR 7/8TH GRADES

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Oral History of a Bracero

Bracero History Project — Digital Memory Bank

Submitted July 27, 2005, 7:35 PM

My name is Jose Guadalupe Murguia. I came north to this country from my village in Zapotitlan, Jalisco in 1952. I came as a bracero after learning from my uncle, tio Raymundo, there were opportunities for earning money working in the fields. I signed my first contract as a bracero after being promised an hourly wage of 60 cents an hour and housing. My cousin also came with me on this first contract. We worked in Arizona and soon learned that the money we expected to earn disappeared in charges for food and housing. We were told we had to buy what we needed from a store at the bracero camp. Because there were times, all the money we earned went to pay for these things, I, along with others began to talk and our discontent led to a labor stoppage that involved all the braceros in the camp. The Mexican bracero representatives, Humberto Bernal, and Maria Maldonado met with us and we were able to negotiate on these issues. It resulted in the growers providing transportation for us to the local town to purchase things we needed, and our employment checks being based on what we actually earned from work. This was the only time in my life as a bracero that a labor action was taken that resulted in an improvement in our working conditions. After completing my contract, I returned to Mexico, using the money I had earned to build a small home for my mother in Zapotitlan and another on our ranch where my brother Ramon lived. I returned as a bracero to California in 1954. The first year I worked in the Salinas Valley for a lettuce company. In 1955 I worked in the lemon and orange groves in Ventura County and in the tomatoes in Yolo County. In the tomatoes we were averaging a dollar a day and when the braceros complained it was always the same. We were humiliated and told to go back to Mexico like “perros con la lengua de corvata”. I decided I could earn more money if I “jumped” my contract and worked on my own. In 1957, I did so and began working in the fields as an illegal. I went to the Mendota/Firebaugh area and began working in the cotton driving a tractor. I was being paid 85 cents an hour.

http://chnm.gmu.edu/tools/surveys/914/responses/details/10095.html
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Disputes over pay

From the Bracero Agreement:

a. (1) Wages to be paid the worker shall be the same as those paid for similar work to other agricultural laborers under the same conditions within the same area, in the respective regions of destination. Piece rates shall be so set as to enable the worker of average ability to earn the prevailing wage. In any case wages for piece work or hourly work will not be less than 30 cents per hour. [30 cents per hour is worth $3.10 per hour in 2006 dollars. See http://eh.net/hmit/ for conversion calculations.]

j. For such time as they are unemployed under a period equal to 75% of the period (exclusive of Sundays) for which the workers have been contracted they shall receive a subsistence allowance at the rate of $3.00 per day.


http://americanhistory.si.edu/ONTHEMOVE/collection/object_1123.html

The photograph shows two men comparing paychecks.

The photographer described the photograph with the following caption: “‘We are paid with checks at the camp,’ one man said, ‘Sometimes the check stubs indicate the deduction and sometimes they don’t. Most of the men do not check [the] stubs with explanations in Spanish. If you ask any questions to have them explain to you, they get very mad.’”
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DISCOVERING HISTORY IN TODAY’S NEW YORK TIMES

1. After reading the documents presented in this lesson, (or included in the unit) research The New York Times to locate two articles on topics related to the work and life of migrant farm workers. As an example, the article “With Migrant Workers in Short Supply” by James Rajotte (nytimes.com/2008/05/27/nyregion/27crops.html?r) presents information not only on current immigration policies, but also on the difficulties of finding enough workers to help with the harvest. This article and many others explain some of the many problems facing migrant workers and their employers. List areas of concern related to government regulations and the need for workers, and make suggestions on how these might be addressed.

2. Search NYTimes.com for articles on champions of farm workers, such as Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, and of the United Farm Workers. Your research should list the conditions they and others have tried to rectify. Make a list of major issues confronting the farm workers; which are of primary importance and which might be resolved on a case-by-case basis? The issues should include border security, temporary entry passes and work visas.

3. Children of migrant workers usually had their education interrupted as they followed their parents from harvest to harvest, working farms from Texas to California, from Florida to Kansas. For interviews with children of migrant farmers discussing the work that they perform and the problems with their education as they travel, visit http://www.emints.org/ethemes/resources/S00000429.shtml, under the topic “migrant children.” Suggest ways to ensure that migrant children have the benefit of an education even though they are traveling many months during the year.