

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-934 (Rev. 12-2015)

OMB Control No. 1024-0276 (Exp. 01/31/2019)

RIO VISTA BRACERO RECEPTION CENTER

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1. NAME AND LOCATION OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Rio Vista Bracero Reception Center

Other Name/Site Number: Rio Vista Farm

Street and Number (if applicable): 800-860 and 901 North Rio Vista Road

City/Town: Socorro

County: El Paso

State: TX

2. SIGNIFICANCE DATA

NHL Criteria: 1

NHL Criteria Exceptions: None

NHL Theme(s): VIII. Changing Role of the US in the World Community
4. Immigration and Emigration Policies

Period(s) of Significance: 1951-1964

Significant Person(s) (only Criterion 2): N/A

Cultural Affiliation (only Criterion 6): N/A

Designer/Creator/Architect/Builder: Nilson, E.R. (architect)
McGhee, Percy (architect)
Braunton and Leibert (architects)
Trost and Trost (architects)
Monroe, Licht, and Higgins (architects)

Historic Contexts: *American Latino Theme Study (2013), American Labor History Theme Study (2021)*

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement. We are collecting this information under the authority of the Historic Sites Act of 1935 (16 U.S.C. 461-467) and 36 CFR part 65. Your response is required to obtain or retain a benefit. We will use the information you provide to evaluate properties nominated as National Historic Landmarks. We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number. OMB has approved this collection of information and assigned Control No. 1024-0276.

Estimated Burden Statement. Public reporting burden is 2 hours for an initial inquiry letter and 344 hours for NPS Form 10-934 (per response), including the time it takes to read, gather and maintain data, review instructions and complete the letter/form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate, or any aspects of this form, to the Information Collection Clearance Officer, National Park Service, 12201 Sunrise Valley Drive, Mail Stop 242, Reston, VA 20192. Please do not send your form to this address.

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3. WITHHOLDING SENSITIVE INFORMATION

Does this nomination contain sensitive information that should be withheld under Section 304 of the National Historic Preservation Act?

___ Yes

X No

4. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

1. Acreage of Property: 11.1

2. Use either Latitude/Longitude Coordinates or the UTM system:

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates (enter coordinates to 6 decimal places):

Datum if other than WGS84:

Latitude:	Longitude:
1 31.661343	-106.267265
2 31.661400	-106.266009
3 31.662527	-106.266060
4 31.662651	-106.263621
5 31.661511	-106.263536
6 31.661399	-106.265852
7 31.660475	-106.265816
8 31.660375	-106.267436
9 31.660559	-106.267461
10 31.661266	-106.267298

OR

UTM References:

Zone	Easting	Northing
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4. Boundary Justification:

The nominated area includes 11.1 acres. The boundary includes all of the resources associated with the Rio Vista Bracero Reception Center during its 1951-64 administration of the Mexican Farm Labor Program, including property on both sides of North Rio Vista Road. The berm to the north, created by the El Paso County Sheriff's Department after 1966, is not included. The polygon representing the boundary was provided as an ArcGIS shapefile to NPS.

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5. SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENT AND DISCUSSION

INTRODUCTION: SUMMARY STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Rio Vista Bracero Reception Center in Socorro, Texas, southeast of El Paso, is nationally significant under National Historic Landmark Criterion 1 in the areas of Social History, Government/Politics, and Agriculture. In particular it is significant for Immigration and Emigration Policies, for its 1951-64 association with the Mexican Farm Labor Program, the “largest single temporary alien worker program” ever undertaken by the United States.¹ The program significantly impacted documented and undocumented Mexican immigration to the United States in the post-World War II era and beyond. As historian Deborah Cohen points out: “Even though the bracero program formally ended virtually 50 years ago the U.S.-Mexican economy remains predicated on labor migration built around ties and knowledge from this earlier period.”² Braceros played a vitally important role in the nation’s agricultural economy in the postwar era, comprising nearly a quarter of US agricultural workers by 1959.³ The program greatly enhanced the profitability of the US agribusiness sector, providing a steady, reliable supply of highly-skilled farmworkers at relatively low wages and permitting expansion of certain crop sectors. The laborers were known as *braceros* (only men were eligible for the program), a term derived from the Spanish word *brazo* for arm, and the bilateral administrative framework developed by the United States and Mexico in 1951 was referred to as the bracero program.

Braceros primarily used their arms and hands in laboring with crops, often in arduous stoop labor tasks. Growers fostered a narrative of braceros as unskilled foreign workers who were willing to perform tasks domestic workers avoided, in order to secure approval of the program and to justify the payment of lower wages to the workers. However, stoop labor should not be equated with unskilled labor. As one nomination reviewer notes, braceros possessed tremendous expertise in raising field crops: “A lettuce worker (*lechuguero*) has different skills than someone who works in sugar beets, cotton, grapes.”⁴ Cohen, who interviewed former braceros in the state of Durango in western Mexico, found that braceros did not see themselves as victims, but “portrayed themselves instead as actors: they fought for their rights (however this term is defined) and made their world, an attitude captured with equal clarity in the archival materials. ... Moreover, the attitude of ex-braceros when describing experiences suggested they saw their participation as important not just in their own lives, but in the resulting economic and social configuration of Mexico and the United States.”⁵ Former bracero Juan Loza supports this view, calling the term bracero “a word of distinction, for me it is a word of great pride. I would like that word to go down in history.”⁶

A 1951 US-Mexico agreement created the Mexican Farm Labor Program, establishing a structure for recruitment of a bracero workforce under joint government auspices. Workers arrived at a needed place and time and then departed after the work was completed. Agricultural economist Wayne A. Grove characterized

¹ Congressional Research Service, *Temporary Worker Programs: Background and Issues* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 1979), 15.

² Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 3.

³ Cohen, *Braceros*, 24.

⁴ Comment of anonymous reviewer number three, Rio Vista draft nomination, December 2020.

⁵ Cohen, *Braceros*, 14. At the time of the interviews, braceros were seeking recognition for their contribution as part of an effort to recoup lost wages withheld by the Mexican federal government.

⁶ Quoted in Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, Kenneth E. Behring Center, Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program, 1942-1964/Cosecha Amarga Cosecha Dulce: El Programa Bracero, 1942-1964, last updated October 31, 2017, website, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/bracero>.

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the Mexican farm labor program as “arguably the most significant labor market development in agriculture since slavery” and judges it amounted to seasonal labor market insurance for US growers provided by the federal government.⁷ Agribusiness supported the program, believing a regulated, dependably delivered flow of legal Mexican stoop labor comprised a critical factor in the profitability and expansion of the agricultural sector, particularly in the American Southwest. Reliability of the labor supply in growing perishable, time-sensitive crops is a critical factor in determining growers’ profits, and, as Craig noted: “The 1951 bracero program became dependability personified.”⁸

An oversupply of needed workers was one element in insuring dependability, and growers responded by overestimating the number of workers needed. Labor activist Ernesto Galarza explains that the estimate of the numbers of required workers was “fundamentally an employer forecast biased by worry, feigned or real,” which the US Farm Placement Service did not attempt to confirm.⁹ Government approval of more workers than actually needed tended to depress total wages paid, saving growers’ out-of-pocket expenses and increasing net profits. Clearly preferring braceros over domestic agricultural workers, growers went through a largely sham process to “advertise” jobs, offering low wages they knew domestic workers were unlikely to accept. Geographer Don Mitchell describes the bracero program as “a boon to farmers.”¹⁰

The Mexican Farm Labor Program stimulated migration between Mexico and the US, encouraging documented and undocumented movement of bracero farmworkers and others to America in the early 1950s and after. Historian Steven Pitti observes that “the braceros established a pattern of Mexican migration that has survived over the past 50 years.”¹¹ Workers who participated in the program gained knowledge of US worklife, folkways, and consumer goods, as well as exposure to the benefits of permanent settlement in the country that contracted them. Sociologist Kitty Calavita judges the program produced “enduring ramifications for both domestic farm labor and subsequent migration patterns.”¹²

Documented and undocumented immigration stimulated by the bracero program contributed to the postwar increase in the US Latino population, particularly in states from Texas westward.¹³ By 1990 all of the states sharing a border with Mexico reported Latinos represented between 18 to 38 percent of their total populations. Over a quarter of the populations of California and Texas were Latino in that year.¹⁴ In 2018 Latinos comprised 18.3 percent of the total US population. In the four states along the Mexican border the Latino proportion exceeded 30 percent, while four additional states ranged between 20 and 30 percent Latino. It is not known exactly how many braceros returned to the US to become residents and eventually citizens, but many Latinos report family ties to the bracero program.¹⁵

⁷ Wayne A. Grove, “The Mexican Farm Labor Program, 1942-1964: Government-Administered Labor Market Insurance for Farmers,” *Agricultural History* 70 (Spring 1996): 303.

⁸ Richard B. Craig, *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1971), 85.

⁹ Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story* (Santa Barbara, California: McNally and Loftin, 1964), 129.

¹⁰ Don Mitchell, *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 195.

¹¹ *El Paso Times*, November 7, 2005, 2A.

¹² Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 22.

¹³ David G. Gutiérrez, “An Historic Overview of Latino Immigration and the Demographic Transformation of the United States,” in *American Latinos and the Making of the United States: A Theme Study* (Washington: National Park Service, 2013), 59-60.

¹⁴ US Bureau of the Census, *We the American ... Hispanics* (Washington: US Bureau of the Census, Ethnic and Hispanic Statistics Branch, September 1993), 3.

¹⁵ Yolanda Leyva, University of Texas El Paso, email to Thomas H. Simmons and R. Laurie Simmons, November 4, 2020.

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During 1951-64 the formal US-Mexico arrangement produced more than 4.2 million bracero contracts for more than two million unique individuals.¹⁶ The highpoint of the program came in 1956 with 445,197 bracero contracts. Thereafter, smaller numbers of braceros moved across the border to work until the end of the program in 1964. The men toiled in a total of thirty-eight states but were concentrated in a smaller number of jurisdictions, mostly along the Mexican border. For example, in 1959, 94 percent of braceros were employed in Texas, California, Arkansas, Arizona, and New Mexico, working with such crops as cotton, sugar beets, fruits, and vegetables.¹⁷ Most were employed in agriculture, with smaller numbers hired by railroads.

In the early years of the program bracero labor was particularly important in cotton raising, where “the great majority” of braceros were employed.¹⁸ Cotton producers strongly supported postwar access to bracero labor, as their industry was impacted by a declining rural labor pool, increasing domestic wages, and growing competition from synthetic fibers and foreign cotton sources. The availability of bracero labor provided a cushion during a transitional era in cotton culture, as technology was developed and implemented for mechanizing the sector. The importance of bracero labor to cotton diminished over time, and the popular image of braceros tending to field crops such as beans, lettuce, and tomatoes became more prevalent.

While less than 2 percent of US farms utilized braceros in 1959, historian Richard B. Craig noted the workers were considered vital by agribusiness because of “where, how, and in what crops” they labored.¹⁹ Particular crops and areas in the border states of Texas, California, Arizona, and New Mexico, plus Arkansas, came to heavily rely on Mexican labor. Craig asserts by the end of the 1950s braceros had “become an essential, if not indispensable, part of the workforce in particular areas and crops,” due to their skills and dependability.²⁰ Braceros comprised 80 percent of the labor force for the lettuce crop at the peak of the harvest season in 1959. Within California, bracero labor proved pivotal in transforming the state’s agricultural landscape into “a model of farming defined by the creation of large single-crop districts across the state.”²¹ This specialization maximized the use of the natural environment by raising certain crops and excluding all others. Historian Steven Stoll asserted the emergence of the “single crop is an enormous event in the history of the North American environment.”²² By the early twenty-first century California produced one-third of Americans’ table food and 12 percent of the agricultural output of the nation.²³

Given early episodes of mistreatment of Mexican laborers in the US, Mexico insisted that farm labor agreements contain provisions protecting workers against racial discrimination while working in the US, but the protections were undermined by racialized perceptions of braceros. Ethnic prejudice helped shape growers’ and government agency views of Mexican workers as being innately suitable for stoop labor. One Farm Placement Service representative commented in 1956 that he saw braceros “work stooping over for hours at a stretch,

¹⁶ The number of unique individuals participating in the program was fewer, since many braceros contracted a number of times. The bracero program existed in some form from 1946 to 1964, as discussed herein, but Rio Vista was not a part of it until the adoption of Public Law 78 in 1951. Thus 1951 through 1964 is employed as the national period of significance for Rio Vista.

¹⁷ Congressional Research Service, *Temporary Worker Programs*, 46. There is some question over this number. The Smithsonian exhibition noted above featured a map showing that braceros worked in thirty-four states.

¹⁸ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 180.

¹⁹ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 131.

²⁰ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 132.

²¹ Don Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape, and the Struggle Over Industrial Farming in Bracero-Era California* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 12.

²² Steven Stoll, *The Fruits of Natural Advantage: Making the Industrialized Countryside in California* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998), xiv.

²³ Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops*, 12.

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without straightening up. An Anglo simply couldn't take it. But it didn't seem to bother these boys a bit."²⁴ Cohen concluded that such perspectives of braceros "transformed learned skills into the outcome of biological selection, all with a paternalistic twist that depicted them as children—simple, innocent, even primitive."²⁵ Such views reflected long-held Anglo prejudice, particularly in the American Southwest. Historian Mireya Loza argues that persons of Mexican heritage were seen by many Anglos as more Indian than Spanish, and "their perceived indigenous ancestry made them exploitable labor because they were viewed as an inferior race with little potential for self-governance."²⁶

Despite these aspects, Mexico as a whole and its participating farmworkers gained economic advantages from the program. Based on oral history interviews, most braceros seem to judge that they were relatively better off under the program and appear not to regret their participation, while acknowledging hardships and exploitation. Former worker Antonio Garcia remarked in 2005: "It was a good opportunity to make more money than if I had stayed to work in Mexico. ... But we all suffered. At some places we were treated bad and not paid very well. It was hard."²⁷ Pablo Baldillo from Jalisco told a reporter in 1951 that "with legal contracts we are treated better. ... A wetback doesn't have any rights."²⁸ Braceros earned vastly more than they could back home and gained exposure to and knowledge of American culture, economy, and agricultural practices. US earnings enhanced the lives of individual braceros, some of whom were able to use funds to start small businesses, buy consumer goods, and generally improve the lot of their families. Hourly US agricultural pay, while objectively low, was roughly ten times what a *campesino* (peasant farmer) might earn in Mexico. For Mexico as a whole, aggregate remittances by braceros to their homeland comprised a major portion of that country's foreign exchange, the third-largest source in 1956 and 1957. The revenue benefited the Mexican economy, particularly in poor, rural, interior areas. In addition, the bilateral agreement generally fostered better relations between the two governments.

However, the program was unpopular with various groups within Mexico. Craig notes that the movement of hundreds of thousands of braceros north to work for what amounted to a pittance by American standards provoked Mexican progressives, to whom "the entire process constituted a classic example of colonial exploitation by capitalistic gringos. For countless political moderates, it was clearly an affront to Mexican dignity."²⁹ The Catholic Church in Mexico also opposed the bracero program, arguing that it separated workers from their families, with attendant social and economic impacts; enticed the men to pursue drinking, gambling, and prostitutes; and exposed the workers to possible conversion by Protestant missionaries.

Within the US the use of bracero labor was controversial and drew criticism throughout its existence over concerns it resulted in worker exploitation and negatively impacted domestic farmworkers. Opponents of the plan argued growers failed to consistently observe protective aspects of the bilateral agreement negotiated with Mexico in terms of pay, work conditions, food, housing, and discrimination, as well as exposure to pesticides and other environmental toxins. Worker Luis Barocio Ceja, who participated in the program from 1943 to 1963,

²⁴ Quoted in Henry P. Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California, with Particular Reference to Health Status, Attitudes, and Practices* (New York: Arno Press, 1976), 217.

²⁵ Cohen, *Braceros*, 56.

²⁶ Mireya Loza, *Defiant Braceros: How Migrant Workers Fought for Racial, Sexual, and Political Freedom* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 34.

²⁷ *El Paso Times*, December 18, 2005, 2A.

²⁸ *El Paso Herald-Post*, October 17, 1951, 1. "Wetback" is a derogatory term commonly used starting in the 1920s referencing those crossing the Rio Grande to the United States.

²⁹ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 22.

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believed exploitation increased in the later years and felt that a bracero was valued as “a beast of burden.”³⁰ By the late 1950s and early 1960s, criticism of the program by labor unions and social welfare groups grew in intensity.

Concern also increased during the late 1950s and early 1960s over the adverse impact of growers’ use of braceros on the wages of domestic farm workers. Grower preference for large numbers of on-demand braceros lowered average wages of American domestic workers in areas where they were deployed and displaced domestic farmworkers, who relocated to other areas. Galarza stated that by the end of the 1950s the domestic interstate migrant farmworker “was close to extinction in California.”³¹ The availability of bracero labor also delayed and impaired efforts to unionize agricultural workers, causing labor unions and social welfare groups and their allies in Congress to sharpen their criticisms of the program. The early 1960s saw the beginnings of effective efforts to organize farmworkers, including the National Farm Workers Association (1960) under the leadership of Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, and the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (1962), led by Larry Itliong.³² Mitchell argues the bracero program ended “when a renewed farmworker militancy helped make government involvement in the pauperization of agricultural labor once again less politically tenable.”³³ Congress eventually declined to extend the Mexican Farm Labor Program, and it concluded at the end of 1964.

The Rio Vista Bracero Reception Center, one of only five long-term reception centers along the US-Mexico border from the inception of the farm labor agreement in 1951 to its end in 1964, is particularly suitable as an exemplar of the entire program. Rio Vista processed approximately 800,000 bracero contracts during its years of operation, sending braceros to worksites in Texas, New Mexico, the northern and central plains, upper Midwest, and Rocky Mountain states. In addition to the multitude of braceros who passed through the center, Rio Vista reflects the participation in the bracero program by numerous government and private sector actors at different levels in both the US and Mexico. The bi-national administration of the program is illustrated in the work of US Department of Labor and Immigration and Naturalization Service employees, who served at migratory stations in the interior of Mexico to assist in evaluating workers, and representatives of the Mexican Consul, who were present at US border reception centers to monitor compliance with the bilateral agreement.

The Rio Vista complex embodies the story of the bracero experience and the important role the workers played in the post-World War II agricultural life of the United States. Rio Vista served as a critical way station, linking the recruitment of workers in the interior of Mexico with their eventual places of employment on US farms and ranches. Former bracero José Ramirez Delgado, who came through Rio Vista, revisited the center in 2006 and remarked: “Here is the history of the braceros! For us and Rio Vista, it’s a great story.”³⁴ The bracero process began at migratory stations in the interior of Mexico where workers were recruited and then transported to US border reception centers, operated by the US Department of Labor with assistance from the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Public Health Service. The center staff used a production line approach to rapidly screen prospective workers, assessing them for health conditions and suitability for manual labor, providing them with identity cards, and creating work contracts with US grower associations and individual farmers. Interviewed in 1958, a former reception center employee observed that rush times could lead to mistreatment of braceros: “Nobody has any patience. Immigration, Public Health, Labor Department—it is all

³⁰ Loza, *Defiant Braceros*, 4.

³¹ Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 95.

³² The two groups merged to form the United Farm Workers of America in 1966.

³³ Mitchell, *The Lie of the Land*, 195.

³⁴ Jose Ramirez Delgado, in KVIE Public Television, “Los Braceros: Strong Arms to Aid the U.S.A.,” KVIE public television, Sacramento, California, 2006. Delgado worked as a bracero for fifteen years.

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the same. Everybody curses the braceros and shoves them around.”³⁵ Braceros were transported from the reception centers to work locations and then returned to the centers at the end of their contracts for processing back to Mexico.³⁶

Rio Vista is the best-preserved example of a bracero reception center, retaining a high level historic integrity conveying its national significance (see Comparative Analysis).³⁷ At the 11.1-acre, multi-building Rio Vista complex the bracero program repurposed existing buildings constructed in the early twentieth century as the El Paso County Poor Farm, as well as erecting a few new buildings. The property was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1996 for its poor farm history. In 2015 the American Latino Heritage Scholars Expert Panel included Rio Vista in a list of fourteen Latino-related sites identified for “consideration as top priorities for evaluation, analysis and nomination assistance in the short term” as prospective National Historic Landmarks.³⁸ A separate panel of Latino Heritage scholars reinforced this recommendation in 2017, developing a list of ten properties across the nation associated with Latino heritage. The panel concluded Rio Vista possessed “a central connection to the largest guest worker program in United States history” and supported its nomination as a National Historic Landmark.³⁹ Rio Vista’s period of national significance is 1951-1964.

MEXICAN MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

For decades prior to formal guest worker initiatives, an informal and largely unregulated cross-border flow of Mexican workers to the US existed. In the late nineteenth century economic factors within Mexico, including rising prices, declining wages, and land displacement, pushed workers from their native land. Simultaneously, they were pulled north by the lure of wages in US agricultural and railroad jobs, made possible by large-scale irrigation projects and substantial capital investment in the region. Historian Otey M. Scruggs reported that “Mexican immigrants had begun to form a reservoir of ‘cheap’ labor for the railroads and farms of the southwest by the last decade of the nineteenth century.”⁴⁰ In the first decades of the twentieth century South Texas saw an influx of Anglo migrants, who established new segregated settlements and created poll taxes to limit the political power of those of Mexican heritage. Cristina Salinas reports that boosters of the growing region portrayed Mexican Americans “as a cheap labor force, another commodity available to the prospective South Texas farmer. ... malleable and adaptable to all crops and conditions.”⁴¹

The relatively porous nature of the US-Mexico boundary and longstanding regional social norms supported this movement of workers, as historian Patrick Ettinger describes: “In the Lower Rio Grande Valley, strong cross-border family and ethnic ties made the international line seem meaningless, and unofficial border crossings

³⁵ Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California*, 49.

³⁶ The above is a general outline of how the program was supposed to work. In practice, some braceros “skipped” (left) their worksites and became “undocumented” workers elsewhere. Others were hired as “specials,” braceros with particular skills, and were permitted extended stays in the US. Some undocumented were “dried” and became braceros.

³⁷ The reception center building at Nogales, Arizona, is extant but greatly modified and expanded.

³⁸ American Latino Heritage Scholars Expert Panel to Stephanie Toothman, National Park Service, April 20, 2015; US National Park Service, National Historic Landmark Program Staff (WASO), Evaluation of Priority Sites for American Latino Heritage Initiative (Short List), May 1, 2015. The WASO response did not correctly address Rio Vista, somehow confusing the panel’s recommendation of the “Bracero Program Site, Socorro, TX” with the Lamesa Farm Workers Community Historic District near LaMesa, Texas, some 265 miles east-northeast in Dawson County.

³⁹ Latino Heritage Scholars (Manuel G. Galaviz, Norma Hartell, and Ashleyann Perez-Rivera), *Place, Story and Culture: A Top Ten List of Places Important to the Latino Community and in Need of Preservation* (Washington: Hispanic Access Foundation, 2017), 17.

⁴⁰ Otey M. Scruggs, “The First Mexican Farm Labor Program,” *Arizona and the West* 2 (Winter 1960): 322.

⁴¹ Cristina Salinas, *Managed Migrations: Growers, Farmworkers, and Border Enforcement in the Twentieth Century* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2018), 24 and 33.

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remained the norm.”⁴² Reinforcing this view, Ernesto Galarza, a farm labor activist and historian of the bracero program, characterizes Mexican movement to the US in the period from 1900 to 1940 as “one of migration by drift, in contrast with the administered migration of the *bracero* that was to begin in 1942. It was a migration propelled by political turbulence in Mexico, channeled across the desert and brought into junior partnership with the capital that was ready to transform vast and barren lands to the uses of commercial agriculture.”⁴³ Established in 1924, the US Border Patrol lacked resources and personnel to effectively address immigration concerns during the first half of the twentieth century.

The 1951 Mexican Farm Labor Program emerged from shared United States-Mexico efforts with earlier temporary guest-worker plans. The Immigration Act of 1917 drastically reduced the number of legal Mexican migrants coming to the US through its imposition of a literacy requirement and doubling of the head tax required for entry. These provisions adversely impacted many southwestern agricultural areas that had come to rely on seasonal Mexican workers. After the US entered World War I, domestic farmworkers were siphoned off by military service and higher-paying defense plant work, and growers argued that the supply of agricultural labor was inadequate. Additionally, domestic agricultural workers displayed increased efforts to organize collectively in the 1910s, perhaps motivating growers to look for other sources of labor.⁴⁴ The US Bureau of Immigration responded to growers’ pleas by suspending selected provisions of the Immigration Act in order to “admit temporarily otherwise inadmissible aliens” to work in agriculture, railroad maintenance-of-way work, and coal mining judged important to the war effort.⁴⁵ US agriculturists were permitted to contract Mexican workers upon a showing that adequate numbers of domestic workers were unavailable to meet labor needs.

The essentially unilateral program was put in place by the US government. Between 1917 and 1921, 72,862 Mexican workers were admitted to the US to assist in the war effort.⁴⁶ As historian Otey M. Scruggs described, the program permitted farmers to recruit workers directly in Mexico with little oversight by either government.⁴⁷ Historian Erasmo Gamboa judged that the wartime program was a tragic failure, as “most often, employers did not honor the workers’ contracts and exploited them ruthlessly.”⁴⁸ The program’s tilt toward agricultural interests and lack of oversight would be recalled nostalgically by American agribusiness in later decades. Later programs would prohibit direct recruitment in Mexico and include some government oversight, but agribusiness successfully gained the upper hand in later, formal binational agreements.

After World War I, the use of Mexican nationals in the Southwest accelerated. By the early 1920s they were “the principal work force in many southwestern farming areas.”⁴⁹ While the wartime exception for the entry of Mexican workers ended in 1921, political scientist George C. Kiser found that the US government tacitly continued the program “by simply refusing to apply the immigration laws vigorously and systematically. Far from reducing the number of Mexican workers, the end of the emergency program marked the beginning of a

⁴² Patrick Ettinger, *Tenacious Immigrants: Crossing the Border, 1880-1930* (El Paso, Texas: El Paso Community Foundation, 2002), 17.

⁴³ Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 32.

⁴⁴ Formed in 1905, the International Workers of the World (IWW), for example, attempted to organize workers across economic sectors into “one big union” through education and direct recruitment at workplaces. The IWW was involved in the so-called Wheatland Riot of 1913 at a hops ranch in northern California.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Congressional Research Service, *Temporary Worker Programs*, 7.

⁴⁶ Congressional Research Service, *Temporary Worker Programs*, 11.

⁴⁷ Otey M. Scruggs, “Evolution of the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement of 1942,” *Agricultural History* 34 (July 1960): 142.

⁴⁸ Erasmo Gamboa, *Mexican Labor & World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, 1942-1947* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000; orig. pub. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 39.

⁴⁹ Scruggs, “The First Mexican Farm Labor Program,” 319.

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decade which brought Mexican workers to the United States in vastly increased and unprecedented numbers.”⁵⁰

The precarious position of Mexican migrant workers in the US became clear following the stock market crash of 1929. As the economy descended into the Great Depression, US citizens viewed Mexicans within the country as competition for the dwindling number of jobs available. Federal and state governments sought to remove Mexicans from the country, and President Herbert Hoover decried migrants as contributing to the Depression. Even long-term, legal Mexican residents in the US, including those with US-born citizen children, were pressed to return home. Ultimately, more than 400,000 Mexicans were repatriated between 1929 and 1935 and another 85,000 “voluntarily” returned to Mexico. Many of them arrived destitute.⁵¹ Historian Camille Guerin-Gonzales asserted that the characterization of Mexican immigrants as “‘birds of passage,’ not settlers” made it easier to justify expelling them during an economic downturn.⁵² Mexico deeply resented this treatment of her countrymen, and the experience impacted negotiations over later migrant labor arrangements.

MEXICAN FARM LABOR ARRANGEMENTS, 1942-50

During World War II the US and Mexican governments reached agreement for a temporary program to permit Mexican farmworkers to replace US domestic agricultural workers serving in the military or other defense-related tasks, including railroading. This first bracero program extended from 1942 to 1947, with later understandings continuing the arrangement to 1950. In 1951 a bilateral agreement between the US and Mexico and Public Law 78 (PL-78) provided the framework for the 1951-64 Mexican Farm Labor Program. Geographer Don Mitchell argues that “it is appropriate to refer to a single bracero program both because that is how contemporaries understood it over its life course and because there were strong continuities across each of its iterations.”⁵³ However, the program’s various iterations did vary in their legal authorization and specific provisions.⁵⁴ The two countries and competing interest groups fiercely contested the details as the program evolved.

The 1942-47 Program

In the late 1930s the US began to expand the nation’s military infrastructure as the situation in Europe deteriorated. American defense preparedness gained greater urgency after the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939. In September 1940 Congress approved the Selective Service Act to make way for a military draft. Agricultural interests began raising the specter of a shortage of farm workers that would cause a drop in food production and hamper the national defense effort. During the summer of 1941, as domestic agricultural workers entered the military or moved from rural areas to higher-paying jobs in war-related industries and construction in cities, growers in Texas, Arizona, and California sought federal government approval for the importation of Mexican workers. The trend accelerated following the entry of the US into World War II in December 1941. Historian Otey M. Scruggs explains: “As men continued to leave the fields for the armed

⁵⁰ George C. Kiser, “Mexican American Labor, Before World War II,” *Journal of Mexican American History* 2 (Spring 1972): 128.

⁵¹ US House of Representatives, Office of the Historian, Office of Art and Archives, “Separate Interests to National Agendas: Hispanic-American Members of Congress in the Civil Rights Era, 1945–1977, Depression, War, and Civil Rights,” Accessed March 24, 2020. <https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/HAIC/Historical-Essays/Separate-Interests/Depression-War-Civil-Rights/>.

