Mexican Braceros and Arkansas Cotton: Agricultural Labor and Civil Rights in the Post-World War II South

J. JUSTIN CASTRO

Picking cotton was not something anyone would volunteer to do. The farmers faced a labor shortage that gradually grew worse; then somebody discovered the Mexicans.

—John Grisham, *A Painted House* (2001)

ARKANSAS GOVERNOR BEN LANEY WAS FURIOUS when he heard that the Mexican government had refused to allow over a thousand agricultural workers to come to Arkansas. Only months away from the 1948 cotton harvest, Laney publicly repudiated allegations that Mexicans faced racial discrimination and poor working conditions in his state. Mexicans, he declared, had "been coming and going in this state for years," and they had "made more money here than anywhere else."[1] Instead of entertaining the possibility that Mexican migrants had been mistreated or addressing the Mexican government's concerns about racism, Governor Laney—chairman of the recently established States' Rights Democrats (Dixiecrats)—blamed the predicament on President Harry S. Truman's interest in promoting civil rights in the South.[2] Laney referred to the potential blacklisting as a "squeeze play" by Washington politicians upset at his campaign against

[1] "Mexico Keeps Farm Workers from Arkansas," *Arkansas Gazette* (Little Rock), May 21, 1948, p. 1; "Mexico Refuses to Send Workers to Miss.; Ark.," *Atlanta Daily World*, May 27, 1948, p. 2 (quotations).

[2] "Mexico Blacklists 2 Southern States," *New York Times*, May 21, 1948, p. 12; "Laney to Head Campaign for Ousting Truman," *Arkansas Gazette*, May 11, 1948, p. 1; John L. Fletcher, "Democracy and Civil Rights," ibid., May 10, 1948, p. 4.

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Braceros in eastern Arkansas, circa 1950. *Courtesy Bracero History Archive.*

Truman's civil rights initiatives.[3] In Congress, Rep. Ezekiel C. "Took" Gathings, who represented much of the Arkansas Delta, expressed similar suspicions in hounding Robert C. Goodwin, director of the U.S. Employment Service, about the Mexican government's action. "Governor [Laney] took an active part in opposition to civil-rights legislation," Gathings told Goodwin at a hearing. "You do not know whether or not the governor's activities with regard to the [civil rights] program of the President of the United States had anything to do with [the Mexican government's blacklisting of Arkansas]?"[4] This linking of the issues of Mexican labor and civil rights was no isolated instance. Labor, race, and social justice had

[3] "Mexico Charges Bias, Denies Aid," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 2, 1948, p. 16.
[4] House Committee on Agriculture, *Hearings*, 80th Cong., 2nd sess., June 11, 1948, p. 20.

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long been contentious and intertwined issues in the South, debated by farm owners, union leaders, civil rights activists, journalists, and representatives of the federal government. But the influx of Mexican workers exacerbated these debates and complicated the all too common black and white dichotomy.

Laney had been right about one thing: Mexicans had been coming and going for years, though not many. Farmers in the Arkansas Delta had begun using Mexican workers at the turn of the twentieth century as African Americans pressed for fairer treatment and cotton choppers left for work in larger cities or in agriculture elsewhere. In 1904, planters in the delta "experimented" with Italian and Mexican laborers. These operations, according to one eastern Arkansas newspaper, were "fairly successful," but the farm owners hoped ultimately to acquire migrant laborers from northern European countries, exhibiting their bias for whiter, Protestant workers.[5] In 1917 and 1918, over three hundred Mexican workers had come through Arkansas, the first sign of large-scale Mexican migration to the state.[6] According to a study conducted by the noted Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio, there were 280 Mexicans in Arkansas in 1920.[7] The 1930 census showed 465 "white persons born in Mexico," mostly in the center of the state. Ten years later, the census reported a substantial decrease in this population to 211. Interestingly, the largest concentrations of Mexicans had shifted to the eastern counties of Mississippi and St. Francis.[8]

Mexicans would come to Arkansas in far greater numbers following World War II. Between 1947 and 1964, over 300,000 immigrants from Mexico worked in Arkansas fields, their numbers peaking at 39,000 in 1959.[9] This greater Mexican migration to Arkansas did not begin until five years into the "bracero program," the product of a series of Mexican-U.S. agreements that allowed millions of Mexican workers to come, temporarily, to the United States starting in 1942. All in all, approximately 4.6 million contracted braceros worked in the United States.[10] In Arkansas, most

[5]"The Labor Problem," *Craighead County Sun* (Jonesboro, AR), August 2, 1905, p. 3.

[6]"De El Paso salieron al norte trabajadores mexicanos," *Imparcial de Texas* (San Antonio, TX), January 24, 1918, p. 4.

[7]Manuel Gamio, *Mexican Immigration to the United States: A Study of Human Migration and Adjustment* (1930; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1969), 20-24.

[8]Historical Census Browser, University of Virginia Library, http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/ (accessed April 20, 2016).

[9]Donald Holley, *The Second Great Emancipation: The Mechanical Cotton Picker, Black Migration, and How They Shaped the Modern South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 152; Julie M. Weise, "The Bracero Program: Mexican Workers in the Arkansas Delta, 1948-1964," in *Race and Ethnicity in Arkansas: New Perspectives*, ed. John A. Kirk (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2014), 126.

[10]David Fitzgerald, "Inside the Sending State: The Politics of Mexican Emigration Control," *International Migration Review* 40 (Summer 2006): 271. Braceros translates roughly as "people who

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Mexican laborers worked in the cotton fields of the delta. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the region was often the fourth, and at times the third, most common destination for Mexican agricultural laborers, California and Texas consistently ranking first and second.[11]

Yet only recently have scholars begun to seriously study the massive waves of Mexican workers who came to eastern and central Arkansas every fall or the impact that they and the bracero program left on the region.[12] This article uses Arkansas to show how braceros and the bracero program influenced the U.S. labor and civil rights movements. This influence was threefold. First, braceros complicated the black and white narrative surrounding labor and civil rights in the South by forcing U.S. activists and congressmen to address the issue of Mexican laborers and their rights in comparison to non-Mexican domestic workers. Second, the social and economic protections for braceros demanded by the Mexican government prompted U.S. labor and civil rights activists to demand that the same standards and protections against discrimination be extended to American workers. And, finally, politicians and activists who promoted civil rights and better conditions for U.S. agricultural workers, and who at first condemned the bracero program as unethical and unfair to domestic laborers, could ultimately use the program to call out hypocritical southern legislators, including Congressman Gathings, who ardently supported the bracero program but stood firmly against domestic policies that might include similar provisions for American workers.

