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The Bracero Program in the Arkansas Delta: The Power held by Planter Elite

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The Bracero Program in the Arkansas Delta: The Power held by Planter Elite

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by

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Abstract

This paper examines the Bracero Program and its implementation from the start of World War II to the end of the program in 1964. Farmers and planters in America needed a sufficient labor supply once the war started, and Mexico became the main supplier. The Bracero Program was initiated as a war effort and meant to only last until the end of the war, but the planter elite had far different intentions once they realized how productive and inexpensive the program could be. This paper identifies the leading causes for how the Bracero Program was able to last over twenty years.

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Introduction: A Reason for Bracero Labor and its Implications

At the height of the Great Depression the national unemployment rate hovered around twenty-five percent. The economic catastrophe crippled the industrial economy and caused immense hardship all across the country. The supply of unskilled workers in the United States was plentiful; employers all across the country could find labor to harvest their crops. The Great Depression gave credence to the old adage “one man’s loss is another man’s profit,” at least for farmers and planters. In the late 1930s, the threat from an increasing conflict in Europe created a sudden war mobilization. This mobilization opened job markets and helped shrink unemployment. With the United States bracing and preparing for conflict, the industrial economy began to hire more and more labor. During World War II, American men, black and white, devoted their lives to the defense of American values and freedom. Once the conflict began, a labor shortage developed, especially in the agricultural South. The demand for industrial workers in northern cities, such as Chicago, Detroit, and Pittsburg, exacerbated the labor shortage. The industrial labor demand initiated a massive rural to urban migration, particularly on the part of southern African Americans who had been the main labor source for planters and farmers. The solution adopted by the United States government was to work with the Mexican government to recruit Mexican laborers into specific areas of the country.¹ This will examine how American farmers and planters used their influence over politicians to extend the Bracero Program beyond World War II.

¹ Jeannie Whayne, *A New Plantation South: Land, Labor, and Federal Favor in Twentieth-century Arkansas* (Charlottesville, Va : University Press of Virginia, 1996), pg. x

When the United States officially entered World War II, the governments of Mexico and the United States engineered a program for the “importation and employment of “braceros,” literally “arms,” and the Hispanic equivalent of the Anglo word “hand,” meaning a laborer available for hire.”² The United States Immigration Service (USIS) was responsible for coordinating with the Mexican government. The USIS worked hand in hand with farmers in the United States and coordinated with the Mexican government by allowing Mexico to select the workers on a term-by term -basis. Each contract was based on where, when, and what type of labor was needed. This initiative became known as the Bracero Program.

“The agreement stated (United States Executive Agreement series 278, 1943:3) 1. Mexican Laborers shall not be subject to the military draft. 2. Discrimination against braceros is forbidden. 3. They shall be guaranteed transportation, food, hospitalization and repatriation. 4. They shall not be used to displace other workers nor to lower wages. 5. Contracts made by employee and employer will be made under the supervision of the Mexican government and shall be written in Spanish. 6. Expenses incurred for transportation and lodgings from point of origin to destination shall be paid by the employer who will be reimbursed by sub-employer. With regard to word and salary, the principal points were: 1. Salaries shall be the same as those made to citizens of the U.S.A and shall not be lower than 30 cents an hour. 2. Exceptions as to wages can be made under extenuating circumstances provided authorization by the Mexican government is given. 3. No minors under 14 will be allowed to work. 4. Braceros will be allowed to form associations and elect a leader to represent them. 5. They shall be guaranteed work for 75 percent of the working days. 6. Savings shall be deducted from their pay and Banco Nacional Agricola shall take charge of the money until the braceros return.”³

² Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story, 1942-1960* (San Jose, CA: The Rosicrucian Press 1964), pg. 10

³ Maria Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience: Elitlore versus Folklore* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Latin American Center Publications 1979), pg. xiii

The 1942 agreement between the United States and Mexico was beneficial for both countries. In the United States farmers were able to request Mexican labor for a designated amount of time by submitting applications to the government. This allowed them to fill their labor needs without hiring in the fall and firing workers once the harvest was completed. The Bracero Program also gave American farmers the ability to negotiate their labor needs without worrying about the demands of labor unions, and it made it much more profitable to hire temporary workers compared to domestic workers. Domestic workers needed year-round employment and in the capital-intensive environment of post-war agriculture, year-round labor was no longer necessary. Once American farmers realized the economic benefits of renting labor from Mexico, it became a full-fledged agricultural industry. For Mexico, the Bracero Program provided the opportunity to assist in the war effort. It also gave Mexican labor an opportunity to work for a higher wage, some of which made its way back to the Mexican economy.

Under the Bracero Program a farmer requested, through the United States Agricultural Extension Agency, a certain number of temporary workers. The American farmer would have to agree to the duration of the contract, the pay rate, and the type of work to be done. Once the contracts were signed by all parties, the process of transporting the braceros to the farms would begin. To ease the cost for farmers, the United States insisted that the bracero processing centers be located near the border between Mexico and the United States. The two border checkpoints used by Arkansas farmers were located in Hidalgo and Brownsville, Texas. Once the contracts were complete, it was the responsibility of the farmer to pay for transportation costs back to the border checkpoints. Unfortunately, this placed the cost of transportation to these border locations completely on the laborer. Upon arrival at the border processing centers, the braceros would be subject to a rigorous screening process. For example, “at the US labor reception center, the

worker and his luggage are thoroughly dusted with DDT powder as a sanitary measure and to prevent insects from being brought into the US.”⁴ The laborer was then subject to an x-ray and a photograph then it was attached to the individual’s passport. After these processes were complete, the braceros were ready to be transported, and planters fulfilled that part of their bargain. Unfortunately, many of the vehicles were substandard and overcrowding was the norm. In fact, “the transportation resulted in the largest number of accidents and safety violations they experienced.”⁵ Once they arrived at their work sites, it was very difficult for the bracero to complain or voice his concerns over any type of issue. In many cases, the braceros were expendable, because “the threat of returning a contractee to Mexico if he did not meet the demands of the job without complaint was usually enough for workers to conform to grower expectations.”⁶ This made it very difficult for the braceros to affect any type of change if they felt their situation was unfair. The threat of deportation prevented most protests and made it easy for planters to disregard any type of bracero protest that did arise. In other words, “growers could rely on fear rather than violence to keep workers in line.”⁷ Also, while working in the United States braceros were consigned to labor camps where they were separated from the rest of American society. This was designed to allow planters to monitor their whereabouts at all times and to segregate the braceros from domestic workers and the public. Once the braceros completed their contracts, it was the responsibility of the planter to return the bracero back to Mexico.

⁴ Ronald Mize and Alicia Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Press 2011), pg. 10

⁵ Ibid., pg. 14

⁶ Ibid., pg. 15

⁷ Ibid.

The Bracero Program continued after World War II and operated for a total of twenty-two years. The program brought more than four million temporary Mexican workers to the United States.⁸ The program had tremendous implications within the agriculture sector of the United States, in particular the Arkansas Delta. This study examines how Arkansas planters mobilized their political and economic influence over Arkansas politicians to support the advancement of the Bracero Program and limit the power held by local labor. Most studies in U.S. agricultural history focus on African American labor, the impact slavery had on agriculture, or general agricultural shifts, especially once slavery ended. However, this research focuses on a different category of agricultural labor. This thesis uses primary documents and secondary sources to understand why farmers, the United States, and Mexico worked together to implement the Bracero Program. The sources will shed light on how and why it was utilized by large planters and landowners, in particular Arkansas plantation owner, Lee Wilson.

This research addresses key issues that surrounded the Bracero Program, specifically in Arkansas, and its impact on the local community, in particular the local labor. More importantly, it addresses why plantations, such as that operated Lee Wilson & Company, were determined to rely on the Bracero Program for its labor force and began using their influence over government officials, such as Senator J. William Fulbright and Governor Orval Faubus, to gain a more favorable outcome. Another vital issue this research examines is the effect mechanization and industrialization had on the implementation of the program and why it was favorable for planters to use their economic power to influence political elites into adopting the program, especially in regards to large plantations, such as Lee Wilson & Company.

⁸ Justin Castro, "Mexican Braceros and Arkansas Cotton: Agricultural Labor and Civil Rights in the Post-World War II South," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* LXXV (Spring 2016), pg. 27-46.

Chapter One: Bracero Program Historiography

The historiography centered around the Bracero Program has taken several different approaches. Scholars have focused on planters influencing the political establishment to adopt the Bracero Program and they have highlighted the attitude of local labor toward the program and how the political elite neglected their discontent in favor of the planters' economic agenda. Along with understanding the impact on the local labor force, this research explores why and how plantation owners took advantage of the Bracero Program. The program was implemented in 1942 as a war measure, it benefitted farmers all across the agricultural United States, and it became evident that it was important, economically, for both the government and planters, to sustain a productive output during the war. However, the program survived long past the declaration of peace and was not disbanded until 1964. The Bracero Program survived after World War II because it could supply a sustained and cheap labor force for American planters. The following sources have been arranged from oldest to newest publication, and are not arranged according to content. Each will shed light on how and why the program was utilized by large planters and landowners.