⁵² Camille Guerin-Gonzales, *Mexican Workers and American Dreams: Immigration, Repatriation, and California Farm Labor, 1900-1939* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 135-36.

⁵³ Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops*, 1.

⁵⁴ Manuel García y Griego, “The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers to the United States, 1942-1964,” in *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*, ed. David G. Gutiérrez (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, Inc. 1996). García y Griego divides the program into three periods: 1942-46, wartime cooperation; 1947-54, turbulence and transition; and 1955-64, apogee and demise.

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forces and the factories, authorities became increasingly concerned lest a shortage seriously impair the government's food production program."⁵⁵

If growers had offered higher wages and improved working conditions, the purported shortages may have been filled by the domestic labor pool. Some federal officials and the Mexican government characterized the claims of labor shortage as ruses to keep farm wages low. Writing in April 1942, Davis McEntire, head of the Division of Population and Rural Welfare within the Bureau of Agricultural Economics in the Agricultural Department, argued that the clamor for Mexican nationals stemmed from the unwillingness of growers to increase wages to attract domestic workers, as well as long-held racist beliefs that certain ethnic groups were more "suited" to agricultural stoop labor. McEntire believed that easy access to imported Mexican labor would give growers an opportunity to tap into a large labor pool and permit them "to evade what might be considered the reasonable obligations of employers to pay fair wages, provide decent housing, and working conditions, and use the labor force efficiently and without waste."⁵⁶

In April 1942 the federal government formed a cross-departmental working group to explore the importation of Mexican workers. Agricultural interests preferred direct grower recruitment in Mexico unhindered by restrictions imposed by either the Mexican or US governments. The committee produced a plan in May that attempted to balance the needs of growers for harvest laborers with protections against the exploitation of domestic and imported workers, while incorporating the desires of both national governments. The proposal authorized alien workers only after a certification that domestic workers were unavailable. It permitted growers and labor contractors to recruit workers in Mexico; required written contracts in English and Spanish specifying work conditions and compensation (the prevailing wage in the area but in no case less than \$0.30 an hour); called for the provision of medical care to workers; and mandated that housing meet standards set by the US Department of Agriculture.

Subsequent negotiations with Mexico in May through July 1942 modified some of the American terms and produced a bilateral agreement. Having declared war on Germany in June, Mexico enjoyed some leverage in negotiations and saw supplying agricultural workers as a means of playing a role in the war effort and fostering good relations with its major trading partner. The Mexican government pushed to include protections for any workers who might be dispatched to the US. As Scruggs observed:

To begin with, the Mexican government doubted the existence of a labor shortage on American farms, and it feared that the growers' demand was for the purpose of keeping wages down to the detriment of Mexicans already in the United States. Moreover, the committee knew that the Mexican people would never again accept lightly the return home of impoverished workers. Neither would the Mexican people acquiesce in the dispatch of *braceros* to states like Texas and Arkansas which had long records of discrimination against Mexicans.⁵⁷

Mexico succeeded in shaping the agreement to include provisions protecting braceros, including recruitment in Mexico by the US Farm Security Administration (not growers); incorporation of the requirements of Article 29 of the Mexican Labor Law of 1931 (including payment of workers transportation expenses, deposit of bonds with banks in Mexico to cover the costs of returning workers to Mexico, payment of a fixed wage, and written contracts approved by Mexican officials); a nondiscrimination clause; exemption from US military service; and

⁵⁵ Scruggs, "Evolution of the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement of 1942," 141.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops*, 25.

⁵⁷ Scruggs, "Evolution of the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement of 1942," 146.

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a requirement that braceros not be used to displace domestic workers or lower farm wages. The US Farm Security Administration executed and was guarantor of bracero contracts, with the agency then subcontracting workers to growers.

Some of the provisions were vague and others had little actual impact on conditions workers experienced. A 1979 Congressional Research Service study observed “a number of the guarantees provided in the initial agreement were somewhat hollow, since they were contingent upon benefits which at that time were not generally provided to domestic agricultural workers. This was generally true of subsistence payments for unemployment and occupational insurance, as well as on-farm housing and medical facilities in many localities.”⁵⁸ Nonetheless, in August 1942 the US and Mexico formalized the agreement, the first accord ever reached with Mexico on the importation of Mexican agricultural workers to the US.⁵⁹ Public Law 45, enacted in April 1943, provided a legislative basis for the program, which the departments of Agriculture, Labor, and Justice were charged with administering.⁶⁰

The supply of would-be braceros significantly outstripped demand. In 1942 the National Stadium in Mexico City served as the venue for recruiting. Galarza reported that “the stadium was congested with thousands of applicants who were never recruited, and even those who succeeded in signing up were forced to wait for weeks.”⁶¹ The Mexican government added recruiting venues in other parts of the country in later years. The first groups of Mexican workers crossed into the US at El Paso and arrived in California in the final months of 1942 and were greeted warmly. In the midst of war and as a show of Allied cooperation, the first braceros who arrived in Stockton, California in September 1942 were met by a welcoming delegation and a banquet.⁶²

By the time the World War II program ended in 1947, approximately 219,600 braceros had worked in twenty-four states, including those along the Mexican border, the Pacific Coast, Rocky Mountains, and upper Midwest. California was the principal state receiving bracero labor. In 1945 California, Washington, Idaho, and Oregon accounted for 78 percent of Mexican guest workers.⁶³ Other states obtaining substantial numbers of workers included Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Utah, and Wisconsin. Principal crops harvested by braceros included cotton, sugar beets, fruits, and vegetables.⁶⁴ In addition to agricultural work, the program brought over 100,000 braceros to the US to work for more than thirty railroads. The unskilled Mexican workers were employed on track and railbed repair and maintenance. Unlike its agricultural counterpart, the railroad bracero program ended at the close of the war.⁶⁵

In 1960 Scruggs assessed the impact of the wartime program, judging that “concern for crops seems to have largely supplanted concern for men, and there is little doubt that though relatively few workers were imported

⁵⁸ Congressional Research Service, *Temporary Worker Programs*, 24.

⁵⁹ Scruggs, “Evolution of the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement of 1942,” 142 and 147-48.

⁶⁰ Galarza, “Evolution of the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement of 1942,” 144-45; Calavita, *Inside the State*, 23.

⁶¹ Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 52.

⁶² Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops*, 1.

⁶³ Wayne D. Rasmussen, *A History of the Emergency Farm Labor Program, 1943-47* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1951), 226.

⁶⁴ Congressional Research Service, *Temporary Worker Programs*, 15 and 27.

⁶⁵ Barbara Driscoll, *Tracks North: The Railroad Bracero Program of World War II* (Austin, Texas: CMAS Books, Center for Mexican American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1998), ix-x; Mae M. Ngai, “Braceros, ‘Wetbacks,’ and the National Boundaries of Class,” in *Repositioning North American Migration History: New Directions in Modern Continental Migration, Citizenship, and Community*, ed. Marc S. Rodriguez (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 2004), 218. Different sources provide varying numbers for the wartime program. Historian Mae M. Ngai reported 290,000 braceros for the 1942-47 period, with 75,000 working in railroading, mostly for the Southern Pacific.

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during the life of the agreement, the fact that Mexicans were available prevented wages from rising any higher than they did. Even so, with the continuing exodus from the fields after 1942, the crops in some cases would not have been picked had it not been for braceros.”⁶⁶

Given the wartime bracero experience, in 1964 labor activist Ernesto Galarza concluded that agribusiness came to recognize the correspondence “between their ideal of a farm laborer and the *bracero*.”⁶⁷ The benefits of bracero workers were described in a recommendation made by a special committee to the governor of California in 1947: “Mexican workers ... should constitute a flexible group which can be readily moved from operation to operation and from place to place where local help falls short of the numbers needed to save the crops.”⁶⁸ G.W. Guiberson, a representative of the Agricultural Labor Bureau of San Joaquin, baldly articulated the point of view of growers: “We’re asking for labor only at certain times of the year—at the peak of our harvest—and the class of labor we want is the kind we can send home when we get through with them.”⁶⁹

Interim Arrangements, 1948-50

Despite the end of the wartime emergency, growers were reluctant to give up access to Mexican labor. Following the expiration of the US-Mexico guest worker agreement at the end of 1947, the importation of Mexican workers continued, either under interim binational agreements or even in the absence of formal agreements. The arrangements included direct contracting by growers in Mexico, which were generally more acceptable to US agricultural interests than they were to the Mexican government. In 1949, agricultural interests succeeded in removing administration of the program from the Farm Security Administration, which growers viewed as being too sympathetic to farmworkers, and placing it in the hands of the US Employment Service in the Department of Labor.⁷⁰

The late 1940s saw a surge in the numbers of undocumented workers crossing into the US. In 1948 US border guards unilaterally opened the border for five days (the “El Paso Incident”), permitting several thousand Mexican men to cross into the US where they were “paroled” to growers to work in Texas cotton fields, thus alleviating a labor shortage.⁷¹ Craig suggests that “faced with an embarrassing exodus of her citizenry, Mexico believed that a continuation of the bracero program would possibly reduce the tide of illegal wetbacks.”⁷² These developments spurred interest by the Mexican federal government in renegotiating a binational labor agreement. A total of 209,845 braceros came to the US between 1948 and 1950, almost as many as during the war.⁷³ The geographic focus of bracero labor shifted in the immediate postwar years, as California declined as a principal bracero destination. By 1949 Texas, New Mexico, and Arkansas accounted for 79 percent of Mexican farm workers.⁷⁴

Sociologist Kitty Calavita concluded that the interim system produced “havoc” by its unpredictability, confusion, and attraction of too many potential braceros to border towns, creating public disorder and health

⁶⁶ Scruggs, “Evolution of the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement of 1942,” 149.

⁶⁷ Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 55.

⁶⁸ Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 55.

⁶⁹ Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 55.

⁷⁰ Ngai, “Braceros, ‘Wetbacks,’ and the National Boundaries of Class,” 220.

⁷¹ Cohen, *Braceros*, 202-03.

⁷² Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 58; Calavita, *Inside the State*, 202. “Wetback” was a commonly used term of the era for undocumented Mexican migrants who waded across the Rio Grande to enter the US. Calavita noted “the English term quickly took on racist overtones.”

⁷³ Congressional Research Service, *Temporary Worker Programs*, 36.

⁷⁴ US President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, *Migratory Labor in American Agriculture*, Report of the US President’s Commission on Migratory Labor (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1951), 55.

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concerns.⁷⁵ Faced with the unsettled and piecemeal Mexican labor arrangements in the postwar period, President Harry S. Truman explored ways to better protect domestic farm labor and enhance US-Mexico border security. In June 1950, he created the President's Commission on Migratory Labor to study the "social, economic, health, and educational conditions among migratory workers, both alien and domestic," as well the issue of undocumented immigration.⁷⁶ The administration anticipated the commission's conclusions would form the basis for legislation reforming the foreign guest worker program. The commission gathered information and held hearings throughout the country during 1950.

In March 1951, the commission published its findings, with broad recommendations including: "No special measures should be adopted to increase the number of alien contract laborers beyond the number admitted in 1950. Future efforts should be directed toward supplying agricultural labor needs with our own workers and eliminating dependence on foreign labor. Foreign-labor importation should be undertaken only pursuant to the terms of intergovernmental agreements. ... Legislation is needed to make it unlawful to employ aliens who have entered the United States illegally."⁷⁷ Congress, however, was headed in an entirely different direction. Earlier in the year, US and Mexican representatives met to discuss the parameters of a temporary farm labor program. Included as members of the US delegation were two leading proponents of bracero labor, Senator Allen J. Ellender and Representative William R. Poage.

PUBLIC LAW 78 AND THE MEXICAN FARM LABOR PROGRAM OF 1951-64

Drafting the Legislation and the Binational Agreement

In taking up the issue of imported Mexican labor in 1951, Congress largely ignored the presidential commission's recommendations. The legislative effort was orchestrated by two powerful congressional committee leaders: Senator Allen J. Ellender (Democrat-Louisiana), chair of the Agriculture and Forestry Committee, and Representative William R. Poage (Democrat-Texas), member of the Agriculture Committee. Historian Robert S. Robinson explained: "Ellender and Poage proposed to bring Mexican labor into the United States quickly and easily, with a minimum of bureaucratic intervention and seemingly with no reference to the findings of the [commission's] report. ... [W]hat became known as the Ellender-Poage Bill was a victory for farm owners and a defeat for labor interests."⁷⁸

Labor unions opposed the bill but were ineffectual in influencing the shape of the legislation. The 1935 National Labor Relations Act, permitting employees to organize and collectively bargain with employers, exempted agricultural workers from its provisions. Efforts to organize in the late 1930s focused more on employees in agricultural processing facilities than field workers. Ernesto Galarza's efforts in the 1940s and 1950s with the National Farm Labor Union produced few enduring results. Ironically, many of the domestic farmworkers harmed or displaced by the bracero program were domestic Latinos, many of whom were citizens or documented permanent residents. Some traced their presence in the US to the 1850s or earlier.

Growers exerted substantial power in shaping the bill, which became Public Law 78, and the bilateral agreement with Mexico. Historian Richard Craig concluded that "the forces of agribusiness supported the legalized importation of Mexican agricultural laborers with a seldom equaled political acumen and adroitness."⁷⁹ Grower associations influenced the program's requirements and were well-suited to take

⁷⁵ Calavita, *Inside the State*, 45.

⁷⁶ Robert S. Robinson, "Taking the Fair Deal to the Fields: Truman's Commission on Migratory Labor, Public Law 78, and the Bracero Program, 1950-1952," *Agricultural History* 84 (Summer 2010): 384.

⁷⁷ US President's Commission on Migratory Labor, *Migratory Labor in American Agriculture*, iii.

⁷⁸ Robinson, "Taking the Fair Deal to the Fields," 390.

⁷⁹ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 24.

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advantage of its resulting structure. Geographer Don Mitchell explains that by the end of the 1930s California growers had organized into associations for specific crops (such as, fruit, walnuts, and raisins), as well as into more general farm groups (the Western Growers Protective Association and the Grower-Shipper Vegetable Association) and political lobbying groups (California Farm Bureau Federation and the Associated Farmers of California, Inc.). Mitchell argues that through such combinations growers achieved a unified front and “amassed the power to significantly control the conditions of agricultural production in the state—and they did.”⁸⁰ One of the principal tools of such organizations was their ability to develop a consensus on wages to be paid and to enforce adherence by members. Similar grower associations existed in other states. The tremendous power of growers would not be challenged until the mid-1960s and early 1970s when agricultural unionism emerged in California and other western states.

The American Farm Bureau Federation took the lead in advocating for continuation of the bracero program in 1951 and was joined in a well-organized effort by many other national and state agricultural groups, including the National Grange, the Vegetable Growers Association of America, the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives, the National Farm Labor Users Committee, the Amalgamated Sugar Company, the National Beet Growers Federation, the National Cotton Council, the Council of California Growers, and other state growers associations.

Enacted in July 1951, Public Law 78 authorized the Mexican Farm Labor Program and comprised a further evolution of the 1942 program. The law eliminated the ban on importation of foreign contract labor that had been in place since 1885.⁸¹ President Truman reluctantly signed the legislation but criticized the bill for not addressing undocumented immigration and the problems of domestic farmworkers. He supported follow-up legislation including provisions to punish companies or individuals who hired undocumented workers and empower Immigration and Naturalization Service officers to inspect places believed to be harboring such workers without a search warrant.⁸²

Following the passage of the law, the US and Mexico completed negotiating the terms of a bilateral agreement implementing the program. Given the labor pressures within the US occasioned by the Korean Conflict (1950-53), Mexico enjoyed some leverage in negotiating the terms of the understanding. In August 1951 the two nations signed the Migrant Labor Agreement. The 1951 agreement called for: recruitment of workers at migratory stations in the interior of Mexico manned by Mexican and US representatives; transportation of potential workers to five US reception centers spaced along the US-Mexico border; processing of workers at these centers; contracting of braceros by private agricultural associations or employers who provided transportation to farms throughout the US; return of the braceros to the reception centers; and transportation of the workers back to Mexico. The program was only open to men, and the screening process in Mexico typically targeted younger men with manual labor experience. To protect bracero workers, the program specified standards farm operators were required to observe for transportation, housing, pay, work conditions, and meals. Braceros were to be protected from racial/ethnic discrimination in the areas where they worked.

For a grower to be eligible to receive bracero labor, the Secretary of Labor through the Farm Placement Service was required to certify that an adequate number of domestic workers was unavailable in the local area to meet the anticipated demand. The Secretary also needed to verify that employment of braceros would not adversely affect the wages and working conditions of domestic agricultural workers and assure that “reasonable efforts

⁸⁰ Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops*, 17.

⁸¹ Calavita, *Inside the State*, 46.

⁸² Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 76.

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have been made to attract domestic workers for such employment at wages and standard hours of work comparable to those offered to foreign workers.”⁸³ The legislation did not define such concepts as labor shortage or how prevailing wages were to be determined. In practice, the system was stacked against the interests of agricultural workers, with growers and their associations controlling the outcome of these determinations.

Structure and Operation of the Bracero Program, 1951-64

Recruitment and Screening of Workers at Migratory Stations in Mexico

To administer the program, in 1952 the Mexican government created the Dirección de Asuntos de Trabajadores Agrícolas Migratorios (Bureau of Migratory Farm Labor Affairs) within the Foreign Ministry. The bureau had broad authority to assemble prospective workers based on requests received from the US Department of Labor (DOL). The number of workers to be recruited by each migratory station during a particular season was determined by staged requests from DOL indicating the number of workers needed at a US reception center by a certain date. The Mexican federal government assigned quotas to states whose governors allocated them by districts and municipalities, with the ostensible purpose of favoring rural areas with high and persistent unemployment. The program sought *campesinos* (peasant farmers) who were experienced agricultural workers. Applicants for the program needed to provide a birth certificate, prove they had completed military service, and supply recommendations of good character. Additionally, members of *ejidos*, agricultural communities with communal land ownership created by land reforms in the 1930s, were ineligible to become braceros.⁸⁴

Aspiring braceros sought letters of good character from locally prominent politicians and business owners, large landowners, or priests. While radio and newspaper announcements by the Mexican government emphasized that application documents were free for the bracero program, bribes (*mordidas*) soon began to play a role. Historian Deborah Cohen explains: “At first most men obtained official documents without charge, yet officials began to spot the possibility for gain. As more men sought contracts, a growing number of officials, as well as those with official-sounding positions or connections, began to charge for documents, both official and fake, especially micas or identification cards.”⁸⁵ A 1957 investigation revealed that nearly 80 percent of braceros had paid something to obtain a contract.⁸⁶ Presidents of municipalities were empowered to issue *certificados de aspirante a bracero* (bracero aspirant certificates) to applicants cleared to apply for the program. In addition to this official flow of applicants, Galarza reported that others came to the migratory stations as “*libres*” (free ones), sometimes bearing recommendations from political patrons.⁸⁷

Historian Mireya Loza explains that aspiring braceros were not a cohesive whole and included mestizos as well as indigenous workers, many coming from the southern states of Mexico. High Mexican political leaders perceived the bracero program as a vehicle for “modernizing” indigenous workers and making them more productive members of the country’s economy. Setting many indigenous workers apart was their use of local dialects and little or no ability to speak Spanish. Nemecio Meza, an indigenous bracero interviewed by Loza, reported his “greatest challenge” in the bracero program was limited Spanish, which was used at reception

⁸³ Public Law 78, Section 503, quoted in Congressional Research Service, *Temporary Worker Programs*, 33.

⁸⁴ The government feared opening the program to *ejidatarios* would disrupt those communities and undermine the rationale for their establishment.

⁸⁵ Cohen, *Braceros*, 91. The mica was an alien laborer identification card issued by the INS (Form I-100d), containing a photograph and identifying information about the holder. Professor Yolanda Leyva explained the cards were laminated and the nickname “mica” came from the Spanish word *enmascar*, which means laminate.

⁸⁶ Cohen, *Braceros*, 96.

⁸⁷ Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 81.

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centers and at workplaces.⁸⁸

Given Mexico's widespread rural poverty, lack of suitable agricultural land, overpopulation, and limited avenues for individual financial betterment, the supply of aspiring braceros greatly exceeded US agricultural demand and favored agribusiness interests. The prospect of higher wages drew nonagricultural applicants, including white collar and other workers, who rubbed their hands with stones or chalk to make them appear callused.⁸⁹ Discussing the era, historian Richard B. Craig argued that: "Even if he earned a paltry sum by American standards, the bracero could, through hard work and diligent saving, return home with a substantial nest egg by Mexican standards."⁹⁰ Economist Wayne A. Grove estimated the typical wage for agricultural workers in the US was ten times that paid in Mexico.⁹¹ While economic factors were dominant in men's participation in the program, a sense of adventure and the opportunity to see something beyond one's village may have provided additional motivations.

As specified in the 1951 bilateral agreement, the Mexican federal government established migratory stations, recruiting centers in the interior of the country where prospective braceros assembled.⁹² The location of migratory stations within Mexico was a point of contention in drafting the US-Mexico agreement, with the two governments and affected interest groups promoting different approaches. American growers favored locations close the border to reduce transportation costs, while the Mexican government believed border locations would encourage illegal migration of workers.⁹³ The initial five migratory stations selected included Monterrey, Chihuahua, Irapuato, Guadalajara, and Aguascalientes.⁹⁴ Closest to the US border were the stations at Monterrey (137 miles southwest of Laredo) and Chihuahua (217 miles south of El Paso), while the remaining three were more than three hundred to four hundred miles distant. Over the life of the program, migratory stations shifted to new locations and were reduced in number. By 1953 Durango replaced Aguascalientes, and by 1955 Hermosillo and Guaymas took the places of Guadalajara and Durango. In 1959 and later, only Monterrey, Chihuahua, and Guaymas were still operating.⁹⁵

It was up to aspiring braceros approved at the local level to make their way to a migratory station, since the government did not provide transportation. The trip could entail considerable time and expense to the would-be workers, and sometimes families would pool funds to sponsor an applicant. In 1959 Ramon Garfia Bermudez of Paramuen, Michoacan, walked and hitchhiked more than one thousand miles to reach the migratory station at Empalme. The trip took over two months to complete, but he stopped for fifteen days to earn money picking cotton in the Yaqui Valley of Sonora.⁹⁶

US Department of Labor, US Public Health Service, and Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)

⁸⁸ Loza, *Defiant Braceros*, 10, 21, and 25. Mestizo connotes a person of European and Indian descent. Loza explains that a hierarchy existed within this worldview: "Although mestizaje functioned as a spectrum of mixture, whiteness had more value..."

⁸⁹ Cohen, *Braceros*, 98.

⁹⁰ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 16-17.

⁹¹ Grove, "The Mexican Farm Labor Program," 313.

⁹² Little research has been undertaken on the Mexican migratory stations, and their present status and historic integrity was not a focus of this nomination.

⁹³ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 82.

⁹⁴ Norma J. Robinson, "The Public Health Program for Mexican Migrant Workers," *Public Health Reports* 73 (September 1958): 853.

⁹⁵ US Secretary of Labor to US Secretary of State, April 23, 1953, in *Congressional Record*, Senate, June 8, 1953, 6199-6200; Julian S. Strauss, "The Bracero" (MA thesis, Texas Western College of the University of Texas, August 1957).

⁹⁶ *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix), November 22, 1959, 160. Bermudez was selected at Empalme, processed through the Nogales reception center, and picked onions west of Phoenix.

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employees were detailed to the migratory stations to participate in initial screenings. The INS role was “to discover and deny entry to prospective alien workers who are members of the subversive, narcotic, criminal, or immoral classes, and who it is believed will not maintain contract worker status if admitted.”⁹⁷ The last criterion aimed at those seen as likely to “skip” from their contracted work locations and seek other employment. Mexican medical personnel conducted initial medical screenings at the migratory stations. Plans to administer photofluorographic X-rays to migrant workers at the migratory stations proved problematic due to electrical supply problems, and this task shifted to US reception centers.

Department of Labor employees looked for men experienced at manual labor. Rudy Villalobos, a DOL employee at various migratory stations in Mexico from 1941 through 1964, recalled that appropriate bracero candidates were easy to spot: lean and muscular men, ranging in age from the twenties through forties, with facial wrinkles and sun damage from outdoor work. He deemed callused hands from manual work the “icing on the cake.”⁹⁸ Villalobos observed that there were notable differences in Mexican states apparent in the applicants’ manner of dress. Galarza concluded, “A quick look at the applicant’s feet, hands, clothing and general bearing, and a few questions, settled his selection or rejection.”⁹⁹

Transportation of Workers to the US

The men selected as potential braceros were transported from the migratory stations by rail or bus to US reception centers on the border. Each migratory station supplied workers to a specified reception center. At this point in the process, US employers began to bear the costs of recruitment in terms of travel costs and subsistence meals. The program placed emphasis on rapidly transporting the braceros to the US border. Galarza noted: “Until he [the bracero] stepped into a field or an orchard he was an unproductive factor running up costs on his employer’s ledger.”¹⁰⁰ In 1960, braceros recruited in Empalme in the afternoon were shipped to the El Centro reception center (more than four hundred miles to the north) and could be ready for contracting by 8 a.m. the following day.¹⁰¹

Cohen found that some braceros rode to the border in relatively comfortable buses, while others traveled in railroad boxcars without drinking water, toilets, or heat.¹⁰² Rudy Villalobos, who worked for the DOL at the Monterey migratory station in the mid-1950s, reported that braceros generally traveled to reception centers in railroad boxcars equipped with wood seats along the sides and in the center, with a tank in a corner for water. Occasionally a few passenger cars would be used. The workers received prepared sack lunches for the trip.¹⁰³ Carlos Corella, a Department of Labor employee at Rio Vista, judged the braceros’ journey from Chihuahua to Juárez as “horrendous,” a roughly seven-hour trip packed in railroad cattle cars.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁷ “Supplemental Labor Programs,” *I&N Reporter*, June 1961, 1; Cohen, *Braceros*, 107. Cohen noted screening was seen as more important in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when concern over communist infiltration grew and “every potential bracero was a weak link in the armor of U.S. security.”

⁹⁸ Rudy Villalobos, El Paso, Texas, interview by Kristine Navarro, interview number 85, January 31, 2003, Bracero History Archive, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

⁹⁹ Robinson, “The Public Health Program for Mexican Migrant Workers,” 853-54; Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 81.

¹⁰⁰ Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 84.

¹⁰¹ Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 82.

¹⁰² Cohen, *Braceros*, 97-98.

¹⁰³ Villalobos, interview, 2003.

¹⁰⁴ Carlos Corella, El Paso, Texas, interview by Rebecca Carver, February 5, 2003, item number 37, Bracero History Archive, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso; Julius Lowenberg, El Paso, Texas, interview by Richard Baquera, interview number 1583, March 19, 2003, in Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso. Lowenberg also confirmed the transportation of braceros to Rio Vista in railroad cattle cars.

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Screening and Contracting at US Reception Centers

*Screening*¹⁰⁵

The five reception centers located along the US-Mexico border served as important way stations between the Mexican migratory stations and work sites on American farms. Despite their centrality to the process, the reception centers have received only passing discussion in most books about the bracero program.¹⁰⁶ The reception centers specified in Public Law 78 in 1951 stood strategically spaced along the border from west to east: El Centro, California; Nogales, Arizona; Rio Vista (El Paso), Texas; Eagle Pass, Texas; and Harlingen, Texas.¹⁰⁷ All of the centers were less than ten miles from the border. Their placement reflected a desire for proximity to major agricultural areas along the border and access to rail and highway transportation links. The viability of a center depended on growers applying there for laborers. The bracero reception center at Harlingen in southern Texas only operated during 1951-53 before its role was transferred to Hidalgo, Texas, thirty-five miles west.

Some of the facilities used as centers were purpose-built, including Nogales, El Centro, Eagle Pass, and Hidalgo. In Nogales, for example, the Arizona Co-operative Growers Association erected two steel and concrete warehouses costing \$60,000, which were leased to the federal government. In other cases existing facilities were utilized. The coliseum in downtown El Paso, Texas, served as a stop-gap reception center for a few months in 1951, until a permanent location at Rio Vista was readied thirteen miles southeast. Rio Vista employed existing adobe buildings on part of the El Paso County Poor Farm, with a small number of additional buildings constructed to meet expanding and changing program needs. The El Paso Valley Cotton Association advanced funds to the county to prepare the center for braceros. The Harlingen reception center employed facilities at the existing Cameron County Labor Camp but added a mess hall and latrine.¹⁰⁸

The reception centers varied greatly in the total number of workers processed over the life of the program and the geographic areas where they sent workers. Rio Vista in west Texas processed more than 800,000 contracts between 1951 and 1964. It dispatched workers to Texas, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado, as well as several Midwestern and northern Rocky Mountain states. The El Centro center processed more than 1.5 million bracero contracts between 1951 and 1964, while the Nogales center handled just 142,000 contracts for braceros between 1951 and 1962, with the highest number of 19,300 recorded in 1958.¹⁰⁹ Most workers from Nogales were dispatched to Arizona and Utah farms, with smaller numbers sent to New Mexico and Oregon. The center at Hidalgo, Texas, executed 807,000 work contracts from its opening in 1954 through its 1962 closure, with 1955 the peak year with 128,000 contracts. Braceros passing through Hidalgo worked on farms in Texas, Arkansas, Tennessee, Georgia, Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Indiana, and Kentucky.¹¹⁰ Hidalgo sent many braceros to pick cotton in the Arkansas Delta, and historian J. Justin Castro observed: "During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the region was often the fourth, and at times the third, most common agricultural destination for Mexican agricultural laborers."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ A more detailed description of the screening and contracting process at the Rio Vista reception center appears later in this document.

¹⁰⁶ Of the principal books on the bracero program the most extended description of the screening process at reception centers is found in Deborah Cohen's *Braceros*, 98-105.

