

Sonoma County Museum

***Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero
Program, 1942-1964***

November 20, 2010 – January 30, 2011



Educator Guide

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Exhibition Credits	2
Exhibition Overview	3
Frequently Asked Questions	4
Educational Objectives	7
Activity I: Learning From Photos	8
Activity II: Tracing the Route of a Bracero	13

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sonomacountymuseum.org
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EXHIBITION CREDITS

Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program 1942-1964 is on loan to Sonoma County Museum from the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES).

Bittersweet Harvest is organized by the National Museum of American History and organized for travel by SITES. Funding is made possible through the Smithsonian's Latino Center, which celebrates Latino culture, spirit and achievement in America by facilitating the development of exhibitions, research, collections and education programs.



Smithsonian
Institution

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

Bittersweet Harvest, a bilingual (English/Spanish) exhibition from the Smithsonian, explores the little-known story of the bracero program.

During the early 1940s in the United States, the economic and social upheaval stemming from both the Great Depression and World War II forced the U.S. government to seek out a source of inexpensive labor to meet its manpower needs in both agriculture and railway maintenance.

Due to this need, a treaty was signed in 1942 between the United States and Mexico to alleviate the shortage of labor. With many American men sent off to fight in Europe and elsewhere, the recruitment and processing of an available pool of laborers from Mexico created what is called the Bracero Program. Bracero is a Spanish term which can be defined loosely as “one who works with his arms,” or as a close equivalent, as a field hand.

Under this program, Mexican workers, many of whom were rural peasants, were allowed to enter the United States on a temporary basis with short-term work contracts. The agreement guaranteed a minimum wage of 30 cents per hour and “humane treatment” for workers. Between 1942 and 1964, the year the program ended, it was estimated that approximately 2 million Mexican nationals came to work in the U.S. as braceros.

The bracero program had a major impact in California, which was one of five states to use the program most extensively. Sonoma County hosted braceros, and this local story is also told in the Sonoma County Museum’s contributions to the exhibit.

Many bracero laborers faced an array of injustices and abuses, including substandard housing, discrimination, and unfulfilled contracts or being cheated out of wages. Also, with many braceros remaining in the United States after their contracts ended, the Immigration and Naturalization Service began Operation Wetback in 1954. Many US-born children of Mexican braceros were wrongly repatriated, along with their parents. Nevertheless, the impact of the Bracero Program on the history and patterns of migration and settlement in the United States remains an important area to explore and assess, particularly in the contexts of civil rights, social justice, and Latino history in the United States.

In the exhibit, the history of the bracero program is told through text, photographs by Leonard Nadel (see FAQ below), and oral histories collected by the Smithsonian and Sonoma County Museum.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: What was the bracero program?

A: The bracero program was a bi-national agreement between the U.S. and Mexico that allowed for bringing in contract workers to the U.S. During the bracero program, braceros were allowed to stay within the U.S. for up to 18 months, after which they had to return to Mexico. They were allowed to come back if they were re-contracted.

Q: Was the bracero program the largest guest worker program in United States history?

A: There have been other guest worker programs in the U.S., both prior to and after the bracero program, but with 4.6 million contracts and approximately 2 million or more workers, the bracero program was the largest.

Q: What does the word “bracero” mean?

A: Bracero is a term used in Mexico for a manual laborer.

Q: What happened to the Bracero program? Why did it end in 1964?

A: Many factors contributed to the end of the bracero program in 1964. Among the reasons were the rise of the Civil Rights Movement and the unionization of domestic farm workers, (attention was brought to the fact that the program depressed the wages of U.S. workers). In addition, the mechanization of farm labor resulted in a need for fewer laborers. Because of these and other factors, Congress decided not to renew the program.

Q: How did someone become a “bracero?”

A: Braceros were usually recruited in local villages. The worker would then would travel to a processing center, make a down payment of 50 pesos, and place his name on a list. Before being processed for the program, the applicant had to prove that he was a good citizen through a statement from a local or state official. Once an applicant was called, he would be screened in Mexico, examined by U.S. officials and if accepted, receive a numbered contract and identification card. The bracero was then transported to the U.S. border, where after more security and medical exams, he waited to be selected for a job. All parties then signed the work contract. Applicants would wait anywhere from two days to two months for word on a particular contract. Braceros had to be between the ages of 18-35.

Q: Were there particular areas of the country in which braceros were concentrated?

A: While 34 states had braceros, roughly 94 percent of all the braceros could be found in just five states: California, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico and Arkansas.