The Bracero Program was utilized throughout the United States, especially, and most significantly in California where seasonal workers were an essential component of agriculture. California's enormous and varied food productions dictated its participation in attracting bracero labor from Mexico. The oldest scholarship relating to the Bracero Program in California is by Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story: An Account of the Managed Farm Workers in California 1942-1960*. Galarza highlights the background of Californian and Mexican societies. As the preface, by U.S. Senator from Alaska Ernest Gruening, makes clear California dealt with massive political corruption and pressure from wealthy planters. Planters

used their influence over politicians to maintain the program long after the war. First, Galarza chronicles the need for agricultural labor during World War II as the main reason California planters turned to bracero labor. Coupled with an inability to find and secure sufficient labor, and the fear of an actual shortage of food during the war the United States government negotiated labor bonds with the Mexican government. The United States wanted Mexico to provide transportation costs for the braceros from their homes to the border checkpoints. Mexico wanted the United States to provide the transportation costs for the braceros from the border checkpoints to the farms, and then back to the border checkpoint once their contracts were completed. The government supplied planters in California with braceros from contracting centers over eight hundred miles away, and had them on the farms in just forty-eight hours. Galarza claims the ability of the government to supply California planters with Mexican labor was a major factor in allowing the Bracero Program to flourish. “In California the hinge of an enormous input of more than 500,000,000 man-hours to raise 33,000,000 tons of agricultural products was the bracero labor force, which in 1957 numbered over 100,000.”⁹

The railroads and the agricultural sector needed laborers with different skills; regardless, according to Galarza, the qualifications held by braceros were appreciated by major railroad companies and commercial farmers all across the American south. According to Galarza, the railroad companies considered braceros to be very hard workers, and they were well versed in railroad construction since Mexico had a budding railroad industry at the time of the program. Galarza claims planters desired braceros because they could be hired easily through government channels, they could be counted upon to appear to work on schedule, contracts could be made without negotiating with labor unions, and the individual contract could be overseen by the

⁹ Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, pg. 15

planter. Another major issue that Galarza highlights is the ability of the Bracero Program to reduce the social cost of unemployment since it allowed the planter to send the braceros back to Mexico when they were no longer needed. It is clear that planters and landowners held influence and power over the political processes, and Galarza claims the United States government tipped the scales farther in the favor of property owners and agribusiness. Galarza argues this resulted in an implementation of an administered democracy because the laborer had a choice to become a bracero, but once he became a bracero he was not able to make his own choices, in regards to the type of labor he performed. It also further exposed the bracero labor force because it helped planters dictate contractual agreements once the braceros were on the farms. At the end, Galarza reflects on how the Bracero Program affected the bracero home communities and the communities they entered. The braceros were under constant surveillance, and in some cases, the planters were fearful enough of absconded braceros that they surrounded the labor camps with barbed wire. Galarza explains that these barbwire camps were constructed primarily for symbolic purposes, and unfortunately, “a more effective barrier surrounded them- the social justice created by difference in language, customs and familiar patterns of character and behavior,”¹⁰ which meant no matter how hard the braceros worked they would never be viewed or considered equal by Americans.

In *Bracero Experience: Elitlore Versus Folklore*, Maria Herrera-Sobek enhances our understanding of bracero life by balancing the interplay between elitlore and folklore and using oral histories to advance the Bracero Program methodology. Unlike Galarza, Herrera-Sobek does not examine or even hint at the corrupt politicians who used their power to benefit the planter elite in the United States. By using tape-recorded interviews and firsthand accounts of the

¹⁰ Ibid.

experience of braceros, she is able to create a compelling portrait of conditions on American farms. She also observes that the literary elite in Mexico did not participate in the Bracero Program, and this fact, created a negative explanation of bracero experiences in the United States. Herrera-Sobek explains that the lack of understanding and relationship between elite Mexican novelists and braceros made the bracero experience become an embarrassment to the intellectual historians of Mexico. In many instances, elite Mexican novelists portrayed the returning bracero as a bitter and broken man. “Although Mexico’s novelists thought that they were right in protecting Mexico from the loss of some of its best labor, in reality they tended indirectly to help convince the bracero of his inferiority.”¹¹ In effect, the novelists and intellectuals were using their power and influence to criticize the Bracero Program, and felt it was necessary to discredit and demean the impact of the braceros in Mexican history.

Herrera-Sobek’s decision to select differing villages with varying socioeconomic characteristics in Mexico allowed her to create a composite story of the bracero experience. Herrera-Sobek does not place one hundred percent of the blame for the negative impact of the Bracero Program in Mexican history on the Mexican elite. She places a majority of the blame on the United States agricultural regions that requested foreign labor for their farms and subjugated them to demeaning treatment and racist attitudes. However, in many accounts, the braceros she interviewed were “either oblivious to prejudice that the Anglo-Saxon segment of the U.S. population might have directed at them or unconsciously repressed the idea altogether.”¹² She makes it clear braceros were more interested in the possibility of bettering their lives through low wages in the United States over low wages in their native Mexican villages. According to the

¹¹ Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience*, pg. 2

¹² Ibid., pg. 127

braceros, the decision was made because even low wages in the United States equaled to a high exchange rate once they returned to Mexico. For example, “the rate of exchange was 12.50 pesos to 1 dollar,” and one bracero told her “as long as Mexican workers come home with radios, cars, clothing, and dollars, there will be a constant stream of them trekking to the United States.”¹³ Herrera-Sobek concludes her research with the realization that Mexican workers will always look to the United States as a land of economic prosperity, especially compared to their native land. Herrera-Sobek’s outlook seems to have become a reality. “Until Mexico can provide adequate employment for its jobless, its destitute campesinos, braceros will continue to be part of the United States-Mexican scene whether in the form of “wetbacks” or “wire jumpers.”¹⁴

The Tracks North: The Railroad Bracero Program of World War II, by Barbara Driscoll, separates itself significantly from the research by Herrera-Sobek, but it does resemble the research completed by Galarza. While Galarza focuses mainly on the labor in California, in which both railroad and agricultural labor are examined, he still devotes the majority of his book to addressing the role braceros played in the California agricultural labor force. *The Tracks North: The Railroad Bracero Program of World War II*, by Barbara Driscoll, documents the factors and negotiations that created the Bracero Program, specifically in the railroad industry, and highlights the “remarkable fact that this short-lived program remains the only binational migration agreement between Mexico and the United States that both parties respected in its original form.”¹⁵ Driscoll makes it clear the railroad industry was not as influential or successful as the agricultural industry, especially in maintaining the Bracero Program, however, Driscoll

¹³ Ibid., pg. 128

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Barbara A. Driscoll, *The Tracks North: The Railroad Bracero Program of World War II* (Austin, TX: University of Texas 1999), pg. xiii

does point out the braceros' contribution to the railroad system "represents a singular and pivotal, albeit largely unknown, chapter of Mexican immigration to the United States."¹⁶ The railroad companies were not building new lines, but they did need constant maintenance, and the braceros held important work experience that benefitted the railroad companies.

Although, the railroad industry only utilized the Bracero Program from 1943 to 1945, it employed over 100,000 Mexican workers at more than thirty different railroad sites.¹⁷ Driscoll says railroad employers were just as pleased as the planters were over the work ethic of the braceros and the ease with which they could be hired. According to Driscoll, the major difference between the Bracero Program in the railroad industry and the agricultural industry was the control held by powerful railroad unions. As he puts it, "the railroad bracero program was implemented in spite of the presence of large and powerful railroad unions in Mexico and United States."¹⁸ Fortunately, for domestic workers, the railroad unions were able to use their influence over the United States government to end the Bracero Program- as far as railroads were concerned- once the war emergency was over. Driscoll states, "in spite of efforts of the railroads and some U.S. bureaucrats to extend the railroad program beyond the war, for example, the brotherhoods had merely to remind the United States government that the negotiations had limited it to the war emergency."¹⁹

This analysis provides a stark difference between the power and influence held by domestic railroad workers compared to the lack of power and influence domestic agricultural workers held over the United States government, and it highlights the tremendous influence

¹⁶ Ibid., pg. ix

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., pg. 168

unions had with government officials. If the domestic agricultural workers would have been able to unionize they could have used their power to combat the power held by planter elites, thus decreasing the planters' ability to hire Mexican labor through the Bracero Program. Driscoll claims the railroad portion of the Bracero Program "stands out as the only successful binational immigration project implemented by the U.S. and Mexican governments,"²⁰ because it is the only instance where the Mexican government was able to negotiate significant results that would protect Mexican laborers. In regards to the agricultural Bracero Program, Driscoll highlights the measures planters made to supply labor in their fields before the program was implemented. In many cases planters, especially in predominately agricultural states, recruited workers from outside the agricultural labor force. Unfortunately, even whole communities stopping their usual activities to work in the fields did not prove to be a sufficient solution for planters.

In *Guest Workers or Colonized Labor?: Mexican Labor Migration to the United States*, by Gilbert Gonzalez, the focus is on how Mexico has been prized and exploited by the United States for its natural resources, and most of all its cheap labor. According to Gonzalez, the international relationship the United States has with Mexico "bears the imprints of imperialist domination."²¹ Gonzalez uses this idea to identify the social consequences of imperialist domination, particularly the mass uprooting of migrated labor from Mexico to the United States. Gonzalez claims most historians have been reluctant to compare the Bracero Program to an imperialist scheme because it can be described as a unique agreement between two sovereign nations. In Gonzalez's opinion, the Bracero Program conforms to an "imperialist schema,"²²

²⁰ Ibid., pg. x

²¹ Gilbert Gonzalez, *Guest Workers or Colonized Labor: Mexican Labor Migration to the United States* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers 2006), pg. 1

²² Ibid., pg. 2

because it comprises a series of government measures designed to recruit and organize Mexican labor for purposes beneficial to the national interests of the United States. Gonzalez provides ample evidence to demonstrate his argument, and he claims the Bracero Program paralleled colonial labor practices used by Britain and France during the spread of colonialism. According to Gonzalez, under the auspices of the Bracero Program, Mexican workers were transported to the United States as indentured servants and systematically placed under planters' control. Since they were placed under employer control, it was easy to segregate the workers from domestic labor and to deny them certain key labor rights, such as the right to organize into unions, the right to negotiate fair wages, the right to protest and the right or ability to change employers. Gonzalez says "little if any oversight enforced rights and privileges legally accorded to the laborers."²³ Another example Gonzalez highlights is the low standard of living afforded to the braceros. He claims, as other historians have pointed out, that braceros were subject to harsh working conditions and poor living situations while in the United States. He also points to how planters themselves held long standing imperialistic ideas toward their labor force.