¹⁰⁷ Contemporary government documents and newspaper accounts often refer to Rio Vista as "El Paso," although it lies some miles outside that city's municipal boundary. The location is now within the City of Socorro, which incorporated in 1986.

¹⁰⁸ *Brownsville Herald*, August 10, 1951, 1.

¹⁰⁹ *Independent* (Long Beach, California), January 2, 1965, 7; *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix), March 27, 1963, 17.

¹¹⁰ *Wichita Falls Times* (Texas), September 29, 1957, 16A.

¹¹¹ J. Justin Castro, "Mexican Braceros and Arkansas Cotton: Agricultural Labor and Civil Rights in the Post-World War II South," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 75 (Spring 2016): 30.

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The reception centers performed bracero processing and contracting and were managed by the US Department of Labor with additional staffing by the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the US Public Health Service. The centers operated at full strength seasonally during peak periods of demand for farm workers. A skeleton staff was present during other times of the year. Historian Mae M. Ngai described the situation at reception centers: “The operation assumed the character of ‘batch processing’ that alienated individual braceros and also strained INS personnel, who complained of a shortage of staff and equipment, long hours, temperatures from 108 to 117 degrees, and a ‘stench of sweaty, unwashed human bodies.’”¹¹² Calavita noted the “degradation and bureaucratic delays” in the process, and Cohen emphasized the dehumanizing aspects of the experience: “As men were examined and reduced to their bodies, they could no longer keep their disgust and humiliation in abeyance.”¹¹³

The facilities handled hundreds or thousands of braceros daily. Each bracero proceeded from station to station within a center where different steps were completed. The aspiring braceros were aware of the type of worker sought by growers, and some roughened their hands to pass muster as experienced manual laborers. Others deliberately presented themselves as meek or docile by adopting humble dress and mannerisms. They first were dusted with disinfectant powder (delousing). Next, each man had his photograph and fingerprints taken. The medical staff then completed a blood test, chest X-ray, and cursory physical exam. The braceros were sent for work selection by a representative of a grower association or individual growers. The bracero then signed a contract for farm work in a specific location; the Mexican consul and manager of the reception center also signed the document. Finally, he received a work permit and identification card.

The US Public Health Service (USPHS) played a role in examining braceros for infectious diseases at the reception centers. Serological screening of migrant workers started in 1955. The development of the rapid plasma reagin (RPR) test for syphilis by the USPHS Venereal Disease Program permitted identification and treatment of infected persons before they departed the reception centers. USPHS also developed a rapid process for tuberculosis screening using 70mm photofluorograms. The X-ray films were developed and read at the center, and those shown as positive for tuberculosis were returned to Mexico. Braceros were deloused using DDT (and later lindane) to prevent the spread of typhoid.¹¹⁴ DDT was banned by the US in 1972 as a possible human carcinogen.¹¹⁵ The USPHS also vaccinated braceros for smallpox, as well as providing emergency medical care at the centers. Between 1952 and 1957, fewer than 2 percent of braceros were returned to Mexico for medical reasons, with tuberculosis or other pulmonary conditions being the most frequent cause for rejection.¹¹⁶

INS staff undertook fingerprinting, photography, and questioning of prospective braceros. An INS publication noted that the “inspection includes a check against lookout records for undesirable aliens.”¹¹⁷ Those found admissible were issued a card attesting to their legal status within the US (form I-100C). Braceros who

¹¹² Ngai, “Braceros, ‘Wetbacks,’ and the National Boundaries of Class,” 221.

¹¹³ Calavita, *Inside the State*, 67; Cohen, *Braceros*, 108.

¹¹⁴ Vicente Estevis, Socorro, Texas, interview by Victor Reta, December 26, 2018. Lindane may have replaced DDT in the later years of the program. According to Estevis, lindane was used at the Rio Vista center during 1960-64.

¹¹⁵ US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, cdc.gov, last updated April 7, 2017. The CDC reported: “Following exposure to high doses, human symptoms can include vomiting, tremors or shakiness, and seizures.”

¹¹⁶ Robinson, “The Public Health Program for Mexican Migrant Workers,” 856; Ngai, “Braceros, ‘Wetbacks,’ and the National Boundaries of Class,” 221. Ngai stated that “the maximum pace was set by the capacity of the X-ray machines, which each handled 175 braceros per hour.”

¹¹⁷ Gertrude D. Krichesky, “Importation of Alien Laborers,” *I&N Reporter*, July 1956, 4.

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satisfactorily completed their work assignments were provided with laminated cards to facilitate their return in future years.¹¹⁸ Members of the Mexican Consular Service were stationed at reception centers to monitor the process, hear complaints from braceros, and sign the employment contracts.

Selection and Contracting

Galarza contended that the reception centers could well have been called “contracting centers” since completing bracero contracts was their primary function. Historian Deborah Cohen related that braceros were assessed by potential employers for traits “that would make them ideal workers: youth, servility, humility, and docility. Growers and labor contractors contended that, after years of working with farmhands, they could spot the good ones.”¹¹⁹ To some observers the process echoed that of antebellum slave or contemporary livestock auctions. Reflecting growers’ views, one representative explained his selection rationale to public health researcher Harry P. Anderson in the late 1950s: “This one ... [is] the right size. He’s built right. He’s a farmworker, you can tell that. ... He hasn’t any big ideas. He’s got the right attitude. He’s humble, not fresh or cocky. He’s an Indian type.”¹²⁰ Former bracero Isidoro Ramirez described the workers’ impression of the experience: “In the [reception] center they put you up against the wall, and the contractors came like they were coming to buy livestock.”¹²¹

Galarza explained the realities of the selection process:

When workers and employers met in the hiring hall of the center in theory it was for the purpose of bargaining on the terms and conditions of the job. In fact the employers were the choosers from a thrice-screened pool that was kept safely above the maximum expected demand. *Braceros* who were not hired within five days were returned to Mexico, their travel and subsistence paid for. Theoretically this gave the employers a week to make up their minds about employing a particular *bracero*. Practically, since it was the supply and not the demand that was excessive, it meant the worker had only that much time to accept employment on the terms offered.¹²²

Transportation to Work Locations

Growers were responsible for transporting braceros from the reception centers to their places of work. Where a grower association was the contractor, braceros were transported to a central location where individual farmers then picked up their allotment of workers. Buses generally were used for longer trips. In rare instances, commercial airlines were employed to carry braceros to distant locations such as Michigan.

Bracero Worklife and Conditions

The bilateral agreement specified protections and standards for food, housing, and treatment of the Mexican workers, and growers developed ways of profiting from some aspects of the process, including meals and insurance. Grower treatment of braceros was influenced by ethnic stereotypes portraying the Mexican workers as innately suited to certain types of field labor and also saw them as more dependable than Americans. This view of braceros as “the other” permitted growers to rationalize exploitation and inhumane treatment. Comments of a Department of Labor field representative in 1957 reflected this perspective: “When you’re out in the fields, they’re usually irrigated, and very humid. The combination of the heat and the humidity is just about

¹¹⁸ J.M. Swing, “A Workable Labor Program,” *I&N Reporter*, November 1955, 15.

¹¹⁹ Cohen, *Braceros*, 99.

¹²⁰ Cohen, *Braceros*, 100, citing Harry P. Anderson, *Fields of Bondage: Mexican Contract Labor System in Industrialized Agriculture* (N.p.: Martinez, California, 1963), 26-27.

¹²¹ Quoted in Smithsonian Institution, *Bittersweet Harvest*.

¹²² Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 83.

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more than a human being can take. ... I'm not going to ask an American ... to do it. I don't know of anybody except the [braceros] who can take it.”¹²³ Growers also lauded the dependability, behavior, and quality of bracero labor over domestic workers. A Stanislaus County, California, farmer commented in 1963: “Give me a bracero and the work is done. Give me some of the domestic help and do the work yourself. ... [American farm workers] do too much talking and inadequate work. They only work when it suits them, but the bracero was brought here to work, and he takes his work more seriously.”¹²⁴

The nature of the arrangements for supplying food and housing was dependent on how individual workers were contracted. In 1959, for example, the hiring of braceros was performed by 305 associations (representing 38,715 members), 86 food processors, and 5,131 individual growers. Congressional sponsors of Public Law 78 envisioned a major role for grower associations, which aided the federal bureaucracy by reducing the number of entities involved in contract administration. The grower organizations were funded by a membership fee and a handling fee per bracero and relieved individual farmers of the logistical matters of bracero hiring. These duties included such tasks as transportation, acquiring documentation, preparing paperwork, fulfilling reporting requirements, dealing with insurance matters, and communicating with and lobbying for members.¹²⁵ If not represented by an association, individual farmers were responsible for the provision of bracero necessities.

While many braceros were illiterate and could not understand the provisions of the lengthy contract executed at the reception center, Ngai argues that “the entire process of recruitment and migration was a crucible they experienced collectively, and within that collective process knowledge was diffused by word of mouth through family and village networks.”¹²⁶ For example, a group of braceros working near Dell City, Texas, presented a handwritten petition in October 1962 complaining that the pay they were receiving did not comply with the terms of their contract, they were being charged \$.25 per person to be driven to town, and they had to go to work hungry because no gas was available for cooking.¹²⁷ If employers were unreceptive to complaints about work conditions, treatment, and accommodations, workers could seek aid from Mexican consuls or compliance officers of the US Employment Service (USES). USES staffing was inadequate to monitor tens of thousands of braceros in widely dispersed field locations. Ngai concluded that Mexican consuls’ advocacy for bracero complaints was most likely to prod the USES to take action, although penalties for violations were typically warnings rather than removal of bracero labor.¹²⁸

Worklife

The wartime program portrayed the imported farmworkers as necessary to “save the crops.” They would be employed on demanding stoop labor purportedly eschewed by domestic workers, or at least at the rates growers were willing to offer. Growers quickly moved to expand the scope of tasks on which braceros could be utilized. Galarza asserted that the scope of permissible jobs for braceros under Public Law 78 “was stretched to include tasks before and after harvesting or not connected with it. Among these were cultivating, planting, dairying, raising livestock, lumbering, delivery to market, and the maintenance of tools, equipment, irrigation ditches and canals. In 1959 the agreement was further amended to permit the employment of braceros as ranch hands.”¹²⁹

¹²³ Quoted in Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California*, 218.

¹²⁴ Letter to the *Modesto Bee*, quoted in “The Second Bracero Program, 1951-1965: Stanislaus County and California,” *Stanislaus Historical Quarterly* 7 (Summer 2014): 643.

¹²⁵ Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 113.

¹²⁶ Ngai, “Braceros, ‘Wetbacks,’ and the National Boundaries of Class,” 225.

¹²⁷ Bracero petition in Spanish, October 17, 1962, Vicente Estevis papers (a former employee at Rio Vista), in the files of the City of Socorro, Socorro, Texas. It is not known to whom the petition was addressed or how the issues raised were resolved.

¹²⁸ Ngai, “Braceros, ‘Wetbacks,’ and the National Boundaries of Class,” 224-25.

¹²⁹ Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 92.

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The bracero role also expanded to include the operation of farm equipment. Working as a bracero, for example, Lucio Apodaca learned to plow with a tractor, receiving \$3.70 a day at first and then \$4 a day once he learned to plow in straight rows.¹³⁰

Since the bracero program under PL-78 spanned thirteen years and encompassed more than two million individual workers in widely scattered geographical areas and crops, the work experiences of individual braceros differed. Ramón Avitia of Durango recalled life with other workers: “We worked together all day; we cooked together; we drank together; we slept together. We spent all our time together.”¹³¹ Mauricio Herrera of Durango reminisced: “I picked lots of different crops, but beets—that was very hard work. And I didn’t earn much money—I thought I would but I didn’t.”¹³² Former braceros vividly recalled their stoop labor experiences: Paulino Martinez remarked “You didn’t straighten up until you reached the other side of the field,” and José Natividad Alva Medina observed “That’s where we encountered el cortito, or what’s called the short-handled hoe. And for sure, that’s where I shed my tears.”¹³³ José Esequiel Adame Castro also remembered the *cortito*, working for hours each day in sugar beets as well as cotton.¹³⁴ Francisco Uviña became a bracero in 1953, picking cotton in west Texas, where he harvested up to four hundred pounds of cotton a day. He worked eight hours a day, six days a week, and earned \$.50 an hour.¹³⁵ Rubén Ramírez, a bracero for four years, recounted picking cotton in Deming and Lovington, New Mexico, and Pecos, Texas: “When you pick cotton you tie a large bag around your shoulders and pull it down the rows until you fill it up. ... it gets very heavy after six or seven hours of work. ... but the short hoe was the worst.”¹³⁶ Felipe Serrano worked for seven years as a bracero, principally for railroads in maintenance-of-way work on bridges and roadbeds. Over time he worked in such states as Washington, Colorado, Ohio, Tennessee, and Texas. He remembered being paid in cash every Friday, for laboring ten-hour days at fifty cents an hour.¹³⁷

Workplace Safety

Bracero fieldwork was arduous and sometimes dangerous, resulting in injury or death to workers. Historian Mireya Loza recalls meeting with a group of former braceros in 2008: “They pointed out the physical toll the work took on their bodies, like soldiers sharing war scars. One man pointed to a finger now missing, another pointed to an old lesion, and so many others clung to the crooks of their backs in pain.”¹³⁸ Former bracero Octavio Camarena of Stockton, California, pointed to the use of the *cortito* as a cause of many lasting lower back injuries to workers, a tool described by United Farm Workers leader Cesar Chaves as “the nail they use to hang us from the cross.”¹³⁹ Braceros could also encounter heat stroke and dehydration in the fields or fall prey to a wide variety of farm accidents.¹⁴⁰ Insurance provided by employers specified fixed payments for loss of life, one or more limbs, and eyesight. Employers were also authorized to deduct insurance premiums from

¹³⁰ Quoted in KVIE, “Los Braceros: Strong Arms to Aid the U.S.A.,” KVIE Public Television, Sacramento, California, 2006.”

¹³¹ Cohen, *Braceros*, 120.

¹³² Cohen, *Braceros*, 113.

¹³³ Smithsonian Institution, *Bittersweet Harvest*.

¹³⁴ José Esequiel Adame Castro, Tucson, Arizona, interview by Marina Kalashnikova, interview number 655, January 6, 2008, Bracero History Archive, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

¹³⁵ Andres Gallegos, “If These Walls Could Talk—El Paso County Farm That Served as Processing Center for Bracero Program Evokes Memories of a Different Era,” *Bordderzine.com*, February 18, 2018.

¹³⁶ Rubén Ramírez, Greeley, Colorado, February 25, 2008, Colorado Oral History & Migratory Labor Project, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, Colorado.

¹³⁷ Serrano, interview, 2018.

¹³⁸ Loza, *Defiant Braceros*, 1.

¹³⁹ Quoted in Loza, *Defiant Braceros*, 178.

¹⁴⁰ Octavio Camarena, quoted in KVIE, “Los Braceros.”

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bracero wages for non-occupational injuries and accidents. According to Galarza, this coverage represented another way for growers to profit from braceros, with premiums ranging from \$2.50 to \$4.00 a month per bracero.¹⁴¹

Travel between work locations and camps could also prove hazardous. In 1958 twelve braceros died and seventeen were injured in Soledad, California, when fire broke out on a converted truck in which they were being transported. The tailgate of the truck had been chained shut. Thirty-two braceros were killed and twenty-two injured in a horrific 1963 accident, when their open truck was struck by a freight train at a grade crossing near Chualar, California. An investigation of the accident, described at the time as the worst bus tragedy in US history, determined the overloaded truck used illegal seating and was mechanically unsafe.¹⁴² Ernesto Galarza, who led an investigation of the accident for US House Committee on Education and Labor, remarked: "It is inconceivable that this accident should, after a few months, be practically forgotten."¹⁴³

Lodging

Different approaches were employed for providing housing to braceros, and the quality of accommodations varied greatly. Loza described bracero housing as having limited privacy, small space per person, and sparse furnishings.¹⁴⁴ Associations sometimes established centralized camps that provided lodging and meals. The nature of bracero lodging differed widely when it was supplied by individual farmers. John McBride, a cotton grower in the Lower Rio Grande Valley who first employed braceros in 1954, recounted that the housing standards for braceros were largely ignored: "Now, it was well known by the TEC [Texas Employment Commission] that practically no suitable housing existed, but they accepted invented housing and made out orders for braceros with abandon. ... The actual houses used were cotton houses, tents, vegetable sheds, and nearly everything, but were, to some extent, the same brush patches and tarpaulins used for wetbacks."¹⁴⁵ In inspections of bracero housing, it was not uncommon for USES to find problems with one-third to one-half of accommodations.¹⁴⁶

Meals

The bilateral agreement limited the amount that employers were required to spend on bracero food to \$1.75 per day for three meals. When provided by the employer, the arrangements for meals included mess halls operated directly by the employer, by a catering service, or by a middleman (such as a growers' association) as a concessionaire. Ngai reports braceros "complained about poor quality, lack of variety, and scant servings" of employer provided meals.¹⁴⁷ Feeding braceros comprised another potential profit center for growers, as Galarza elaborated: "Deductions for meals were a first charge on the wages of the worker, and they often represented a substantial portion of his earnings."¹⁴⁸

Braceros could prepare their own meals on cooking facilities supplied by the employer, but Galarza reported that few braceros chose this option. Growers were required to provide free weekly transportation to nearby towns for braceros, where they could shop for provisions and spend leisure time. Lack of English could prove

¹⁴¹ Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 100.

¹⁴² Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops*, 314-15.

¹⁴³ Quoted in *Mercury News*, September 16, 2013. This section of US Highway 101 was renamed Bracero Memorial Highway in 2013.

¹⁴⁴ Loza, *Defiant Braceros*, 57.

¹⁴⁵ John G. McBride, *Vanishing Bracero: Valley Revolution* (San Antonio, Texas: The Naylor Company, 1963), 16-17.

¹⁴⁶ Ngai, "Braceros, 'Wetbacks,' and the National Boundaries of Class," 234.

¹⁴⁷ Ngai, "Braceros, 'Wetbacks,' and the National Boundaries of Class," 224.

¹⁴⁸ Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 99.

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problematic when shopping in American grocery stores. One bracero who could not read English complained that the canned fish he had purchased was all “guts and bones,” not realizing it was pet food for cats. Many were inexperienced at cooking for themselves.¹⁴⁹

Leisure Time and Local Community Interaction

On days off, braceros often interacted with the local communities in the areas where they worked. Lily Gutierrez Reveles recalled the impact of braceros on the relatively small west Texas town of Pecos in the mid-1950s: “The Braceros, on the weekend, would flood downtown because they had a weekend off. And so, everywhere you went, the grocery stores the post office, they were there buying at JC Penny’s [sic] or Woolworth’s or whatever.”¹⁵⁰ They obtained money orders to send part of their earnings to Mexico but also helped the local economy by buying flour, beans, and other groceries for meals and consumer goods, such as Levi jeans and items for their wives, including tablecloths, dish towels, sewing machines, and other items.¹⁵¹

As he was growing up on his family’s sugar beet farm in Weld County, Colorado, one of Charles O. Collins’ chores included taking the braceros shopping in Greeley. The men sought Singer treadle-powered sewing machines that they could carry back to Mexico. Collins explained that “with such a machine, a man’s wife and daughters could not only sew some of the family’s clothing and home furnishings, but also supplement the family income with the wife’s earnings as a seamstress.”¹⁵² For similar reasons, battery-powered transistor radios were also popular purchases: “With such a radio the man and his family could keep up on the news and become a part of regional and national life. Beyond this, the radio could become a neighborhood recreation center, supplying the music for a *baile* [dance] or other social get together. Neighbors would be charged a small fee to attend such events and the owner's wife and daughter might prepare snacks and sell drinks. I began to see the radio in the same light as the Singer.”¹⁵³ Collins also drove the “Nationals,” a term used to distinguish braceros from native Mexican American workers, to a nearby general store. There they acquired popular items, including “sardines, lard, beans, onions, dried chiles, tomato paste, and postal envelopes.”¹⁵⁴ The men also engaged young Collins to cash their checks in town, secure money orders, and mail them in pre-addressed envelopes to Mexico.

Roberto Orduño García came as a bracero in 1956 and worked for about two years in the Tularosa, New Mexico area, weighing cotton. Leisure activities he remembered included listening to music on the radio, playing baseball, and drinking in the local tavern with nearby Mescalero Apaches.¹⁵⁵ Ex-bracero Pedro del Real Perez remembered: “I was in a place far from town with nothing to do and no place to go. ... You bought a radio to listen to music. That was it. There was nothing else to do.”¹⁵⁶ Former bracero Facundo Ruiz sent most of his earnings home to his mother and younger siblings, but the rest he spent “on dances, finding girlfriends, and doing whatever I wanted. That’s right, because I was young!”¹⁵⁷ Loza noted that workers “created their own

¹⁴⁹ Charles O. Collins, “Life Lessons from the Beet Fields: Growing Up with Braceros,” *Colorado Heritage* (September/October 2012): 20.

¹⁵⁰ Lilly Gutierrez Reveles, El Paso, Texas, interview by Fernanda Carillo, April 7, 2003, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

¹⁵¹ Reveles, interview, 2003.

¹⁵² Collins, “Life Lessons from the Beet Fields,” 22.

¹⁵³ Collins, “Life Lessons from the Beet Fields,” 23; Cohen, *Braceros*, 1. Such radios were something of a status symbol back in Mexico. One bracero interviewed by Cohen stated: “Only braceros had them. They were progress.”

¹⁵⁴ Collins, “Life Lessons from the Beet Fields,” 20.

¹⁵⁵ Roberto Orduño García, Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua, México, interview by Myrna Parra-Mantilla, interview number 29, May 10, 2003, Bracero History Archive, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

¹⁵⁶ Quoted in Smithsonian Institution, *Bittersweet Harvest*.

¹⁵⁷ Facundo Ruiz, quoted in KVIE, “Los Braceros.”

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spaces where they could reclaim their bodies for enjoyment instead of labor.”¹⁵⁸ Cohen reported that some local taverns offered transportation to and from the bracero camps and that prostitutes sometimes visited the camps to provide sex.¹⁵⁹ Compared to the Southwest, braceros working on sugar beets, hops, and railroads in the Pacific Northwest found themselves more isolated and lonelier, given the area’s lack of local Latino communities, restaurants, taverns, and entertainment.¹⁶⁰

Discrimination

The migratory labor agreement with Mexico provided that braceros would not be supplied to areas of the US where they faced ethnic discrimination. Cristina Salinas reported that Texas did not receive braceros until 1947 “because of the state’s long history violence and discrimination against Mexicans.”¹⁶¹ Reveles noted that Pecos, Texas, was “very discriminatory” in the 1950s, stating that Mexican Americans and braceros were not permitted to sit on the main floor of the local movie theater.¹⁶² East Texas was known as one of the worst places for discrimination, with businesses posting signs reading “No Mexicans or dogs allowed.”¹⁶³ Reporter Elmer Kelton found that in the early 1950s in Texas braceros “found that peace officers bore down harder on them than other people.”¹⁶⁴ In the late 1940s, the Mexican government threatened to withhold bracero labor from parts of Arkansas due to poor treatment. Bracero labor proved so important to growers that by the early 1950s the municipal government of Marked Tree, Arkansas, enacted fines for any business found guilty of banning or segregating Mexicans.¹⁶⁵

Operation and Conclusion of the Mexican Farm Labor Program

Initially the US-Mexico Migrant Labor Agreement was to be in effect for six months, a trial-run to demonstrate the merits of the program and allow time for Congress to address the issue of undocumented workers. The Mexican government conditioned continuation of the program on the passage of US legislation to punish citizens trafficking in undocumented migrants. Mexico found the undocumented movement of large numbers of its citizens northward embarrassing, spotlighting its inability to provide an adequate standard of living at home. Increasing undocumented Mexican migration in the late 1940s drew enhanced scrutiny and criticism within the US as numerous headlines proclaimed a “wetback invasion.” The 1951 report of the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor found that growers’ preference for undocumented workers depressed agricultural wages, displaced domestic farmworkers who could no longer compete, and contributed to such social problems as infant mortality, disease, and poor housing conditions.¹⁶⁶

In early 1952 Congress moved to assuage Mexican concerns by amending the Immigration Act of 1917. Public Law 283, passed in early March, made it a felony—punishable by a fine not exceeding \$2,000 or by

¹⁵⁸ Loza, *Defiant Braceros*, 17.

¹⁵⁹ Cohen, *The Braceros*, 122.

¹⁶⁰ Erasmo Gamboa, Associate Professor of History, University of Washington, quoted in KVIE, “Los Braceros.”

¹⁶¹ Salinas, *Managed Migrations*, 130. To persuade the Mexican government to allow braceros in the state, Texas set up a Good Neighbor Commission and enacted a Caucasian Race Resolution that condemned acts of discrimination against Caucasians (including those of Mexican heritage), while maintaining Jim Crow segregation against African Americans. The act had no enforcement provisions.

¹⁶² Reveles, interview, 2003.

¹⁶³ Paul Lopez, Associate Professor of Chicano Studies, California State University-Chico, in KVIE, “Los Braceros.”

¹⁶⁴ Elmer Kelton, “These Are Braceros—No. 4: Tall Tales of Abuse ‘Loco,’ Say Workers,” *Standard-Times* (San Angelo, Texas), 1958, reproduced in US House of Representatives, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Equipment, Supplies, and Manpower of the House Committee on Agriculture, *Farm Labor: Problems in the Southwest and Mexican Labor* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1958), 342.

¹⁶⁵ Castro, “Mexican Braceros and Arkansas Cotton,” 36-37.

¹⁶⁶ US President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, *Migratory Labor in American Agriculture*, 80-84.

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imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years, or both—to transport an undocumented alien into the US, to induce such an alien to enter the country, or to willfully or knowingly conceal or harbor such an alien within the country. Growers persuaded Congress to insert language comprising a major loophole: “For the purposes of this section, employment (including the usual and normal practices incident to employment) shall not be deemed to constitute harboring.”¹⁶⁷ Significantly, the act did not criminalize the employment of undocumented workers. Galarza opined that farm interests thus were able to avoid prosecution by “keeping up the pretense that they were unaware of the illegal status of laborers arrested on their premises.”¹⁶⁸ The legislation satisfied the Mexican government and the labor agreement was renewed.

In 1954 the INS engaged in a massive effort to detain undocumented Mexican workers and return them to Mexico. INS Commissioner Joseph Swing, a former army general, conducted the project (known as Operation Wetback) with military precision. Unauthorized farmworkers were rounded up in pincer movements executed by Border Patrol agents and local law enforcement officers with the assistance of Mexican authorities. The action was accompanied by a large public relations campaign that motivated tens of thousands of undocumented workers to voluntarily return to Mexico. Following the 1954 sweep, the number of apprehensions of undocumented workers dropped dramatically. The numbers fell from more than a million in 1954, to 250,000 in 1955 and less than 30,000 in 1960. Craig observed that the curtailment of unauthorized migrant workers resulted in “an era of unprecedented bracero contracting.”¹⁶⁹ The absence of undocumented workers particularly impacted Texas, where they were preferred to braceros and where discrimination barred certain areas or growers from the program. Texas cotton farmers had to scramble in the fall of 1954 to obtain sufficient braceros for the harvest.¹⁷⁰

The highwater mark for the bracero program came in 1956, with 445,197 bracero contracts. The number of braceros remained above 400,000 yearly through 1959 and then dropped sharply to 315,846 in 1960 and 291,420 in 1961. Fewer than 200,000 contracts were processed during each of the last three years of the program (1962-1964).¹⁷¹ As the number of braceros coming into the US declined, fewer border reception centers were needed to process workers. The Department of Labor closed the centers at Nogales and Hidalgo in 1963.¹⁷² Only Rio Vista, El Centro, and Eagle Pass remained open until the program ended in December 1964.

As the post-World War II decades unfolded, bracero labor was less critical in certain crops because American agriculture became increasingly mechanized. This was especially true in the harvesting of cotton, a crop that earlier employed the bulk of braceros. Whereas in 1950 roughly 8 percent of US cotton was machine harvested, the figure had risen to 78 percent by 1964. The proportion was even higher in the bracero labor intensive states of Arizona and California, where 97 percent of the 1964 cotton crop was machine harvested.¹⁷³

Operating alongside the Bracero Program was a robust system of undocumented labor. Despite the benefits

¹⁶⁷ Public Law 238, March 20, 1942.

¹⁶⁸ Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 62.

¹⁶⁹ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 129-30.

¹⁷⁰ McBride, *Vanishing Bracero*, 11-18. McBride describes the chaos of securing enough workers following Operation Wetback.

¹⁷¹ Congressional Research Service, *Temporary Worker Programs*, 15 and 27.

¹⁷² *El Paso Herald-Post*, March 28, 1963, 3; US Department of Labor, Bureau of Employment Security, Farm Labor Service, *Report of Operations of the Mexican Farm Labor Program Made Pursuant to Conference Report No. 1449, House of Representatives, 84th Congress, First Session, July 1-December 31, 1962* (Washington: Farm Labor Service, 1962), 3. The functions of the Hidalgo center were transferred to Eagle Pass, while the El Centro facility took over Nogales' workflow.

¹⁷³ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 16-17.

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accruing from bracero labor, agribusiness chafed at the bracero program's requirements, including recordkeeping, paperwork, bureaucracy, and transportation costs. The Department of Labor employed compliance workers who inspected conditions at worksites and monitored bracero complaints about work conditions and compensation. Manager George Spence of the El Paso Valley Cotton Association declared in 1956 that "the 'wetback' operation was preferred by the farmer because the employer could do his own hiring and firing, and it was more in the tradition of the American system of individual freedom of operation by the farmer. Not as good a man is obtained as was obtainable under the 'wetback' system. By this is meant not as good a worker."¹⁷⁴ Growers also worried that the protections and benefits extended to braceros might establish precedents for providing such requirements to domestic farm workers.