Q: What kind of work did the braceros do?

A: The work the braceros performed was largely agricultural – picking crops in U.S. fields, including citrus, cotton, tomatoes, lettuce, asparagus, grapes and sugar beets. However, some

braceros worked on maintenance of railroad tracks from 1942 to 1946.

Q: What rights did bracero workers have in the U.S.?

A: Braceros worked under the laws and rights of a “Temporary Guest Worker.” They had rights to a prevailing wage, adequate housing and living conditions, and transportation. In practice, braceros routinely earned less than what their contracts promised, but more than what they would have made for the same work in Mexico. There were also deductions for room and board, work equipment and clothing.

Q: What was an average wage during the time period of the Bracero Program?

A: The prevailing wage in 1942 about 30 cents an hour and by 1958, it was between 80 cents and one dollar. Braceros were sometimes paid by the hour and sometimes by the box or bag of produce. On average, employers often paid braceros 10 to 15 cents less than they paid their U.S. workers. A local worker might have earned a weekly gross income of \$43.20; a bracero, \$38.40.

Q: What were the living conditions like for braceros in the U.S.?

A: Conditions varied. Even though contracts specified hygienic lodgings adequate to the climate of employment, the men were often housed in makeshift dorms and camps and in overcrowded conditions.

Q: What kinds of tools did the braceros use? What is the short-handled hoe and why is it significant in bracero history?

A: The types of tools used depended on the type of crop being harvested. In the fields, short handled hoes, shovels, and hammers were common. Known as “el cortito” by many workers, the short-handled hoe, according to sociologist Douglas L. Murray, was a symbol of oppression. Some employers argued that braceros were generally shorter than Caucasian workers and therefore, were better built to use the short tool which required them to work stooped over. Many workers suffered symptoms ranging from minor back pain to physical disability because of the tool. In 1975, an administrative edict banned the use of the short-handled hoe in California fields.

Q: What happened to the families of braceros back in Mexico?

A: Families left behind while men were away had to make do without husbands, fathers or brothers helping the household. Some braceros were able to earn enough money to buy land, build houses or start businesses, while others were only able to send home a little money.

Q: What was the legacy of the bracero program?

A: As U.S. popular culture, business and labor-influenced Mexico, so have Mexican labor, culture and religious practices influenced the U.S. Although bracero workers were to return to Mexico at the end of their contracts, not all did. Many who returned later emigrated to the U.S., aided by the experience and knowledge they gained as braceros. Today, numerous

American families and communities trace their histories to the bracero program.

Q: What inspired the Smithsonian to begin working on this project?

A: The National Museum of American History holds a collection of photographs by photojournalist Leonard Nadel. Among the collections are pictures of the braceros' experiences. These images, coupled with the fact that many former braceros were getting older and there were few oral or written accounts of their experiences, inspired museum staff to begin working on the project. The project began as an oral history documentation and evolved into an exhibition.

Q: Who was Leonard Nadel?

A: Born in 1916, Nadel was a successful photojournalist whose work was published in Look, The Ladies Home Journal, Pageant, International Harvester, Coronet, Boy's Life, Cosmopolitan, Business Week, and Friends. In 1956, Nadel traveled throughout Mexico and the southwestern United States on an assignment to document the bracero program. His pictures supplemented a report on the bracero program entitled "Strangers in Our Fields," published in 1956, by Ernesto Galarza. Both Nadel and Galarza were paid by the Fund for the Republic, a liberal anti-McCarthy group. During his travels, Nadel was constantly confronted with the widespread abuses of the program and he felt as though he had a duty to spread knowledge of the program's abuses through his images. His moving images were presented to Congress along with the "Strangers in our Fields" report. Together these managed to implement changes to the program.

EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES

Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program 1942-1964 offers many opportunities for student learning. The story of the bracero labor program can inspire students to explore a wide range of subjects, including **immigration, history, geography, economics, and world culture**.

As a history exhibit, the show offers curricular tie-ins for History-Social Science, including the following goals of the **California State Content Standards**:

- Chronological and Spatial Thinking
- Research, Evidence, and Point of View
- Historical Interpretation

The following activities are intended to supplement your curriculum and encourage students to practice these skills.