Gonzalez focuses on the planters' ability to blacklist Mexican workers with rebellious tendencies or lazy work performance as evidence of a commonly applied colonial practice. Gonzalez makes three major arguments to bolster his claim that the Bracero Program resembles a colonial practice. The economic relationship between Mexico and the United States, exhibits "the classic hallmarks of neocolonialism."²⁴ Gonzalez suggests American business owners dominated the Mexican economy by investing in mining, agriculture, banking and financing institutions, which strengthened the United States economic position over Mexico. He claims the

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., pg. 3

Bracero Program was a variation of a migration pattern that had been happening for half a century. As he suggests, “migration here is explained through acknowledging the critical impact effected by U.S. imperialism upon the demography and social organization of the Mexican nation.”²⁵ Gonzalez cites the work of Galarza when he claims the wages and working condition standards found in the United States did not compare to those in Mexico and presented Mexican labor with an opportunity to better their lives and enhance their economic livelihood. In other words, the low wages in the United States were considerable better than the highest wages available in Mexico. Finally, Gonzalez emphasizes and compares European migration with Mexican migration. He says it is not possible to use European migration as a “one size fits all”²⁶ because there is a significant cultural divide between Mexico and the United States. He argues that European immigrants had an easier time adjusting and assimilating in the United States, and in many cases were provoked to migrate to the United States for different reasons than Mexican immigrants. Gonzalez claims Mexico’s neocolonial status, in the eyes of the United States, “as the precondition for migration to the United States and for the subsequent Mexican immigrant experience within the United States.”²⁷

Overall, Gonzalez explores the result of United States economic influence over the migration of Mexican labor, specifically the Bracero Program, and how it was a “quintessential expression of imperialism.”²⁸ Gonzalez believes examining the Bracero Program within the imperialist domination context allows historians to “engage more realistic explanations regarding the U.S.-Mexico relationship and its offspring- migration- and thereby establish valuable

²⁵ Ibid., pg. 4

²⁶ Ibid., pg. 5

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., pg. 11

approaches to the more important aspects of Chicano history.”²⁹ Gonzalez sought to elucidate the conditions brought on by the Bracero Program, which he claims ripped apart the Mexican countryside and initiated widespread labor migrations. His analysis centered on how the program served the economic interests of American employers, and how the program integrated Mexican workers into the United States economy using imperial and colonial style tactics. “Using such an approach, we are bound to arrive at the conclusion that there is no such thing as a “good” guest worker program, inasmuch as all such programs depend upon the continual availability of uprooted people without options, refugees of an economic policy leading toward the recolonization of Latin America.”³⁰

Dr. Rocio Gomez, a professor of Latin American and environmental history at the University of Arkansas, explored the experience of braceros who worked in the Arkansas Delta. Gomez’s approach, which supports most of the recent historiography, differs from the mainstream Arkansas agricultural scholarship because she believes the impact of Bracero immigrants has been ignored “despite their presence and driving force of the cotton sector in the 1950s.”³¹ Gomez’s research is based around the Bracero point of view, which differs greatly from the research this paper has focused on. Gomez painted a vivid picture of the tumultuous and rigorous process the Braceros had to endure on their journey from Mexico to the Arkansas Delta. Gomez used firsthand accounts of Braceros who explained the hardships they faced while working in the Arkansas Delta, the tremendous stress caused by the plantation owners and how they adjusted to things like the climate and the new types of land/crops they were cultivating.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., pg. 221

³¹ Gomez, Rocio, “Braceros in the Arkansas Delta, 1943–1964,” *Ozark Historical Review* 39 (Spring 2010): 1–18

Gomez also focuses on the Braceros who decided to stay in the United States once their work-visas ended and how they accomplished the act of staying in the United States. Gomez also points to the implications mechanization and industrialization had on ending the Bracero program in the Arkansas Delta.

The role mechanization and industrialization played on the Bracero Program in Arkansas can also be highlighted through the work of Jeannie Whayne. Whayne's most recent book, titled *Delta Empire: Lee Wilson and the Transformation of Agriculture in the New South*, provides a significant source of information on why plantation owners, such as Lee Wilson took advantage of the Bracero labor. Whayne argues that planters, like Lee Wilson, turned to bracero labor because the transition to capital-intensive agriculture led to the "erosion of the tenancy and sharecropping system which insured a virtual depopulation of the rural countryside."³² This argument serves as a vital point for this research because it shapes the backdrop of the Great Migration. Whayne also argues, however, that the Bracero Program gave planters more control over labor and, particularly, the wage rate. She cites testimony to a presidential Commission on Migratory Labor, which held hearings from July 31st to September 16th 1950, that said there was plenty of domestic labor available. The commission agreed, recommending to the president that "Further efforts should be directed toward supplying agricultural labor needs with our own workers and eliminating dependence on foreign labor."³³ Congress ignored the advice of the commission, however, and the Bracero Program expanded.

Whayne's research provides important insight into why and what caused planters to adopt bracero labor, along with the influence their economic prosperity had over local politicians. The

³² Jeannie Whayne, *Delta Empire: Lee Wilson and the Transformation of Agriculture in the New South* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State Press 2011), pg. 219

³³ Ibid.

cotton plantation was undergoing a fundamental reorganization, one that began during the New Deal. During the first phase of this transition, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration paid farmers and planters to limit the production of certain crops – like cotton – and inadvertently created a labor surplus. Planters ceased planting up to 25 percent of their acreage in cotton and many resorted to evicted tenants and sharecroppers because they no longer needed their labor. The second phase of the transition began with World War II when a labor scarcity emerged. Many landless farmers enlisted or were drafted into the armed services and others went to work in the defense industry. The bracero program came into existence in order to address that labor shortage. As Whayne shows, few braceros were used in the Arkansas delta, however, as sufficient prisoner-of-war labor existed. The third phase of the transition began after World War II. It was during the war that the first mechanical cotton harvester came off an assembly line and planters began to adopt their use in the post-war period. Planters once again needed labor but many of the men who went off to war or to work in war industries did not return to rural areas. Many others did return, however, and that became a point of contention when planters urged the continuation of the Bracero program in order to fill their labor needs. The native laborers expected a certain guarantee of year-round labor rather than seasonal labor planters were becoming accustomed to in order to harvest their crops. Another facet of this third phase was increasing use of weed-killing chemicals. This greatly curtailed – and ultimately eliminated – the need for chopping cotton to rid the fields of weed during the summer. Now planters needed labor only a few weeks in the summer to chop the cotton and a few weeks in the fall to harvest it. Under the old tenancy system they had found it necessary to keep a labor force year-round in order to provide sufficient hands for planting and harvesting season. Under the modern system, they no longer had that need. While some native labor remained in the

plantation areas, the Bracero Program provided an attractive alternative of laborers who could be closely monitored and paid a low wage without the threat of protest.³⁴

While Whayne focuses on the impact of the Bracero Program on agricultural workers in the Arkansas Delta and their role in providing labor during an important transition period between labor-intensive and capital intensive agriculture, Ronald Mize and Alicia Swords, in *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA*, examine another angle. Mize and Swords view the Bracero Program as a systematic exploitation of Mexican labor by the United States and place much of the blame on the United States government and the planters who failed to live up to the original contracts. They also observe that consumption and production in the United States are tied to Mexican migration. They examine how North America's "consumption practices are shaping particular labor needs in terms of low-wage and marginalized conditions where Mexican immigrant workers are increasingly recruited to work."³⁵ Their central argument is that the economic relations between the United States, Canada and Mexico are "inextricably intertwined"³⁶ because the consumption based economies are built on the labor of Mexicans. They explore how the social relations of production and consumption in the United States and Canada shape Mexican migration patterns and labor production. They use the time span from 1942 to the present day to "present these relations as constituting a triad that includes capital accumulation, labor exploitation, and consumption practices in the making of Mexican labor for North American consumption."³⁷ In regards to the Bracero Program, they

³⁴ Whayne, *A New Plantation South*, pg. x

³⁵ Mize and Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor*, pg. xiii

³⁶ Ibid., pg. xvii

³⁷ Ibid., pg. xxvii

analyze the program and the post-war experiences of Mexican labor, and how each contributed to the United States economy's reliance on Mexican labor.

An essay by Julie Weise, "The Bracero Program: Mexican Workers in the Arkansas Delta, 1948-1964," focuses on the Braceros and the actions they took to solidify and expand their benefits as workers. Weise highlights how Braceros used the Mexican governments' agreement with the United States as a political bargaining chip with landowners. Weise argues that this bargaining chip allowed them to break down Jim Crow discrimination, and enabled them to succeed "in forcing farmers to reject overt anti-Mexican discrimination and to admit dark-skinned foreigners into white establishments as early as 1948."³⁸ Weise's essay is key to understanding the importance the Bracero Program had on the Arkansas Delta in terms of disrupting the Jim Crow mentality, since the program and its stipulations forced landowners to abandon Jim Crow habits or risk losing the benefits of the program. Weise's conclusion, regarding the power and influence landowners held over economic issues, shows the braceros "eluded the rigid structures of Jim Crow, but did not escape the economic, social, and cultural caste system it had created."³⁹

Weise's *Corazon de Dixie: Mexicans in the U.S. South since 1910* includes a discussion of the experiences of braceros in the Arkansas Delta, mainly focusing on the discrimination they faced. Weise emphasizes that racial tension consumed the Arkansas Delta, and she addresses instances where local whites treated the bracero workers as unequal and refused to allow entry to white establishments: "local authorities used every means at their disposal- law, culture, and

³⁸ Julie Weise, "The Bracero Program: Mexican Workers in the Arkansas Delta, 1948-1964," In *Race and Ethnicity in Arkansas: New Perspectives*, edited by John A. Kirk. (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2014), pg. 139

³⁹ Ibid.

practice- to ensure Mexicans' nominal access to the white public spaces and to defuse racially charged conflicts as they emerged."⁴⁰ This book provides a basis for race relations between local people and the braceros, especially in regards to how whites reacted to the influx of bracero labor. A major argument from Weise's research is the differential treatment plantation owners gave towards the braceros. Wiese argues that the changes implemented by the United States government over local officials helped spur the beginning of the destruction of Jim Crow in the Arkansas Delta. Weise's research emphasized the ways braceros successfully pressed their claim for fairness among local whites. She also focuses on how the braceros were awarded better treatment by the planters, who caved to demands by the braceros and the Mexican government for personal injury insurance.