In 1959 Eisenhower's Secretary of Labor, James P. Mitchell, created a consultants group to analyze the bracero program and make needed recommendations. The consultants' report issued in October 1959 concluded bracero labor did produce adverse effects on domestic farmworkers, including displacement and lowered wages. They further found that growers did not make good faith efforts to find domestic workers and that they were using braceros year-round and in more highly skilled jobs than envisioned at the program's outset. Geographer Don Mitchell judged the consultants "presented a damning picture of the program and the department's administration of it."¹⁷⁵ To address the identified problems, the group recommended that braceros be limited to "necessary crops in temporary labor shortage situations and to unskilled, non-machine jobs." Additionally, they suggested the Secretary of Labor should be empowered to establish prevailing wage rates, to promulgate criteria for assessing adverse effect, and to take action "to insure active competition for the available supply of domestic agricultural workers."¹⁷⁶ The committee opined that "the case in favor of PL 78 on a temporary basis is more conclusive than the arguments against its renewal," provided that steps were taken to address the shortcomings identified in the report.¹⁷⁷

The advent of the administration of Democratic President John F. Kennedy in 1961 ushered in enhanced concern for the welfare of domestic agricultural workers, with the bracero program drawing greater scrutiny and more active supervision from the Secretary of Labor. In addition to mechanization, a 1965 Department of Agriculture study attributed the rapid decline of the numbers of braceros after 1959 to "a tightening of the certification of need for braceros, and more rigid enforcement of wage guarantees to imported and domestic workers."¹⁷⁸

American domestic opposition to the Mexican Farm Labor Program from organized labor and social welfare groups grew and became more effective in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The major groups advocating an end to the program included: National Farmers Union, AFL-CIO, International Brotherhood of Teamsters, National Agricultural Workers Union, United Packinghouse Workers of America, United States Section of the Joint United States-Mexico Trade Union Committee, National Catholic Rural Life Conference, American GI Forum of Texas, National Sharecroppers Fund, National Consumers League for Fair Labor Standards, National Catholic Welfare Committee, and American Friends Service Committee.¹⁷⁹ Arguments over the continuation of the program echoed reasons advanced against its initial adoption. Within Congress Senators Eugene McCarthy

¹⁷⁴ George Spence, interview, June 25, 1956, quoted in Strauss, "The Bracero," 26.

¹⁷⁵ Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops*, 293.

¹⁷⁶ Consultants to the Secretary of Labor, *Mexican Farm Labor Program Consultants Report* (Washington: US Department of Labor, October 1959), 4-6 and 15-16.

¹⁷⁷ Consultants to the Secretary of Labor, *Mexican Farm Labor Program Consultants Report*, 14.

¹⁷⁸ Robert C. McElroy and Earle E. Gavett, *Termination of the Bracero Program: Some Effects on Farm Labor and Migrant Housing Needs*, Agricultural Economic Report No. 77 (Washington: Economic Research Service, US Department of Labor, 1965), 7.

¹⁷⁹ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 142-43.

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(Democrat-Minnesota), William Proxmire (Democrat-Wisconsin), Maurine B. Neuberger (Democrat-Oregon), and Harrison A. Williams (Democrat-New Jersey), Representative George S. McGovern (Democrat-South Dakota), and others emerged as major opponents of the bracero program. McCarthy argued: “The moral problem should be of more concern than the problem of whether we are to have cheap tomatoes or pickles.”¹⁸⁰

Congress refused to renew the bracero program, which ended on December 31, 1964. Secretary of Labor W. Willard Wirtz reflected the Kennedy administration’s views at a January 1965 Senate hearing, declaring that bracero labor was not needed and “there is no situation in this country today in which there is a shortage of sufficiently qualified labor.”¹⁸¹ Growers sought to revive the bracero program, and the committee lawmakers pushed Wirtz to support negotiating a new agreement with Mexico if bracero labor proved to be needed. The Secretary of Labor declined to do so, responding: “I suspect that the availability of crutches would make it more likely we would use them.”¹⁸²

Scope and Impacts of the Program

The program executed 4,216,954 bracero contracts between 1951 and 1964. Ernesto Galarza, labor activist and a historian of the bracero program, observed: “A farm labor recruiting system which was able to assemble, contract, deliver and supervise as many as 100,000 laborers at peak [times seasonally] from distant parts of Mexico was evidently an efficient one.”¹⁸³ The distribution of bracero labor by geographic area was widespread and its importance varied by type of crop and shifted over time. A total of thirty-eight states received braceros over the life of the program, with states along the Mexico border generally comprising the largest users. In 1959 braceros labored in twenty-four states, with Texas, California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Arkansas accounting for 94 percent of workers.¹⁸⁴ By 1963, 57 percent of the total man-months of bracero labor occurred in California, following by 20 percent in Texas, and 11 percent in Arizona. The combined share of Michigan, Colorado, Arkansas, and New Mexico accounted for an additional 10 percent of the total.

In 1959 braceros comprised nearly a quarter of the nation’s agricultural workforce but were highly concentrated geographically. The 48,788 farms that employed braceros that year comprised less than 2 percent of the US total, but in the four top bracero-using states 11 percent of farms participated in the program. In 1957 braceros constituted 34 percent of the seasonal agricultural workforce in California and more than 90 percent of total farm labor in some counties.¹⁸⁵ In California, Galarza discovered that the importance of bracero workers grew during the 1950s: while in 1952 braceros were employed in thirty major crops, by 1959 they were involved in fifty-five crops. Galarza commented: “It was not long, however, before braceros were also found to be if not indispensable, at least advantageous in practically every crop that grew on tree, bush, vine or stalk. In some of these crops they became the backbone of the labor force—in lettuce, strawberries, asparagus, grapes, tomatoes and melons, to name only a few.”¹⁸⁶ Cotton growing occupied a majority of braceros over the life of the program, although its importance greatly diminished over time. The most important crops utilizing braceros in 1963 were tomatoes, citrus, lettuce, sugar crops (cane and sugar beets), and other vegetables. Only 6.8 percent of the cotton crop then used bracero labor.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁰ Robert Sherrill, “The Faith of Eugene McCarthy,” *The Nation*, December 13, 2005.

¹⁸¹ *El Paso Herald Post*, January 16, 1965, A12.

¹⁸² *El Paso Herald Post*, January 16, 1965, A12.

¹⁸³ Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 80.

¹⁸⁴ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 130.

¹⁸⁵ Calavita, *Inside the State*, 78.

¹⁸⁶ Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 87-88.

¹⁸⁷ McElroy and Gavett, *Termination of the Bracero Program*, 15.

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Large-scale agricultural interests profited greatly from the Mexican Farm Labor Program. In a study of seven major bracero-using states for the 1953-64 period, Larry C. Morgan and Bruce L. Gardner estimated that braceros lowered local wages by 8.8 percent annually and enabled growers to save \$185 million in wages yearly.¹⁸⁸ Program provisions requiring the Department of Labor to certify that domestic labor was unavailable in an area and mandating that growers pay the prevailing wage proved to be largely meaningless, since agricultural interests generally controlled wages. Ngai judged that “the fundamental principle of the program, that braceros would not be used to undermine domestic wages or to displace domestic workers, was a fiction.”¹⁸⁹ This further supports the view that the underlying rationale of the program was to enhance the bottom line of agribusiness. Galarza, Gallegos, and Samora concluded that the large infusion of braceros, even though their employment was for a limited duration, “was long enough to set in motion a corresponding displacement of settled Mexican landworkers throughout the Southwest. From this time dates the increasing flow of Spanish-surname people for the large cities.”¹⁹⁰

Many braceros made multiple trips to the US, participating in the program seasonally. C.H. Rhodes, manager of the Rio Vista bracero reception center, opined in 1956 that most braceros were “repeaters,” ones who had contracted with the program several times. He believed “they seem appreciative of the chance to make money in the United States. . . . They go back with a better understanding of this country.”¹⁹¹ When forty-nine-year-old Carmen Delgado Gallegos, from Teocaltiche, Jalisco, passed through the Rio Vista reception center in 1956, it marked his fourth trip to the US as a bracero.¹⁹² In 1957 an INS official estimated that 70 percent of workers seeking entry under the program would possess cards indicating prior satisfactory service as braceros.¹⁹³

As a nation, Mexico financially benefited from the substantial amounts of money braceros sent back home. Craig reported, “It has been estimated that during the 1950s official and unofficial remittances of Mexican farmworkers ranged between \$22 million and \$120 million annually.”¹⁹⁴ In 1956 and 1957 such transfers were the third largest source of foreign exchange to Mexico. The payments flowed directly to bracero families and their communities in some of Mexico’s poorest, rural areas. On an investigative trip to Mexico in 1958, reporter Elmer Kelton concluded: “Often, especially with a short work contract, a bracero will net just enough with one work period, to buy new clothes for all of his family and feed them while he is gone. With a longer contract he can and often does save enough to build an adobe house or improve the one he already has. We found some who have bought small farms. We found a great many who, already owning some land, paid off debts, bought farm implements or livestock, or drilled water wells.”¹⁹⁵ Cohen recounts the story of Álvaro Garcia, who learned to cut hair as a bracero and amassed sufficient savings to acquire “a few more head of cattle, invest in his land, and open the community’s first barbershop. . . . He had left his country a poor farmer and returned to

¹⁸⁸ Grove, “The Mexican Farm Labor Program,” 314, citing Larry C. Morgan and Bruce L. Gardner, “Potential for a Guest-Worker Program in Agriculture: Lessons from the Braceros,” in *The Gateway: U.S. Immigration Issues and Policies*, ed. Barry R. Chiswick (Washington: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1982), 361-411.

¹⁸⁹ Ngai, “Braceros, ‘Wetbacks,’ and the National Boundaries of Class,” 222.

¹⁹⁰ Ernesto Galarza, Herman Gallegos, and Julian Samora, *Mexican-Americans in the Southwest*, 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara, California: McNally and Loftin, Publishers, 1970), 20.

¹⁹¹ *El Paso Herald-Post*, April 28, 1956, D12.

¹⁹² *El Paso Times*, June 14, 1956, 1.

¹⁹³ *El Paso Times*, September 7, 1957, 5.

¹⁹⁴ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 17.

¹⁹⁵ Elmer Kelton, “These Are Braceros—No. 1: Mexicans Are Eager for Return United States Trip,” *Standard-Times* (San Angelo, Texas), 1958, reproduced in US House of Representatives, *Farm Labor*, 338. Kelton’s travel companion and interpreter was Orson Hawkins, a field manager for the Trans-Pecos Cotton Association. Some braceros may have been reluctant to criticize the bracero program in his presence.

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become a small business owner and prominent local citizen.”¹⁹⁶

Craig argues that the bracero program also served as a means of social control within Mexico by enhancing social and political stability. The program served as a “safety valve,” removing large numbers of unemployed young men from the countryside. Without such an outlet, such individuals might have turned to politically destabilizing activism. In addition, the country’s rural areas may have profited from “agricultural skills and techniques acquired by the braceros and put to use on their return, and the culturally broadening experience that being a bracero invariably entailed.”¹⁹⁷

The impact of more than 4.2 million bracero contracts in the 1951-64 period acquainted the program’s more than two million participants with the US side of the border and stimulated both documented and undocumented immigration. Legal immigration from Mexico increased from 60,000 in the 1940s to 219,000 in the 1950s and 459,000 in the 1960s. Over the life of the bracero program the number of undocumented Mexican immigrants apprehended somewhat exceeded the number of bracero contracts executed.¹⁹⁸ Historian David G. Gutiérrez elaborated: “By reinforcing communication networks between contract workers and their friends and families in their places of origin in Mexico, increasing numbers of Mexicans were able to gain reliable knowledge about labor market conditions, employment opportunities, and migration routes north of the border.”¹⁹⁹ Vernon Briggs concluded that many of the post-1964 undocumented migrants “were former braceros. They had been attracted to the Mexican border towns from the rural interior of central and northern Mexico by the existence of the former contract labor program.”²⁰⁰ The bracero program provided a principal impetus for the mass migration of Mexicans northward.

THE RIO VISTA BRACERO RECEPTION CENTER

Overview

The Rio Vista Bracero Reception Center played a bi-nationally significant role in the Mexican Farm Labor Program as one of five border locations serving as way stations for braceros.²⁰¹ Located in the City of Socorro, Texas, thirteen miles southeast of El Paso in the Lower Valley, Rio Vista occupied a central position along the US-Mexico border. Other reception centers operated in Nogales, Arizona, and El Centro, California, situated to the west and Eagle Pass and Harlingen (later Hidalgo), Texas to the east. Rio Vista utilized existing buildings at the El Paso County Poor Farm, undertaking only limited new construction over the life of the bracero program.

The facility, established as the El Paso County Poor Farm in 1916, continued in that function until 1964. In the midst of the Great Depression, the Texas Transient Bureau began construction of a multi-building labor camp on part of the poor farm grounds in 1935. The Transient Bureau soon ceased operations. Works Progress Administration (WPA) completed the previously planned construction in 1936, intending the new buildings for expanded poor farm uses. Prior to occupation by the poor farm, the facility housed a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp for a few months in 1936.

The complex’s use as the Rio Vista Bracero Reception Center, as part of the Mexican Farm Labor Program,

¹⁹⁶ Cohen, *Braceros*, 1-2.

¹⁹⁷ Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 18-19.

¹⁹⁸ Gutiérrez, “An Historic Overview of Latino Immigration and the Demographic Transformation of the United States,” 59.

¹⁹⁹ Gutiérrez, “An Historic Overview of Latino Immigration and the Demographic Transformation of the United States,” 59.

²⁰⁰ Vernon M. Briggs, “Labor Market Aspects of Mexican Migration to the United States in the 1970s,” in *Views Across the Border: The United States and Mexico*, ed. Stanley R. Ross, 204 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978), 204.

²⁰¹ Government reports sometimes referred to the Rio Vista center as “El Paso” for the nearest city. The City of Socorro was not an incorporated city during the bracero era.

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began in 1951 and extended to the program's end in 1964. The reception center and poor farm both closed in 1964. Some buildings of the complex became a training academy and substation for the El Paso County Sheriff's Department that operated from 1966 to ca. 1999. In 1991, the City of Socorro began using part of the historic complex, which in 2020 houses City of Socorro functions, including a courtroom, community center, police station, and administrative offices, in addition to Texas A & M University office and program space. A number of the buildings on the north side of North Rio Vista Road are presently vacant.

Creation and Operation of the El Paso County Poor Farm²⁰²

The Texas poor farm system developed following the Civil War after the state's 1869 constitution provided that each county establish a "Manual Labor Poor House, for taking care of, managing, employing and supplying the wants of its indigent and poor inhabitants."²⁰³ Historian Debbie Mauldin Cottrell studied the Texas system and found that "the poor farm became the county's version of the poorhouse, providing a means of caring for the destitute en masse in a removed, agrarian-based, institutionalized setting."²⁰⁴ Following the creation of El Paso County in 1871, indigents initially received care through the outlay of direct relief to the poor or their caregivers. Beginning in 1885 the county administrative body (the commissioners' court) explored creating a county poor farm to centralize indigent care. This process continued into the late 1880s, as the commissioners grappled with issues of cost and location. The county's initial poor farm opened near Santa Rosa in 1891, but public criticism of the facility led to its closure after only a few years of operation.²⁰⁵

Beginning about 1911, the commissioners' court again considered establishing a poor farm. In 1915 El Paso County voters approved a \$100,000 bond for land acquisition and construction of such a facility. In October of that year the county acquired the farm of Dr. W.P. Book situated in present-day Socorro as the site for the county program. Fourteen acres of the 198-acre tract were designated for use as a poor farm, with the rest leased to the state as an experimental farm.²⁰⁶ El Paso architects Hugh Braunton and John G. Leibert prepared plans for the initial poor farm buildings, which were projected to cost \$65,000.²⁰⁷

Construction proceeded during 1916, and the buildings opened for public inspection in November.²⁰⁸ The project included the main building and the laundry (Resources 2 and 3, respectively) on the south side of today's North Rio Vista Road. The large, roughly X-shaped main building included a central lobby and reception area with four wards housing residents projecting from the center. The 1995 National Register nomination for the property stated that shortly after the initial construction a superintendent's house and barn

²⁰² A more detailed discussion of the poor farm era is contained in the 1995 National Register nomination. See, Terri Myers and David Moore, Rio Vista Farm Historic District, City of Socorro, El Paso County, Texas, National Register of Historic Places nomination, December 1995, 18-22. The property was listed in the National Register on February 22, 1996 (NRIS 96000131).

²⁰³ Constitution of the State of Texas, Article 12, Section 26, 1869.

²⁰⁴ Debbie Mauldin Cottrell, "The County Poor Farm System in Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 93 (October 1989): 170 and 173. Based on a 1987 survey of county clerks and historical commissions, Cottrell found that most poor farms were established in east Texas. She did not note the presence of the El Paso County Poor Farm.

²⁰⁵ Myers and Moore, Rio Vista Farm Historic District, 18-22.

²⁰⁶ *El Paso Herald*, September 10, 1915, 5 and October 18, 1915, 2; Myers and Moore, Rio Vista Farm Historic District National Register nomination, 22-23.

²⁰⁷ *El Paso Herald*, January 15, 1916, 4; Myers and Moore, Rio Vista Farm Historic District nomination, 22-23; Robert G. Hill, Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Canada, 1800-1950, 2009-20, <http://dictionaryofarchitectsincanada.org>. Braunton (1871-1945), a native of England who came to the US as an infant, worked as a carpenter and builder in Stockton, California by 1899. In about 1907 he moved to Vancouver, British Columbia, where he formed a partnership with John G. Leibert 1912-13. They briefly practiced in Seattle before relocating to El Paso, "where the firm flourished, and the name of Braunton & Leibert can be linked to dozens of major buildings in that city from 1916 to 1928." Braunton partnered with Percy McGhee in El Paso ca. 1928-31. Leibert was born in San Francisco in 1887 and died there in 1949.

²⁰⁸ *El Paso Herald*, November 24, 1916, 2.

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(no longer extant) were erected on the north side of the road. Operation of the poor farm was funded jointly by the county and the City of El Paso.

The county selected John O'Shea to serve as Poor Farm superintendent. O'Shea, a railroader, entrepreneur, real estate investor, and farmer, owned an adjacent farm. He and his wife, Agnes, operated the poor farm until his death in January 1929. Agnes continued as manager, assisted by their daughter, Helen O'Shea Keleher. The arrangement was planned as temporary, but the Kelehers stayed on to manage the farm until its closure in 1964.

The Poor Farm during the Great Depression and World War II

The onset of the Great Depression in October 1929 profoundly affected the El Paso area, with thousands rendered jobless and thrown into poverty. The commissioners' court, which had discussed closing the poor farm earlier in 1929, instead kept it open to aid indigent residents. The nation's continuing economic crisis brought the activities of four federal New Deal agencies to the property, substantially increasing the number of buildings at the facility.

Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works

The county secured funding for an expansion of the main building at the farm (Resource 2) from the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works (FEAPW). The agency was established in 1933 by newly elected President Franklin Roosevelt to alleviate unemployment and stimulate the economy. The prominent El Paso architectural firm of Trost and Trost (Henry C. and Gustavus A. Trost) prepared plans in late 1934 for an addition near the southeast corner of the main poor farm building. Constructed 1934-35 by contractor R.E. McKee, the \$26,750 addition was designed to house homeless men.²⁰⁹

Texas Transient Bureau

As hundreds of thousands of persons displaced from farms and factories took to the nation's highways seeking economic opportunities elsewhere, the Roosevelt Administration in 1933 established the Transient Division within the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. The agency provided funds to state and local authorities to create centers and camps for jobless migrants, with no local match required. The Texas Transient Bureau (TTB), created by the state in 1933, managed the program. Since the El Paso area comprised a major transportation hub and principal urban area, the TTB presented plans to the commissioners' court in March 1935 to erect a 160-man transient camp on a portion of the El Paso County Poor Farm. The concept included not only housing transients but proposed employing them in growing vegetables on the poor farm tract. The commissioners approved the concept, and E.R. Nilson prepared the plans for a complex constructed of adobe bricks on the north side of today's North Rio Vista Road, including dormitories and recreation halls, an infirmary, dining hall, office, and bath. One dormitory and one recreation hall were reserved for "colored" residents.²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ Myers and Moore, Rio Vista Farm Historic District National Register nomination, 26; *El Paso Herald*, April 10, 1935; Linda C. Flourey and Carol Kennedy, Commercial Structures of El Paso by Henry C. Trost Thematic Resources, National Register of Historic Places nomination, March 7, 1980. FEAPW was renamed the Public Works Administration in 1935. Henry C. Trost served as chief designer for the firm, which completed many important works in the area, including commercial buildings, hotels, and a theater in El Paso's downtown.

²¹⁰ El Paso County Commissioners' Court, minutes, 17:324, April 3, 1935; *El Paso Times*, August 11, 1935, 8; Myers and Moore, Rio Vista Farm Historic District National Register nomination, 27; US Census of Population, manuscript returns, East Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1940; *Advocate* (Baton Rouge), January 22, 1984, 64. No copies of Nilson's or later architectural plans of the facility have been located. E.R. Nilson was likely Louisiana native Ellwood R. Nilson (1907-84), who lived with his wife in East Baton Rouge in 1940 and worked as a draftsman for the Louisiana Highway Commission. It is unknown how Nilson became involved with the El Paso project. In the post-World War II era, he was an employee of the East Baton Rouge Assessor and owned and operated the E.R. Nilson Map Service in Baton Rouge. Efforts to contact his descendants were unsuccessful.

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Construction of the transient camp got underway in April 1935. The county contributed \$3,500 in materials and retained El Paso architect Percy McGhee (1889-1971) to oversee construction.²¹¹ A native of Waco, Texas, McGhee came to El Paso as a boy in about 1900. He designed many El Paso buildings, including the El Paso Coliseum, the federal courthouse, and buildings at Texas Western College (later the University of Texas at El Paso, or UTEP). His practice extended to New Mexico and other parts of west Texas, including a number of buildings at New Mexico A&M College in Las Cruces (now New Mexico State University).²¹²

Approximately one hundred transient laborers lived in tents at the poor farm, where they learned to make adobe bricks on site and erect the buildings.²¹³ The *El Paso Times* reported in August 1935 that a mess hall capable of accommodating five hundred persons had been completed; it was one of “about fifteen buildings to be erected.”²¹⁴ The south wall of the mess hall (Resource 4) included a round arch in the top part of the curvilinear parapet holding a bell “from one of the oldest churches in Socorro. It has been loaned to the transient bureau.”²¹⁵ The transient bureau dissolved in September 1935, having completed only the mess hall and two other buildings (one of which was likely Resource 19).²¹⁶

Works Progress Administration

Following the dissolution of the transient bureau, most New Deal relief efforts were managed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA, known by 1939 as the Work Projects Administration). Under the WPA, local and state governments proposed needed projects and provided matching funds. The federal agency hired the project workers, providing employment for millions of people. Created to reduce unemployment, most WPA projects included new construction, which resulted in the building of new schools, bridges, highways, outhouses, parks, water lines, and airports around the country.

In order to complete the complex planned by the TTB, in September 1935 El Paso submitted a \$101,848 project proposal to the WPA. The request encompassed construction of twelve dormitories, two recreation halls, an infirmary, sidewalks, and planting of trees and shrubs.²¹⁷ The WPA approved the proposal (Project No. 65-66-4680) the same month, with architect Percy McGhee serving as superintendent. It is not known to what extent, if any, McGhee modified Nilson’s original plans. The construction was anticipated to require 390 men, who would receive meals at the mess hall.²¹⁸ Construction resumed in December 1935, and when completed in 1936 encompassed eleven dormitories, two recreation halls, an infirmary, and a sewage system. To provide water, an elevated water tank that appeared in a 1940 photograph was also added.²¹⁹

²¹¹ El Paso County Commissioners’ Court, minutes, 17:341.

²¹² Percy McGhee Photograph Collection, Collection BHCA-055, El Paso Public Library, El Paso, Texas; *El Paso Herald-Post*, February 3, 1971, 3A.

²¹³ *El Paso Herald-Post*, April 9, 1935, 10. There is no evidence of a borrow pit within the nominated area.

²¹⁴ *El Paso County Times*, August 11, 1935, 8.

²¹⁵ *El Paso Herald-Post*, October 12, 1936, 2. A photo ca. late 1940s still shows the bell.

²¹⁶ *El Paso Herald-Post*, September 16, 1935, 4 and August 31, 1936. Resource 19 has a parapet similar to that of the mess hall.

²¹⁷ US Works Progress Administration, Records of Official Project No. 65-66-4680, microfilm of Texas WPA Projects, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas.

²¹⁸ *El Paso Herald-Post*, November 27, 1935, 12.

²¹⁹ *El Paso Herald-Post*, August 31, 1936; Texas Works Projects Administration, Recreation at Rio Vista Farm, photograph S-5442, July 12, 1940. Only eleven of the planned twelve dormitories were completed. A 1940 WPA photo shows the base of the water tank through the open west doors of Resource 14, then used as a recreation building. The water tank is also shown on a 1943 aerial photograph.

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Civilian Conservation Corps

From April to August 1936, the facility housed members of Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) Camp 889. Created in 1933 as part of New Deal efforts to allay negative social and economic impacts of the Depression, the CCC provided jobs on public lands for unemployed young men aged eighteen to twenty-five. More than three million participants received training and education, food and lodging, health care, and a small salary to send home to their families. Major CCC tasks included such outdoor work as forest fire prevention; elimination of plant pests and diseases; and the construction, maintenance, and repair of park and forest infrastructure. CCC Camp 889 undertook soil conservation and flood control near Fabens, Texas. In the National Register nomination for the complex, Myers and Moore reported that as many as one thousand CCC enrollees occupied Rio Vista buildings until their permanent camp was completed at Fabens, Texas.²²⁰

Continuing Poor Farm Uses

In June 1936, in order to remove the perceived stigma associated with the term “poor farm,” the facility was renamed “Rio Vista Farm.”²²¹ Recalling her years at Rio Vista more than forty years later, manager Helen O’Shea Keleher stated the county tasked her with taking charge of neglected and dependent children in the new buildings on the north side of the road: “You’ve seen pictures of children starving to death in other countries, little tiny legs and arms and distended tummies, head lice and body lice and eating out of garbage cans. Well, we had that in El Paso.”²²² City-county hospital superintendent Dr. A.N. Butler described plans for housing destitute women and children in August 1936: “Until individual apartments can be built in three of 17 dormitories on the site, the mothers and children will live in 25-bed dormitories. ... They will eat in a common dining room. Food will be prepared in a central kitchen. Able-bodied mothers will help cook the food and work at cleaning the dormitories, ... Gardens to raise spinach and turnips will be planted this fall and will be tended by male residents when they are enrolled, ...”²²³

In October 1936 Rio Vista Farm held thirty-four children and twenty-one adults, while fifty-six elderly men and women lived in the original poor farm building on the south side of the road. At one point Keleher estimated the facility housed 300 people, of whom 118 were children.²²⁴ Three buildings on the north side of the road were used as schools, while gardens at the complex supplied vegetables that were canned for use in later meals.²²⁵ Keleher estimated four thousand children passed through the facility during its years of operation. In 1940 the county sold a parcel at the east end of the complex containing three buildings (Resources 11 through 13) to the State of Texas for Agricultural Extension Center use.

The population of Rio Vista Farm dropped during World War II. Most residents resided in the main building, which had four wings housing women, girls, men, and a dining hall. Boys lived in one of the dormitories on the north side of the road and used the toilet/shower building there (Resource 23). Additional buildings in that area provided spaces for recreation and workshops. In 1943 farmers in the Lower Valley suggested that the Rio Vista buildings could be used to hold Italian prisoners of war who might be employed in agricultural work. There is no evidence this proposal was implemented.²²⁶ A 1945 description of the facility noted that “huge cottonwood

²²⁰ Myers and Moore, Rio Vista Farm Historic District National Register nomination, 31-32.

²²¹ *El Paso Times*, June 7, 1936, 6.

²²² Helen O’Shea Keleher, El Paso, Texas, interview by Sarah E. John, interview number 766, September 12, 1978, 13, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

²²³ *El Paso Herald Post*, August 31, 1936. No evidence of the gardens are present within the nominated area.

²²⁴ *El Paso Herald Post*, April 11, 1936 and January 7, 1965.

²²⁵ Keleher interview, 1978, 16-17.

²²⁶ *El Paso Herald Post*, August 18, 1953, 10; Lilla Rakoczy, Military Sites and Oral History Programs, Texas Historical

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and Elm trees shade the buildings. Lawns, hedges and flowers resemble pictures from a garden magazine.”²²⁷

In 1947 County Judge Gilbert examined the complex’s suitability for housing youths, remarking: “The farm seems to be ideally located to take care of a limited number of juveniles.”²²⁸ It does not appear this proposal was implemented, since a 1951 article on the poor farm noted that several of the buildings on the north side of the road had not been used for a decade.²²⁹ When bracero processing began at the property in 1951, the poor farm housed just thirty-five mostly elderly residents. The poor farm operated concurrently with the bracero reception center between 1951 and 1964, as the number of its residents continued to dwindle. At the time of its closure on January 1, 1965 Rio Vista held just twelve elderly residents, who were transferred to rest homes in El Paso.²³⁰

The Rio Vista Bracero Reception Center, 1951-1964²³¹

Selection of the Site

A new role for the poor farm property came in 1951, when the federal government leased most of the buildings for use as a bracero reception center associated with the Mexican Farm Labor Program. Public Law 78 and a bilateral agreement with Mexico specified that US reception centers would be located in specific cities at or near the braceros points of entry to the US.²³² Department of Labor staff began scouting the areas for specific sites for the centers. Agricultural organizations interested in bracero labor advocated for locations most beneficial to their members. Two representatives of the US Department of Labor visited prospective reception center sites in the El Paso area in late August 1951, including the El Paso County Coliseum, buildings at Ft. Bliss, and Rio Vista Farm. They searched for a location capable of processing two thousand braceros daily.²³³ The coliseum was deemed unsuitable due to crowded conditions and interference from ongoing entertainment programs. No buildings at Ft. Bliss were available. The poor farm site was deemed suitable, and the El Paso County Commissioners’ Court authorized the lease of twelve to fourteen acres of Rio Vista Farm on September 1, 1951.²³⁴ Since Rio Vista then was situated in unincorporated territory, the reception center typically was referred to in government reports and newspaper accounts as “El Paso,” after the closest sizable municipality.