If you open a book on the U.S. civil rights movement, you are not likely to come across "braceros" in the index. Scholars have, for the most part, ignored the influence of Mexicans and Mexican policies on the U.S. civil rights movement.[13] The mass protests of thousands of African Americans undoubtedly were the greatest impetus to the passage of civil rights

work with their arms," or manual laborers. The first agreement between the United States and Mexico to allow bracero labor was officially titled the Mexican Farm Labor Program.

[11]Holley, *Second Great Emancipation*, 152.

[12]For the existing literature on Arkansas braceros, see Marietta Ann Lucas, "Bracero Labor in Northeast Arkansas," *Craighead County Historical Quarterly* 6 (Summer 1968): 19-25; Harold Berry, "The Use of Mexicans as Farm Laborers in the Delta," *Phillips County Historical Review* 31 (Spring 1993): 2-10; Rocio Gomez, "*Braceros* in the Arkansas Delta, 1943-1964," *Ozark Historical Review* 39 (Spring 2010): 1-18; Julie M. Weise, "Braceros and Jim Crow in Arkansas," in *Que Fronteras? Mexican Braceros and a Re-examination of the Legacy of Migration*, ed. Paul Lopez (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing, 2010), 197-213; Weise, "Bracero Program," 125-140. Weise's recent book, *Corazón de Dixie: Mexicanos in the U.S. South since 1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015) argues, as I do, that the bracero program and the Mexican government influenced economic and racial policies in eastern Arkansas, but this article dwells more on the repercussions of the bracero program for national politics, labor organizations, and civil rights movements.

[13]The exception is Ruben Flores, *Backroads Pragmatists: Mexico's Melting Pot and Civil Rights in the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

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legislation, but transnational forces were at work as well. As Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in 1964, “In the past two decades, the contemporary world entered a new era characterized by multifaceted struggles for human rights.”[14] Jim Crow policies in the South impeded the U.S. in winning support during the Cold War from those African and Asian governments that had won independence from old colonial empires and instead provided fodder for anti-American propaganda from communist states.[15] The ideals from the Mexican Revolution—nationalism, Mexican pride, and the incorporation of different ethnicities—that Mexican leaders incorporated into the migratory labor agreements they made with the United States would represent another transnational contribution to the dialogue on civil rights.

The bracero program commenced during World War II. The war strained agricultural production as throngs of men left fields to take up arms and as both men and women sought employment in war-related industrial jobs. Planters responded to the changing labor conditions by convincing the federal government to institute a wartime wage ceiling, in the name of controlling inflation. This wage ceiling, in turn, encouraged greater migration.[16] To escape both Jim Crow and poor wages, many southern families moved to northern cities in search of factory work. At the same time, opportunities for industrial employment expanded in the South. Northern capitalists attempting to escape obligations to labor unions began to slowly move operations to the South, where unions were weaker. Between 1940 and 1945, the combined numbers of southern farmers and farm workers dropped by 3,660,000 people, over 22 percent.[17] Facing increasing labor shortages and reluctant or unable to pay local pickers more, cotton producers sought out new labor sources.

The wartime need for agricultural laborers provided the Mexican government of President Manuel Ávila Camacho significant bargaining power. In order to fill the void caused by workers who had gone to war or had left for other parts of the country, U.S. growers and their political allies in Washington agreed to a number of significant stipulations. Braceros had to be paid an established minimum wage based on prevailing regional wages or, if those were too low, sufficient to provide an acceptable standard of living in those regions—this at a time when no minimum wage was enforced for domestic farm workers, who had been excluded from the

[14]Martin Luther King, Jr., “Hammer of Civil Rights,” in *The Civil Rights Act of 1964*, ed. Robert H. Mayer (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2004), 61.

[15]Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[16]J. Lewis Henderson, “In the Cotton Delta,” *Survey Graphic* 36 (January 1947): 51.

[17]Holley, *Second Great Emancipation*, 149.

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protections of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. Growers also yielded to the Mexican government's demands for transportation, healthcare, and anti-discrimination guarantees for Mexicans, benefits similarly denied to black and white farm hands. Perhaps most strikingly, the Franklin Roosevelt and Truman administrations and the U.S. Congress agreed to the Ávila Camacho administration's stipulation that it could "unilaterally deny bracero labor to any state, county or enterprise that discriminated against or mistreated Mexicans" because of race or nationality.[18] As happened in Jefferson County, Arkansas, in 1948, the Mexican consul would pursue complaints from braceros, then file requests to blacklist regions and individuals that did not live up to the provisions. These Mexican policies, accepted by planters and their political representatives out of necessity, would ultimately bolster challenges to the racial and economic discrimination suffered by African-American workers.

Arkansas growers were slower than their western counterparts to take up bracero labor. This was partly because of another phenomenon directly connected to World War II: the presence of Axis prisoners of war. During the war, the United States became the temporary home of 380,000 German prisoners. By 1945, 140,000 of them were working as contract laborers.[19] Indeed, until 1946 there were more prisoners of war than Mexican laborers in the United States. Starting in 1943, Arkansas detainment centers Camp Robinson, Camp Chaffee, and Camp Dermott all housed German prisoners. Many of them worked as agricultural laborers in the delta.[20] Often, they were paid little, sometimes less than a dollar a day, but they also usually worked fewer hours and less energetically than domestic migrant and, later, Mexican immigrant labor.[21] The Germans, as well as

[18]Commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization and Director of United States Employment Service, "Information Relative to Temporary Admission of Nationals of Mexico to the United States to Engage in Agricultural Employment under the Agreement of August 1, 1949," p. 18, box 299, folder 4473a, E. C. Gathings Papers, Arkansas State University Special Collections and Archives, Jonesboro; Timothy J. Henderson, "Bracero Blacklists: Mexican Migration and the Unraveling of the Good Neighbor Policy," *Latin Americanist* 55 (December 2011): 201. Also see Otey M. Scruggs, "Evolution of the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement of 1942," *Agricultural History* 34 (July 1960): 140-149. In an attempt to appease U.S. labor groups, the agreement established that braceros were only to be used where a genuine lack of American workers existed.