Another book that analyzes the Bracero Program is *Defiant Braceros: How Migrant Workers Fought for Racial, Sexual & Political Freedom*, by Mireya Loza. The main argument in this book traces the experiences of the Bracero Program through the eyes of the braceros. Loza claims this approach's complexities have been overlooked by countless historians. She uses memory, race, sexuality and state power to critically examine the "material experiences of braceros and the discursive power the guest-worker program has wielded."⁴¹ Loza uses bracero memories to "reveal contradictions within U.S. immigration policy that renders Mexican labor as necessary and Mexican settlement as unnecessary and unwarranted."⁴² Loza determines that many former braceros have become strong critics of the Mexican nation-state. Loza says the memories collected from the former braceros "call attention to the dehumanizing nature of the

⁴⁰ Julie Weise, *Corazon De Dixie: Mexicans in the U.S. South since 1910* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press 2015), pg. 85

⁴¹ Mireya Loza, *Defiant Braceros: How Migrant Workers Fought for Racial, Sexual & Political Freedom* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press 2016), pg. 19

⁴² Ibid.

program and the Mexican state's profiteering and complicity in creating a stateless class of workers primed for exploitation."⁴³ According to Loza, braceros were already feeling marginalized by the Mexican government before the Bracero Program started. Loza claims the bracero population had distinct racial and ethnic identities that "shaped how individuals understood their place in the racialized landscape of the United States and their relationships with other braceros."⁴⁴ She says this helps answer important questions concerning the racial and ethnic homogeneity of the bracero population. Loza places the braceros history at the center of her argument to show how the United States and the execution of the program "created and perpetuated a distinct racialized system when hiring Mexican migrants."⁴⁵

The most recent source that analyzes the Bracero Program is an article by Justin Castro titled, "Mexican Braceros and Arkansas Cotton: Agricultural Labor and Civil Rights in the Post-World War II South." In this article, Castro examines how Arkansas politicians, such as Congressman Took Gathings, used their political power to influence negotiations and the implementation of the Bracero Program. According to Castro, Gathings "ardently supported the bracero program but stood firmly against domestic policies that might include similar provisions for American workers."⁴⁶ Castro pulls evidence from the Gathings collection to show how he used his political power to help Arkansas farmers push the implementation of the Bracero Program. Castro also highlights how Gathings used his power to identify distinct differences between braceros and domestic labor. Castro uses Arkansas "to show how braceros and the

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Castro, "Mexican Braceros and Arkansas Cotton," pg. 30.

bracero program influenced the U.S. labor and civil rights movements.”⁴⁷ He uses three very distinct situations to strengthen his argument. Castro claims braceros “complicated the black and white narrative surrounding labor and civil rights in the South.”⁴⁸ This complication forced the United States to address the issue involving the Bracero Program and the rights of braceros in comparison to domestic workers. The Mexican government demanded social and economic protections for each bracero working in the United States, and these demands prompted “U.S. labor and civil rights activists to demand that the same standards and protections against discrimination be extended to American workers.”⁴⁹ Once the standards and protections afforded to the braceros were realized “politicians and activists who promoted civil rights and better conditions for U.S. agricultural workers,”⁵⁰ could use the program to call out hypocritical south Dixiecrats, such as Gathings..

The secondary sources in this chapter give a broad understanding of the Bracero Program. Each source provides a different perspective surrounding the program and each helps the reader recognize how important the program was for American farmers and the braceros. These sources have supplied a great deal of information to this thesis because each source uses different research methods, different agricultural regions in the United States and highlights the importance of the Bracero Program in the United States and Mexico. The historiography surrounding the Bracero Program is consistent with this thesis because it can be concluded that politicians were always willing to be influenced by farmers and the planter elite. However, unlike the historiographies analyzed, this research contains a more extensive view of a very

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

distinct area and plantation that took part in the Bracero Program. The following chapter examines how a specific plantation, Lee Wilson & Company, in the Arkansas Delta utilized the Bracero Program and fought to keep it in existence.

Chapter Two: The Lee Wilson & Company Braceros

In the Arkansas Delta, the most important time of the year is harvest time. Once the harvest begins, planters have a limited amount of time to secure the crop and thus produce the most profit from their crops. The need to realize a return on the investment was a driving factor in their pressure on politicians to secure the Bracero Program. On the other hand, changes to the program gave them a reason to voice their concerns once their economic returns were limited, especially after the 1949 bond agreement, which stated that the braceros were to be afforded individual health insurance for on and off the job site. It also stated that planters would be charged a fee for each bracero that was not safely returned to Mexico once their contracts were complete. The majority of planters voiced their concern because they felt the insurance was not necessary and they felt the fee charged was being unfairly applied to them. In many cases, planters placed the blame of costly financial penalties on the poor negotiations between the United States Immigration Service and the Mexican government. The information and data that follows analyzes how Lee Wilson & Company was affected financially and culturally by the Bracero Program.

In the mid-twentieth century, the Arkansas Delta held enormous agricultural importance. The fertile soil, abundance of available water and the determination of landowners made it the epicenter of Arkansas agriculture. One of the most productive counties in the Arkansas Delta was Mississippi County. Located in the northeastern corner of the state and along the Mississippi River, it was the largest cotton producing county in the South at the height of cotton's supremacy. The most important and wealthiest plantation in Mississippi County was operated by Lee Wilson & Company. At its height, Lee Wilson & Company included more than 65,000 acres of land and cultivated cotton, corn, alfalfa and soybeans. The company even used its influence

to run and organize a town, famously named Wilson. The town of Wilson was the focal point of operations and included, cotton oil mills, a cooperage factory, a stave mill, a bank and other businesses. The company divided its farmlands into thirteen district units, each with its own general store and farm manager. The farm managers planted acreage in specific crops according to the dictates of the general farm manager who was housed in the headquarters in Wilson, but they had considerable authority over how farming activities were carried out on their units and, particularly, over the treatment of laborers.⁵¹

Like other plantations in the mid-twentieth century, Lee Wilson & Company made the transition to capital-intensive farming and the Bracero Program figured prominently in their successful negotiation of the transition away from labor-intensive agriculture. Under the old tenancy system, they had expertly tied their laborers to them through debt and coercion in order to maintain a sufficient supply of labor. With labor needs declining steadily during the 1950s, they found it burdensome to keep native labor year-round and viewed it as economically expedient to turn to seasonal labor such as that offered through the Bracero Program. The Lee Wilson & Company experience with braceros was typical in many ways. Once Lee Wilson & Company paid the necessary fee to participate in the program, they were then allotted their temporary labor. The company provided transportation from the United States border centers to the plantations, typically packing laborers into open trucks, some of which had been used to haul cotton, and brought them back across Texas to Northeastern Arkansas. The company was also tasked with the safe return of the braceros once their contracts were complete. The Bracero Program became a very successful venture for Lee Wilson & Company, but by 1964 the

⁵¹ Whayne, *Delta Empire*, pg. x

transition to capital intensive agriculture was nearly complete and the company likely suffered little disruption once the Bracero Program ended.⁵²

While Lee Wilson & Company took advantage of the Bracero Program, they maintained high production rates, increased their wealth, and were able to limit the amount of money they paid to their laborers. However, hiring braceros through the Bracero Program did not allow Lee Wilson & Company to limit their pay to individual laborers. By law and according to contract agreements, the braceros were to be paid the same wage as domestic workers. However, domestic laborers had the ability to negotiate for higher wages, an impossibility for braceros. Even though “labor laws required a minimum wage of \$.60 per hour for both domestic and foreign labor,” few braceros could press the point and “were often paid below that rate.”⁵³ Fortunately for the braceros, the exchange rate from US dollar to Mexican peso made the lowest legal domestic wage quite favorable.

The information used in this research was supplied by Jeannie Whayne, who secured the data from newly discovered files at the Lee Wilson & Company archives. Since this study began Dr. Whayne has secured information on additional bracero, indicating that a total of 2,224 laborers were on the plantation in 1949. My analysis is based on the first 492 passport cards that were Dr. Whayne’s possession at the time my study was launched. This represents 22.1 percent of the total number of braceros on the plantation, a sufficient sample for analysis. I entered the data into spreadsheets where the information could be accessed and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The data set provides information on several important

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Gomez, “Braceros in the Arkansas Delta,” pg, 16.

issues. First, it provides detail on the type of bracero planters and farmers preferred. Second, it also helps to understand the importance of bond insurance, since each bracero that abandoned their contract would, by law, cost the farmer a penalty fee. Third, together with invoices from the USIS in the files, it provides crucial information on the 194 braceros who “abandoned their contract” in 1949. Although it cannot be certain that the latter were the only braceros who left the plantation without fulfilling their contracts, it probably reflects an accurate account of those who were apprehended. Since the company was responsible for returning all braceros assigned to them to Mexico once the contract was completed, they were charged fees by the USIS to cover the costs of transportation and incarceration of the fugitive invoices.