Preparation of the Center

To handle the sudden incoming flow of workers, the US Department of Labor temporarily leased facilities at the El Paso Coliseum. In the meantime, the county readied the Rio Vista location to meet the federal government’s requirements for receiving and processing braceros. An initial estimate placed rehabilitation costs at \$12,000 to make Rio Vista’s long-dormant buildings usable. The El Paso Valley Cotton Association advanced funding to the county for the project in anticipation of receiving bracero workers in a location convenient for their

Commission, email to Thomas H. Simmons, August 20, 2018. Investigations by Texas Historical Commission staff did not find any POW camps within Socorro. The 1943 request by farmers may be the reason that local lore holds that the complex was used as a prisoner of war camp during World War II.

²²⁷ *El Paso Herald Post*, September 19, 1945, 1.

²²⁸ *El Paso Herald Post*, January 25, 1947.

²²⁹ *El Paso Herald-Post*, September 21, 1951, 21.

²³⁰ *El Paso Herald Post*, January 7, 1965.

²³¹ Published information on Rio Vista-specific operations and building uses was relatively sparse. Existing oral history interviews of former center employees and braceros were consulted and new interviews were undertaken for this project. There is some variation in the information provided by different individuals, owing fading memories due to the passage of time and changing uses of buildings and processing procedures over the life of the program. Work life at the reception center appears to have been quite compartmentalized by function; women and men undertook gender-based roles typical for the era.

²³² Public Law 78, Section 501(2).

²³³ *El Paso Herald-Post*, August 29, 1951, 2.

²³⁴ *El Paso Times*, September 1, 1951, 1.

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members. The association represented growers in El Paso, Hudspeth, Culbertson, and other west Texas counties.²³⁵

J.E. Morgan and Sons served as the contractor for the rehabilitation project, which included installing “toilet and shower rooms, in addition to some repairs on buildings, fencing the center area, and roadway preparation.”²³⁶ Each of the adobe buildings used as a dormitory accommodated fifty to sixty braceros.²³⁷ Minerva Cheatum, who worked at the center in the late 1950s and 1960s, stated the building exteriors were all painted white.²³⁸

The final cost of readying the reception center totaled more than \$20,000. A metal Quonset building (Resource 18), erected in 1951 as a storeroom, replaced an adobe building destroyed by fire ca. 1948.²³⁹ Sounding much like the narration from a newsreel of the era, the *El Paso Herald-Post* glowingly described the refurbished facilities for its local English-reading audience:

Juan Gonzales will have all the comforts of home and a few more he’s not used to when he arrives at Rio Vista. He will sleep on Army canvas cots on loan from Ft. Bliss. Surplus armed forces blankets will keep him warm. If he’s thirsty, pure drinking water from a recently drilled well is only a few feet away. Plumbers have completed construction of four drinking troughs. Each is equipped with eight bubblers. ... Plumbers have completed installation of 35 showers with hot and cold water, a large dressing room, and restrooms with facilities for 35 persons. Juan’s barracks have new roofs. They are simple but clean. The barracks will be disinfected and sprayed with DDT before the first bracero beds down. Long tables capable of seating 20 men at a time fill the renovated mess hall. More than 300 men can be fed at one time. There is a new electrical system throughout all the buildings.²⁴⁰

The rush to supply cotton farmers with workers resulted in hundreds of braceros being sent to Rio Vista in early September before the facilities were ready. The *El Paso Times* reported that center officials were alarmed “when the workers, who said they had been fed little during their two-day trip to the border, began protesting. Many pointed to their mouths to indicate their hunger.”²⁴¹ The incident passed after water spigots at the facility were turned on and lunches were brought from El Paso.

Center Staffing

The Department of Labor through its US Employment Service (USES) was in overall charge of the reception centers and received critical assistance from the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the US Public Health Service (USPHS). Mississippi native Joseph Beeson of USES served as the first manager of bracero operations in the El Paso area, first overseeing processing at the Coliseum and then guiding the transition of the program to Rio Vista.²⁴² Robert L. Elliott replaced Beeson in March 1952 but remained less

²³⁵ *El Paso Times*, August 12, 1952, 1.

²³⁶ *El Paso Times*, September 1, 1951, 1-2 and September 20, 1951, 32.

²³⁷ *El Paso Herald-Post*, October 17, 1951, 1.

²³⁸ Minerva Christine Ann Cheatum, Socorro, Texas, interview by Thomas H. Simmons and R. Laurie Simmons, June 19, 2019, in Bracero History Archive, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

²³⁹ *El Paso Times*, October 15, 1951, 3; Myers and Moore, Rio Vista Farm Historic District National Register nomination, 13.

²⁴⁰ *El Paso Herald-Post*, September 21, 1951, 21.

²⁴¹ *El Paso Times*, September 9, 1951, 1.

²⁴² *El Paso Times*, September 6, 1951, 1.

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than two months.²⁴³

In May 1952 Cleon H. “Dewey” Rhoades became manager of the center and remained through the closure of the facility in 1964.²⁴⁴ Born in Nebraska in 1907, Rhoades came to Rio Vista after serving as the employment director for the Nebraska State Employment Service. He remained in El Paso after the bracero center closed and later served as an educational adviser at Biggs Airfield at Ft. Bliss. He died in El Paso in 1976.²⁴⁵

Rhoades management team included: Herbert L. Rucker, assistant manager; J.T. “Jim” McDonald, chief of contracting; and Raul Galindo, assistant chief of contracting; M.W. Shafer, chief of reception; Ted Alejandro, supervisor of transportation; and Felipe Chacon, US compliance officer. Keith McDonald headed the Immigration and Naturalization Service staff at Rio Vista. Department of Labor employee Carlos Corella stated the managers “were not required to be bilingual, because they did not have to deal with the braceros,” but their assistants all spoke Spanish.²⁴⁶ Center employees with direct bracero contact were required to be bilingual in English and Spanish. Cheatum and Corella believed most of the supervisors had served in the military. Corella described the managers as older than rank-and-file employees and as college graduates.²⁴⁷

Former reception center workers recall that the top managers were housed in the main poor farm building on the south side of the road (Resource 2) and in the original poor farm superintendent’s residence (no longer extant) west of the mess hall (Resource 4). It is not clear if offices operated concurrently in the two locations or if they shifted at some date. The federal government began leasing the superintendent’s residence as a headquarters in 1952. Herminia Reza Contreras, who worked at Rio Vista for INS and DOL from 1953 to 1963, recalled it as “a lovely house but we made it up into offices.”²⁴⁸

Many of the women clerk-typists were local young women recruited for work at the center directly from local high schools. Celia Castro Berton recalled taking stenography and typing tests while still in high school and then obtaining temporary work at Rio Vista during the summer of 1953 following graduation.²⁴⁹ Ines Enciso related that the women workers at the center were housed in buildings on the north side of the quadrangle and that the south side was staffed by men.²⁵⁰

Staffing at Rio Vista fluctuated depending on the need for braceros, with August through September generally the busiest times due to the Texas cotton harvest. Shortly after the center opened, it had a total of sixty-four employees.²⁵¹ In 1956 the *El Paso Herald-Post* reported the center had a staff of twelve to sixty depending on the season.²⁵² Minerva Cheatum, who worked at the center in 1957-59 and 1963-64 estimated that during busy seasons Rio Vista had roughly 150 employees, with about fifty in contracting, twenty in immigration, and three

²⁴³ *El Paso Herald-Post*, March 24, 1952, 1.

²⁴⁴ *El Paso Times*, May 8, 1952, 1.

²⁴⁵ *El Paso Times*, May 8, 1952, 1 and August 12, 1976, 18 and 54; Cleon Houston Rhoades, accessed November 14, 2020, findagrave.com.

²⁴⁶ *El Paso Times*, June 15, 1956, 21; Corella, interview, 2003. Corella, a native of Clint, Texas, worked at Rio Vista from 1955 to 1962.

²⁴⁷ Corella, interview, 2003.

²⁴⁸ Contreras, interview, 2003.

²⁴⁹ Celia Castro Berton, El Paso, Texas, interview by R. Laurie Simmons and Thomas H. Simmons, June 5, 2018, in Bracero History Archive, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

²⁵⁰ Ines Enciso, El Paso, Texas, telephone interview by Thomas H. Simmons, August 31, 2018.

²⁵¹ *El Paso Times*, October 20, 1951, 1; Enciso, interview, 2018. Enciso estimated the center had forty to fifty employees when she worked there in 1951-52.

²⁵² *El Paso Herald-Post*, April 28, 1956, D12.

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or four in transportation, plus supervisors, public health workers, and security.²⁵³

Rio Vista lay some distance from downtown El Paso, and the present system of limited access highways did not exist. Some parents drove the young women employees to Rio Vista. Berton remembers that her mother drove her to work in the mornings, and she obtained a ride with co-workers in the evening to downtown El Paso, where she took a bus home. Cheatum drove herself from nearby Clint; Terrazas also drove herself. Enciso and Perez remembered a bus bringing workers down North Loop Road from El Paso.²⁵⁴

According to Celia Berton the clerk-typists in the contracting section worked from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., receiving a half-hour lunch break and eating in shifts in a room in the building where they worked. The workers never ate with the braceros. Minerva Cheatum recalled having an hour for lunch; she usually brought a lunch or went with several other women workers to Carmen's Café in Ysleta, where they had telephoned in orders.²⁵⁵

Mexican Government Participation

Illustrating the bilateral character of the migrant worker program, the US and Mexican flags flew on separate flagpoles placed east of the mess hall at Rio Vista. A sign in Spanish read: "Bienvenidos, braceros!"²⁵⁶ Ines Fresquez Enciso, who worked in contracting in 1951-52 and later served as the secretary for the Mexican consular officer, recalled that the consul's office was in the main poor farm building (Resource 2) on the south side of the road.²⁵⁷ She married Consul José Luis Enciso in April 1953. Elisio Ruiz Russek succeeded Enciso and remained the Mexican government representative at the center until at least 1956.²⁵⁸

The Mexican Consul was charged with safeguarding the rights of the braceros and ensuring that the US was complying with the terms of the Migrant Labor Agreement. The representative signed each bracero contract executed at the center. Center employee Carlos Corella recalled that the consular officer had two assistants. Corella related that when braceros returned to Rio Vista at the end of their work assignments the consul "would invariably get together with them, every single load, and ask them if they had any complaints, if they had been mistreated, if they had been abused, if they had been exploited, if they had been paid properly. He would prod 'em, because most of them would not want to complain, understandably, because they anticipated coming back next year, and they got used to the idea that certain exploitation, certain abuse was expected, it was part of being a bracero, so they tolerated it."²⁵⁹

Mexican oversight of the bracero process was not limited to consular representatives. At various times in the 1950s Mexican federal government officials visited Rio Vista. Angel Carabajal, Governance Secretary (Secretario de Gobernación) inspected the center in September 1954.²⁶⁰ In 1955 Miguel G. Calderon, director general of the Mexican Department of Migratory Workers, examined bracero centers at Rio Vista, Hidalgo, and

²⁵³ Cheatum, interview, 2019.

²⁵⁴ Enciso, interview, 2018; Perez, interview, 2003; Cheatum, interview, 2019.

²⁵⁵ Celia Castro Berton, El Paso, Texas, interview by Fernanda Carrillo, January 22, 2003, in Bracero History Archive, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso. The interview incorrectly identified her as Celia Berton Castro; her maiden name was Castro and her married name is Berton.

²⁵⁶ *El Paso Herald-Post*, April 28, 1956, D12.

²⁵⁷ Enciso, interview, 2018; Berton, interview, 2018; Dr. Peter A. Ortega, El Paso, Texas, interview by Thomas H. Simmons and R. Laurie Simmons, June 18, 2019. Berton and Ortega also stated that the consular staff worked in the main poor farm building.

²⁵⁸ *El Paso Times*, June 15, 1956, 21.

²⁵⁹ Corella, interview, 2003.

²⁶⁰ *El Paso Times*, September 10, 1954, 18.

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El Centro.²⁶¹ In 1958 Mexican Ambassador Manuel Tello visited the center.²⁶²

Processing Flow

Groups of braceros destined for Rio Vista arrived by train in Ciudad Juárez on the Mexico bank of the Rio Grande. A staff person from the reception center met them at the depot, and, with local police controlling traffic, walked them through the streets of the city a mile or two to the international bridge. Rio Vista Department of Labor employee Carlos Corella performed this escort duty starting in 1955 and recalled bringing in groups of 800 to 1,600 braceros per trip. Following a cursory inspection by American immigration, Corella would assemble the braceros and distribute lunches, consisting of “an apple and two gringo bologna sandwiches in a brown paper bag. They would look at it, some of them were surprised, they didn’t know what it was.”²⁶³ After a short trip by bus the braceros arrived at Rio Vista.

Given the large number of braceros passing through the reception center, the *El Paso Herald-Post* noted “the workers move through processing on a production line basis.”²⁶⁴ Growers pushed to quickly move braceros from the migratory stations in the interior of Mexico to worksites on farms in the United States. When the center opened in September 1951, a peak of 1,500 braceros daily was anticipated, but by October up to 2,000 were being processed each day, leading center manager Joseph G. Beeson to conclude the site was too small for bracero processing.²⁶⁵ By 1956, Rio Vista processed 2,500 to 2,800 braceros daily, and Dr. Pedro A. Ortega recalled screening a record of 3,133 men on one occasion.²⁶⁶

Based on oral history interviews with former Rio Vista employees, most braceros arrived and departed the same day. Buses dropped off braceros at the southwest corner of the quadrangle on the north side of the road at the site of the current sun shelter (Resource 20). The braceros then moved counterclockwise around the quadrangle to processing stations in the surrounding buildings, including those designated for public health, fingerprinting, photography, selection, contracting, and transportation.²⁶⁷ Carlos Corella, a DOL employee, commented: “The braceros got used to the idea of the Army, that you hurry up and wait and stand in line and stand in line, ...”²⁶⁸ Felipe Serrano, who first came through Rio Vista in 1951 and worked on railroads in various states for seven years, echoed this point: “We’d have to make a line to go to the toilet. Because we would be 500-600 men. It wasn’t easy. There would be a line for the beds, to shower, and to get our blankets.”²⁶⁹

The center had a central public address system, and staff members were equipped with bullhorns to communicate in smaller areas. Workers who successfully passed the screenings and obtained a contract were picked up at the northwest corner of the compound and transported to work sites, some in distant states. Oral history interviews and other information reveals that building uses and processing steps were not static during the 1951-64 period and shifted over time. The following section generally describes the process at Rio Vista.

²⁶¹ *El Paso Times*, October 22, 1955, 13.

²⁶² *El Paso Times*, May 18, 1958, 5.

²⁶³ Corella, interview, 2003. Corella recalled the braceros arriving in Juárez about 10am or 11am. The arrival time varied over the life of the program.

²⁶⁴ *El Paso Herald-Post*, September 21, 1951, 21.

²⁶⁵ *El Paso Herald-Post*, October 23, 1951, 3.

²⁶⁶ *El Paso Times*, June 15, 1956, 21; Ortega, interview, 2019.

²⁶⁷ Herminia Reza Contreras, El Paso, Texas, interview by Fernanda Carrillo, interview Number 1566, March 18, 2003, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso; Cheatum, interview, 2019.

²⁶⁸ Corella, interview, 2003.

²⁶⁹ Felipe Serrano, Socorro, Texas, interview by Rocio Hinojosa, “Café con Leche,” Season 1, Episode 4, City of Socorro, Texas. December 11, 2018.

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Health Screening

The adobe building (Resource 19) at the west end of the south row of buildings housed the US Public Health Service (USPHS) staff, which included doctors, X-ray technicians, and serologists. The braceros were first disinfected for lice. In 1955 Carlos Corella, a Department of Labor employee, described the process at Rio Vista:

... they were formed in four or five lines, they were placed through a Quonset hut [Resource 18], and they were asked to strip, and they were sprayed with a white powder all over their body, including their hair, facial hair, the hair on their head, and even around the low area. Some of the braceros that experienced that for the first time were embarrassed, and some thought it was kind of cute, it was a laughing matter. When they would come out of the Quonset hut, they would look at each other, and they were all white, and they'd say, "Well, I guess we're gringos now." Humor was always part of the way they tolerated the adventure.²⁷⁰

Most braceros took this delousing more seriously, and their nakedness, the heat, and the choking clouds of powder comprised a dehumanizing experience. Former bracero Francisco Uviña was processed through Rio Vista and noted that during this step "they wouldn't give us masks. Only those that were fumigating us had masks."²⁷¹ Vicente Estevis, who served as USPHS laboratory manager at Rio Vista from 1960 through 1964, said that during his time the fumigation took place in the sun shelter (Resource 20). The braceros disrobed in the open at the southwest corner beneath the shelter, and they and their clothing were dusted with lindane powder there.²⁷² Estevis noted the braceros arrived before dawn and that "there was nothing out here" then in terms of development.²⁷³ Estevis stated the men washed up and ate breakfast following the disinfection.

Estevis recounted the braceros then went through several medical screenings. The Quonset hut (Resource 18) also accommodated a very general physical inspection by a doctor, including a check for hernias, and housed the USPHS laboratory.²⁷⁴ The braceros received a chest X-ray to identify men who were positive for tuberculosis, a reason for rejection by the program. Julius Lowenberg served at Rio Vista as an X-ray technician ca. 1954-55 despite having "no training" for the job, a notable admission considering the seriousness of the task being performed. X-rays were done on 70mm roll film and read by technicians like Lowenberg, who brought anomalies to the attention of the doctor. Larger X-ray plates were taken in questionable cases. He recalled working in what he called an infirmary with bunks and X-ray machines. Resource 19 was labeled as the USPHS building and the infirmary on the 1956 map of the center. In addition to tuberculosis, Lowenberg indicated that bad eyesight or albinism constituted other causes for rejection, but relatively few men were turned down for medical reasons.²⁷⁵ During the tenure of Estevis there were about thirty-five people working for USPHS at Rio Vista.

²⁷⁰ Corella, interview, 2003; Enciso, interview, 2018. Ines Enciso also recalled that the Quonset hut was used for delousing. The white powder was not identified but, in 1955, was likely DDT.

²⁷¹ Francisco Uviña in Borderzine Reporting, "Revisiting the Rio Vista Farm and the U.S. Bracero Program," YouTube video, February 18, 2018.

²⁷² Lindane, a white powder used for treating head lice and scabies, is now banned in many countries according to MedicineNet.com.

²⁷³ Estevis, interview by Victor Reta, 2018; Vicente Estevis, Edinburg, Texas, telephone interview by Thomas H. Simmons, August 22, 2019. When asked about the public nature of the disrobing in 1919, he noted that the center was then in a rural area with little passing traffic on the road.

²⁷⁴ Estevis, interview 2018.

²⁷⁵ Julius Lowenberg, El Paso, Texas, interview by Richard Baquera, interview number 1583, March 19, 2003, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso; Ortega, interview, 2019.

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The braceros underwent blood tests, including the rapid plasma reagin (RPR) test developed by the USPHS that screened the men for venereal diseases and provided results before the workers left the reception center.²⁷⁶ Sam Sánchez, employed at the center from 1959 to 1964, drew blood; he was inexperienced but received some instruction on the procedure.²⁷⁷ Dr. Pedro A. Ortega, a Cuban refugee who served at Rio Vista from 1961 to 1964, stated that those who tested positive for a venereal disease were treated with 2.4 million unit doses of Bicillin administered using 20-gauge needles. The shot resulted in some men fainting.²⁷⁸ Sometimes the public health staff tracked down men in later stages of processing after the medical screening turned up problems that needed further study or which were cause for rejection.

Meals

Braceros received meals in the mess hall (Resource 4) at the west end of the quadrangle. The building had kitchen space in the north part of the building. The mess hall could seat 200 men at a time. Bracero Francisco Uviña described the facility: “The dining room was around 100 feet and there was a table that stretched from one end of the room to the other. That’s where we all ate. Beans, rice, and tortillas.”²⁷⁹ Breakfast featured bacon and eggs, beans, bread, an orange, and milk or coffee. The lunch and dinner menus included beans, chili con carne, corn, Spanish rice, cabbage and carrot slaw, bread, and a beverage. The meals were prepared by a concessionaire under contract to the federal government.²⁸⁰ Estevis and Cheatum recalled that an African American cook prepared the meals.²⁸¹ Sam Sánchez described the meals as “almost always the same and not very appetizing.”²⁸² Bracero Felipe Serrano, who was sixteen years old when he first came through Rio Vista in 1951, agreed, asserting “the food wasn’t good” and recalled being “hungry all the time.” He noted that there was a store (at the north end of the mess hall) where “they would sell sandwiches and snacks, but if we didn’t have any money, how would we buy them?”²⁸³

Photography and Fingerprinting

The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) questioned braceros to identify possible subversives or “skips” (one who would violate program rules by leaving his assigned workplace and seek work elsewhere) and prepared identification cards with a photograph and fingerprints. Socorro Perez, who worked in the fingerprinting section typing passports from about 1955 to 1957, recalled: “If their hands were very smooth, that meant they were not workers, they were just out here for the adventure or to stay here.”²⁸⁴ She noted that in some cases manual work had so worn some men’s hands that they no longer had usable fingerprints. She remembered one instance where she fainted from the odor of braceros surrounding her: “They had just gotten off the train. I started to type, then the smell, I couldn’t breathe, only the smell, pow, I fainted. ... They had not taken a bath or anything.” Ms. Perez stated her section had a desk in a corner of “a big room, like, a warehouse”

²⁷⁶ US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Public Health Service, *The Communicable Disease Center Report of Activities, July 1, 1956 to June 30, 1957* (Atlanta: US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Public Health Service, 1957), 46-47.

²⁷⁷ Sam Sánchez, San Elizario, Texas, interview by Richard Baquera, interview number 86, April 19, 2003, in the Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

²⁷⁸ Ortega, interview, 2019. In 1956 doctors Joe Ramirez-Rivera and William E. McGhee oversaw the USPHS activities.

²⁷⁹ Uviña, quoted in Gallegos, “If These Walls Could Talk.”

²⁸⁰ *El Paso Times*, June 15, 1956, 21.

²⁸¹ Estevis, interview, 2018; Cheatum, interview, 2019.

²⁸² Sánchez, interview, 2003.

²⁸³ Serrano, interview, 2018.

²⁸⁴ Socorro Perez, El Paso, Texas, interview by Richard Baquera, interview number 1564, March 3, 2003, 5, in the Bracero History Archive, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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(perhaps Resource 21).²⁸⁵ Celia Berton recalled that mostly male employees staffed the center's fingerprinting and photography sections. Minerva Cheatum estimated that about twenty people worked for immigration. Ines Enciso noted that those sections were located in the northeast corner of the quadrangle in Resources 9 and 10. A 1956 map of the center which showed photography and X-ray (likely meaning X-ray *processing*) occupying Resource 10.

Selection

Representatives of grower associations or individual farmers came to the reception center to select braceros based on their particular needs. Minerva Cheatum identified the large frame building on the east (Resource 21) as the location where the selection took place.²⁸⁶ Important players in requesting braceros from Rio Vista included: the El Paso Valley Cotton Association, the Trans-Pecos Cotton Association, the Artesia Alfalfa Growers Association in Texas; the Dona Ana County Farm and Livestock Bureau in New Mexico; and the Holly and Great Western sugar companies in Colorado. The Trans-Pecos Cotton Association was the largest single employer of braceros in the nation in 1952, when it contracted more than 19,000 workers.²⁸⁷

Some work destinations were more popular than others among braceros, based on pay levels and the nature of the work. Experienced braceros avoided work assignments in the Pecos Valley of Texas and preferred work in the sugar beet fields of Colorado. The center staff would announce over the public address system that certain numbers of men were needed for work at a particular location. Cheatum recalled that when jobs were announced for the Holly or Great Western sugar companies in Colorado, men would come running from all over the center to apply.²⁸⁸ At times braceros would stay overnight or for a number of days hoping for a specific type of work or work location.

The selection occurred in the large building at the opposite end of the quadrangle from the mess hall (Resource 21), according to Sam Sánchez, who worked at Rio Vista from 1959 to 1962.²⁸⁹ He formed the braceros into lines and kept order as the selection proceeded. When some of the big sugar companies came for five hundred men, the selection moved quickly, primarily based on the outward appearance of the men.²⁹⁰ Braceros clearly lacked bargaining power vis-à-vis growers, and the process appears to have been structured for the convenience of the latter. DOL employee Carlos Corella stated the center was always crowded with contractors or farmers eager to obtain workers. He described how braceros were chosen, notably describing selected groups of workers as "the property" of a grower:

We called it a selection line, and there the contractors or farmers, whichever would happen to be the case, would speak to them, and based on a very, very short interview, three, four questions: "Do you know how to pick cotton? Do you know how to pick cantaloupe? Do you know how to pick corn? Do know how to pick strawberries? Do you know how to pick watermelons?" ... Depending on their response, they would choose the braceros. They would select them, and they were considered then the property of that contractor or that farmer. They were placed aside and

²⁸⁵ Perez, interview, 2003. She commented that the Rio Vista buildings "were all the same, but this one [where she worked] was bigger," strengthening the case for Resource 21.

²⁸⁶ Cheatum, interview, 2019.

²⁸⁷ *El Paso Times*, May 24, 1953, 2:2.

²⁸⁸ Cheatum, interview, 2019.

²⁸⁹ Sam Sánchez, Horizon City, Texas, telephone interview by Thomas H. Simmons, March 24, 2020; Cheatum, interview, 2019. Minerva Cheatum also confirmed that the selection occurred in Resource 21. The 1956 lease map of the center labeled the building as a dormitory, a function it probably served at night.

²⁹⁰ Sánchez, interview, 2003.

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processed individually under that contractor, under that farmer, and eventually transported to their final destination, either the farm of the individual farmer or wherever the contractor would choose to send them, because the contractors would contract for several farmers.²⁹¹

A certain percentage of braceros would be processed and transported on the day that they arrived. The remainder would stay overnight and would be selected and shipped out over the next few days. The Rio Vista managers would alert the Mexican migratory station when the center was able to accept a new batch of braceros. Corella judged the “the timing was practically perfect.”²⁹²

Contracting

The contracting section completed individual contracts for each bracero with the specified employer. Inez Enciso, who worked at the center from 1951-52, remembered the contracting section occupying three buildings on the north side of the quadrangle (Resources 6 through 8). Celia Castro Berton recalled that in 1953 the section was housed in “a long building” with the clerk typists seated before typewriters at a long desk facing waiting braceros.²⁹³ Faye Terrazas, who worked as a clerk-typist at Rio Vista from 1954 to 1957, recalled there were a dozen women sitting on a podium in front of typewriters facing lines of braceros.²⁹⁴ She described her workplace as “a long, a very long building ... On the side of the building they had a chain linked fence around a portion of the outside and that’s where the men stood but most could get in [in snaking lines]...”²⁹⁵ Flora Garcia Villalva, a clerk-typist at the center from 1954-58, described the contracting area as “a long room, barrack type, a lot of desks, and men standing right in front of you, lines of men standing while you’re processing.”²⁹⁶ Herminia Reza Contreras, who worked at Rio Vista from 1953 to 1963, recalled the contracting clerk-typists located in buildings on the north side of the quadrangle (likely Resources 6 through 8).²⁹⁷ The 1956 lease map showed four buildings along the north edge of the quadrangle were being used for processing (Resources 6 through 9). The contracts were signed by the employer, the Mexican consul, and the manager of the reception center. A manifest was prepared listing all braceros going to a particular destination, and it came with each contingent of workers aboard their bus or truck.

During the selection step, the name of the employer and destination were filled in on the printed contracts, and the braceros carried the forms to contracting. The women clerk-typists in contracting were tasked with filling in the remaining blanks. Berton and Cheatum described the bracero work contracts as multiple pages with carbons and said it took about twenty minutes to complete one. Terrazas said each contract took about five minutes and that the work was non-stop: “... We just typed all day long. ... It was never an interval where we ... didn’t have anything to do or we talked to each other but typing.”²⁹⁸ Cheatum, who worked as a clerk-typist at Rio Vista from 1957-58 and 1960-61, felt the braceros seemed tense and a little intimidated lining up before the row of young women with typewriters. The women staff used information from a Mexican form (#345) to complete

²⁹¹ Corella, interview, 2003.

²⁹² Corella, interview, 2003.

²⁹³ Berton, interviews, 2003 and 2018. In both interviews Berton identified Resource 22 on maps as where she thought she worked. In the 2003 interview she described her workplace as “in a large room. I know the other rooms were smaller, and they were around the camp.” In 2018 she did not think contracting was in Resource 21, since the building in which she worked did not have as many posts on the interior as that building has.

²⁹⁴ Faye Terrazas, El Paso, Texas, interview by Fernanda Carrillo, interview number 1571, April 1, 2003, in the Bracero History Archive, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

²⁹⁵ Terrazas, interview, 2003.

²⁹⁶ Flora Garcia Villalva, El Paso, Texas, interview by Fernanda Carrillo, interview number 1556, March 26, 2003, in the Bracero History Archive, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

²⁹⁷ Contreras, interview, 2003.