[19]Barbara Schmitter Heisler, "The 'Other Braceros': Temporary Labor and German Prisoners of War in the United States, 1943-1946," *Social Science History* 31 (Summer 2007): 240.

[20]Merrill R. Pritchett and William L. Shea, "The Afrika Korps in Arkansas, 1943-1946," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 37 (Spring 1978): 3-22; Michael Bowman, "World War II Prisoner of War Camps," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net (accessed April 19, 2016).

[21]Bob Huckaby, interviewed by Simon Hosken and Mireya Loza, September 24, 2008, Jonesboro, AR, Bracero History Archive (hereinafter BHA), Item #3094, braceroarchive.org (accessed April 20, 2016); Bowman, "World War II Prisoner of War Camps."

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L 1166417
ALIEN LABORER'S PERMIT AND IDENTIFICATION CARD
Name Nunez-Sotelo, Santos
Home address Rcho. H. de Nacozari
Mpio Durango, Dgo.
Date and place of birth 3/28/28
same MEXICO
Nationality
Identifying marks none
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L 1166417
Admitted under PL 78
To LEPANTO GROWERS ASSN.
(Name of employer)
For employment as AGRICULTURAL LAB.
in (area) POINSETT & MISS.CO.,ARK.
Date to which admitted OCT. 27, 1954
Extensions:
Temporary departures and readmissions:
Form I-100 (Rev. 5-25-51)
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE

Courtesy Bracero History Archive.

some Italian prisoners of war, nonetheless diminished demand for Mexican laborers available through the newly established bracero program.[22]

None of the 4203 braceros who came to the United States in 1942 ended up in Arkansas, according to records.[23] This does not mean, however, that no Mexican laborers were present in the state. That year, some Arkansas cotton growers made contracts with the Gephart Employment Agency, of San Antonio, Texas, for the use and transportation of an unspecified number of non-bracero laborers.[24]

As Axis detainees cleared out of Arkansas, the state's farmers pushed political leaders to expand the bracero program into Arkansas in 1946.[25] Mexican immigration to the state increased significantly the following year. The number of Mexicans leaving for Arkansas caught the eye of Spanish-language newspapers in Texas, including San Antonio's *La Prensa*. It reported regularly on the increased desire of Mexican laborers to move farther north and on the retaliation they endured from law officials

[22]"Pomeroy details history of local Italian POW camp," *Advance-Monticellonian*, November 25, 2009, mymonticellonews.net (accessed April 20, 2016).

[23]Luis Alfonso Herrera Robles, "Historias de braceros: Olvido y abandono en el norte de México," *Guaraguao* 14 (Summer 2010): 41-42.

[24]"Agente de empleos," *La Prensa* (San Antonio, TX), August 16, 1942, p. 3; Baukhage, "Cooperation with Mexico Big Boost to Agriculture," *Arkansas State Press* (Little Rock), July 28, 1944, p. 5; "Inmigración coopera para la importación de los braceros," *La Prensa*, July 24, 1947, p. 1.

[25]H. R. Adams to E. C. Gathings, July 17, 1946, box 214, folder 2990, Gathings Papers.

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and from Texas growers who had come to rely on their work. A sheriff in Marshall, for example, arrested thirty Mexicans in September for attempting to leave Texas for Arkansas. He charged that they were violating an unspecified state law. Another, larger group avoided incarceration and reached Arkansas. The next month, white Arkansas "patrones" or bosses contracted 201 Mexican workers.[26] The following year, thousands more Mexicans made their way to the state.

Many braceros (and other Mexican laborers), eager to secure much-needed money for their families and also to experience a little adventure, appreciated the opportunity to work in the United States. Some remember the time fondly. Arkansas was wetter and greener than central and northern Mexico, or Texas and the U.S. Southwest, and its black population was larger. Often, Mexicans found their living situation poor but tolerable. Despite the bracero agreements, Mexicans faced some discrimination, but they were allowed to use the same stores as whites more often than blacks were. Joe Garcia, a Mexican American from Texas who worked alongside braceros, recalled police corruption and discrimination against Mexicans and African Americans in Arkansas but also many good people. According to him, there were few problems between Mexicans and blacks despite attempts from whites to "separate the races."[27]

But not all of the newcomers found Arkansas to their liking. During the initial years of the program, some braceros complained of poor working conditions and racial discrimination. Contracted by the Agricultural Association of Arkansas, Roberto Castillo de la Garza in 1947 wrote a letter from Pine Bluff to Mexican president Miguel Alemán complaining that growers violated a number of the program's stipulations. Drivers for this organization would go to the border and pack upwards of eighty Mexicans onto a single trailer for the thirteen-hour ride to Pine Bluff with no stops and little food.[28] Pine Bluff growers provided shacks previously occupied by black sharecroppers. They often lacked sanitary facilities, electricity, furniture, or mattresses. The only blankets available came at the cost of a pay deduction. Apparently, the only health care was provided by an old veterinarian who believed sulfur pills to be a cure all. The water

[26]"Multados por traer braceros al país," *La Prensa*, September 12, 1947, p. 1; "Protesta en contra de ilegal detención de muchos braceros," ibid., September 17, 1947, p. 1; "Comienzan a salir braceros a Arkansas," ibid., September 17, 1947, p. 4; "Terminó el contrato de braceros," ibid., October 3, 1947, p. 1.

[27]Joe Garcia, interviewed by Mireya Loza, September 23, 2008, Parkin, AR, BHA Item #3098, braceroarchive.org (accessed April 20, 2016). Also see Trinidad Guzmán García, interviewed by Mireya Loza and Julie Weise, September 23, 2008, Parkin, AR, BHA Item #3084, ibid.; Natibidad Mancinas, interviewed by Myrna Parra-Mantilla, May 12, 2003, Chihuahua, Chihuahua, México, BHA Item #23, ibid.