At first glance, the number of braceros who abandoned their contracts seem extraordinarily high- 194 out of 492. It is likely, however, that the USIS invoices and letters represent the total number of escaped braceros and should be considered as a percentage of the total number of braceros on the plantation, 194 out of 2,224. In other words, the 8.9 percent of the braceros on the plantation left without permission and were apprehended by authorities. As far as can be ascertained from a perusal of the published works on the program, no other record of abandoners from a single plantation is available, making this a unique window into the Bracero Program. The visa cards provide a wealth of detail: full names, the age of the braceros, distinguishing marks, specific origins in Mexico, place of border admission, and which farms the braceros worked on. The cards also provide information such as, which braceros were able to write. In many cases, if the bracero could not sign his own name a fingerprint was collected to

take the place of a signature. Taken together with the invoices from the Immigration Service, they provide an interesting portrait of the company's experience using braceros.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ The following photographs and data sets in this chapter have been provided by Jeannie Wayne. Wayne Research File, Lee Wilson and Company Bracero Files, 1949

No. **L** 180713 256 No. **L** 180713

ALIEN LABORER'S PERMIT AND IDENTIFICATION CARD

Name LUNA-Guerrero, Salomon Admitted under Bond - 9th Proviso, Sec. 8
 Home address Morelos 135, Salvatierra, Gto., Mex. To LEE WILSON & CO.
 (Name of employer)
 For employment as Agricultural Worker
 in (area) _____
 Date to which admitted DEC 31 1949
 Extensions: _____

Date and place of birth 5/15/26
Las Cruces, Gto., Mex.

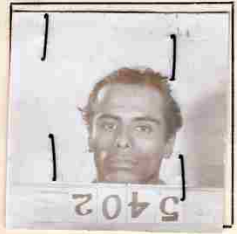
Nationality Mexico

Identifying marks Tatoo heart & arrow
rt. forearm: scar rt. fore

Temporary departures and readmissions: _____
Armed Supply

LEE WILSON & CO.
WILSON, ARK.

Form I-100 a
 U. S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
 IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE



No. **L** 196997 425 No. **L** 196997

ALIEN LABORER'S PERMIT AND IDENTIFICATION CARD

Name Vasquez-Casasola, Felix Admitted under Bond - 9th Proviso, Sec. 8
 Home address Tectuitatlan, Jal., Mex. To LEE WILSON & CO.
 (Name of employer)
 For employment as Agricultural Worker
 in (area) _____
 Date to which admitted DEC 31 1949
 Extensions: _____

Date and place of birth 11-7-28
Guadalajara, Jal.

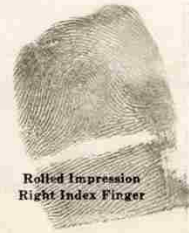
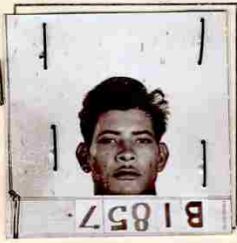
Nationality Mex.

Identifying marks Mole each cheek

Temporary departures and readmissions: _____

LEE WILSON & CO.
WILSON, ARK.

Form I-100 a
 U. S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
 IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE



No. **L** 197061 B.4960 No. **L** 197061

ALIEN LABORER'S PERMIT AND IDENTIFICATION CARD

Name RAYA-Nava, Onesimo Admitted under Bond - 9th Proviso, Sec. 8
 Home address Morelia, Mich. To LEE WILSON & CO.
 (Name of employer)
 For employment as Agricultural Worker
 in (area) _____
 Date to which admitted DEC 31 1949
 Extensions: _____

Date and place of birth 2-16-24
Morelia, Mich.

Nationality Mexico

Identifying marks scar in hairline

Temporary departures and readmissions: _____

LEE WILSON & CO.
WILSON, ARK.

Form I-100 a
 U. S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
 IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE



Este permiso es proveniente bajo condición que el portador:

- (1) No aceptará empleo en los Estados Unidos, a menos que autorizado en esto por el Servicio del Inmigración y Naturalización de los Estados Unidos;
- (2) Saldrá de los Estados Unidos al espiración del tiempo permitido;
- (3) Entregará este permiso al mismo tiempo de la salida de los Estados Unidos a un agente autorizado por el Servicio del Inmigración y Naturalización de los Estados Unidos;
- (4) Reportará, al fin de cada tres meses, su dirección en los Estados Unidos al Servicio del Inmigración y Naturalización en el lugar en donde fué admitido como indicado por el sello sobre esto.

Entendo que cualquiera violación de los condiciones arriba resultará en la revocación de este permiso.

[Signature]
(Firma del portador)

ALIEN LABORER'S PERMIT and IDENTIFICATION CARD

Date and place of admission of holder to the United States
Entered near Hidalgo, Texas.
on 7-1-49
Illegal status changed under 9th Prov., Sec. 3, 1917 Act, on
SEP 2 1949
at Harlingen, Texas

Final departure verified on.....
at.....
(Signature of verifying officer)

Este permiso es proveniente bajo condición que el portador:

- (1) No aceptará empleo en los Estados Unidos, a menos que autorizado en esto por el Servicio del Inmigración y Naturalización de los Estados Unidos;
- (2) Saldrá de los Estados Unidos al espiración del tiempo permitido;
- (3) Entregará este permiso al mismo tiempo de la salida de los Estados Unidos a un agente autorizado por el Servicio del Inmigración y Naturalización de los Estados Unidos;
- (4) Reportará, al fin de cada tres meses, su dirección en los Estados Unidos al Servicio del Inmigración y Naturalización en el lugar en donde fué admitido como indicado por el sello sobre esto.

Entendo que cualquiera violación de los condiciones arriba resultará en la revocación de este permiso.

[Signature]
(Firma del portador)

ALIEN LABORER'S PERMIT and IDENTIFICATION CARD

Date and place of admission of holder to the United States
Entered near Hidalgo, Texas.
on 7-2-49
Illegal status changed under 9th Prov., Sec. 3, 1917 Act, on
SEP 15 1949
at Harlingen, Texas

Final departure verified on.....
at.....
(Signature of verifying officer)

Este permiso es proveniente bajo condición que el portador:

- (1) No aceptará empleo en los Estados Unidos, a menos que autorizado en esto por el Servicio del Inmigración y Naturalización de los Estados Unidos;
- (2) Saldrá de los Estados Unidos al espiración del tiempo permitido;
- (3) Entregará este permiso al mismo tiempo de la salida de los Estados Unidos a un agente autorizado por el Servicio del Inmigración y Naturalización de los Estados Unidos;
- (4) Reportará, al fin de cada tres meses, su dirección en los Estados Unidos al Servicio del Inmigración y Naturalización en el lugar en donde fué admitido como indicado por el sello sobre esto.

Entendo que cualquiera violación de los condiciones arriba resultará en la revocación de este permiso.

[Signature]
(Firma del portador)

ALIEN LABORER'S PERMIT and IDENTIFICATION CARD

Date and place of admission of holder to the United States
Entered near Hidalgo, Texas.
on 7-6-49
Illegal status changed under 9th Prov., Sec. 3, 1917 Act, on
SEP 18 1949
at Harlingen, Texas

Final departure verified on.....
at.....
(Signature of verifying officer)

In regards to distinguishing marks, the United States government had several different ways of recording an individual braceros' characteristics. When the bracero was being evaluated during the medical examination their distinguishing marks would be listed in numerous ways such as, pockmarked face, scar on left/right cheek, scar on forehead or scar on chin. This information illustrates how detailed and thorough the observation of each bracero was during the check-in process. Of the 437 braceros in our data set that we could match with the Master file, 122 had distinguishing marks. The percentages and total number of braceros with distinguishing marks can be seen in the table below.

Distinguishing Marks
(does not include abandoners we could not match with Master file)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid NONE	315	.0	72.1	72.1
Distinguishing marks	122	.0	27.9	100.0
Total	437	.0	100.0	
Missing System	0			

The process to become a bracero started once the Mexican government admitted the desired amount of men into the program. The terms of the Bracero Program stated that the Mexican government was obligated to pay the cost required to transport the laborers to the border checkpoints, which unfortunately fell to the braceros themselves since the Mexican government was unwilling to pay for the cost of transportation. At first, the Mexican government wanted the United States and the planter to pay the transportation cost, but once the planters voiced their disgust the United States demanded a different approach. The braceros secured transportation to border checkpoints and the planter was responsible for the transportation to the

ultimate destination. The admission checkpoints stretched along the American/Mexican border. The two admission centers that were used to admit the braceros hired by Lee Wilson & Company were located in Texas, one in Brownsville and the other in Hidalgo. Each checkpoint processed the braceros by completing their visa cards, ordering them into groups for transportation, and providing contract stipulations. While the braceros were awaiting transport the United States required each bracero to undergo a strict medical examination. During medical exams the braceros gave blood, received vaccinations, were checked for hemorrhoids, and sprayed with DDT. These medical examinations were crude and embarrassing for the braceros, and in many cases the doctors did not provide sufficient reasons for completing the examinations.⁵⁵ The braceros had little experience with American doctors and this made them leery of the idea that strangers would be conducting such personal examinations. The total amount and percentages of where the Lee Wilson & Company braceros were admitted can be seen in the table below. This data does not provide significant detail for specific braceros, but it does show the distance these braceros had to travel once they were admitted for work at Lee Wilson & Company.

Place of Admission, border
(does not include abandoners we could not match with Master file)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Brownsville, Tx	176	.0	40.3	40.3
Hidalgo, Tx	261	.0	59.7	100.0
Total	437	.0	100.0	
Missing System	0			

⁵⁵ Gomez, "Braceros in the Arkansas Delta, 1943–1964," pg. 16.

Some inconvenient problems present themselves when analyzing the data. For some of the abandoners, the identification cards existed, either with the invoice or in the company records. As the tables below indicate, 55 of the 139 “abandoners” could be found on the Master List while 55 could not. The data set includes identification cards for 139 abandoners and 298 braceros who fulfilled their contracts with Lee Wilson & Company. However, an additional problem exists. Some cards were incomplete since they did not have ages or did not indicate precisely which LW&C farm they had been assigned to. Since there were cards with incomplete information it is difficult to determine if there were more abandoned contracts other than the ones we could identify.