²⁹⁸ Terrazas, interview, 2003.

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some fields and asked the men questions to complete other parts of the contract, including name, age, address, next of kin, beneficiary, and identifying marks. For identifying marks braceros reported tattoos, including many with religious themes such as Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe or the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Berton recalled that many workers could not provide an exact date of birth or a street address, describing their residence as “behind the church” or “next to the railroad station.” Many of them could not write and signed contracts with an “X.”²⁹⁹

Transportation

The transportation section was located at the northwest corner of the quadrangle in Resource 5. Its workers prepared a manifest for each group of braceros, listing the names of workers headed for specific employer locations. Contracted braceros were picked up at the northwest corner of the complex for transportation to their work sites. The workers were provided a sack lunch for the trip to their workplaces, but most ate the food immediately. The sun shelter and restroom (Resources 25 and 27) built northwest of the quadrangle in 1956 were likely placed there to accommodate braceros waiting for transport. The expense of transportation lay with grower associations and farmers, who employed buses for longer distances and trucks and pickups for closer destinations. New Mexico farmer David F. Herrera reported braceros were hauled to the Pecos, Texas, area in cattle trucks.³⁰⁰ Fred Morales recalled that his grandfather, Ernesto Morales, transported hundreds of braceros by station wagon and car from El Paso via Rio Vista to farms in the Dell City area east-northeast of El Paso during approximately 1955-61.³⁰¹ In 1956, 195 braceros contracted at Rio Vista traveled by commercial airliner from El Paso to work in sugar beet fields in Michigan. Travel by air was a rare occurrence for the workers.³⁰²

Other Center Elements

Administrative Offices. Ines Fresquez Enciso, who worked at Rio Vista in 1951-52, reported that a portion of the main poor farm building on the south side of the road (Resource 2) housed the reception center’s top manager, assistant manager, and heads of sections. The facility included a large switchboard for routing telephone calls. The Mexican Consul at Rio Vista, José Luis Enciso, also had an office in this building. He observed the bracero process, noted how they were treated, and addressed questions and complaints from workers. The consul representative was tasked with signing every bracero contract.³⁰³

West of the mess hall, the poor farm superintendent’s house (no longer extant) was leased in 1952 for use as the headquarters for the reception center. Herminia Reza Contreras, who worked at the center from 1953 to 1963, observed: “It’s a lovely home but we made it up into offices.”³⁰⁴ Minerva Cheatum, who worked in contracting, recalled taking materials to this headquarters building lying just west of the mess hall (Resource 4).

Dormitories. While most braceros passed through the center on the same day they arrived, others stayed overnight and some might spend a week seeking particular work. In 1951-52 the three buildings to the east (Resources 11 through 13) were used as dormitories. Those three buildings were returned to the Agricultural Extension Service in early 1952, necessitating the acquisition of replacement space. Two large dormitories equipped with cots and blankets for overnight stays were constructed, one at the east end of the quadrangle

²⁹⁹ Berton, interview, 2018.

³⁰⁰ David G. Herrera, Mesquite, New Mexico, interview by Beth Morgan, interview Number 1559, April 7, 2003, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

³⁰¹ Fred Morales, El Paso, Texas, interview by Thomas H. Simmons, September 8, 2019. Morales referred to this as his grandfather’s “taxi service.”

³⁰² *El Paso Times*, June 14, 1956, 14.

³⁰³ Enciso, interview, 2018. She left the contracting section to serve as Enciso’s secretary; the couple married in April 1953.

³⁰⁴ Herminia Reza Contreras, El Paso, Texas, interview by Fernanda Carillo, interview number 1566, March 18, 2003, in the Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

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(Resource 21, 1952) and one along its south edge (Resource 22, ca. 1954-56). By 1956 the center had sleeping space for 1,700 men, including the two large buildings and three adobe buildings along the southern edge of the quadrangle (Resources 15 through 17).³⁰⁵ Former bracero Felipe Serrano recalled the dormitories were equipped with Army-type bunk beds, observing that “there were a lot of us, and when we were full, we had to sleep outside.”³⁰⁶

The Quadrangle. Braceros congregated, relaxed, and milled around in the large, open quadrangle formed by the center’s buildings between processing steps, while awaiting selection, or pending transportation to distant farms after selection. Francisco Uviña related that he and his fellow braceros referred to the area as the *corralón* or farmyard.³⁰⁷ Historic photographs show large clusters of men in the quadrangle and former laboratory manager Vicente Estevis described it as very busy with “people all over the place.”³⁰⁸ Former DOL clerk-typist Minerva Cheatum recalled that braceros returning to Mexico after working in the US would sit in the quadrangle in the evenings playing transistor radios tuned to different stations. Some preferred to sleep outside in the quadrangle, even though inside space was provided.³⁰⁹ Fred Morales, accompanying his grandfather who transported braceros, remembers seeing the interior of the center full of braceros with some playing soccer and baseball in the quadrangle.³¹⁰ There was also a small store (*tiendita*) at the north end of the mess hall (Resource 4), where braceros and center employees could buy food items, cigarettes, and soft drinks.

Braceros spending the night at Rio Vista would play cards, listen to radios, engage in occasional fistfights, and talk with other workers about places to work and strategies for coping. Center staff member Carlos Corella observed: “so the experienced bracero was invaluable to the inexperienced bracero. And it was at night that they would exchange information and educate each other.”³¹¹ Corella would sometimes play Mexican music over the center PA system. Former X-ray technician Julius Lowenberg noted that the center had a chainlink fence and that there were security guards, but there was no means of sealing off the camp. Lowenberg asserted that prostitutes sometimes visited the center at night.³¹²

Expansion of the Center

Seven buildings were erected within the complex during the bracero center era. A request by the Agricultural Extension Service to return the three adobe buildings at the east end of the center in 1952 (Resources 11 through 13), necessitated the need for replacement space. In April 1952 the federal government asked the county to provide “additional operating space.”³¹³ El Paso County responded by building a large frame dormitory (Resource 21) with a capacity of four hundred beds at the east end of the quadrangle. A June 1952 newspaper article reported the building would cost \$9,000 and be designed in a “pavilion-type and screened as indoor sleeping quarters for workers.”³¹⁴ The 160’ x 50’ building was described as having “screen and lumber

³⁰⁵ *El Paso Times*, June 15, 1956, 21; El Paso County Commissioners’ Court, Minutes, May 21, 1956, Lease between the County of El Paso and the United States of America (includes labeled map of center), May 10, 1956.

³⁰⁶ Serrano, interview, 2018.

³⁰⁷ Uviña, in “Revisiting the Rio Vista Farm and the U.S. Bracero Program.”

³⁰⁸ Estevis, interview 2018.

³⁰⁹ Cheatum, interview, 2019; Minerva Christine Ann Cheatum, Clint, Texas, interview by Fernanda Carrillo, item number 77, April 3, 2003, Bracero History Archive, University of Texas at El Paso.

³¹⁰ Morales, interview, 2019.

³¹¹ Corella, interview, 2003.

³¹² Lowenberg, interview, 2003. No other former employee mentioned the prostitution claim. Lowenberg worked during the day, so this information may have been second-hand.

³¹³ *El Paso Herald-Post*, April 15, 1952, 13; *El Paso Times*, April 15, 1952, 3. The planned building originally was described as a “Quonset hut” measuring 200’ x 40’ and costing \$24,000; instead, it appears a site-built frame building was erected.

³¹⁴ *El Paso Times*, June 20, 1952, 7.

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sidings;" it later received jalousie windows.³¹⁵

In 1952 the county leased the old poor farm superintendent's house (no longer extant) on the north side of North Rio Vista Road to the federal government for use as the headquarters for the center for \$150 a month.³¹⁶ In 1953 two flagpoles holding the US and Mexican flags were installed east of the mess hall.³¹⁷ The center gained another large dormitory constructed ca. 1954-56 (Resource 22). The 252' x 36' building was placed along the south edge of the quadrangle, between the water tank and the south row of adobes. The May 1956 map in the GSA lease shows the building, which was identified as a dormitory, but no photographs of this building were located.

Nationally, the peak number of bracero contracts occurred in 1956, and Rio Vista processed about 85,000 workers that year. Perhaps anticipating similar or greater levels in future years, the federal government provided funding for additional improvements at Rio Vista that year. Architects Monroe, Licht, and Higgins of El Paso prepared plans for the \$92,511 project, and J.E. Morgan and Sons served as the general contractor.³¹⁸ The work included a concrete block restroom (Resource 26) at the southeast corner of the 1952 dormitory (resource 21), a small concrete block restroom (Resource 24) at the southwest corner of the quadrangle, and a sun shelter (Resource 25) and concrete block restroom (Resource 27) outside the northwest corner of the quadrangle.³¹⁹ Open porches were also built along the walls of the buildings facing the quadrangle, as well as breezeways between adjacent buildings. Four cast concrete drinking fountains (Resources 28 through 31) were installed ca. 1952-1956.³²⁰ Another sun shelter (Resource 20) was completed at the southwest corner of the quadrangle ca. 1959.³²¹

The building of sun shelters and the provision of drinking fountains were required by the hot, dry climate of El Paso, which averages 107 days yearly of 90° or greater temperatures and fifteen days of 100° or more.³²² When sun shelters were erected at the El Centro reception center in 1962, a Department of Labor publication explained their purpose: "these shelters are used for loading and unloading operations and to protect the workers from the hot sun, while waiting to be processed."³²³ The cost of improvements made by the county at Rio Vista

³¹⁵ *El Paso Times*, August 26, 1952, 9. The windows had louvered glazing slats that could be cranked open for ventilation.

³¹⁶ *El Paso Times*, June 17, 1952, 15.

³¹⁷ *El Paso Herald-Post*, June 13, 1953, 11.

³¹⁸ El Paso County Commissioners' Court, minutes, January 3, 1956; *El Paso Herald-Post*, June 24, 1963, 16 (Richard H. Licht obituary); Monroe, Higgins, and Lantow, Architects and Engineers, Firm Information, May 5, 1964, in Material Supporting the Agenda, May 1964-August 1964, University of Texas Board of Regents, Buildings and Grounds Committee, May 22, 1964, utsystem.edu. The county also selected the firm to design the new City-County building in 1956. James E. Monroe (1908-86), Richard H. Licht (1914-63), and Clarence M. Higgins (1914-90) were the El Paso firm's partners.

³¹⁹ *El Paso Times*, April 24, 1956, 5; *El Paso Herald-Post*, September 27, 1956, 5.

³²⁰ The drinking fountains probably were installed sometime between 1952 and 1956. They are too small to identify on aerial photographs, but the 1956 map showed that the new porch construction included the shed roof projection over the drinking fountain (Resource 31) by the southwest corner of Resource 7. The 1956 map does not show porches on the south row of buildings facing the quadrangle; however, these must date to the bracero period, likely to the late 1950s.

³²¹ *El Paso Times*, May 12, 1959, 1. The shelter was not part of the 1956 construction but was remembered as being present by former center laboratory manager Vicente Estevis. It is shown on a 1967 aerial photograph of the facility.

³²² National Weather Service, El Paso, Texas, Extreme Weather Records, accessed March 18, 2020; www.weather.gov; *El Paso Times*, June 22, 2019.

³²³ US Department of Labor, Bureau of Employment Security, Farm Labor Service, *Report of Operations of the Mexican Farm Labor Program Made Pursuant to Conference Report No. 1449, House of Representatives, 84th Congress, First Session, July 1-December 31, 1962* (Washington: Farm Labor Service, 1962), 3.

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were compensated by the federal government through lease payments for the center.³²⁴

Interactions of Center Staff with Braceros

Braceros moving through Rio Vista received varying receptions from the center staff. Carlos Corella, a DOL employee at the center in 1955, recalled sometimes mistreating braceros to maintain order, keep them from cutting in line, and “bark orders” at them to direct them during processing. He concluded that there was “just no other way but to be very, very harsh with these people, and everything was permissible, other than hitting them, but jerking them out of lines and pushing them, all that was permissible.”³²⁵ Clerk typist Minerva Cheatum voiced a different perspective, saying “for me, it was not just a job. It was helping people. Helping somebody to better their lives.”³²⁶

Staff Impressions of the Braceros

Nearly all of the braceros passing through Rio Vista came from the migratory station in Chihuahua, Chihuahua, Mexico, more than two hundred miles to the south. Many traveled some distance, walking or hitchhiking, to get to Chihuahua. Rio Vista workers remember processing workers from many parts of Mexico, including Chihuahua, Zacatecas, Veracruz, Michoacán, Matamoros, and Tamaulipas.³²⁷ Sam Sánchez, at Rio Vista from 1959 to 1964, recalled a group from Yucatan who did not speak Spanish; one of their number served as an interpreter.³²⁸

Celia Berton described the braceros as “obedient” and “respectful” as they waited in line and bringing few possessions to the US. Minerva Cheatum was struck by differences in the appearance and manner of the braceros when they first arrived from Mexico in contrast with their return after working in America. Arriving for the first time in the US, most were dressed in white clothing, including straw hats and *huarache* footwear and were “very, very quiet.” Clerk-typist Faye Terrazas described the braceros as being from the interior of Mexico: “I don’t think they were from any big cities or any people that had too much of an education. They were dressed in cotton, big baggy pants and huaraches and, ah, straw hats and the baggy cotton shirts that they would wear.”³²⁹

When they returned to Rio Vista on their way to Mexico, Minerva Cheatum noted the men were dressed in western clothes—cowboy hats, jeans, and boots—and you “wouldn’t recognize them.” She recalled that “every one of them bought a radio” and many had acquired treadle sewing machines or bicycles, which were transported back to Mexico on the tops of the buses.³³⁰ Faye Terrazas concurred in the braceros’ transformation and noted many also purchased baby strollers, highchairs, or jewelry to take back to their families in Mexico.³³¹ Rio Vista manager Dewey Rhoades recalled braceros taking home thousands of antiquated, second-hand treadle sewing machines.³³²

Dr. Pedro A. Ortega observed that many braceros came through the center year after year and that the men were

³²⁴ *El Paso Herald-Post*, September 27, 1956, 5. As a result of the 1956 improvements, the monthly lease paid by the federal government to the county increased from \$500 monthly to \$2,570.

³²⁵ Corella, interview, 2003.

³²⁶ Quoted in KVIE, “Los Braceros.”

³²⁷ Perez, interview, 2003.

³²⁸ Sánchez, interview, 2003.

³²⁹ Terrazas, interview, 2003.

³³⁰ Cheatum, interview, 2019.

³³¹ Terrazas, interview, 2003.

³³² *El Paso Times*, February 7, 1965, 9. This type of sewing machine did not require electricity for its operation.

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changing over time in terms of their manner of dress and material possessions.³³³ Ed Keleher, whose wife Helen Keleher managed the poor farm, observed both arriving and departing braceros and agreed with Dr. Ortega's assessment: "When the braceros go back to Mexico they are changed. They walk differently. They look better. They are better dressed. They carry those shiny metal lockers."³³⁴

Rio Vista's Role in Bracero Processing

Rio Vista began receiving braceros in September 1951 and handled sizable numbers of workers annually throughout the life of the program. The center processed somewhat less than 50,000 bracero contracts during 1951 and approximately 69,000 laborers in its first full year of operation in 1952. Rio Vista mirrored national trends during the decade by increasing numbers to about 84,000 in 1953, 83,000 braceros in 1955, and 85,000 in 1956 (19.1 percent of the national total). Following national trends, the figures dropped thereafter, with the center handling 74,942 braceros in 1959, 72,400 in 1960, and 65,280 in 1961. Numbers plummeted in the final years of the program, declining to 23,402 in 1962, 30,461 in 1963, and approximately 25,000 in 1964.³³⁵ Using available statistics and interpolating missing years, Rio Vista may have processed as many as 882,000 bracero contracts or about 20.7 percent of the national 1951-64 total. The *El Paso Herald-Post* in February 1965 reported the center handled "more than 800,000" bracero contracts.³³⁶

Given the volume of braceros passing through Rio Vista, in June 1953 El Paso County Judge Hugh McGovern proposed that the county impose a fifty-cent head tax on all braceros processed in order to raise revenue for maintaining the reception center. George W. Spence, head of the El Paso Valley Cotton Association argued strongly against the proposal, suggesting that adoption of the tax might cause the federal government to move the center. Spence noted: "The County had no money to make the improvements so the farmers, realizing the value of such a project in this area, agreed to put up \$17,500 to pay for the cost of improvements. Now, the County seeks to tax the persons who made the center possible."³³⁷ Faced with such criticism from a major constituency, McGovern withdrew the proposal two days later.

Perhaps due to its central location along the border, Rio Vista appears to have played a more geographically widespread role in supplying braceros than other centers. A 1953 *El Paso Herald-Post* article observed: "A Kansas sweet potato grower contracted a small contingent [of braceros] recently for the first time. Colorado and Montana sugar beet growers find a regular source of labor at the El Paso center. The Green Giant Pea Co. in Washington state is scheduled to contract 400 braceros here next week. Minnesota vegetable growers have contracted small groups. In the fall the bulk of the workers go to cotton picking jobs in the El Paso Southwest."³³⁸ Reception center manager C.H. Rhoades pointed out in 1956 that Rio Vista sent braceros to fourteen states, from as far north and east as Michigan and Ohio and as far north and west as Idaho and Montana. Colorado, Texas, Nebraska, and Montana were among the leading states receiving workers.³³⁹ The center supplied braceros to pick cotton in the Tularosa area of New Mexico.³⁴⁰

³³³ Ortega, interview, 2019.

³³⁴ *El Paso Herald-Post*, October 6, 1956, 17. This perhaps refers to metal footlockers.

³³⁵ *El Paso Times*, June 14, 1956, 1; *El Paso Herald-Post*, October 23, 1951, 3 and April 29, 1954, 14; US Department of Labor, *Report of Operations of the Mexican Farm Labor Program*, January 1, 1959 through June 30, 1964. By November 15, 1951, 47,575 braceros had been processed. Annual statistics for individual reception centers were not compiled or readily available. The 1959 Department of Labor report was the first one accessible.

³³⁶ *El Paso Times*, February 7, 1965, 9.

³³⁷ *El Paso Times*, June 17, 1953, 8.

³³⁸ *El Paso Herald-Post*, June 13, 1953, 11.

³³⁹ *El Paso Times*, June 14, 1956, 1.

³⁴⁰ *Alamogordo Daily News* (Alamogordo, New Mexico), September 19, 1956, 1.

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El Paso's central location also led US and Mexican administrators of the farm labor program to meet there. Twice-yearly, multi-day meetings of the managers of US reception centers and Mexican migratory stations were held to discuss operating and personnel problems in administration of the program. Training for supervisory personnel was also sometimes offered. The Hotel Paso del Norte hosted the June 1959 meeting. It is not known if any of these meetings occurred at Rio Vista.³⁴¹

Return Processing to Mexico

At the conclusion of a work contract, braceros were returned to the reception centers for processing before their departure for Mexico. This appears to have been a more expeditious process than the entry into the US, but Minerva Cheatum noted the center had to account for the outcome of every bracero who came into the country, including those returning to Mexico, as well as those who had been injured, died, or skipped from worksites. Buses picked up braceros at the northwest corner of the center, with their newly acquired possessions stored atop the vehicles.

Later Uses of the Complex

When the Mexican Farm Labor Program ended on December 31, 1964, Rio Vista's closure followed quickly. A January 29, 1965 local newspaper article reported the center would be "closed tight" after that date.³⁴² The buildings and land had been leased and reverted to El Paso County after the closure, which used the complex for governmental and community functions. As bracero processing wound down in 1964, the county Civil Defense agency stored two emergency hospitals for disaster preparedness at the facility.³⁴³ From 1966 to 1999, the El Paso County Sheriff's Department, under the leadership of Sheriff Mike Sullivan, occupied the 1916 main poor farm building (Resource 2) as a training academy and staff recreation center. Former training director Donald L. Reay judged that a "lot of good troops went through there."³⁴⁴ The former Poor Farm superintendent's house (Resource 1) served as the Sheriff's Department Lower Valley Patrol Substation. A 1966 newspaper article reported two buildings on the north side of the road were being converted to an indoor firing range and a workshop. The Sheriff's Department also built an outdoor firing range incorporating a sun shelter (Resource 27) erected during the bracero era. It included firing stands permitting twenty-five marksmen to practice at the same time.³⁴⁵ El Paso residents recall that the county 4-H Club used the former Mess Hall (Resource 4) on the north side of the road and staged 4-H fairs at the complex.³⁴⁶

The post-bracero period saw the demolition or removal of a small number of resources. The water tower was removed in the 1970s. During the ca. 1974-89 period one building erected during the bracero era (Resource 22) and the WPA-era shower building (Resource 23) were removed (their concrete foundations remain). To the west, the original poor farm superintendent's house and barn disappeared ca. 1989-91.³⁴⁷ No new construction took place.

Socorro (which had been a municipality earlier in the twentieth century) re-incorporated in 1986 and viewed Rio Vista for possible municipal use. The city began leasing part of the facility in 1991, and in 1994 the Rio

³⁴¹ *El Paso Times*, June 19, 1959, 13.

³⁴² *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 29, 1965.

³⁴³ *El Paso Herald-Post*, December 4, 1964.

³⁴⁴ Donald L. Reay, El Paso, Texas, telephone interview by Thomas H. Simmons, August 12, 2018.

³⁴⁵ *El Paso Times*, August 28, 1966, 1B. It is not known if the plans for the two buildings were implemented.

³⁴⁶ *El Paso Times*, May 19, 1974, 4; *El Paso Herald-Post*, July 24, 1975, B3.

³⁴⁷ The dating of removals is based on an analysis of available aerial photographs of the complex.

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Vista Community Center opened in Resource 4.³⁴⁸ In 2005 El Paso County transferred ownership of the Rio Vista property to the City of Socorro. A municipal courtroom and city offices now occupy the Main Poor Farm building (Resource 2) and laundry (Resource 3), while the police department is housed in the former superintendent's residence (Resource 1). The north side of the road now includes the city's Rio Vista Community Center, which offers education and fitness classes, senior programs, support groups, and recreational activities in the former mess hall (Resource 4). Texas A&M University also leases space in some buildings for its programs. Other buildings are used for storage or are vacant.

Increased recognition of the historical importance of Rio Vista developed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. A nomination focusing on the property's poor farm era secured its listing in the National Register in 1996. In 2000 a small stone-clad interpretive monument (Resource 32) was installed south of Resource 4 by the Texas Historical Commission. Two plaques, one in English and the other in Spanish, recognized the listing of Rio Vista Farm in the National Register and discussed its historical significance. In 2005 the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History staged the Envisioning Bracero History Conference in El Paso in cooperation with the University of Texas at El Paso. The three-day conference collected oral histories from former braceros and raised public awareness of the program.³⁴⁹ The role played by Rio Vista in the bracero program led the National Trust for Historic Preservation to name the complex a National Treasure in 2016. To explore the center's bracero history, a Bracero History Summit was staged in 2017, bringing together former braceros and scholars.

In recent years Rio Vista served as a setting for scenes in the major motion picture "Traffic" (2000), which necessitated construction of a large arch and low wall in the quadrangle (later removed). In 2018 an art installation, "Unearthed: Desenterrado," by Adriana Corral added a 60'-tall flagpole (Resource 33) to the quadrangle. The city hosts a fall variety festival and other community events at Rio Vista, which has also been used for photography shoots and music videos. With funding from the city and state and federal grants, rehabilitation of the building parapets and roofs began in 2018 and is ongoing.

CONCLUSION

The Rio Vista Bracero Reception Center is nationally significant for the role it played throughout the life of the United States-Mexico Mexican Farm Labor Program of 1951-1964. As the best-preserved example of a reception center that processed bracero laborers into and out of the United States, Rio Vista is exceptionally well-situated to illustrate the significance and scope of the largest guest worker program in the nation's history. Within the Rio Vista complex, representatives of US agencies and the Mexican Consul oversaw the screening and contracting of hundreds of thousands of workers from Mexico's interior, who traveled from the center to perform temporary agricultural work throughout the country each year. The skill and flexibility of individual braceros combined with the managed availability and lower wages of the bracero workforce were sought after enthusiastically by growers in many agricultural sectors. Braceros played a critical role in the postwar era by helping raise and harvest certain crops in selected states.

The national significance of Rio Vista has been recognized over the past decade by individuals and organizations. Latino scholar Luis Hoyos listed Rio Vista among eight sites in the West "significant to Latino culture and history." Hoyos, an architect and member of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, who formerly served on the Landmarks Committee of the National Park System's Advisory Board, observed that other reception centers had been repurposed or destroyed, judging that "Rio Vista is rare because it survives,

³⁴⁸ *El Paso Times*, December 9, 1999, 4.

³⁴⁹ *El Paso Times*, November 7, 2005, 1A.

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and it's a fairly intact example."³⁵⁰ The National Trust for Historic Preservation designated the complex a National Treasure, a threatened and nationally significant historic property, where the Trust's involvement might result in preserving the resource and elevating its history.³⁵¹ A panel of Latino Heritage scholars included Rio Vista in a list of ten properties across the nation associated with Latino heritage, concluding the resource possessed "a central connection to the largest guest worker program in United States history" and supporting its nomination as a National Historic Landmark.³⁵²

The Rio Vista Bracero Reception Center is the most appropriate resource to recognize the contributions of more than two million bracero agricultural workers to America's economy and society from 1951 to 1964. Ernesto Galarza paid tribute to these workers, whom he described as "in the midst of all, important yet insignificant, central yet marginal, the *bracero* himself, in apprehensive competition with five of his fellows for the one job offered, often illiterate and always ready to fulfill his obligations on the trot."³⁵³ The reception center through which they passed between their homes in Mexico and work places in the United States is a fitting resource to convey the national significance of the contributions of these men and that of the Mexican Farm Labor Program.

PREVIOUS RECOGNITION

Rio Vista Farm was listed in the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance in 1996 (NRIS 96000131). The nomination focused on the resource's significance as a county poor farm and counted bracero-era resources as noncontributing, since they were not yet fifty years old. The authors noted that this assessment should be re-evaluated once they became fifty years old due to the property's "significant contributions to agricultural history in the region."³⁵⁴

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The universe of comparable properties with Rio Vista is small. Only six other locations served as bracero reception centers, and just four of them operated for all or most of the Mexican Farm Labor Program like Rio Vista did: El Centro, California; Nogales, Arizona; and Eagle Pass and Hidalgo, Texas. Two locations housed reception centers for much shorter spans: Harlingen, Texas, ca. 1951-53, which was supplanted by the Hidalgo site and the El Paso Coliseum, El Paso, Texas, for a few months in 1951 before Rio Vista became operational.

Four of the seven bracero reception centers are no longer standing: El Centro, California and Eagle Pass, Harlingen, and Hidalgo, Texas. The El Paso Coliseum is extant, but it is a poor example of a reception center as it only functioned in that role for a matter of months in 1951 and does not appear to retain historic integrity dating to the bracero period. The Nogales, Arizona, reception center, which operated from 1951 to 1963, is extant but no longer retains historic integrity due to post-bracero-era additions. The properties are discussed in more detail below.

Reception Centers Operating for All or Most of the Program

El Centro, California

The El Centro Bracero Reception Center occupied about twenty-six acres at the northeast corner of West

³⁵⁰ Luis Hoyos, "An Architectural Tour through Latino History in the West," CalPoly Pomona PolyCentric, September 23, 2019, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California, accessed May 21, 2020, <http://polycentric.cpp.edu/2019/09/an-architectural-tour-through-latino-history-in-the-west/>.

³⁵¹ National Trust for Historic Preservation, <https://savingplaces.org/stories/preservation-tips-tools-nominate-a-national-treasure>.

³⁵² Latino Heritage Scholars, *Place, Story and Culture*, 17.

³⁵³ Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 86.

³⁵⁴ Myers and Moore, Rio Vista Farm Historic District National Register nomination, 14.

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Danenberg Drive and Farnsworth Lane in El Centro, about 93 miles east of San Diego. The center operated from 1951 to 1964. In June 2008, the *Imperial Valley Press* reported that the former bracero reception center would be demolished for new construction.³⁵⁵ A Google Earth image for January 31, 2008 shows the former center, apparently abandoned and with several buildings lacking roofs. A May 24, 2009 aerial image documents the location cleared of all buildings. The El Centro reception center is not a viable comparative property as its buildings are no longer extant.

Nogales, Arizona

The Nogales Bracero Reception Center operated from 1951 to 1963 at 60 Terminal Drive, about 2.8 miles north of the US-Mexico border on the east side of the Tucson-Nogales Highway. Nogales is located 59 miles south of Tucson. Housed in a temporary location in 1951, the center moved in April 1952 to a permanent facility composed of two connected steel and concrete warehouses. The Arizona Cotton Co-operative Growers Association erected the building for \$60,000 and leased it to the federal government.³⁵⁶ After the center closed in 1963 the organization sold the building to M.J. Martinez of Tucson, operator of Burnand and Company of Nogales, who planned to use the facility as packing sheds for Mexican produce. The building was described as a “14,000 square foot, sheet metal structure.”³⁵⁷ The facility currently houses a wholesale distributor of fruits and vegetables from Mexico.³⁵⁸ The original footprint of the building was greatly expanded after the bracero era in the 1966-77 period, including a full-width front stucco addition, loading docks to the east and west, and warehouse additions to the east and west. The Nogales Bracero Reception Center no longer retains its historic integrity.³⁵⁹

Eagle Pass, Texas

The Eagle Pass Bracero Reception Center operated from 1951 to 1964. Eagle Pass is about 132 miles west-southwest of San Antonio. It was located directly east of the international bridge with Mexico, southwest of the intersection of South Adams Street and Garrison (US Highway 57). After the center closed, the buildings were leased by the local school district from Maverick County. According to Anna Saucedo, Director of the Eagle Pass Public Library, the bracero buildings were torn down in the 1980s.³⁶⁰ Current aerial photographs show that the reception center site is now occupied by a US Customs and Border Protection station and its large parking area. The Eagle Pass reception center is not a viable comparative property as its buildings are no longer extant.