[28]"Unos braceros mexicanos protestaron ante Alemán," *La Prensa*, October 2, 1947, p. 1.

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was yellow and of poor quality. After a damning report from an investigating Mexican consul stationed in Memphis, the Mexican government demanded the return of the 2000 braceros in the vicinity. Only then did Pine Bluff growers agree to improve conditions.[29]

In addition to poor conditions around Pine Bluff, braceros especially complained about the properties of Lee Wilson & Company, a huge commercial farm in Mississippi County that contracted over 3000 workers. Robert E. "Lee" Wilson had built a cotton empire along the Mississippi River and won a reputation for possessing a progressive attitude toward black workers—at least progressive by white southern standards. Mexicans, however, found his descendants and other trustees of Lee Wilson & Company less than generous. Bracero Apolinar Zamora said that the Wilsons treated him and others "like pigs . . . [the braceros] were forced to sleep on the floors of stables covered in sacks of cotton." There was no medical access, housing, or water, and a number of the workers became sick.[30] A number of laborers fled. Many of them were subsequently arrested and deported.[31] These instances in Pine Bluff and at Lee Wilson & Company farms may have represented worst-case scenarios for braceros, but they were not the only instances of poor treatment. Workers also complained about racial discrimination, especially in Marked Tree, where eating establishments refused to serve Mexicans.[32]

Perhaps the most common problem during the last two years of the 1940s was transportation. Arkansas growers often were not equipped to properly transport large groups of workers over long distances. *La Prensa* published a number of reports on injuries and deaths involving trucks and trailers overloaded with Mexicans. On one occasion, a growers' association's truckers abandoned forty-two workers, including some women and children, who were likely in the country illegally. The incident sparked a probe by the Mexican consul Ángel Cano de Castillo. Gonzalo Ojeda Cortez, a twenty-four-year-old immigrant, died in October 1948 after a truck heading to Pine Bluff with twenty-five Mexicans overturned near Jacksonville, Texas.[33] Continued criticism from Mexican emissaries and

[29]Henderson, "Bracero Blacklists," 203-204.

[30]"Laredo y Nuevo Laredo grupo de braceros que regresaron después de mil penalidades en los campos aligoneros de Arkansas," *La Prensa*, November 27, 1948, p. 6. For more on the Wilson family, see Jeannie Whayne, *Delta Empire: Lee Wilson and the Transformation of Agriculture in the New South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011).

[31]"Se busca a unos pizcadores para ser deportados," *La Prensa*, December 3, 1948, p. 1; "Laredo y Nuevo Laredo fueron deportados 40 braceros mexicanos," ibid., December 9, 1948, p. 6.

[32]Weise, "Bracero Program," 134-137.

[33]"42 braceros abandonados pasan 35 horas sin probar alimento el Consul Angel Cano del Castillo," *La Prensa*, October 8, 1948, p. 1; "La muerte de un bracero atribuida a la deficiente transportación," ibid., October 8, 1948, p. 1; "Los cadeneras de braceros," ibid., December 12, 1948, p. 3.

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U.S. officials eventually forced Arkansas growers to replace "open top trucks" with buses.[34]

The reports of poor treatment sparked rumors that the Mexican government was going to blacklist all of Arkansas. It had already put in place restrictions on immigrants in a number of counties in Texas. In autumn 1948, Mexico similarly placed a temporary ban on braceros going to certain parts of Arkansas, the move that prompted Governor Laney's outburst about Truman. This presented a serious threat to the state's farmers. Arkansas faced a 2,000,000-bale cotton crop and a worker shortage. But Mexican sanctions, in the end, rarely produced more than delays. Mexicans, legally or not, continued to work. In 1949, Congressman Gathings told Parkin farm owner Ed McKnight, whom braceros had charged with unfair treatment, that U.S. and Mexican officials had made progress in reaching terms. The main differences, according to Gathings, were over claims of racial discrimination in job assignments. He told McKnight, "It is believed that compromise on question of discrimination may be reached which would incorporate in contract provision[s] that groups of famers in particular communities offer assurance in writing that no discrimination in employment be made."[35] Although the Mexican government ultimately allowed Mexican laborers to return to most farms against which complaints had been made, it made clear that it could pull workers from Arkansas in the future if discrimination continued.

That threat was not always hollow. Four years later, in 1953, Mexican officials, with the approval of the U.S. Department of Labor, revoked Bay, Arkansas, farmer A. W. Barnhill's privileges to hire bracero labor. They cited reported breaches of contract over transportation and housing and the unfair arrest of three Mexican workers who had fled his farm.[36] Despite Barnhill's denial of these charges and Gathings' staunch support, Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Affairs blacklisted Barnhill for years, arguing that "reinstatement cannot be recommended . . . due to the numerous and continuous violations incurred by Mr. Barnhill during the time that he had Mexican workers in his employ."[37]

To avoid being blacklisted and losing their labor force, many Arkansas growers worked to make at least modest improvements in working and living conditions, accepting Mexican provisions for fair treatment.

[34]Bill Stone, interviewed by Brady Banta, September 26, 2008, Bay, AR, BHA Item #3100, braceroarchive.org (accessed April 20, 2016); Bernard Lipsey, interviewed by Julie Weise, September 22, 2008, Memphis, TN, BHA Item #3090, ibid.

[35]E. C. Gathings to Ed McKnight, 1949, box 297, folder 4433, Gathings Papers.

[36]A. H. Barnhill to Ed McDonald, May 5, 1953, box 298, folder 4463, ibid.; Ed McDonald to A. H. Barnhill, May 6, 1953, ibid.

[37]José T. Delgado to E. C. Gathings, April 29, 1957, ibid.

