**The Bracero Program**

The Mexican migrant worker has been the foundation for the development of the rich American agricultural industry, and the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez border region has played a key role in this historic movement. One of the most significant contributions to the growth of the agricultural economy was the creation of the Bracero Program in which more than 4 million Mexican farm laborers came to work the fields of this nation. The braceros converted the agricultural fields of America into the most productive in the planet.

Mexican peasants were hard-working, highly skilled agricultural laborers. Yet, despite the fact that two million peasants lost their lives in the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the government failed to provide them the resources needed to improve their lives. By the late thirties, when the crop fields began yielding insufficient harvest and employment became scarce, the peasant was forced to look for other means of survival.

The occurrence of this grave situation coincided with the emergence of a demand in manual labor in the U.S. brought about by World War II. On August 4, 1942, the U.S. and the Mexican government instituted the Bracero program. Thousands of impoverished Mexicans abandoned their rural communities and headed north to work as braceros.

The majority of the braceros were experienced farm laborers who came from places such as "la Comarca Lagunera," Coahuila, and other important agricultural regions of México. They stopped working their land and growing food for their families with the illusion that they would be able to earn a vast amount of money on the other side of the border.

Huge numbers of bracero candidates arrived by train to the northern border. Their arrival altered the social environment and economy of many border towns. Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, across from El Paso, Texas, became a historic recruitment site and substantial gathering point for the agricultural labor force.

The following note illustrates the movement:

"More than 80,000 braceros pass through the El Paso Center annually. They're part of an army of 350,000 or more that marches across the border each year to help plant, cultivate and harvest cotton and other crops throughout the United States." (El Paso Herald Post, April 28, 1956)

The bracero contracts were controlled by independent farmers associations and the "Farm Bureau." The contracts were in English and the braceros would sign them without understanding their full rights and the conditions of employment. When the contracts expired, the braceros were required to turn in their permits and return to México. The braceros could return to their native lands in case of an emergency, only with written permission from their boss.

The braceros labored tirelessly thinning sugar beets, picking cucumbers and tomatoes, and weeding and picking cotton. The braceros, a very experienced farm labor, became the foundation for the development of North American agriculture.

Despite their enormous contribution to the American economy, the braceros suffered harassment and oppression from extremist groups and racist authorities.

By the 60's, an excess of "illegal" agricultural workers along with the introduction of the mechanical cotton harvester, destroyed the practicality and attractiveness of the bracero program. The program under which more than three million Mexicans entered the U.S. to labor in the agricultural fields ended in 1964. The U.S. Department of Labor officer in charge of the program, Lee G. Williams, had described it as a system of "legalized slavery." The following note describes the last day of the program:

"527 Braceros Cross to U.S." With the crossing of 526 braceros through the Santa Fe Street Bridge Tuesday night, current contracting of Mexican laborers for work in U.S. farms ended, official of the National Railways of Mexico reported Wednesday. The railroad in charge of transporting the braceros to Juárez from all parts of the state, disclosed the total number of workers contracted amounted to 12,127. Of this number, only a few were sent back after failing to pass their physical examination at the Bracero Center. (The El Paso Times, May 30, 1963)

The braceros returned home. Unable to survive in their communities, however, they continue to cross the Río Bravo (or Río Grande) to work in the farms and ranches of this country. In the fields of West Texas and Southern New Mexico, you will still find braceros. They are now known as chile pickers and continue to be one of the most exploited labor groups in the U.S.