Hidalgo, Texas

The Hidalgo Bracero Reception Center operated from 1954 to 1963, succeeding the center at Harlingen, which had closed after operating for three years. Hidalgo lies 49 miles west of Brownsville. Photographer Leonard Nadel extensively documented the Hidalgo center in 1956 photographic images available at the National Museum of American History.³⁶¹ The reception center was located on the south side of International Boulevard

³⁵⁵ “Buildings to Replace Migrant Camp,” *Imperial Valley Press*, June 10, 2008.

³⁵⁶ *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix), February 13, 1952, 11; *Arizona Daily Star* (Tucson), April 3, 1952, 28.

³⁵⁷ *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix), May 29, 1963, 33.

³⁵⁸ iDeal HarBest website, August 27, 2018. www.idealharbest.com.

³⁵⁹ Comstock Steel to Arizona Cooperative Cotton Growers Association, letter, January 22, 1952, in the Arizona Cotton Growers Association Collection, Manuscript Collection Number 30, Arizona State Archives and Public Records, Phoenix, Arizona; Santa Cruz County Assessor, 60 Terminal Produce Drive, Nogales, Arizona, parcel number 10201006M, property information, building footprint, and photographs. The size of the building remained unchanged between 1952 and 1963, indicating that all later additions occurred after the bracero era.

³⁶⁰ Anna Saucedo, Director of the Eagle Pass Public Library, Eagle Pass, Texas, email to Thomas H. Simmons, August 23, 2018.

³⁶¹ Leonard Nadel, Hidalgo bracero photographs, Collection number NMAH.AC.1313, National Museum of American History, Washington, DC.

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approximately 0.2 miles from the US-Mexico border. According to Hidalgo architect Eduardo Vela, all of the reception center buildings have been demolished. Their location is now occupied by a US Customs and Border Protection facility. The Hidalgo reception center is not a viable comparative property as its buildings are no longer extant.³⁶²

Reception Centers Operating for a Shorter Period of Time

El Paso, Texas

The El Paso County Coliseum, 4100 E. Paisano Drive, El Paso, served as the program's first temporary reception center for a few months in 1951. This function ended as soon as the Rio Vista center was ready. The coliseum, built in 1942 as the El Paso County Live Stock and Agricultural Exhibition Building, is still extant and continues to host a variety of entertainment and sporting events. A 2017 article on the 75th anniversary of the coliseum noted the facility "has undergone several changes throughout the years, including renovations to the façade and box office, expanded hallways and upgraded concession stands and restrooms."³⁶³ The coliseum's historic integrity has been impacted by a 1950s concrete block addition to its east wall and large 2003 additions to its east and west walls. The coliseum's short association with the bracero program and loss of integrity due to subsequent alterations make it a poor candidate to reflect the national significance of the bracero program.

Harlingen, Texas

The bracero reception center at Harlingen in southern Texas operated from 1951 to 1953, before its activities were transferred to Hidalgo, Texas, thirty-five miles to the west. The Harlingen center was located in the 900 block of Rangerville Road in what is now Rangerville Park.³⁶⁴ The site, visible on historical aerial images, earlier housed the Cameron County Labor Camp, a migrant labor camp containing many small houses and a few larger buildings serving as an auditorium and washroom/ laundry.³⁶⁵ A mess hall and latrine building were added to the site in 1951 when the property started serving as a bracero reception center.³⁶⁶ The closure of the Harlingen center was announced in 1953 due to "no patronage of the center on the part of the growers."³⁶⁷ Today, none of the resources comprising the center are visible on aerial photographs, and the area is used as a public park. The Harlingen reception center is not a viable comparative property as its buildings no longer exist.

³⁶² Eduardo Vela, EGV Architects, Hidalgo, Texas, to Thomas H. Simmons, email, December 10, 2018. The exact location of the Hidalgo reception center initially was difficult to pinpoint. To determine the location, Vela and his colleagues matched Nadel's 1956 ground level photographs of the reception center buildings with those shown in a 1952 oblique aerial photograph and determined they were no longer extant.

³⁶³ "El Paso County Coliseum Celebrates 75th Anniversary," *Fusion Magazine*, May 17, 2017.

³⁶⁴ Veronica Martinez-Matsuda, Cornell University, emails to Thomas H. Simmons and R. Laurie Simmons, September 12 and 17, 2018.

³⁶⁵ *Valley Morning Star* (Harlingen, Texas), December 11, 18, and 25, 2003.

³⁶⁶ *Valley Morning Star* (Harlingen, Texas), September 15, 1951, 1.

³⁶⁷ *Valley Morning Star* (Harlingen, Texas), August 19, 1953, 1.

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6. PROPERTY DESCRIPTION AND STATEMENT OF INTEGRITY

Ownership of Property

Private:
Public-Local: X
Public-State: X
Public-Federal:

Category of Property

Building(s):
District: X
Site:
Structure:
Object:

Number of Resources within Boundary of Property:

Contributing

Buildings: 24
Sites: 0
Structures: 2
Objects: 4
Total: 30

Noncontributing

Buildings: 1
Sites: 0
Structures: 0
Objects: 2
Total: 3

PROVIDE PRESENT AND PAST PHYSICAL DESCRIPTIONS OF PROPERTY

(Please see specific guidance for type of resource[s] being nominated)

LOCATION AND SETTING

The Rio Vista Bracero Reception Center is located in the north central part of Socorro, Texas, a city of 34,533 population (2018) in the Rio Grande Valley. Rio Vista lies thirteen miles southeast of downtown El Paso, with the US-Mexico border 3.7 miles west. The Rio Grande forms the international boundary. Founded in 1680, Socorro initially incorporated in 1871. The present City of Socorro, established in 1986, generally lies between Interstate 10 to the northeast and the international border to the west.

Cotton fields surround the 11.1-acre district on the north, east, and south, while a public park is present to the west. The nominated area is part of the Socorro Grant, created by the State of Texas in 1858. The district encompasses resources associated with the Mexican Farm Labor Program lying on both sides of North Rio Vista Road, a two-lane asphalt road. Thirty resources are situated to the northeast on the north side of the road, with most arranged around an open quadrangle. Three poor farm buildings (two of which were later used in the bracero program) stand to the southwest on the south side of the road.³⁶⁸ Thirty of the district's thirty-three resources contribute to the national significance of the property. Three resources are assessed as noncontributing, either due to construction after the period of national significance or lack of association with the bracero program.

HISTORIC PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The complex displays successive building eras reflecting its expansion and evolution over the twentieth century to serve the requirements of changing uses. The current appearance of the Rio Vista complex is very similar to that during its period of national significance. Started as a county poor farm, Rio Vista occupied a rural El Paso

³⁶⁸ The buildings on the south are addressed as 800 and 860 North Rio Vista Road (Resource 1 and 2, respectively) and the community center on the north side as 901 North Rio Vista Road (Resource 4).

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County location that included buildings on both sides of Poor Farm Road (later renamed North Rio Vista Road). The 1930s saw a substantial expansion of the facility with seventeen Mission Revival-style adobe buildings constructed on the north side of the road in 1935-36, forming an open quadrangle with a water tower near its center. Pictures from the early 1950s and employee recollections reveal that the quadrangle had many trees around its north and south edges; these were removed after 1974, based on aerial photographs.³⁶⁹ The bracero reception center era (1951-64) added eight buildings and four objects to the facility. The poor farm also gained a new superintendent's residence on the south side of the road in 1952.

Since the end of the bracero program in 1964, two associated buildings and a water tower were demolished or moved from the complex.³⁷⁰ Poor farm buildings lying west of the quadrangle complex are no longer extant, including a barn and the old superintendent's residence leased to the bracero program for a headquarters office. Two flagpoles at the west end of the quadrangle present during the bracero era are no longer extant. Three objects were installed in more recent years: a small memorial marker dedicated in 2000 near the southwest corner of the quadrangle area and a commemorative flagpole erected in 2018 in the center of the quadrangle as part of an art installation. Through at least 2006 the road itself remained a narrow asphalt-surfaced country lane without the current concrete sidewalk to the north.

PRESENT PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The 11.1-acre nominated district consists of two generally rectangular areas, one of 7.3 acres on the north side of North Rio Vista Road containing thirty resources and a smaller area of 3.8 acres to the southwest, on the south side of the road, holding three resources. All of the buildings in the complex are one story in height. Thirty of the resources within the district are assessed as contributing for their association with the Mexican Farm Labor Program, which operated between 1951 and 1964. Noncontributing resources include: a poor farm superintendent's dwelling erected in 1952 (not associated with the bracero program) and two objects constructed after the closure of the bracero reception center (a 2000 interpretive monument and a 2018 commemorative flagpole).

Information on construction dates and uses of resources was derived from the 1995 National Register nomination, historical maps and aerial photographs, contemporary newspaper accounts, El Paso County Commissioners' Court Minutes, and oral history interviews of former reception center employees and braceros.³⁷¹ Resource numbers in this nomination and on the Sketch Map are those used in the 1995 National Register nomination; additional numbers were assigned to resources not identified therein or constructed after that date.³⁷² The resources on the north side of North Rio Vista Road are described first, followed by the those on the south side.

North Side of North Rio Vista Road

Most of the district's resources (thirty of thirty-three) are located on the north side of North Rio Vista Road. Sixteen of these were constructed in the 1930s as part of an expansion of the poor farm by the Texas Transient

³⁶⁹ Enciso, interview, 2018.

³⁷⁰ The concrete slab foundations of the buildings remain and are counted as contributing structures.

³⁷¹ Aerial photographs consulted included the following years: 1943, 1956, 1957, and 1974, as well as images available on Google Earth from 1991 through 2019. Historic maps examined included a 1947/1951 (updated) map of the poor farm and 1995 engineering survey. Newspaper articles in the *El Paso Times* and *El Paso Herald-Post* proved useful in dating some buildings and identifying architects.

³⁷² Some buildings in the complex bear an earlier set of numbers; the 1995 National Register nomination developed its own set of numbers, which are used in this nomination. Additional numbers were assigned to identify resources not addressed in the earlier document. Center employees said that they did not use numbers in referring to buildings but instead identified them by function.

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Bureau and the Works Projects Administration, using adobe bricks handmade at the site and displaying curvilinear parapets reflecting the Mission Revival style. Twelve of the remaining resources date to the bracero reception center era, while two were added after the period of national significance.

Most of the resources are grouped in or around an east-west oriented open quadrangle (436' x 178') with an earth surface. The quadrangle is mostly covered with dirt, gravel, and scattered grass and contains utility poles. A large deciduous tree stands southeast of the mess hall/community center with smaller trees near the northwest corner of a sun shelter (Resource 20). A dirt road passes east and north of the quadrangle, which has a nonhistoric chainlink fence along its south and east sides. A small east-west drainage ditch (date unknown) extends along the north side of the dirt road and ends near the east end of Resource 7. A gravel parking area lies to the west of the quadrangle.

The former mess hall (Resource 4), a north-south oriented adobe building, encloses the west side of the quadrangle, while a bracero selection building/dormitory (Resource 21) terminates the area on the east. Two concrete drinking fountains are located south and northeast of the bracero dormitory (Resources 28 and 30, respectively), and a concrete block restroom (Resource 26) is located near its southeast corner. A row of six east-west oriented adobe buildings (Resources 5 through 10) extends along the north edge of the quadrangle, while the south border is defined by the linear placement of a sun shelter (Resource 20), a Quonset hut (Resource 18), and four adobe buildings (Resources 15 through 20). Within the quadrangle are an adobe storage building originally constructed as a recreation hall (Resource 14), a small concrete block restroom (Resource 24), the concrete slab foundations of a bath/shower building (Resource 23) and bracero dormitory/warehouse (Resource 22), two concrete drinking fountains (Resources 29 and 31), and a 2018 ceremonial flagpole (Resource 33). Porches and covered breezeways (all of which date to the period of national significance) link the buildings surrounding the north, east, and south sides of the open quadrangle and were designed to provide shelter from the bright sun or inclement weather. The shed roof open porches are supported by square wood posts atop concrete piers. The porches on the south walls of Resources 5 through 7 extend above a wide concrete sidewalk (nonhistoric).

A short distance northwest of the quadrangle are two additional bracero-era resources built in 1956, a frame sun shelter (Resource 25) and another concrete block restroom (Resource 27).³⁷³ A small 2000 commemorative marker (Resource 32) lies near the southwest corner of the quadrangle south of Resource 4. A row of six evergreen trees are present west of Resource 4 with a gravel parking area farther west. A metal flagpole with a ball finial and a post with the message "May Peace Prevail on Earth" (a time capsule) stand near the southwest corner of Resource 4; both were installed post-1994.³⁷⁴

Common Plan for 1935-36 Adobe Buildings

Eleven of the buildings in and around the quadrangle (Resources 7 through 17) were constructed 1935-36, following plans developed by designer E.R. Nilson and built by the Texas Transient Bureau and the Works Progress Administration. The stucco-clad adobe brick buildings display a rectangular footprint measuring 75' x 22'. Each front-gabled roof building features curvilinear parapets elaborated with slightly projecting coping on the front and rear, with a shallow round arch niche in each parapet face. Double five-panel wood doors are in the entrance on one end wall and a single five-panel wood door is on the opposite end wall. Side walls contain ten windows, an unfenestrated expanse, and a single window toward the rear. Window openings are flat-headed

³⁷³ The sun shelter (Resource 25) was later used to shelter the firing line of a shooting range installed by the Sheriff's Training Academy, ca. 1966.

³⁷⁴ The latter two resources are judged too small in scale to be included in the count of resources.

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and deeply inset, with projecting stuccoed concrete sills. The roofs exhibit overhanging eaves, exposed rafter tails, and asphalt shingle roofing.

These adobe buildings are indicated as “common 1935-36 plan” in the individual descriptions below, with any variations and alterations noted. Three ca. 1935-36 buildings (Resource 5, 6, and 19) reflect a shortened version of the common plan, measuring 22’ in width but only 63’ or 63’6” in length rather than 75’. The shortened buildings also display different door and window fenestration than the longer versions.

The processing flow for braceros began at the southwest corner of the quadrangle (where braceros were dropped off), moved in a counterclockwise movement around the quadrangle, and ended at the northwest corner (where braceros waited for transportation to farms). The description below emulates that process, beginning with resources at the west end and southwest corner of the quadrangle and then continuing in a clockwise manner, addressing the south row of buildings bordering the quadrangle, the resources to the east, the resources within the quadrangle, the north row of buildings, and the two resources to the northwest. A discussion of intact components of interior spaces is provided in the entries for larger or more significant buildings.³⁷⁵

WEST END OF THE QUADRANGLE

The east and west ends of the quadrangle hold the largest buildings on the north side of the road, a 1952 bracero selection building/dormitory to the east and a 1935 mess hall to the west. The mess hall was the first building completed as part of the 1930s expansion of the poor farm. A 2000 interpretive marker lies south of the mess hall.

Bracero Mess Hall/Kitchen, 1935, E.R. Nilson (architect), Resource 4, Building, Contributing

In 1935, the Texas Transient Bureau erected this mess hall terminating the west end of the quadrangle as part of a planned camp for transients. The building now houses the City of Socorro’s Rio Vista Community Center. The one-story rectangular plan building (122’ x 35’) is similar to, but larger than, the buildings following the common 1935-36 plan. Constructed of adobe brick clad with stucco, the one-story front-gabled roof building faces south and displays curvilinear parapets with coping on the north and south walls. The parapets are taller and more intricately shaped than those of most of the remaining adobe buildings. Window openings are deeply inset, with rectangular wood window frames and projecting sills.

The front (south) contains center double, paneled, wood doors flanked by projecting wall piers with canted tops. A small plate glass window and utility boxes lie west of the entrance, while to the east is a rectangular window mostly blocked by a small, frame, shed-roof storage structure placed in front of, but not attached to, the building. Tapered buttresses with canted tops are at the southwest and southeast corners of the building. The east wall is divided into bays by five square projecting wall piers. The first bay contains three windows, followed by two bays with four windows, a bay with a paneled wood door and three covered windows, and three covered windows.

The rear (north) wall has a curvilinear parapet without coping. The face of the parapet has a central, rectangular opening with a vent fan. At the east end of the rear wall is a paneled wood door; three windows are evenly spaced west of the door (plate glass to the east and two four-light to the west). A full-width, shed-roof open porch projects outward from the north wall and is supported by wood posts atop a poured concrete pad extending from the rear of the building. Two metal picnic tables are built around two wood porch posts.

³⁷⁵ The interiors of selected adobe buildings were accessed during fieldwork.

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The west wall is divided into five bays by wall piers. From the north end, the first bay has two four-light windows and a paneled wood door. The second bay includes two four-light windows, one plate glass window, and a paneled door. The next bay has four plate glass windows. The fourth bay contains a full-height, slightly projecting, polychromatic sandstone rubble chimney with wide, sloping shoulders and a tall shaft with pointed arch openings along the top. The chimney is flanked by plate glass windows. The final bay includes three plate glass windows. Along the west side of the building are a narrow concrete sidewalk and a wide area in grass between the sidewalk and the parking lot. Six tall evergreen trees grow west of the building along the edge of the parking lot.

Interior. The interior still displays a large open space with a kitchen at the north end. The west wall retains a massive stone fireplace with a concrete star (the symbol of El Paso) above the mantel. Stone seating areas with concrete tops flank the fireplace. *Alterations and Integrity.* The interior has been modified with a drop ceiling and nonhistoric wall and floor finishes. A bell shown in historic photographs in the arched niche in the south parapet is no longer present; the arch is now filled in. The curvilinear parapets were repaired in 2018 and the building re-roofed. Alterations include metal utility boxes attached to the south wall. Several windows are altered from four-light to plate glass. Overall, the building retains historic integrity.

Rio Vista Farm Historical Marker, 2000, Resource 32, Object, Noncontributing

South of the mess hall is this historical marker installed by the Texas Historical Commission in 2000. Facing south-southwest, the monument measures about 6' x 5', is clad with stone veneer, and features a slanting face holding two cast aluminum plaques bearing English and Spanish interpretive text explaining the historic significance of the site. The stone cladding consists of polygonal pieces with small stones inserted in the mortar joints, reflecting the *el hueso* technique executed by Elias Varela of the El Paso County Road and Bridge Department.³⁷⁶ *Alterations and Integrity.* The monument appears to be unaltered and is assessed as noncontributing since it was installed after the period of national significance for the district.

RESOURCES ALONG THE SOUTH EDGE OF THE QUADRANGLE

The south edge of the quadrangle is bordered by a row of six buildings, described from west to east. A continuous shed-roof porch and breezeways link the buildings, starting between the Resource 19 and the Quonset hut (Resource 18) to the east.

Bracero Sun Shelter, ca. 1959, Resource 20, Building, Contributing

This open shelter is not shown on a 1956 aerial photograph of the complex but does appear on a 1967 image. Former reception center employees recall the building in this location, and it seems likely it was built ca. 1959 based on a newspaper account.³⁷⁷ The one-story, low-pitched gabled roof building measures 96' x 34' and has a small shed-roof projection near its southwest corner adjacent to the roadway. The east-west oriented shelter has wood post supports (4" x 4") with diagonal braces along its sides and in the center. The roof displays overhanging, boxed eaves and is clad with rolled asphalt roofing. The interior has asphalt paving and features metal picnic tables with benches built around some of the center posts. The shelter is freestanding and is not connected to Resource 19 to the east with a breezeway. *Alterations and Integrity.* It is not known if the metal picnic tables were present during the historic period. The shelter retains historic integrity.

³⁷⁶ Gary Williams, El Paso Community Foundation, El Paso, Texas, email to Thomas H. Simmons, December 18, 2019. Dr. George Torok of the History Department of the El Paso Community College, Gary Williams of the El Paso Community Foundation, and Will DeBusk of the El Paso County Historical Commission completed the historical research for the plaques.

³⁷⁷ *El Paso Times*, April 24, 1956, 5 and May 12, 1959, 1. The US General Services Administration required the construction of sun shelters (apparently this one and Resource 25 to the north), as a condition of its continued leasing of Rio Vista .

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Bracero US Public Health Service Building, ca. 1935, E.R. Nilson (architect), Resource 19, Building, Contributing

This building follows the shortened version of the common 1935-36 building plan, measuring 63'-6" on its longer east-west axis. It housed the US Public Health Service doctor and staff during the bracero period. The one-story adobe brick building has a gabled roof and curvilinear parapets on the east and west (without central arched niches). The parapet shape is taller and more defined than most of the other adobe buildings and is similar to those on the mess hall (Resource 4). The deeply inset windows are wood frame with four-lights and projecting stuccoed concrete sills. The front (west) has center, double, five-panel wood doors flanked by four-light windows. The long south and north walls contain three groups of four four-light windows. There are short projecting wall buttresses along the bottoms of the walls. The east wall displays a single center five-panel wood door flanked by four-light windows. *Interior.* The interior of the building has a concrete floor and painted stucco walls. *Alterations and Integrity.* The curvilinear parapets were repaired in 2018 and the building was re-roofed. The building retains historic integrity.

Bracero Storage and Disinfection Quonset Hut, 1951, Resource 18, Building, Contributing

This Quonset building was erected in 1951 as part of preparations for bracero processing.³⁷⁸ The Quonset replaced a 1935-36 adobe building on the site destroyed by fire ca. 1948. It was first used for storage and later for disinfecting braceros. The building measures 60' x 20', has a longer east-west axis, and displays an arched roof. The roof and walls are composed of corrugated steel panels and the building stands atop a concrete pad. The west wall has an off-center entrance with double flush metal doors. Adjacent to the entrance on the south is a four-light window. The north and south walls are unfenestrated. The east wall has a center entry with a single metal door and a metal security screen and is flanked by four-light awning windows. Breezeways extend east and west of the building. The area between the Quonset and the building to the east has asphalt paving and grass. *Alterations and Integrity.* A 1993 photograph in the National Register nomination shows an arched metal vent projecting from the roof near the center of the building. A 1995 photograph and a 2006 documentary video show the west wall with a center single door flanked by four-light windows. The building retains historic integrity.

Bracero Dormitory/Immigration and Naturalization Service Building, ca. 1935-36, E.R. Nilson (architect), Resource 17, Building, Contributing

This building follows the common 1935-36 building plan. It is labeled on the 1956 lease map as a bracero dormitory; two center workers identified it later in the late 1950s/early 1960s as housing the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The west wall of the building has a center entrance with a five-panel wood door with a security screen; the east wall contains an off-center door opening (boarded-up). The windows are one-over-one-light wood windows, most of which are covered. On the north wall facing the quadrangle four windows are exposed, one with broken glazing and three with security screens. An entrance near the west end is covered with plywood. All windows except one on the south wall are boarded-up with plywood; one window has the lower sash exposed and is covered with a security screen. *Alterations and Integrity.* The adobe bricks are mostly exposed on the gable faces below the parapet, as well as along the bottom of the north wall. The entrance on the north wall toward the west end is likely an alteration. Most windows are covered but appear to be intact. The building retains historic integrity.

Bracero Dormitory, ca. 1935-36, E.R. Nilson (architect), Resource 16, Building, Contributing

This building follows the common 1935-36 building plan. It is labeled on the 1956 lease map as a bracero

³⁷⁸ *El Paso Times*, October 15, 1951.

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dormitory. The west wall contains a center entrance with double five-panel wood doors (partially boarded-up); the east wall displays a center entrance with a five-panel wood door with a metal security door. The north and south walls each contain eleven boarded-up windows. *Alterations and Integrity.* The adobe bricks are exposed below the western parapet and on the eastern gable face below the parapet, as well as along the bottoms of the north and west walls. Most windows are covered but appear to be present. The building retains historic integrity.

Bracero Drinking Fountain, ca. 1952-56, Resource 29, Object, Contributing

When the complex was readied for bracero use in September 1951, drinking fountains with bubblers were installed. A newspaper photograph shows that the 1951 fountains employed a different design than the four sturdier, trough-like, cast concrete drinking fountains present today.³⁷⁹ The original ones were replaced ca. 1952-56. Near the northeast corner of Resource 16 is this concrete bracero drinking fountain (12' x 1'-6"). The walls are about 2" thick and the longer sides are canted outward. Solid concrete supports anchor the trough of the fountain at each end, as well as a center concrete support shaped like the end supports. A metal water supply pipe to the east end extends from the ground to the upper part of the trough. A metal drainpipe protrudes from the bottom of the trough near its east end. *Alterations and Integrity.* The drinking fountain is no longer functional: the bubblers are no longer present, but its original design and function are still apparent. The object retains historic integrity.

Bracero Dormitory, ca. 1935-36, E.R. Nilson (architect), Resource 15, Building, Contributing

This building follows the common 1935-36 building plan. It is labeled on the 1956 lease map as a bracero dormitory. The west wall contains a center entrance with a security door; the east wall displays a center entrance with double five-panel wood doors (some panels missing). The north and south walls each hold eleven boarded-up windows. Some adobe bricks are exposed on the east and west gable faces, the west end of the north wall, and at places along the foundation of the north and wall walls. *Alterations and Integrity.* All windows are boarded-up but appear to be present. The building retains historic integrity.

EAST END OF THE QUADRANGLE

At the east end of the quadrangle is the large selection building/dormitory (Resource 21), which has a full-width shed-roof porch along its west wall and breezeways connecting it to the buildings to the north (Resource 10) and south (Resource 15). A restroom building lies to the southeast with two concrete drinking fountains nearby, one near the dormitory's southwest corner and one near its northeast corner.

Bracero Selection Building/Dormitory, 1952, Resource 21, Building, Contributing

This 160' x 50' former bracero selection building/dormitory, the largest building on the north side of the road, was built in 1952 to replace the functional space lost when the three buildings to the east being used for the bracero program (Resources 11 through 13) were returned to the Agricultural Extension Service. The one-story, rectangular plan, frame building has a concrete slab foundation and horizontal board walls clad with cement asbestos shingles. Each wall features a center entrance that originally contained double doors; some entrances are boarded-up and are missing doors. Flanking each entrance are bands of jalousie windows; most are boarded-up and many of the glazing slats are missing/broken. The south section of the east wall adjacent to a nearly abutting building (Resource 26) is unfenestrated. The low-pitched gabled roof has overhanging eaves, exposed rafter tails, and asphalt composition roofing shingles in deteriorated condition (some shingles are missing and some holes are present in the decking). The gable face of the south wall has two rectangular metal louvered vents. Breezeways connect this building to ones to the south and north; a full-width shed-roof porch extends

³⁷⁹ *El Paso Herald-Post*, September 21, 1951, 21.

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along the west wall. *Interior.* The interior is one large, open room with its ceiling joists and rafters exposed. Three rows of 4" x 4" wood posts divide the interior into four north-south bays. *Alterations and Integrity.* Most entrances and windows are boarded up; many roofing shingles are missing or deteriorated. The roof decking and roofing of the west porch is missing. The building retains historic integrity.

Bracero Restroom (Escusado), 1956, Monroe, Licht, and Higgins (architects), Resource 26, Building, Contributing

Southeast corner of the large dormitory (Resource 21) is a one-story, rectangular (33'-8" x 10') concrete block restroom building or *escusado*, as identified by a sign on the south wall. The use of the term *escusado* is a more formal term for restroom than the more common Spanish word *baño*. The north and south walls of the building feature under-eave porches sheltering entrances; each wall contains an entry with a flush wood door and an exterior screen door. A small rectangular jalousie window is near the top of the wall adjacent to the entrance. The east and west walls each hold four of the same type of jalousie windows. The shed roof has overhanging eaves with exposed rafters and appears to be clad with rolled asphalt roofing. *Interior.* The interior has a concrete floor with urinals and sinks placed against the side walls at the south end. A partition wall provides separation for a toilet area toward the north. *Alterations and Integrity.* Most window glazing appears to be broken and missing. The building retains historic integrity.

Bracero Drinking Fountain, ca. 1952-56, Resource 28, Object, Contributing

Near the southwest corner of the large dormitory (Resource 21) stands this 3'-tall cast concrete bracero drinking fountain (6' x 1'-6"). The south wall has a hole toward the top through which a water pipe may have entered to supply the bubblers; a metal drainpipe extends from the bottom of the trough near the north end. *Alterations and Integrity.* The drinking fountain is no longer functional: the bubblers and water supply pipe are no longer present, but its original design and function are still apparent. The object retains historic integrity.

Bracero Drinking Fountain, ca. 1952-56, Resource 30, Object, Contributing

Near the northeast corner of the dormitory (Resource 21) is a concrete bracero drinking fountain (4' x 1'-6"). It follows the same design as Resource 28 but is shorter. *Alterations and Integrity.* The drinking fountain is no longer functional: the bubblers are no longer present, but its original design and function are still apparent. The object retains historic integrity.

A chainlink fence encloses the area east of the bracero selection building/dormitory. Across a north-south gravel road stand three buildings farther east aligned in a north-south column. Cotton fields lie to the east. El Paso County transferred the parcel holding the three buildings to the State of Texas about 1940 for the use of Texas A&M University.³⁸⁰

Bracero Dormitory, ca. 1935-36, E.R. Nilson (architect), Resource 11, Building, Contributing

The north building follows the common 1935-36 building plan. Owned by the state, the county leased this building and the two buildings to the south (Resources 12 and 13) for use as bracero dormitories in 1951-52.³⁸¹ Unlike other 1935-36 adobe buildings at the center, the building does not feature niches on its parapet faces. The east and west walls each contain a center flush metal door. The north and south walls each hold eleven one-over-one-light windows with security grills fabricated from welded reinforcing rods. *Interior.* The interior

³⁸⁰ Myers and Moore, Rio Vista Farm Historic District National Register nomination, 5.