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Although McKnight resisted the set minimum wage for Mexican nationals, he eventually caved to bracero demands. Farmers and politicians in Marked Tree worked vigorously to stop businesses in the town from segregating or banning Mexicans. The city council put in place fines for any business found guilty of such discrimination. By 1953, the number of complaints from Arkansas received by the Mexican consul was minimal.[38]

In addition to the threats of the Mexican government, Arkansas growers also had to contend with domestic opposition to the bracero program. A number of U.S. political leaders condemned the program, often on the grounds that it promoted labor and racial inequality. In his State of the Union message on January 7, 1948, President Truman called on Congress to strengthen civil rights statutes, stop lynchings, better protect the right to vote for all, and create a permanent "Fair Employment Practice Commission to prevent unfair discrimination in employment," including by slowing or ending the bracero program.[39] In 1950, Truman created the Commission on Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, and, the following year, the administration and its allies battled Gathings and other congressmen and senators connected to farming interests in the South and West over Public Law 78, which would extend the bracero program. Truman's allies argued that Mexican labor was less necessary than growers stated, that the bracero program fueled illegal immigration (contrary to Gathings' argument that it slowed it), and that growers often treated Mexican nationals better than domestic migratory workers.[40]

Truman's pro-civil rights and anti-bracero message met with massive hostility from large landowners in Arkansas and their representatives. Along with Governor Laney, Congressman Gathings and Sen. John McClellan were among the most vocal anti-Truman Democrats. In the name of states' rights, they opposed the abolition of the poll tax and refused to support federal antilynching laws while fighting to preserve, in the shape of the bracero program, federal guarantees of an adequate farm labor supply. Sen. J. William Fulbright also supported the bracero program, though not as emphatically as Gathings, whose position was more exclusively dependent on the support of large agricultural producers in eastern Arkansas.[41]

[38]Weise, "Bracero Program," 128, 136-137.

[39]Harry S. Truman, "Civil Rights Speech, 1948," www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/truman-civilrights/ (accessed April 20, 2016).

[40]Robert S. Robinson, "Taking the Fair Deal to the Fields: Truman's Commission on Migratory Labor, Public Law 78, and the Bracero Program, 1950-1952," *Agricultural History* 84 (Summer 2010): 381.

[41]Timothy P. Donovan, Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., and Jeannie M. Whayne, *Governors of Arkansas: Essays in Political Biography*, 2nd ed. (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1995), 207-208; Sherry Laymon, *Fearless: John L. McClellan, United States Senator* (Mustang, OK: Tate

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As long as the bracero program continued, its supporters would have to fend off labor unions and their allies, who argued, correctly, that the bracero program guaranteed to Mexican nationals wages and benefits denied to domestic black and white migratory workers. Grower associations often refused to pay domestic pickers—white and black locals and migrants—the same as Mexicans, and Congress, one critic said, had "shamefully disregarded the needs and the rights of American citizens in the migratory labor force."[42] Pro-labor senators and congressmen echoed these complaints, highlighting the fact that the bracero agreements with Mexico included not only a minimum wage but certain health and housing requirements, while U.S. migrant laborers enjoyed no such safeguards.[43]

As early as 1946, the Arkansas State Federation of Labor's *Union Labor Bulletin* denounced the importation of Mexican labor as aiding the exploitation of Arkansas workers. It insisted that reports of labor shortages were overblown: "Someone should inform the landlords of the cotton regions of Arkansas about the unemployment existing in the state! Most of the thousands of war plant workers, now unemployed in Pulaski, Saline, Jefferson, and Miller county, were share-croppers before the war." The paper suggested that these workers could be lured back to the fields if they were "offered decent living wages."[44] Several years later, the National Farm Labor Union, speaking on behalf of members in Arkansas, Mississippi, Missouri, Alabama, and Tennessee, called for an end of the bracero program, which it termed a "tool to help the plantation owners force down the cost of labor." It also demanded a one dollar an hour minimum wage for American farm workers.[45] Others in the labor movement insisted that American agricultural workers should at the very least be treated by growers with the same dignity as braceros. Fay Bennett, Executive Secretary of the National Sharecroppers Fund, wrote that the bracero program's "impact on American farm workers, already among the lowest paid, least protected, and most underemployed members of our society, has been disastrous." Bennett pointed out that workers in Arkansas, black and white, were among the lowest paid in the country. She continued that

Publishing, 2011), 94-112; Richard B. Craig, *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 172, 188; "Sharpen Axe For Senate 'Rights' Enemies," *Chicago Defender*, March 26, 1949, p. 1; Jerry Landauer, "The Great Equalizer," *Wall Street Journal*, January 17, 1964, p. 8.

[42]Robert E. Lucey, *Commonweal*, January 15, 1954, reproduced in *Congressional Record*, June 14, 1954, 83rd Cong., 2nd sess., vol. 100, part 6, pp. 8129-8130.

[43]C. P. Trussell, "Provisions Protecting Braceros Cited as Rights-Bill Precedent, "*New York Times*, August 25, 1963, p. 75; Norman Thomas, "Aiding Farm Workers," ibid., June 22, 1960, p. 34.

[44]"We View the News," *Union Labor Bulletin* (Little Rock), August 16, 1946, pp. 1-2.

[45]John N. Popham, "Farm Union Seeks 50,000 Cotton Folk," *New York Times*, February 26, 1950, p. 45.

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it was mostly large farm owners who hired braceros, making it hard for small farms to compete, and that braceros allowed big growers to maintain low wages.[46]

The latter claims are difficult to evaluate in the case of Arkansas. Large growers used braceros more than others, and they undoubtedly had the most influence with politicians like Gathings. His correspondence is dominated by mail to and from wealthy landowners and officials of weighty farm organizations. But Gathings did hear from small farmers who employed braceros. For example, Brookland farmer F. G. Mote, who had a sixty-two-acre cotton farm, wrote: "if they [Congress] knock out the Mexican labor we can't get our crops chopped or picked . . . and if the Mexican labor is cut out, us little farmers will be forced off our small farms. . . . [There are] hundreds of others just like us."[47]

As for pay, the Mexican government had fought for and won a minimum wage rate initially set at fifty cents an hour in Arkansas, arguing, against the protests of farmers and congressmen, that the average prevailing wage of migratory and day-haul cotton workers in the delta, sometimes as low as thirty cents an hour, was unfair.[48] A National Sharecropper Fund report found that in July 1956 braceros in Phillips County earned fifty cents per hour, while those in the mostly black domestic labor force made thirty-five cents. At this time, the federal minimum wage stood at one dollar an hour. The report blamed the low domestic wages on the presence of Mexican workers: "The wages of U.S. farm workers will remain depressed when growers know they always have available a steady supply of contract workers." Five years later, when domestic wages of Arkansas farm workers had dropped to thirty cents per hour, Arthur J. Goldberg, a longtime union official serving as U.S. secretary of labor, pointed out that the annual employment of thousands of Mexican workers in Arkansas "substantially interferes with the normal operations of the law of supply and demand in the labor market" to the detriment of domestic workers.[49]

[46]Fay Bennett, "Hiring Mexican Labor," ibid., May 11, 1961, p. 36.