Matched with Abandoners or not

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Did not Abandon Contract	298	.0	60.6	60.6
	Abandoner found on Master List	139	.0	28.3	88.8
	Abandoner not found on Master List	55	.0	11.2	100.0
	Total	492	.0	100.0	
Missing	System	0	0		

Matched Abandoned or Not

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Abandoned Contract	194	.0	39.4	39.4
	Did not Abandon Contract	298	.0	60.6	100.0
	Total	492	.0	100.0	
Missing	System	0			
Total					

Some interesting observations can be made about the braceros who listed their age on the identification cards. They ranged in age from 16 to 57, but most of them were in the prime working ages. Fully 58.8 percent were aged from 21 to 30. The 16 to 20 and 31 to 40 age groups made up 17.4 percent and the oldest workers, from 41 to 57, represented only 6.4 percent of the company's braceros on the data set listed below. When hiring braceros Lee Wilson & Company made it a priority to acquire workers who could benefit their company and thus they preferred those of prime working age and condition. This would allow the company to maintain high production outputs. Since the work Lee Wilson & Company needed accomplished was labor intensive and required extensive man hours, it became beneficial to have braceros who were in the prime of their lives. This meant it was in the company's best interest to hire braceros who were relatively young, strong, and capable.

There is not a definitive reason why over fifty percent of the braceros were aged from 21 to 30, or why braceros aged 31 to 57 were less than twenty-five percent of the total number, however, it does leave room for speculation. In many cases the labor situation in Mexico and the financial incentive for becoming a bracero in the United States encouraged these men to offer their service to American planters. As for the individual age ranges it is not clear why one set of

ages were more likely to offer their services, but for the men aged 21 to 30 it could be speculated that these braceros had little standing in their way. It would have been more difficult for a bracero aged 31 to 57 to offer their services because of family obligations, a sense of pride, or a minimal need to explore new horizons. On the other hand, men aged from 31 to 57 may have decided to become braceros for the opposite reasons. It may have been more beneficial to their families for them to travel to the United States and work for higher wages. The higher wages being paid in the United States could be sent back to their family. This in turn would allow them to increase their family's livelihood and standard of living. The driving factors for 16 to 30 would have been less about family obligations, and more about their individual freedom, such as a need to explore new horizons. Equally, the prospect of traveling to the United States as a permanent destination could have fueled the intrigue for becoming a bracero.

AGES RECODED

(does not include abandoners we could not match with Master file)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 16 TO 20	76	.0	17.4	17.4
21 TO 30	257	.0	58.8	76.2
31 TO 40	76	.0	17.4	93.6
41 TO 57	28	.0	6.4	100.0
Total	437	.0	100.0	
Missing System	0	0		

Another interesting picture that emerges from the analysis is the placement of braceros on particular farms run by the Lee Wilson & Company enterprise. The company had organized its vast holdings in separate units in order to maximize organizational control, expediency and production. As you will see from the table below, the information of the exact acreage in each farm unit is incomplete, but the largest farm units, other than the main Lee Wilson farm, seem to have been the Armorel and Keiser farms, which together were assigned 129 workers (30.7 percent). Each farm utilized and supervised the labor as separate entities.

**Farm Assigned to
(does not include abandoners we could not match with Master file)**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Lee Wilson	192	.0	45.7	45.7
	Marie	3	.0	.7	46.4
	Keiser	68	.0	16.2	62.6
	Wren	31	.0	7.4	70.0
	Armored	61	.0	14.5	84.5
	Morgan	7	.0	1.7	86.2
	Branch	9	.0	2.1	88.3
	Crain Bros	30	.0	7.1	95.5
	Exp Farm	8	.0	1.9	97.4
	Highland	3	.0	.7	98.1
	Hickory Lake	3	.0	.7	98.8
	Live Oak	5	.0	1.2	100.0
	Total	420	.0	100.0	
Missing	System	0			
Total					

Our data set also analyzed which farms, 174 out of 194, braceros abandoned, and these results can be seen in the table below. Lee Wilson farm only had nine abandoned contracts,

which accounted for 5.2 percent of the total amount. Since Lee Wilson farm had the largest number of braceros hired, it raises the question, what made this percentage so low? It could have been that this farm had the best supervision, or the best working conditions. It is hard to determine, but either reason could explain the low number of abandoned contracts. However, the most reasonable explanation is that the farm unit labeled Lee Wilson exercised maximum control over its bracero labor. The conditions, the pay or the supervision must have been lacking at the other farm units. At the Marie farm the number of abandoned contracts was relatively high considering their number of total braceros. The Keiser farm was not much better. It too had a high proportion of abandoned contracts. On the Armored farm the number of absconded braceros did not reach the percentages seen at Keiser or Marie, but it was still a sufficient amount to warrant speculation on why these farms witnessed abandoned contracts. At the Branch farm only a handful of braceros chose to abandon their contracts. The Crain Bro. farms must have been lacking in several categories because it had a large proportion of abandoned contracts. The Experiment farm had several skipped contracts, but accounted for a very small percentage of the total abandoned contracts. At Highland farm only 6 braceros skipped their contract. The Hickory Lake farm had 10 braceros abandon the farm. The Live Oak farm had 4 abandoned contracts. The Morgan farm had 2 abandoned contracts, the Greenwood farm had 3 and the Beall farm had 4 abandoned contracts.

Using the data set, it can be speculated that the farms with the highest percentage of abandoned contracts were the farms that had the worst working conditions, or more importantly, the least supervision. In regards to Lee Wilson & Company, the forces that prompted the braceros to abandon their contracts are difficult to determine through the data we have accumulated. However, it can be speculated that many of these farms were most likely located in

the most isolated rural areas where braceros felt comfortable maneuvering away from the farm. It can also be theorized that for some braceros the prospect of a job in the industrial centers of the United States, where better jobs and better paychecks were available, could have been a major driving force to abandon their contracts. After reviewing the data set, it is clear that several farm units within Lee Wilson & Company were more susceptible to abandoned contracts. Regardless of the reasons, if a bracero wanted to abandon his contract there was very little Lee Wilson & Company could do to stop him.

Farm Abandoned

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Lee Wilson	9	.0	5.2	5.2
Marie	33	.0	19.0	24.1
Keiser	31	.0	17.8	42.0
Armored	21	.0	12.1	54.0
Branch	5	.0	2.9	56.9
Crain Bros	34	.0	19.5	76.4
Exp Farm	12	.0	6.9	83.3
Highland	6	.0	3.4	86.8
Hickory	10	.0	5.7	92.5
Lake	4	.0	2.3	94.8
Live Oak	2	.0	1.1	96.0
Morgan	3	.0	1.7	97.7
Greenwood	3	.0	1.7	97.7
Beall	4	.0	2.3	100.0
Total	174	.0	100.0	
Missing 99	20	.0		
System				
Total				

Even with all the financial incentives brought on by the Bracero Program, Lee Wilson & Company still had a major complaint, especially once the work was complete. From the moment the braceros were under the planters' supervision to the end of their contract the planter had complete control over the braceros' whereabouts. This allowed planters to keep a close eye on their financial investments. When a braceros' contract was fulfilled it was time for the planter to transport the bracero back to the border centers. This is where things could become economically complicated for the planter, and in many cases a financial burden, at least from the point of view of the planter.

This chapter has analyzed an extensive collection of data. The data sets provide a great deal of information on where Lee Wilson & Company used bracero labor, what age of laborer they preferred, and how many braceros abandoned the agreed contracts. With the information accumulated from this data, it is clear Lee Wilson & Company viewed the Bracero Program as a productive and lucrative means of harvesting their crops. Even when contracts were abandoned and the company charged a fee, it was still beneficial for the company to hire labor through the program. The next chapter examines how Arkansas farmers and businesses, including Lee Wilson & Company, used their influence over politicians to extend the Bracero Program.

Chapter Three: The Benefits and Effects of the Bracero Program in Arkansas

By highlighting the reasons Arkansas farmers shifted to Mexican labor, it becomes clear how and why they used their influence over government officials to sway the United States Immigration Service toward the Bracero Program. Since farmers were able to influence over legislative officials, they were able to benefit financially from the Bracero Program. The economic benefits associated with the program was great for farmers, however, in many instances the farmers became disgruntled with the United States government over the excessive expenses being accrued once the bracero contracts were ended. Many of these disgruntled farmers were upset with the way the United States had negotiated the labor bond of 1949. The first provision that upset the planters was the penalty they would have to pay if their braceros were not returned to the border checkpoints after their contracts were complete. In many cases, the planter would be charged a fifty-dollar penalty for every bracero that did not make it back to the checkpoint. In the minds of the planters, these charges were unfair, especially since they had no control over the braceros once they left the plantation. In several instances, planters blamed poor border patrol enforcement as the reasons braceros were more likely to skip their contracts. The second agreement that had planters complaining about the 1949 bond was the mandatory insurance policies they would have to provide for the braceros. Many planters felt the insurance agreement was beneficial for both camps, but only if they were allowed to use the appropriate local insurance agency.

Although, much of this research highlights the ease with which planters were able to push the USIS and other political elites to adopt the Bracero Program, it also provides evidence to explain why domestic laborers were against the program altogether. Unfortunately, for local

labor, the influence planters had over political officials outweighed the influence they had over those same politicians. The political influence planters held over politicians that made them ignore much of what the common laborers of Arkansas felt was beneficial for their livelihoods can be seen in the following letters of this chapter. Overall, the research accumulated in this chapter helps to underscore why and how planters, especially Lee Wilson & Company, were able to use the Bracero Program to advance their economic interests and influence politicians to support the program.