Activity I: LEARNING FROM PHOTOS

Grade Level: *Adaptable for grades 6-12*

CA Curriculum content: History-Social Science / Visual Arts / Language Arts

Time Required: 50 to 60 minutes

*(This activity can be downloaded in PDF form at the following web address:
<http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/3008>.)*

Materials:

- **Photographs:** Four images are included in the following pages to pass out to the student groups. Also, several images are posted online at http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthemove/themes/story_51_5.html as well as <http://www.braceroarchive.org> (type Leonard Nadel into the search field)
- Bracero Photograph Analysis worksheet
- Computer with Internet access
- Printer
- Pen/pencil and paper

Introduction:

Students will discuss their thoughts on immigration, learn about the bracero labor program, and use photographs to develop deeper understandings of the program.

Instructions:

1. Divide the class into small groups. Have students discuss the following: *What is immigration? What news, commentaries or stories have you read or heard about immigration to the United States? Do you know anyone who has immigrated, either recently or in the past, to the U.S.?*
2. Have students write short statements summarizing their thoughts about immigration.
3. Introduce students to the history of the Bracero labor program using the Exhibition Overview in this Educator Guide.
4. Divide the class into small groups and hand each group one of the attached photographs to analyze and one of the attached Bracero Photograph Analysis sheets. Have them complete the first two columns (“evidence” and “conclusions”) based on the photograph.
5. After groups have completed the first two columns on the Bracero Photograph Analysis worksheet, have them access the internet and view the photograph’s descriptive information. (Teachers may also print out this information beforehand and pass out to students.)

6. Have groups compare their compare their conclusions (column three in the Bracero Photograph Analysis Worksheet) to the information provided on the online title and description of the photograph, taking additional notes if needed. *Do their conclusions match what is online? Are they the same? Different? What new information can be learned from the online title and description for the photograph?*

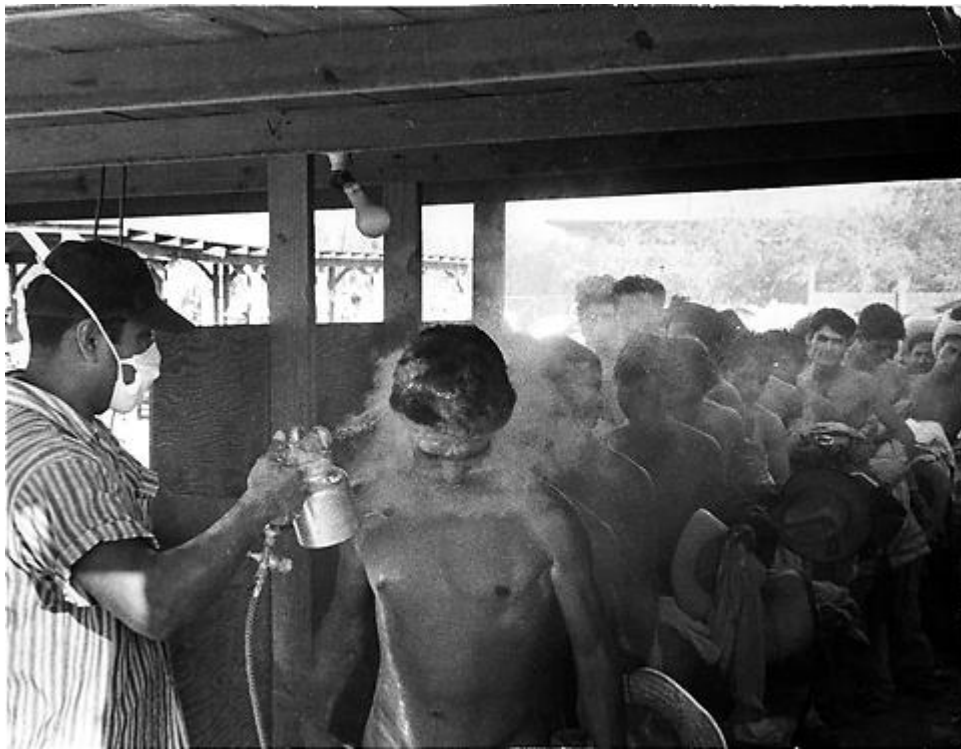
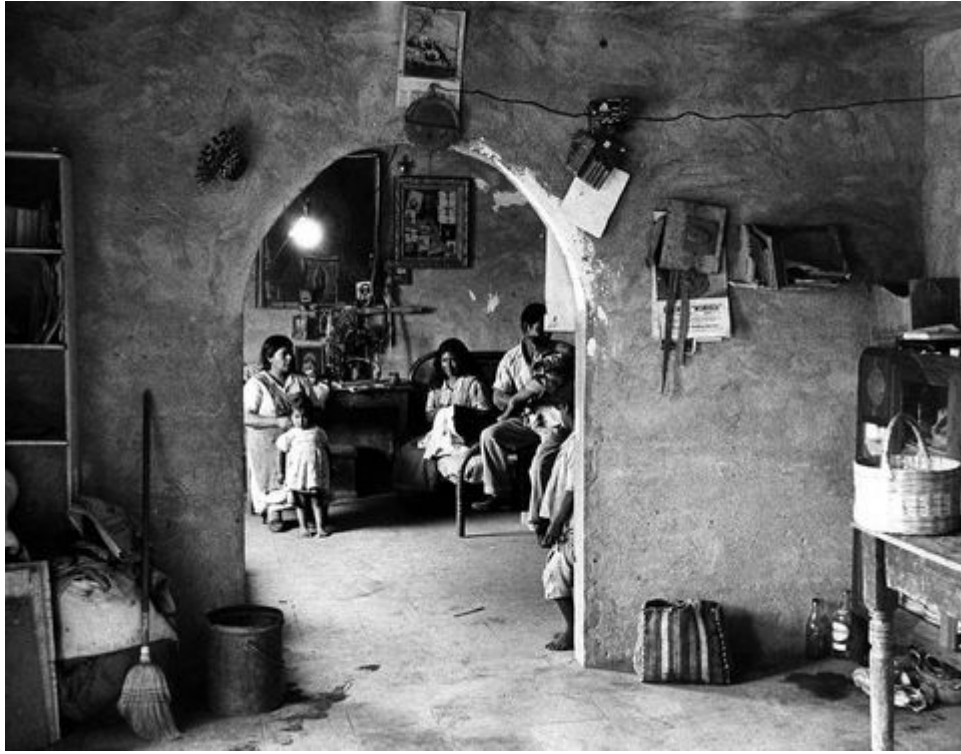
7. Bring all of the small groups back together to report out on their findings. Be sure to ask them to discuss the visual evidence they saw in the photographs that lead them to make conclusions.