[47]F. G. Mote to E. C. Gathings, May 25, 1960, box 42, folder 533, Gathings Papers. The 1950s in Arkansas saw the growth of large corporate farms, but many smaller family operations still existed. Employers of braceros often had operations of a few hundred acres or less. Harold D. Cooley, *Continuation of Mexican Farm Labor Program, a Report together with Minority Views*, 88th Cong., 1st sess., May 6, 1963, pp. 1-18; Scruggs, "Evolution of the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement of 1942," 140-149; "Cotton Acreage Allotments and Marketing Quotas," *Congressional Record*, August 3, 1949, 81st Cong., 1st sess., vol. 95, part 8, p. 10712.

[48]"U.S.-Mexican Contract," *New York Times*, January 20, 1954, p. 26; "Pay Plan Adopted for Mexican Labor," ibid., July 31, 1958, p. 10.

[49]Alice A. Dunnigan, "Survey Reveals 300,000 Farm Families Earn Less Than $1,000 Yearly," *Plaindealer* (Kansas City, KS), April 5, 1957, p. 2; "Congress May Probe Wage Bias Charges," *Crusader* (Rockford, IL), August 6, 1954, p. 1; Donald Janson, "Arkansas Field Pay Falls to 30c an Hour," *New York Times*, July 16, 1961, pp. 1, 61 [Goldberg quotation].

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Sometimes, though, labor leaders suggested that, rather than paying braceros more, large farm operations often paid Mexicans less than native-born workers, driving down wages for all. These seemingly contradictory claims can be accounted for by regional disparities. In California, braceros received lower wages, arguably causing wage stagnation for domestic laborers.[50]

Whether, as labor leaders argued, wages would have been significantly higher for American-born workers in Arkansas if there had been no bracero program is difficult to ascertain. Basic economic logic suggests that without Mexican labor an exacerbated worker shortage would have increased local competition and, hence, wages. But some evidence suggests that the bracero program forced wages to rise. Many local farmers insisted that the minimum wage for Mexicans made locals demand higher pay, driving up agricultural wages.[51] A wage survey in 1961 found that Phillips, Desha, and Crittenden County farmers were paying local "mixed groups" or white and black men, women, and children an average of thirty cents per hour for cotton chopping. In response, J. J. White, president of the Phillips County Farmers Association, "directed his association manager to write all Mexican national-user members of the association, instructing them that no domestic workers could be employed in cotton chopping at less than 50 cents per hour. This, he felt, would have the effect of bringing up the domestic workers' hourly rates for those employed on non-Mexican national using farms."[52] Many farmers in these counties grudgingly agreed to raise domestic wages to meet those of Mexicans in an attempt to ward off further government intervention and to avoid "a recall in Mexican labor." The bracero program, in this case, led to an increase in wages for domestic workers in some parts of Arkansas. In other counties, however, wages appear to have remained as low as thirty cents per hour for non-braceros.[53]

In addition to labor, the bracero program also concerned the burgeoning civil rights movement, given that many domestic farmworkers were

[50]Farmworker organizations in the West, where braceros were most common, frequently spoke out against Mexican labor. Robert J. Callagy of the West Oakland Farm Workers Association wrote: "We have no argument with the braceros themselves. As honest and hard-working men, they are our brothers. But as helpless pawns of the growers' associations, they are used to depressed wages and working conditions"; Robert J. Callagy, "Bracero System Opposed," *New York Times*, December 15, 1964, p. 42.

[51]Weise, "Bracero Program," 133.

[52]J. L. Bland to Tracy C. Murrell, June 14, 1961, box 42, folder 140, Gathings Papers; Harvey R. Adams to E. C. Gathings, June 14, 1961, ibid.

[53]J. L. Bland to E. C. Gathings, June 13, 1961, ibid. By 1961, when the wage survey was conducted, mechanization of cotton agriculture had made significant inroads into Arkansas; Holley, *Second Great Emancipation*, 152. Nonetheless, letters in the Gathings Papers show that many of his most vocal constituents believed bracero labor remained essential to their operations.

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African-American and that braceros enjoyed protections against discrimination based on "nationality or ancestry" that their American-born counterparts did not. As part of its civil rights agenda, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) specifically called for an end to the program.[54] But as aggrieved as they were that black workers did not enjoy the same benefits or protections as braceros, some civil rights activists admired the Mexican government's efforts to secure better treatment of its citzens working in the United States. A story in the progressive African-American newspaper the *Arkansas State Press* declared in 1948 that "Negro anti-discrimination organizations are watching the wielding of the Mexican economic weapon against racial discrimination and its effects with interest." As the journalist pointed out, "Old Mexico [was showing the] World How to Fight Americ'n Prejudice."[55]

The *Arkansas State Press* increasingly recognized Mexicans as a component of the civil rights dialogue. In an attempt to grow solidarity among minorities, one writer asked if blacks and whites were to remain segregated, perhaps "Mexicans, Chinese, . . . Jews and Catholics" would be next.[56] Mexicans and blacks were both stigmatized and needed to fight prejudice together. On the other hand, the newspaper contended that whites displayed a greater racial antipathy toward African Americans, expressing frustration with the fact that Mexicans generally faced less public segregation than black residents of Arkansas.[57] For all its contradictory commentary, the newspaper made clear that the bracero program had brought Mexicans and Mexican Americans into the conversation about racism and inequality.

Virtually until the bracero program's end, Arkansas's "Took" Gathings played a leading role in resisting the labor and civil rights challenges to it. Gathings had become a prominent member of the Committee on Agriculture in the 1950s, and by the end of the decade, the chairman of the Subcommittee on Supplies, Machinery, and Manpower.[58] He worked tirelessly to make sure the program continued and to defeat efforts of opponents to tack on amendments guaranteeing that rights provided braceros were extended to domestic laborers. In 1955, for example, Gathings voiced his ardent opposition to amending the bracero agreements to allow

[54]Louis Lautier, "52nd NAACP Convention Adopts Many Civil Rights Resolutions," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 18, 1961, p. 1.