The following information has been collected from the University of Arkansas Special Collections archives. In these sources we will see how Arkansas planters voiced their appreciation, concerns, and frustrations with the Bracero Program. In many cases these planters, which include Lee Wilson & Company, wrote letters to local and federal politicians. In the letters the planters make it abundantly clear that political involvement in the program was greatly needed. The letters show how important the influence and economic power of planters had become.

In a letter, dated July 13th 1950, Harvey Adams sent a report to the Agricultural Council of Arkansas, which was located in West Memphis, Arkansas, addressing the situation involving braceros who skip their contracts and cost the planters large amounts of cash. Harvey concluded in his report that the annual agricultural conference stated the USIS “showed thirty-five individuals or associates in Arkansas having 696 workers missing, which will cost Arkansas farmers \$17,400.”⁵⁶ This report provides evidence to why planters were willing to influence the

⁵⁶ Harvey Adams to Senator William Fulbright, July 13th 1950 BCN 14 F24 5e, Immigration and Naturalization Service Problem of Return of Mexican Cotton Pickers. J. William Fulbright Papers, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville (I was not able to view the entire box where this folder is located because it has been restricted due to sensitive information since the 1970s)

political elite when it came to how the Bracero Program was negotiated. If their bonds ended up costing the planters money, it was in their best interests to inform the United States government of these financial losses.

Another letter referencing the disapproval and overall concern regarding the poorly negotiated bond of 1949 was a letter from R.S. Barnett. In the letter, dated July 21st 1950, Barnett, the owner of the Elms Planting Company in Altheimer, Arkansas, voices his concern over the excessive bond requirements set by the USIS. Barnett explains to Senator J. William Fulbright that the requirements are unreasonable since “we have absolutely no control over these men from the time they leave the Mexican border until they return.”⁵⁷ Barnett suggests that state and county law enforcement agencies be given the authority to keep the braceros on the jobs they were contracted. Barnett says “we certainly do not wish to keep these men against their will and are willing to return them at any time that they wish to go back to Mexico, but it seems unreasonable to expect us to make a bond guaranteeing their return to Mexico and then give them the privilege of going where they wish in this country, regardless of their contract.”⁵⁸ Barnett also blames the ease at which braceros were able to skip their contracts on the lackluster enforcement of the border by the USIS. John Erickson, Senator Fulbright’s assistant, wrote that Fulbright would urge others in the Senate to require that a new bond be negotiated.⁵⁹ This letter provides evidence to support the fact that planters could use their political influence to impact legislation once it effected their economic prosperity.

Another piece of evidence that indicates planters were willing to use their political influence to produce change over the bond of 1949, also emanated from the Altheimer area. In a

⁵⁷ R.S. Barnett to Senator William Fulbright, July 21st 1950, Fulbright Papers.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ John Erickson to R.S. Barnett, July 27th 1950, Fulbright Papers.

letter, dated July 25th 1950, Charles Willey, the owner of Willey Planting Company, wrote to Senator Fulbright complaining about the bond agreement. Willey acknowledged that he complied with the requirements, but found it to be completely unfair. Willey stated “while we, who are for the most part financially responsible business men with established reputations in our communities, were under cash bond to return these men, they themselves were under no bond or obligation whatsoever to return to Mexico or to fulfill their contract.”⁶⁰ Willey continues to highlight the failures of the bond agreement by explaining the process taken by the deserters. “A number of the workers merely used their contract as a passport into the United States and upon arriving at our farms immediately jumped their contract and migrated to other parts of the country.”⁶¹ He also says there was a marked increase in desertions once the workers neared the end of their contract. At the end of his letter Willey says “to require the farmer to make a bond guaranteeing the return of a man over whom he has no power of detention or arrest appears to me to be most unjust.”⁶² Senator Fulbright responded to Willey’s concerns by explaining that he and other Congressmen were forming a special committee, which would be determined to reach an understanding over renegotiation of the requirements involving braceros that skip their contracts.⁶³ The letter from Willey and Senator Fulbright’s response highlight the close relationship planters had with their elected officials. It also provides evidence to support the argument that planters were willing to use their political influence once their profits or reputations were damaged.

⁶⁰ Charles Willey to Senator William Fulbright, July 25th 1950, Fulbright Papers

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Senator William Fulbright to Charles Willey, July 30th 1950, Fulbright Papers.

In a letter, dated July 29th 1950, C.N. Houck, the vice-president of Miller Lumber Company, wrote to Senator Fulbright explaining the labor and harvest situation in Marianna, Arkansas. Houck says there would be a large cotton harvest that season and labor would need to be hired from Mexico. Houck emphasized his reasons for the shortage of labor by saying, “as you well know the labor on the farm is decreasing from year to year due to the increased use of tractors and other farm machinery. Also due to great industrial activity very little labor is available from the cities and towns and in addition many workers will probably be inducted into the armed services, so that we are now faced with a large crop and a short labor supply.”⁶⁴ Houck also used his letter to Senator Fulbright to voice his grievances over the required bond planters had to pay for each bracero, complaining about the poorly negotiated bond of 1949 and the inability of the USIS to limit the amount of desertions by bracero workers.

Another letter highlighting the shortage of labor and the failure of the USIS to keep track of Braceros comes from Dan Felton, a merchant, planter and ginner from Felton, Arkansas. In a letter, dated July 29th 1950, Felton wrote Senator Fulbright voicing his concern over a shortage of labor. Felton complained that the large harvest yield of 1950 would need a lot of labor. Felton complained about the increased mechanization that was happening on the plantations and the increased industrial activity in the cities. He cites these problems as the reasons for a labor shortage in his area of the state, “due to increased mechanization we don’t have near the labor actually living on the farms that we had in the past, this makes us dependent to a large degree on labor hauled to the farm from cities and towns surrounding us, but due to increased industrial activity in these populated areas it is next to impossible to get the labor required to harvest our

⁶⁴ C.N. Houck to Senator William Fulbright, July 29th 1950, Fulbright Papers.

crops in the fall.”⁶⁵ Felton’s awareness of the impact of mechanized farm equipment and the effect of industrial expansion in the urban areas shows he is concerned with the amount of profit he will make. If he had to pay for recruitment and transportation of urban labor it would cut into his profit margin. His need for labor and the lack of expenses he is willing to spend makes the Bracero Program a perfect way for him to obtain enough labor for his harvest. Felton also complained about the 1949 bond agreements and the heavy penalties required if braceros were not returned to Mexico after their contracts have ended.

Felton detailed three reasons he believed the bond of 1949 was unfair. One is “many aliens enter who are not agricultural workers and have no intention of working. They usually disappear or skip while en-route to the farm or soon after their arrival.”⁶⁶ Second, “many after their arrival at the farm hear of high wages in industrial cities or towns and leave for these jobs before the departure date.”⁶⁷ Third, “some of them become homesick and leave.”⁶⁸ Felton complained about the harsh penalties levied by the 1949 bond for missing or skipping braceros. Felton insisted that all planters felt the same way, but the labor is extremely important for the harvest. He ended his letter with a plea, to Senator Fulbright, to influence the United States Immigration Service to strike a more favorable and reasonable deal with the Mexican government. Senator Fulbright responded that he hoped to work with Felton and other planters to create a better arrangement when it came to the Bracero Program.⁶⁹ This letter provides ample evidence on the ability of planters to use their political connections to influence negotiations of

⁶⁵ Dan Felton to Senator William Fulbright, July 27th 1950, Fulbright Papers.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Senator William Fulbright to Dan Felton, August 3rd 1950, Fulbright Papers.

the USIS. Once planters' finances were affected by the bond agreements of 1949, they knew their economic power could be used to manipulate political officials.

In July of 1950, R.E.L. "Bob" Wilson III was not comfortable with the amount of local labor on hand in the area of Wilson, Arkansas. It was clear to Wilson that Lee Wilson & Company would not be able to harvest their full acreage without the help of some type of government assistance. Wilson's solution was to contact Arkansas Senator, William Fulbright. In a letter dated July 27th 1950, R.E.L. Wilson III voiced his concern that even with a steady supply of bracero labor, he had concerns about his increasing labor needs. Wilson believed "it is of the utmost importance that we secure Mexican National Laborers to harvest our cotton crop."⁷⁰ Later in the letter, Wilson complained about the unfair bond agreement negotiated between the United States and Mexico, he went on to say "there is no obligation on the part of the worker whatsoever and there is no way for the farmer to keep the worker from leaving whenever he wishes."⁷¹ Wilson provided his opinion for a solution, which allowed the farmer to "be permitted to hold out from the worker's wages, enough money to cover the amount of the bond posted for him and to refund this money to the worker when he is safely returned across the border."⁷² As for the issue regarding off-duty accident and sickness insurance, which was also negotiated in the 1949 bond, Wilson considered this a terrible deal because he felt it would encourage "absenteeism and gold-bricking."⁷³ In the last part of his letter, Wilson encouraged the United States government to set up and increase its enforcement by establishing a border patrol office in the Arkansas Delta. Wilson believed this would discourage braceros from skipping their

⁷⁰ R.E.L. Wilson III to Senator William Fulbright, July 27th 1950, Fulbright Papers.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

contracts, which costs the planter a large fee. Senator Fulbright responded to R.E.L. Wilson's letter, on August 1st 1950, indicating that he was interested in the problem and would discuss the situation with other Congressman who have the same problems within their states.⁷⁴ This letter is evidence of the influence planters, such as R.E.L Wilson III, had over government officials, especially when it came to the economic success and burden being put on the planters. This letter also shows how vital the Bracero Program had become to Arkansas Delta planters. It was Wilson's belief that the only way he could produce his harvest was through the help of bracero labor, and he was willing to use his political connections to accomplish that goal.