³⁸¹ *El Paso Times*, August 26, 1951, 9; *El Paso Herald-Post*, May 13, 1952, 20. The Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, the owner of the three buildings, leased the three buildings to the county in 1951. Before allowing the buildings to be used for braceros, the Experiment Station required that wood flooring, ceilings, and light fixtures be removed and stored.

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displays a concrete floor, exposed ceiling joists and rafters, and a lath and plaster bathroom area in the southeast corner. *Alterations and Integrity.* The metal doors may not be original, and security grilles have been added. The building retains historic integrity.

Bracero Dormitory, ca. 1935-36, E.R. Nilson (architect), Resource 12, Building, Contributing

The center building follows the common 1935-36 building plan. The building does not feature a niche on its parapet faces. The west wall contains a center entrance with double five-panel wood doors (one door partially covered with metal and one missing some panels); the east wall features a center flush metal door. The south wall holds seven one-over-one-light windows with security grilles fabricated from welded reinforcing rods; there are unfenestrated areas toward the east end of the wall, suggesting some windows may have been filled in. The north wall contains eight unevenly spaced windows. *Interior.* The interior features a wood floor and a partitioned area at the east end (wall cladding missing); some ceiling panels are missing or damaged. *Alterations and Integrity.* The east metal door may be a replacement, security grilles are added to windows, and some windows may have been filled in. The building retains historic integrity.

Bracero Dormitory, ca. 1935-36, E.R. Nilson (architect), Resource 13, Building, Contributing

The south building follows the common 1935-36 building plan. This is the only one of the three buildings in the east area to display a niche on its west parapet face. The west wall contains a center entrance with double flush metal doors, while the east wall holds a center single flush metal door. The north and south walls hold eleven one-over-one-light wood windows in the configuration typical of the 1935-36 plan; the windows display a security grille fabricated from welded reinforcing rods. *Interior.* The interior has exposed ceiling joists and rafters, wood floors, and a small bathroom in the northeast corner. *Alterations and Integrity.* The metal doors may be replacements. The building retains historic integrity.

RESOURCES WITHIN THE QUADRANGLE

Five resources are located within the quadrangle, including a ca. 1935-36 adobe building, a concrete block restroom, two concrete slab foundations, and a ceremonial flagpole.

Bracero Workshop Building, ca. 1935-36, E.R. Nilson (architect), Resource 14, Building, Contributing

The workshop building follows the common 1935-36 building plan and is located at the east end of the quadrangle near its center, with its long axis oriented east-west. Erected as a recreation building ca. 1935-36, the building is labeled as a workshop on a 1956 map of the complex and is now used for storage. The west wall has a center double door entry with a concrete lintel. The doors are missing and plywood encloses the entrance. The south wall displays the typical common plan fenestration; the one-over-one-light wood windows are still present but are boarded up on the exterior. The east wall has a center entry with a replacement door and a metal security screen. The north wall, at the east end, contains a single window flanked by unfenestrated bays. Further west are four windows on each side of a full-height projecting stucco chimney with an angled shoulder on the east. The west end of the wall is unfenestrated. *Interior.* The interior holds one large room. A stone fireplace on the north wall is composed of various-sized gray stone rubble. The fireplace features an arched firebox and a concrete mantel. Ceiling joists and rafters are exposed. *Alterations and Integrity.* The doors of the west wall are missing and the door on the east wall is a replacement. The windows are boarded up and the building displays areas of exposed adobe and missing roof shingles. The building retains historic integrity.

Bracero Restroom, ca. 1956, Monroe, Licht, and Higgins (architects), Resource 24, Building, Contributing

Near the southwest corner of the quadrangle is a small (12' x 10') concrete block restroom building. It displays the same materials and construction techniques as the 1956 bracero restroom to the east (Resource 26). The front-gabled roof building faces south and has a concrete foundation and painted concrete block walls. The front

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holds a five-panel wood door that opens onto a concrete apron. The east and west walls contain center windows with narrow, concrete block sills with slanting tops; both windows are boarded up. The rear wall is unfenestrated. The roof features widely overhanging boxed eaves and is clad with rolled asphalt roofing.

Alterations and Integrity. Other than boarded-up windows, the building displays no apparent alterations and retains its historic integrity.

Bracero Restroom/Shower Building Foundation, ca. 1935-36, E.R. Nilson (architect), Resource 23, Structure, Contributing

This 82' x 22' concrete slab foundation west of Resource 14 is all that remains of a restroom/shower building erected ca. 1935-36 and later used during the bracero era. Based on historic photographs and a 1995 survey of the complex, the adobe building followed a similar design to the common 1935-36 plan but was longer than most. The slab displays a slightly projecting narrow concrete perimeter. The western portion of the foundation contains thirty-one former toilet locations. Five shower pans are located near the center of the foundation, with sloping drainage areas farther east. *Alterations and Integrity.* The building was moved or demolished between 1974 and 1991. The extant slab marks the location, shape, and size of the former restroom/shower building, which was used for that purpose during the bracero era, and is therefore assessed as contributing to the district.

Bracero Dormitory/Warehouse Foundation, ca. 1954-56, Resource 22, Structure, Contributing

This concrete slab foundation (252' x 36') is all that remains of a building erected ca. 1954-56. The building is not shown in a ca. 1954 photograph of the center but does appear in a 1956 aerial photograph and map, with the latter identifying it as a dormitory. Dr. Pedro A. Ortega recalled it was used as a storage warehouse in the early 1960s.³⁸² No photographs of this building were located. However, aerial photographs and clues in the foundation construction appear to indicate a frame building with a gabled roof. The rectangular concrete foundation has a narrow, slightly raised perimeter. Twelve pairs of raised footers for posts extend east-west through the center of the building; a double white line is painted on the concrete between the lines of posts. *Alterations and Integrity.* The building was moved or demolished between 1974 and 1991. The extant slab marks the location, shape, and size of the former bracero dormitory/warehouse and is therefore assessed as contributing to the district.

Unearthed:Desenterrado Flagpole, 2018, Resource 33, Object, Noncontributing

During the bracero period the complex featured two flagpoles in the quadrangle east of Resource 4 that flew the US and Mexican flags; they were removed by 1991. This ceremonial flagpole was erected as part of the 2018 Unearthed:Desenterrado art installation. The 60' tapered aluminum flagpole with a ball finial rests on a circular concrete base 10' in diameter. Artist Adriana Corral designed a large, white, cotton flag with an embroidered image of the US bald eagle on one side and the Mexican golden eagle on the other. The 30' x 18' flag, visible across the border in Juárez, was flown during the time of the art installation in 2018.³⁸³ *Alterations and Integrity.* The flagpole appears to be unaltered. It is assessed as noncontributing since it was installed after the period of national significance for the district.

RESOURCES ALONG THE NORTH EDGE OF THE QUADRANGLE

The north edge of the quadrangle is bordered by a row of six adobe buildings, described from east to west. The buildings are connected by a shed-roof porch along their south walls as well as breezeways between the buildings.

³⁸² Ortega, interview, 2019.

³⁸³ Andrea Lepage, ed., *Unearthed:Desenterrado* (Lexington, Virginia: Staniar Gallery, Department of Art and Art History, Washington and Lee University, 2019), 4-7.

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Bracero Photography and X-Ray Processing Building, ca. 1935-36, E.R. Nilson (architect), Resource 10, Building, Contributing

This building at the northeast corner of the quadrangle follows the common 1935-36 building plan. The 1956 lease map labeled it as containing photography and X-ray functions (likely meaning X-ray processing). The west wall has a center entrance with a metal security door fabricated from welded reinforcing rods; the building is open to the elements. The east wall contains a center entrance with double five-panel wood doors. The south wall contains two five-panel wood doors (transoms covered) and nine boarded up windows. The north wall displays eleven boarded-up window openings. The one-over-one-light windows are still present. The interior features two small rooms flanking the west entrance; ceiling joists and rafters are exposed. *Alterations and Integrity.* The windows are boarded-up and the west door has been replaced. This is one of the more deteriorated adobe buildings, with large areas of exposed adobe bricks. The roof has missing deck boards, and shingles are no longer present. Although deteriorated, the building retains historic integrity.

Bracero Processing Building, ca. 1935-36, E.R. Nilson (architect), Resource 9, Building, Contributing

This building follows the common 1935-36 building plan. Adobe bricks are exposed on the east and west gable faces below the parapet. The west wall contains a center entrance with double five-panel wood doors, while the east wall has a center entrance with a single five-panel wood door. The north and south walls each contain eleven window openings boarded-up with a variety of materials; the one-over-one-light wood windows are still present. *Alterations and Integrity.* All windows are boarded-up but windows are still present. Some areas of adobe are exposed. The building retains historic integrity.

Bracero Processing Building, ca. 1935-36, E.R. Nilson (architect), Resource 8, Building, Contributing

This building follows the common 1935-36 building plan. The building faces south toward the quadrangle. The south wall contains a five-panel wood door with a security door and a covered transom near its center; the wall also holds three covered door openings with covered transoms and seven covered window openings. The north wall has eleven boarded-up window openings. The west wall features two boarded-up door openings (the center one is wider). The east wall holds an entrance with double five-panel wood doors (lower part boarded-up). *Alterations and Integrity.* A number of doors and windows are boarded-up. Some roof shingles are missing. The building retains historic integrity.

Bracero Processing Building, ca. 1935-36, E.R. Nilson (architect), Resource 7, Building, Contributing

This building follows the common 1935-36 building plan. The building faces south toward the quadrangle, and its south wall contains four five-panel wood doors with transoms and seven one-over-one-light wood windows; this fenestration appears to date to the historic period. The west wall holds a center entrance with double five-panel wood doors, while the east wall features two off-center boarded-up entrances to the north. The north wall has eleven boarded-up window openings. At the west end of the roof is a metal pipe; the north roof slope holds an evaporative cooler unit toward its east end. The shed-roof porch on the south has a shed-roof projection at its west end sheltering a concrete drinking fountain (Resource 31). *Alterations and Integrity.* Some windows and doors are boarded up, but the windows are likely intact. The curvilinear parapets were repaired in 2018 and the building re-roofed. The building retains historic integrity.

Bracero Drinking Fountain, ca. 1952-56, Resource 31, Object, Contributing

Near the southwest corner of Resource 7 (sheltered by a shed-roof extension of the building's porch) is this concrete bracero drinking fountain (8' x 1'-6"). It follows the same general design as Resource 29 and also includes a center concrete support shaped like the end supports. A concrete pad to the west features a projecting metal water pipe that may have supplied water to a hole in the upper part of the trough. A metal drainpipe protrudes from the bottom of the trough near its east end. *Alterations and Integrity.* The drinking fountain is no

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longer functional; the bubblers are no longer present. It is now used as a flower planter, but its original design and function are still apparent. The object retains historic integrity.

Bracero Processing Building, ca. 1935-36, E.R. Nilson (architect), Resource 6, Building, Contributing

This building follows the shortened version of the common 1935-36 building plan, measuring 63'-6" x 22" with its long axis oriented east-west. The 1956 map and worker accounts identified Resources 6 through 9 as occupied by bracero processing functions, including the contracting section. The windows are wood frame one-over-one-light with wood frame metal screen and projecting stuccoed concrete sills. The building shares a covered breezeway containing a restroom with Resource 5 to the west. The west wall of the building has an off-center entrance with a paneled wood door. The long south wall includes a single window at the west end of the building and two windows further east. The remainder of the wall displays three five-panel wood doors with covered transoms alternating with three windows. The east wall has center double panel wood doors. The north wall includes nine windows, including eight evenly spaced and one toward the west end of the wall. A wide breezeway connects Resource 6 to Resource 7 to the east. *Alterations and Integrity.* The curvilinear parapets were repaired in 2018 and the building was re-roofed. A frame restroom was constructed beneath the breezeway between this building and Resource 5 to the west. The building retains historic integrity.

Transportation Building, ca. 1935-36, E.R. Nilson (architect), Resource 5, Building, Contributing

This building at the west end of the north row of buildings facing the quadrangle was used by the transportation section during the bracero era. It follows the shortened version of the common 1935-36 building plan, measuring 63' x 22' with its long axis oriented east-west. The one-story adobe brick building has a gabled roof and curvilinear parapets on the east and west with central arched shallow niches. The windows are wood frame one-over-one-light with projecting stuccoed concrete sills. The roof has overhanging eaves with exposed rafter tails and is clad with asphalt shingle roofing. The west wall of the building contains one window north of a five-panel wood door. The long south wall has two windows west of a five-panel door and six windows to the east. The east wall has a central five panel wood door and no windows. The north wall includes nine windows. A wide breezeway between Resources 5 and 6 (to the east) contains a frame bathroom clad with stucco, likely added since the mid-1990s. The bathroom projects outward at the center of the north wall of the breezeway and has entrances with paneled wood doors on the east and west. A drinking fountain is attached to the south wall of the bathroom. *Alterations and Integrity.* A frame restroom was constructed in the breezeway between this building and Resource 6 to the east since the mid-1990s. In 2018 the curvilinear parapets were repaired and the building was re-roofed. The building retains historic integrity.

NORTH AREA

Two buildings are located near the northwest corner of the quadrangle, north of Resource 5. A gravel road and an earth drainage ditch extends east-west between the two buildings and the north row of quadrangle buildings. Added as part of a 1956 expansion of the bracero reception center, these buildings were built where braceros with contracts waited for transportation to their worksites. After the El Paso County Sheriff's Department began using part of the poor farm in 1966, they built a firing range here with a U-shaped earth berm erected north of the sun shelter. The firing line was located in the sun shelter.³⁸⁴

Bracero Sun Shelter, 1956, Monroe, Licht, and Higgins (architects), Resource 25, Building, Contributing

The rectangular (103' x 33') open shelter faces north and has a shed roof supported by a framework of 4" x 4"

³⁸⁴ A 1967 aerial photograph clearly shows the berm in place. A bronze plaque on a stone-clad base with a concrete cap adjacent to the south wall of the shelter bears a date of 1982 and dedicates the firing range to Chief Deputy Frank Manning and Range Officer O.K. Powell.

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wood posts and displays 2" x 4" and 2" x 6" brackets and joists. The posts divide the building into ten bays. A short section of rear wall near the center is clad with vertical boards. The roof cladding is missing; a low structure (now collapsed) is present on the north edge of roof near its west end. The shelter has overhanging, boxed eaves. *Alterations and Integrity*. The building is deteriorated, but its original function as a sun shelter remains apparent. The building may have been clad with corrugated metal siding during its shooting range use, but this is no longer present.³⁸⁵ The building retains historic integrity.

Bracero Restroom, 1956, Monroe, Licht, and Higgins (architects), Resource 27, Building, Contributing

The rectangular (16' x 10') concrete block restroom is located east of the sun shelter and has a concrete foundation. The west wall contains a center entrance (no door present) with a rectangular window opening with a narrow concrete block sill to the south. The window contained a jalousie window (glazing missing). A similar window is on the south wall toward the east end. The building has a shed roof. *Alterations and Integrity*. The door, window, and roof decking are missing and the building is generally deteriorated. The restroom still displays its original function and retains historic integrity.

South Side of Rio Vista Road

Three buildings, originally built for poor farm uses, are located on the south side of North Rio Vista Road, southwest of the quadrangle complex.

Bracero Administration and Mexican Consular Staff Offices, Main Poor Farm Building, 1916, Braunton and Leibert (architects), Resource 2, Building, Contributing

Erected in 1916 as the main building of the El Paso County Poor Farm, this building now serves as a municipal courthouse and planning and zoning office for the City of Socorro. Former bracero-era workers recall the building housing the reception center administration and Mexican Consular Service offices, as well as continued poor farm functions.³⁸⁶ The building is the largest resource within the nominated area, measuring 190' east-west x 104' north-south.

The building is set back from North Rio Vista Road, with a municipal police station (Resource 1) to the northwest; a grass lawn, concrete sidewalk, and flagpole to the north; and a workshop building (Resource 3) near its southeast corner. The one-story, painted brick building has a raised concrete foundation and is roughly X-shaped, consisting of a north-south center section with wings projecting at approximately 45° angles to the northwest, northeast, southeast, and southwest, as well as a small L-shaped addition (1934-35) near its southeast corner. The building's hipped roof has overhanging, boxed eaves.

The front (north) features a projecting open porch divided into three bays by brick piers that project through the eaves. The porch deck is concrete, with broad concrete steps with wrought iron railings to the north, a pedestrian ramp to the northwest, and narrow concrete steps to the northeast. Wall piers divide the wall facing the porch into five bays. The center bay contains an entrance with double paneled and glazed wood doors and a multi-light transom. The first bay to the east holds a single window with a mesh security screen, followed by double French doors in the next bay. West of the center entrance the first bay contains a six-over-two-light wood window with an air conditioning unit, followed by double French doors (the lights are boarded over) in the westernmost bay.

³⁸⁵ Myers and Moore, Rio Vista Farm Historic District National Register nomination, 14. The 1995 National Register nomination described the shelter as "With wood-pole and corrugated metal construction, the current structure is open only on the north."

³⁸⁶ Ortega, interview, 2019; Enciso, interview, 2018.

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The northwest wing features three corbelled brick piers at its outside corners that project through the eaves. Its sidewalls contain four tall six-over-one-light wood windows with brick sills. A hipped roof full-width enclosed porch (windows are covered) projects from the end of the wing and has a center entrance with concrete steps with wrought iron railings. At the intersection of the northwest and southwest wings is a shed-roof brick section holding an off-center one-over-one-light wood window. The southwest wing is divided into four bays by brick wall piers; each bay contains two six-over-one-light wood windows. Each roof slope features a triangular dormer containing a louvered vent. This wing also features a full-width projecting hipped roof porch with bands of single-light windows on each wall and a center entrance with sidelights that opens onto concrete steps with metal railings.

At the center of the rear (south) of the building the hipped roof core projects outward with four eight-over-eight-light windows with brick sills on its south wall. Attached to the west is a hipped roof projection with two six-over-one-light wood windows with a shared wood sill on its west and south walls; areas flanking the windows are filled with wood (this area may have been an open porch). A tall, corbelled brick chimney rises from the east section of the center projection. To the east is the 1934-35 addition that displays a gabled roof, painted brick walls, a raised concrete foundation, and six-over-one-light wood windows with brick sills on its west and south walls. Attached on the east is a projecting shed-roof enclosed porch with a brick balustrade and square and rectangular glazing. The north porch wall has an off-center entrance and concrete steps with a wrought iron railing. The east wall of the addition holds two six-over-one-light wood windows with brick sills.

The southeast wing follows the same design as the southwest wing. At the intersection of the southeast and northeast wings is a shed-roof brick bay holding an off-center one-over-one-light wood window. The northeast wing is virtually identical in design to the northwest wing with the following differences: its southwest wall contains a paneled wood door between the two brick piers and the full-width projecting enclosed porch has mechanical equipment on its roof.

Interior. Historically, the interior featured open wards for poor farm inmates in three wings and a dining hall in the fourth wing. The 1934-35 addition provided additional resident housing. Two wings now house the city council chamber and a municipal courtroom, while municipal offices occupy the remaining wings and the south part of the original core. A triangular area in the center is accessed by the main entrance to the building and provides access to the wings. Many original features are still present, including plaster walls, paneled wood doors, and wood window surrounds and floors.

Alterations and Integrity. At the time of the 1995 National Register nomination the eave rafter tails were exposed; they are now boxed. Some skylights and air conditioning and mechanical units have been installed on the roof. The porches at the ends of the northwest and southeast wings were enclosed (date unknown). The interior of the building has been repurposed as offices. The building retains historic integrity.

Poor Farm and Bracero Laundry, 1916, Braunton and Leibert (architects), Resource 3, Building, Contributing

The one-story rectangular plan building was built as the poor farm laundry and now serves as a workshop for the City of Socorro. This building likely continued its laundry function during the bracero era. The building has a concrete foundation, painted brick walls, and a slightly pitched flat roof. Parapets with brick coping are on all sides except the south. All windows and doors are flat-headed; doors have flush concrete lintels and windows have slightly projecting brick sills. The west wall contains two center faux panel doors flanked by four-over-four-light wood windows. Three pipes project from the center of the wall above the doors. The north wall holds

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a four-over-four-light wood window at the west end, with three projecting metal pipes on the wall above. An off-center faux panel door is to the east flanked by two boarded-up window openings; the east window also has three projecting pipes above. The east wall contains two boarded-up window openings with three projecting pipes above at the center. The south wall displays two boarded-up windows to the east and a four-over-four-light window to the west. *Alterations and Integrity.* Doors are replacements and some windows are boarded-up. The interior displays no evidence of its use as a laundry. The building retains historic integrity.

Poor Farm Superintendent's Residence, 1952, Garrett Construction Company (contractor), Resource 1, Building, Noncontributing

This one-story irregularly-shaped building (61' x 41') was built in 1952 by the Garrett Construction Company of El Paso for \$11,777 as a new residence for the poor farm superintendent.³⁸⁷ It played no role in bracero reception center operations. The four-room dwelling included a carport. This building now serves as a police station for the City of Socorro.

The cross-gabled building faces north toward North Rio Vista Road. Most of the walls are stucco, all doors and windows are flat-headed, and the gable faces are clad with horizontal boards and have metal louvered vents. The front (north) contains an off-center entrance sheltered by a shed hood. The entrance holds a flush door with a rectangular light with sidelights. To the west is a steel casement window with a projecting stuccoed sill.

The west wall contains a shorter casement window flanked by window openings covered by stucco. Farther south the unfenestrated wall is clad with vertically-grooved panels with vertical battens covering seams. Attached to the rear (south) of the building are five dog kennel runs with concrete block dividing walls enclosed with chainlink gates on the south. The east wall of the building is clad with stucco and divided into sections by vertical battens; there is a flush door to the north. The east wing projects out and has stucco walls. Its south and east walls contain large two-part windows. The east wall also holds a flush door. The building has overhanging eaves with exposed rafter tails, and the roof is clad with asphalt composition shingles.

Alterations and Integrity. The building was converted from residential to office use. The wing to the east, originally an open carport, has been enclosed and converted to additional office space. The west wall holds two windows covered with stucco. Concrete block kennel runs were attached to the rear. Although built during the period of national significance, it is assessed as noncontributing since it was used for the poor farm and was not associated with the bracero program. Further, the building no longer retains historic integrity to its date of construction.

INTEGRITY

The Rio Vista Bracero Reception Center retains a high degree of historic integrity dating to the period of national significance (1951-1964).

Location. The historic resources within the district maintain the highest level of integrity of location as they have never been moved from the sites where they were originally constructed and where the activities occurred during the period of significance. Integrity of location of the resources is important within the district in order to convey the sequence of activities that occurred in the buildings and the relationships between them in processing braceros.

³⁸⁷ *El Paso Times*, August 26, 1952, 9. The county leased the old superintendent's residence on the north side of the road (no longer extant) to the federal government for bracero reception center use.

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Design. The complex possesses a high level of integrity of design through its retention of elements reflecting its original planning, including the overall layout, the placement of buildings around an open quadrangle, the relationship of the buildings and their specific functions to each other, the dominant architectural style, and the indigenous adobe employed in the 1930s buildings. The design reflects the environment and cultural traditions of the region through the layout of buildings around a central open space, the one-story height, walls composed of adobe bricks clad with stucco, shaped parapets with decorative niches, sun shelters, and covered porches. The design of the main poor farm building on the south side of Rio Vista Road reflects its special purpose for housing indigents in wards.

Setting. The district has a high level of integrity of setting within its isolated rural environment. The location and distance from the nearest town impacted the nature of the construction of the buildings and limited the amenities within the complex, determining that the architecture be simple, appropriate to the environment, and pragmatic in nature. Cotton fields still stretch to the north, east and south, continuing to reflect the historic character of the area during the operation of the bracero reception center. To the west is a newer city park, which provides a buffer from postwar residential development in the distance.

Materials. The district exhibits a high level of integrity of materials and retains key exterior materials. The physical elements in the district are representative of the choice made in the original facility planning to utilize available materials and technology. The predominant wall material, adobe brick, was made on the site by transient workers during the Great Depression. The chosen style for the buildings was reflective of regional traditions and appropriate for the materials and the location. Non-adobe resources also retain original cladding materials. Many original wood windows and doors are still present. Two buildings retain stone fireplaces. The Quonset hut also retains original materials. The small resources, such as drinking fountains, also maintain their original materials, although some functional components are missing. Deteriorated and missing materials of some adobe buildings have been replaced with like materials in recent years. The brick buildings of the poor farm building on the south side of Rio Vista Road testify to an earlier era of design and construction.

Workmanship. The buildings were erected for utilitarian purposes as a poor farm, Depression-era transient camp, and bracero reception center. The workmanship exhibited by the resources provides evidence of the labor and skill involved in making and laying the heavy adobe bricks. The adobe buildings thus reflect the knowledge of traditional construction practices in the composition and masonry of the brick walls. Parapets with ornamental niches are one of the few decorative elements included in construction of the adobe buildings. Buildings on the south side of Rio Vista Road represent skilled brick masonry.

Feeling. The integrity of the layout and design of the buildings and complex as a whole, particularly the configuration of buildings surrounding the quadrangle, conveys the sense that the facility played a role that sets it apart from its surroundings, first as a county poor farm and then as a bracero reception center. The size of the complex is impressive, reflected in the extent of the quadrangle, which is nearly one-and-a-half times the length of a football field. The number of buildings and the uniformity of design employed for most of those on the north side of the road also contributes to the institutional character of the facility. The use of indigenous adobe to form the bricks emphasizes the ties of the buildings to their location and environment.

Association. Although the Mexican Farm Labor Program ended in 1964, Rio Vista remains a direct link to the historic events that occurred during its years of service for the program, and its high level of integrity helps convey this relationship to the visitor. Importantly, Rio Vista remains a vital place of memories for former braceros, reception center workers, and local families. In September 2017 the National Trust, University of Texas at El Paso and the City of Socorro staged a Bracero History Summit to discuss the history and

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significance of the program. Rio Vista hosted presentations and a walking tour. Research about the reception center, its operations, and the braceros, staff, farmers, and other people involved is still ongoing in an effort to record memories, preserve documents, and better understand the history of the program in its broader sense and at this nationally significant place.

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**Table 1. Contributing Status of Resources within the
Rio Vista Bracero Reception Center District**

Resource Number	Historic Building Name and Original Builder	Contributing Status	Resource Type	Year Built
1	Rio Vista Poor Farm Superintendent's Residence	Noncontributing	Building	1952
2	Bracero Administration and Mexican Consular Staff Offices, Main Poor Farm Building	Contributing	Building	1916
3	Bracero/Poor Farm Laundry	Contributing	Building	1916
4	Bracero Mess Hall/Kitchen	Contributing	Building	1935
5	Bracero Transportation Building	Contributing	Building	ca. 1935-36
6	Bracero Processing Building	Contributing	Building	ca. 1935-36
7	Bracero Processing Building	Contributing	Building	ca. 1935-36
8	Bracero Processing Building	Contributing	Building	ca. 1935-36
9	Bracero Processing Building	Contributing	Building	ca. 1935-36
10	Bracero Photography and X-Ray Processing Building	Contributing	Building	ca. 1935-36
11	Bracero Dormitory	Contributing	Building	ca. 1935-36
12	Bracero Dormitory	Contributing	Building	ca. 1935-36
13	Bracero Dormitory	Contributing	Building	ca. 1935-36
14	Bracero Workshop	Contributing	Building	ca. 1935-36
15	Bracero Dormitory	Contributing	Building	ca. 1935-36
16	Bracero Dormitory	Contributing	Building	ca. 1935-36
17	Bracero Dormitory/Immigration and Naturalization Service Building	Contributing	Building	ca. 1935-36
18	Bracero Storage and Disinfection Quonset Hut	Contributing	Building	1951
19	Bracero US Public Health Service Building	Contributing	Building	ca. 1935
20	Bracero Sun Shelter	Contributing	Building	ca. 1959
21	Bracero Selection Building/Dormitory	Contributing	Building	1952
22	Bracero Dormitory/Warehouse Foundation	Contributing	Structure	ca. 1954-56
23	Bracero Restroom/Shower Building Foundation	Contributing	Structure	ca. 1935-36
24	Bracero Restroom	Contributing	Building	ca. 1956
25	Bracero Sun Shelter	Contributing	Building	1956
26	Bracero Restroom (Escusado)	Contributing	Building	1956
27	Bracero Restroom	Contributing	Building	1956
28	Bracero Drinking Fountain (near southwest corner of Building 21)	Contributing	Object	ca. 1952-56
29	Bracero Drinking Fountain (near northeast corner of Building 16)	Contributing	Object	ca. 1952-56
30	Bracero Drinking Fountain (near northeast of Building 21)	Contributing	Object	ca. 1952-56
31	Bracero Drinking Fountain (near southwest corner of Building 7)	Contributing	Object	ca. 1952-56
32	Rio Visa Farm Historical Marker	Noncontributing	Object	2000
33	Unearthed:Desenterrado Flagpole	Noncontributing	Object	2018

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Previously listed in the National Register (fill in 1 through 6 below)
- Not previously listed in the National Register (fill in **only** 4, 5, and 6 below)

- 1. NR #: 96000131
- 2. Date of listing: January 1996
- 3. Level of significance: Local
- 4. Applicable National Register Criteria: A B C D
- 5. Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): A B C D E F G
- 6. Areas of Significance: Social History, Government/Politics, Agriculture, Architecture

- | | |
|--|------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Previously Determined Eligible for the National Register: | Date of determination: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Designated a National Historic Landmark: | Date of designation: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: | HABS No. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: | HAER No. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Recorded by Historic American Landscapes Survey: | HALS No. |

Location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office:
- Other State Agency:
- Federal Agency:
- Local Government:
- University: University of Texas at El Paso, Special Collections and Bracero History Archive
- Other (Specify Repository):

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