[55]Leo Fonville, "Old Mexico Shows World How to Fight Americ'n Prejudice," *Arkansas State Press*, July 16, 1948, pp. 1, 4.

[56]S. S. Taylor, "On His Neck Now; Whose Later?" ibid., May 10, 1955, p. 4.

[57]"Beauty Experts Say Mo. P. Railroad Treatment To Passengers Brutal," ibid., August 31, 1951, p. 4; Robert Durr, "One Nation, One World—World Peace," ibid., May 2, 1952, p. 4.

[58]"NAACP says limit export of Mexican workers," *Los Angeles Tribune*, April 8, 1960, p. 24.

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U.S. citizens the same "fringe benefits," or rights, as Mexican immigrant laborers. He argued that many Arkansas farmers could not afford to pay for the transportation, housing, health care, and "kitchen utensils" of U.S. migrant workers, who usually, in contrast to braceros, traveled in family groups.[59] The American Farm Bureau Federation, one of America's largest farm-owner lobbies and an ally of Gathings, similarly insisted on the differences between domestic migrants and braceros. It told Congress that many domestic farm migrants traveled as families and were "often severely handicapped, physically, mentally, or psychiatrically, or by reason of age." According to the federation, braceros were more reliable and able-bodied. The housing and transportation requirements were necessary specifically because they were foreign and exclusively single males, traveling without their families. Extending the same provisions to U.S. workers, the Farm Bureau contended, would work too much economic hardship on farmers.[60] Lloyd Curtis, a state employment official in West Memphis, pointed out that only physically fit, able-bodied men in the prime of their working lives qualified for the bracero program. Domestic workers in the cotton fields, on the other hand, were, he claimed, mostly derelicts, the elderly, women, and children, people who Curtis called "the dregs of humanity."[61]

Congressman Gathings would further argue that extending the bracero policies to include Americans would ultimately put the "working conditions and the rates of pay of American farm workers under the will and arbitration of the officials . . . in power in Mexico."[62]

Gathings usually steered discussion away from "ancestry" or race, emphasizing economic, nationalist, and states' rights arguments in defending the program. But he certainly was well aware that providing Americans the same guarantee as Mexican laborers would legally disallow discrimination based on race. In 1960, when the U.S. Department of Labor, frustrated with Congress, attempted to extend the provisions of the bracero program to domestic laborers, Gathings asserted that the department did not possess "authority over wages or conditions of employment of domestic American farm labor."[63] As with civil rights measures, Gathings rested his case on the constitutional limits of federal authority.

[59]"Extension of Mexican Labor Act," *Congressional Record*, July 6, 1955, 84th Cong., 1st sess., vol. 101, part 8, pp. 10006-10015; "Mexican Farm Labor Program—Conference Report," *Congressional Record*, September 22, 1961, 87th Cong., 1st sess., vol. 107, part 16, pp. 20704-20706.

[60]"Statement of the American Farm Bureau Federation Presented by Matt Triggs, Assistant Legislative Director," May 9, 1961, box 11, folder 142, Gathings Papers.

[61]Janson, "Arkansas Field Pay Falls to 30c an Hour," 61.

[62]"Extension of Mexican Labor Act," 10006-10015 [quotation]; "Mexican Farm Labor Program," 20704-20706.

[63]E. C. Gathings to Cecil R. King, June 25, 1960, box 42, folder 533, Gathings Papers.

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By 1961, Gathings and the bracero program were facing a determined foe in John F. Kennedy's administration. After Gathings and his allies won an extension of the program for another two years, killing all amendments in the process, President Kennedy signed the bill "despite the failure to include in the legislation provisions which I believe necessary to protect domestic farm workers."[64] Kennedy's secretary of labor, Arthur Goldberg, tried another tack. By imposing higher minimum wages for braceros, he hoped to raise the pay of those domestic farmworkers. In 1962, the Labor Department hiked the minimum wage for braceros in Arkansas to sixty cents per hour. Gathings attacked Goldberg's exercise of "excessive and unwarranted" power. He and many of his farmer constituents argued that higher wages would only speed the mechanization of cotton agriculture, displacing human labor entirely and creating competitive difficulties for small and mid-size farmers.[65]

Some in Arkansas, though, wanted to go farther than Goldberg. At a congressional hearing, J. Bill Becker, a labor leader from Little Rock, suggested, to the jeers of large farm owners and pro-bracero representatives in the audience, that pay should be one dollar per hour, the wage set by the Department of Labor for western states, reasoning that this would push wages up more generally. Becker argued that pay for all cotton workers should increase because large Arkansas farms could afford it.[66] And they likely could have, though smaller farms would have been squeezed in the process.

Both the question of civil rights and the issue of bracero labor were coming to a head by 1964. The preceding year, in the wake of police brutality during civil rights protests in Birmingham, Alabama, President Kennedy made a televised call to end segregation and to pass a new civil rights act. In the same months, Congressman Gathings, along with Senator Fulbright, pushed one last time to get legislators to continue the Mexican labor program, a move supported by most Arkansas growers. But the prospects for extension seemed none too good. According to Gathings, opposition "by strong organizations receiving the tacit support of the U.S. Department of Labor . . . made the program more difficult and more costly for the farmer to use."[67] But it might also have become less essential to

[64]Office of the White House Press Secretary, "Statement by the President," October 4, 1961, box 247, folder 4450, Gathings Papers; Craig, *Bracero Program*, 163-173.

[65]Janson, "Arkansas Field Pay Falls to 30c an Hour," 1, 61; "Minimum Wages Set for Migrant Labor," *New York Times*, March 30, 1962, p. 24; "Labor Rules Speed Mechanization," reprinted from *Arkansas Democrat* in *Farm Bureau Press* (Little Rock), November 1962, p. 4.

[66]Roy Reed, "Amid Hoots, Jeers, Unionist Urges Bracero Wage Raise," *Arkansas Gazette*, March 3, 1962, p. 1A.