Bracero Photograph Analysis Worksheet

	Evidence <i>(What do you see in the photo?)</i>	Conclusion <i>(What does that visual evidence make you think?)</i>	Comparison <i>(How does your conclusion compare with the information on the website?)</i>
Can you guess the decade when this photo was taken?			
What is the setting of the photo?			
Who can you see in the photo?			
Can you identify any specific objects in the photo?			
What actions are taken in the photo?			
Do you think this photo is posed or not?			

Photographs by Leonard Nadel





Activity II: TRACING THE ROUTE OF A BRACERO

Grade Level: *Adaptable for grades 6-12*

CA Curriculum content: History-Social Science / Language Arts

Time Required: 50-60 minutes

*(This activity can be found online in more detail and PDF form at the following website:
<http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/3009>.)*

Materials:

- Computer with Internet access
- Printer with paper
- A map of North America to distribute to each student
- Colored pencil or highlighter
- Pen/pencil
- Primary resource: Interview with Juan Loza (<http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/175>)
(The transcription of this interview can also be printed out by the teacher in advance and handed out to students.)

Introduction:

Students will examine an oral history related to the *bracero* worker program and present their research on a map.

Instructions:

1. Have students access the oral history of Juan Loza online at <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/175> and click “Switch to Full View” in the upper right corner. (Spanish speakers can listen to the oral history in Spanish. Students who are not fluent in Spanish can read the English transcription.)
2. Have students print out the transcript and read it. Ask students to highlight all sections related to Mr. Loza’s contract work as a bracero, identifying:
 - Every state and town where he worked
 - The crops he harvested
 - The dates he was in that location
3. Provide students with a map of North America, or have students visit National Geographic’s Xpedition Atlas (<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/>) to select a map on which to plot their research.
4. Have students plot the locations where Mr. Loza worked. For each location, also note the crops he harvested in that location and the dates he mentions in connection with that location.

5. Have students connect the locations on their map, indicating the direction of travel with arrows.

6. Engage students in a discussion:

- How long was Juan Loza a bracero worker? What was the longest time he spent in one location?
- What types of crops did he work on?
- How many different work locations did he work? How do you think the travel between multiple work locations impacted his social or family life?
- Why didn't he pick one location and stay there?
- Articulate some of the thoughts he might have had about the locations where he worked. How might he have compared different locations? How might he have responded emotionally to the migratory nature of his work?
- For students with background knowledge on the bracero program, judge whether Juan was better off working as a bracero in America or staying in his homeland.