Another letter dated November 27th, 1959, was sent from Bob Wilson to Governor Faubus expressing his gratitude and appreciation to Governor Faubus for granting his request for Mexican labor at Lee Wilson & Company. "Please accept my thanks personally, and in behalf of Lee Wilson & Company, for your invaluable assistance in placing our problems before Messrs. McDonald and Murrell."⁷⁵ The beginning of the letter implies Wilson had a pre-existing relationship with the governor of Arkansas, and it seems Wilson felt comfortable that his request would be met. Later in the letter, Wilson again voiced his pleasure for being given the chance to use Mexican labor, and also highlighted the reason behind his request for braceros. "I am very pleased to learn that Mr. McDonald has taken the realistic and sensible attitude toward approving authorization of Mexican Nationals when domestic labor is obviously unavailable. Your efforts in our behalf are appreciated and will be remembered"⁷⁶ Wilson made it clear his request would not have been accomplished without the impact made by Governor Faubus. This is a great

⁷⁴ Senator William Fulbright to R.E.L. Wilson III, August 3rd 1950, Fulbright Papers.

⁷⁵ Bob Wilson to Governor Faubus, November 27th 1959, series: 7, subseries: 2, box: 210, folder 2. Orval Eugene Faubus Papers, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville

⁷⁶ Ibid.

example of how planters used their relationship and influence over high ranking government officials to maintain the Bracero Program. The economic benefits presented by the program gave planters a reason to use their power and influence over the political elite. Another reason politicians were willing to grant the requests of the planter, other than their economic influence, was the planters inability to hire adequate numbers of domestic labor. Wilson makes it clear in his thank you letter to Faubus that without his help they would not be able to find domestic labor.

After receiving Wilson's thank you letter, Governor Faubus sent a letter acknowledging his appreciation to Bob Wilson and extending the opportunity for further assistance if it was needed. "Please let us know at any time you have problems with which we can assist."⁷⁷ This letter is significant because it shows that even after Faubus assisted Lee Wilson & Company he was still willing to use his political power to benefit the planter elite. He also provides Wilson with an avenue to other government officials who could help Lee Wilson & Company with any labor problem that might arise. "If I am not available, you can call on Mr. Jim Bland, and in his usual efficient manner, you can count on the problem's being handled in a proper way, if it is at all possible."⁷⁸ This letter is an important source that shows how politicians were willing to provide assistance to planters and were even willing to point them in the right direction if they themselves were unavailable.

The impact and influence planters held with the political elite in Arkansas has been well documented. These sources have provided substantial evidence to conclude that planters had influence over their economic prosperity. Unfortunately, for local labor the influence they held over the political elite was disastrous. In a letter, dated August 4th 1959, Earnest Dobbs wrote

⁷⁷ Governor Faubus to Bob Wilson, December 3rd 1959, Faubus Papers.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Governor Faubus regarding the braceros being sent to Jackson County. In a handwritten letter, Mr. Dobbs told Governor Faubus there was enough people in Jackson County “to take care of all the farming without any help from Mexicans.”⁷⁹ Dobbs also informed Governor Faubus that people in Jackson County were on the welfare rolls because they were not being offered the farming jobs that existed in the county. Dobbs observed that the “laboring class people put you in office and now we are asking for a little help, please keep the Mexicans out during cotton picking. If you need a petition signed just send me one I will get it signed and returned.”⁸⁰ This plea, by Dobbs, in defense of local labor fell on deaf ears.

In a letter, dated August 17th 1959, J.N. Lewis wrote to the administrator of the Employment Security Division, J.L. Bland regarding the letter from Dobbs. Lewis acknowledged the discontent expressed within the letter from Dobbs, but did not focus on the things Dobbs highlighted in his handwritten letter. Instead of focusing on the problems Dobbs informed Governor Faubus about, Lewis provided Bland with the type of work the Dobbs family had in Jackson County. In Lewis’ letter to Bland he says “neither Mr. or Mrs. Dobbs are agricultural workers.” He continued by saying “Mr. Dobbs will have no trouble keeping his entire group employed this Fall as our shortage of pickers is going to be very large.”⁸¹ This letter provides evidence of just how little these political officials cared about their constituents, especially when it came to local labor. Instead of reading Dobbs’ letter as a concerned citizen who viewed bracero labor to be taking jobs from his fellow citizens, who could have used the work as a way to get off welfare rolls, they assume all Dobbs was referencing his own job, when in fact, Dobbs was trying to be the voice for the local people of Jackson County. This is yet another instance

⁷⁹ Earnest Dobbs to Governor Faubus, August 4th 1959, series: 7, Faubus Papers.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ J.N. Lewis to J.L. Bland, August 17th 1959, Faubus Papers.

where the political elite were unwilling to waiver from their support for the planter elite, even at the expense of local labor.

Another letter that emphasizes political favor towards the planter elite is dated November 4th 1959, from J.L. Bland to J.M. Cleveland, a manager in the Employment Security Division of Blytheville, Arkansas. Bland wrote to Cleveland that the “Lee Wilson Company has presented to us a proposal whereby they would plant a tremendous acreage of berries and vegetables, if we can supply the labor.” He went on to say that “Governor Faubus and I explored this and both of us are inclined to go along with the proposition.”⁸² Five days after the above letter, J.L. Bland sent a letter to Governor Faubus, dated November 9th 1959. In this letter, Bland hailed the production of the Mexican laborers, and how these laborers helped planters of Arkansas make huge profits. Bland stated, “we had 40,000 Mexicans who picked more than 30 days at the low rate and this meant more than a million dollars to the growers.”⁸³ This letter provides a great deal to the argument that planters used their economic influence to sway the political elite in favor of using the bracero labor because it emphasizes the economic benefit between Mexican labor and the cotton industry. Bland’s acknowledgment of the economic benefits provided to planters through the Bracero Program shows how the Arkansas Department of Labor encouraged the economic output of large plantations across the state. In the case of Jim Bland and the ESD, it was imperative that the largest planters in the state be provided the greatest and easiest avenue to large economic outputs. If large plantations were given the opportunity to use cheap labor, thus increasing their overall gains, it would make Bland’s performances as administrator at the ESD

⁸² J.L. Bland to J.M. Cleveland, November 4th 1959, Faubus Papers.

⁸³ Ibid.

seem more successful. Therefore, it became very important for Bland and his office to cater to the planter elite.

After evaluating these sources, it becomes clear that the planter elite had complete control over political officials in Arkansas. It is evident that Arkansas politicians were willing to render their political actions to line the pockets of the planter elite. Planters knew their power over the economy could be used to manipulate and influence political officials. As long as the planters made it clear to politicians how important it was for them to make the most profit or save the most money, it became second nature for them to use their political influence as a way to enhance their economic profit.

Conclusion:

Throughout this paper we have seen how the United States government and the planter elite worked together to respond to downturns in the labor supply. This paper began with the onset of World War II, a time when conflict all across the globe called for brave Americans to offer their services to defend the ideas and values of this great republic. This call to service had an adverse effect on the homeland and the agricultural labor situation. When the United States entered the conflict most able bodied men volunteered or were drafted for military service, and the men and women who could not take part in military action positioned themselves to provide for the war effort in other ways. The main effort for men and women who were not a part of the fighting was to offer their next greatest attribute, their labor. Even though they could not fight against the enemy, they could still work to build the military. During the war factories were transformed into military productions lines and operated entirely for military purposes. This fact propelled the men and women of America to move their families out of agricultural areas and into the industrial heartlands of the United States where they could provide a contribution to the war effort and earn higher wages. Unfortunately for planters and large plantations, the action taken by those Americans is what fueled the eventual need for immigrant labor. Since Americans were moving out of the agricultural areas, in particular the South, planters needed a significant supply of labor to keep production high and in turn contribute to the war effort in their own way.

Once it was understood that crops equaled food for the troops it became extremely important to have the largest and most productive harvests possible. Since domestic labor had shifted towards the industrial sector for higher wages and greater opportunity, the agricultural sector was very limited when it came to hiring enough domestic labor to maintain the wartime production levels. This fact prompted the United States government to act accordingly. As we

know, their solution was to acquire Mexican immigrants. At the beginning of the Bracero Program, the United States government maintained its priorities' by administering the program in a responsible and effective manner. However, once the war ended the United States government began to show favoritism and a lack of control over the program. During the late 1940s and early 1950s the terms of the Bracero Program were increasingly dictated by the American planter. As we have seen from documents and archival data, American farming operations and plantations, such as Lee Wilson & Company, were more than willing to use their power and influence over politicians to extend the program's life span, ultimately, increasing their economic prosperity. The planters' willingness to exploit politicians for economic gains signals the importance of cheap labor to planters. Not only does this exploitation underscore the advantage of cheap labor, but it also decreases the wages and opportunities of domestic labor. When a planter was able to legally hire a bracero, whom he could pay much lower wages, and only pay for a short period of time, it became counter-productive to hire domestic labor. The transition to capital intensive labor and the corresponding demise of the tenancy system played an important role in the attitude of planters toward local labor. Under the tenancy system, planters provided for their laborers year-round. Although the tenancy system imposed a heavy burden of debt for the laborer, it guaranteed them a place in the agricultural sector. With the emergence of scientific agriculture- the use of machines and chemicals- planters no longer needed year-round labor and their responsibilities that accompanied it. It was more expedient for them to use season laborers.

The Bracero Program was meant to be a quick fix, but it ended up becoming a very lucrative business, one that provided millions of jobs to Mexican workers, but also took away hundreds of thousands of jobs that could have been fielded by domestic workers. The Bracero

Program's track record is mixed, especially in the Arkansas Delta. On the one hand, it helped keep production levels high and labor costs low for planters. On the other hand, it allowed planters to gain favorable treatment and political influence over countless government officials. Considering these facts, it is difficult to view the influx of Mexican immigrants we have today as a new phenomenon. When it comes to cheap agricultural labor, American planters continue to look to Mexico to supply that labor. Whether it be through government sanctioned programs, such as the Bracero Program, or recruiting Mexican immigrants from border towns, the planter elite and now the large manufacturing producers, such as Tyson Foods, will always find the most cost effective means of production.

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