[67]E. C. Gathings to Warren H. Wass, June 14, 1965, box 299, folder 4473a, Gathings Papers.

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many of his constituents. Use of braceros dropped sharply in the early 1960s, and by 1967, 93 percent of the state's cotton crop was harvested by machine.[68]

The issues of civil rights and farm labor intertwined in Gathings' correspondence with constituents. Many of Gathings' farm-owning correspondents pressured him to fight any proposed civil rights legislation. Black Oak farmer Ed L. Henry lauded Gathings for his promotion of Mexican labor. He also wrote, "regarding the Civil Rights Program, for goodness sake put the pressure where it belongs." Gathings responded: "We are working hard to get a Cotton Bill enacted at this session of the congress. I am fighting the civil rights proposal with everything I have."[69] Gathings said he respected the "time-honored policy of segregation" and found the civil rights positions of the Kennedy administration a dangerous attack on states' rights and "repulsive to the southerner and those Members who represent Southern districts."[70]

Congressional liberals supporting the civil rights agenda noted the contradiction between such invocations of states' rights and many southerners' support for a bracero labor program that included federally mandated wages and benefits and guarantees against discrimination. The bracero program was, according to these legislators, "more far reaching than the pending civil rights program."[71] Sen. Maurine Neuberger of Oregon pointed out that the U.S. Labor Department, the Mexican government, and communities in Texas had been successfully resolving cases of discrimination against Mexicans in restaurants, bowling alleys, swimming pools, and movie theaters. Although some Texas counties were still banned by the Mexican government from using bracero labor because of discrimination, most southern farmers taking advantage of the bracero program had, the *New York Times* pointed out, "lived with its antidiscrimination prescriptions since 1951."[72] Outside of Texas, Arkansas was the southern state most dependent on bracero labor, so it was a prime example of this contradiction. The bracero program had become harder to justify for Dixie Democrats who supported a massive federal program that included social and labor guarantees for Mexican migrants but who stood against equal rights for their own black constituents in the name of limited government.

Ultimately, the bracero program was not renewed—while Congress did pass the Civil Rights Act on July 2, 1964. Title VII of the law, which

[68]Holley, *Second Great Emancipation*, 152-155.

[69]Ed L. Henry to Took Gathings, July 14, 1963, box 42, folder 163, Gathings Papers; E. C. Gathings to Ed L. Henry, July 17, 1963, ibid.

[70]E. C. Gathings to Glen Hammons, June 19, 1963, box 146, folder 1905, ibid.

[71]Trussell, "Provisions Protecting Braceros Cited as Rights-Bill Precedent," 75.

[72]Ibid.

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addressed "Equal Employment Opportunity," sounded amazingly similar to the bracero agreements in banning discrimination in the workplace based on "race, color, religion, sex, or national origin."[73] As the *New York Times* reported Senator Neuberger had argued the year before, the bracero program was "the strongest precedent that can be presented for the [Kennedy] Administration's civil rights bill."[74]

Long after the program ended in 1964, many families from Arkansas Delta towns continued to discuss braceros with a sort of nostalgic fondness. In interviews conducted in 2008, most farm owners, including Vance Beasley, the son of a large-scale farmer in east-central Arkansas, recalled that Mexicans "didn't cause trouble."[75] They were resourceful, proud, and "amazingly tough for their size."[76] Although generally housed "outside of day-to-day society," braceros often came into communities during the weekends. In Lepanto, stores began for the first time opening on Sundays to cater to Mexicans. According to Bernard Lipsey, who worked at his parents' store, these immigrants made up some 80 percent of their sales. Braceros bought certain foods, radios, jewelry, guns, sewing machines, and other items difficult to obtain in Mexico. The fact that Mexican laborers spent considerable sums on consumer goods made the bracero program a boon for local retailers as well as planters. When the braceros left, the economy deteriorated.[77]

The bracero legacy in eastern Arkansas may have helped to ease later relations between Latinos and non-Latino residents in cities like Jonesboro, where Latinos have once again become more common. This legacy also helps to explain why, much to the aggravation of non-Mexican Latinos, non-Hispanic whites and blacks in the region commonly refer to all Latinos as Mexicans. Mexicans have made up the vast majority of Latino immigrants to the Arkansas Delta recently, but they have also had the longest historical presence. And despite the growing variety of Latinos in some Arkansas towns, and the rise in anti-immigrant sentiments amplified by conservative media outlets, the bracero experience appears to have helped temper anti-Latino views in certain eastern Arkansas communities, a point demonstrated in oral histories of (mostly white) Arkansas residents and other recent research on Latino communities in Jonesboro.[78]

[73]"Excerpts from the Civil Rights Act of 1964," in *The Civil Rights Act of 1964*, ed. Robert H. Mayer (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2004), 115-116.

[74]Trussell, "Provisions Protecting Braceros Cited as Rights-Bill Precedent," 75.

[75]Vance E. Beasley, interviewed by Mireya Loza, September 24, 2008, Heth, AR, BHA Item #3078, braceroarchive.org (accessed April 20, 2016).

[76]Stone interview.

[77]Lipsey interview.

[78]See the Bracero History Archive for interviews; Melany Bowman, "Home Away from Home: The Assimilation of the Hispanic Population in Jonesboro, Arkansas" (Ph.D. diss., Arkansas State

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In its time, debates over the bracero program informed larger debates over social justice and civil rights. By establishing labor contracts that demanded economic fairness and legally prohibited discrimination, the bracero program created precedents for federal action on behalf of agricultural labor and African-American rights and helped to expose the hypocrisy of politicians who invoked states' rights in opposing worker protections and racial equality within the United States but acquiesced in them to secure a reliable supply of foreign labor. Mexico, by insisting on a certain level of wages and benefits and guarantees against discrimination, created a standard by which the United States' shortcomings in protecting the rights and well-being of its own citizens could be measured. The bracero program clearly shows how movements that changed U.S. labor and civil rights policies during the mid-twentieth century were intertwined with larger transnational phenomena—in this instance, Mexican government policies promoting pride, fair treatment, and racial inclusion.

University, 2011). Another factor is likely the relative success of the Jonesboro Hispanic Center in building favorable relations with the city's political and business communities.

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