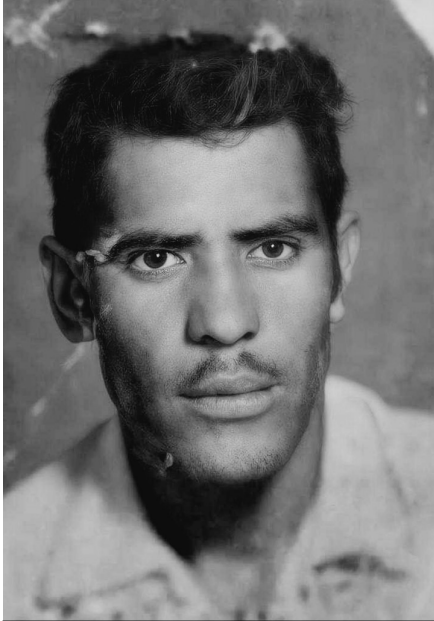


My Grandfather, The Bracero

by Paola Alonso



A headshot of a young Evaristo Guerrero in his twenties, when he was a contracted Bracero.

The Bracero Program was an agreement between the United States and Mexico in 1942. With the US fully engaged in World War II, and with young American men volunteering and being drafted for combat, there was a sudden lack of employees in various workforces, including agriculture. To remedy this, the US and Mexico agreed to contract Mexican men to work in agriculture to aid the United States during this time. The name Bracero literally translates into “arm men”, which depicts the type of manual labor that would be required of them. Hundreds of thousands of Mexican men volunteered to work in the United States for various reasons. The Bracero experience differs with each man that participated in it, including the experiences of my grandfather, Evaristo Guerrero Sierra. While Evaristo’s story is unique, it parallels many of the experiences other Braceros had during their recruitment and while working in the United States.

Evaristo Guerrero Sierra was born in Soledad de Graciano Sánchez, San Luis Potosi, Mexico on October 26th, 1933 to Julian Guerrero and Ignacia Sierra. He was the second oldest of seven children, but the oldest male child. He was raised on a ranch called Rancho Nuevo and lived a humble life. His father, Julian, worked in agriculture as well as his uncles. When recounting his youth, Evaristo recalls starting to work in agriculture at a very young age and the type of work he did. “I started working in El Campo [the fields] when I was about 8 or 9, I went to help my uncles. I took care and herded the animals, gathered firewood, and I would gather sap from the maguey plants. I was happy to do it, I earned my pay and ate well.”¹ He would go on to continue to work in agriculture, something most young men in rural Mexican towns did for work. Another former Bracero, Jesus Zamarron Rocha, was born on the San Elias Ranch in San Luis Potosi in 1936. He has a very similar upbringing to Evaristo, including being one of seven children in their respective families. “Around age eight or nine, I was helping my father sow. I was also milking cows, walking with the team and

¹ Evaristo Guerrero, interview by Paola Alonso, November 7, 2020.

working with the plow.”² Many Braceros were raised similarly and had agricultural experience from a very young age.

It is not uncommon for young men in Mexico to help their older male relatives at work, especially in unskilled labor or families of lower economic classes. This is especially more common in rural areas of Mexico, such as my grandfather’s ranch or mining towns. This can be seen in the study of Mexican families by Oscar Lewis. One of the families that was studied, the Martinez family lived in the small mining town of San Jose. The father of this family has three sons who have helped him work in agriculture to pay off his debts and to sustain the family.³ The youngest of these sons is a cause for concern for this father because he believes that the mother is spoiling the son too much by not having him work in the fields with him. In the 20th century in Mexico, and even currently, Mexican fathers have strong expectations for their sons to be masculine and manly. Evaristo grew up with these ideas, and he continued to pass them onto his sons. Evaristo enjoyed working with his hands a lot, which was ideal for him as a young man.” In school I mostly learned hands-on, but I remember my woodworking class the most. I made tables like this one but a bit bigger.”⁴ There was a great emphasis on teaching young men and boys how to work with their hands and uphold these ideas of masculinity.

In 1942, when Evaristo was nine years old, the United States was fully involved in World War II. The U.S. had just declared war against Germany in December of 1941 and had begun drafting eligible men to fight overseas. This was a revolutionary time for the United States. More women than ever began to enter male-dominated jobs, manufacturing in the U.S. was at an all-time high, and the U.S. cemented its position as a world power. Due to the fact that there were so many men enlisting and being drafted into the war, the U.S. was losing people who could farm. As a result of this shortage of farm labor, the U.S. government created an agreement with Mexico to transport men to the U.S. to fill the need for these agricultural jobs. This system of labor was organized by a group of federal administrators in 1942 and passed by Congress within a few months.⁵ Under this agreement, the U.S. government would be responsible for importing Mexican men to build railroads and harvest crops for three to six-month contract periods.⁶ Mexican President, Manuel Avila Camacho, agreed to the arrangement on the basis that the Braceros be excluded from the normal immigration

² “Jesus Zamarrón Rocha,” Bracero History Archive, accessed November 30, 2020. <http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/108?view=full>.

³ Lewis, Oscar. *Five Families; Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*. New York: Basic Books, 1959, 29.

⁴ Evaristo Guerrero, interviewed by Paola Alonso.

⁵ Calavita, Kitty. *Inside the State : The Bracero Program, Immigration, and The I.N.S. After the Law*. New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 2.

⁶ Rosas, Ana Elizabeth. *Abrazando El Espíritu*. 1st ed. Vol. 40. American Crossroads. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.

requirements like literacy tests and fees, and that they would be protected from social discrimination.⁷ The agreement seemed promising and both sides were excited.

Avila Camacho believed that unskilled Mexican men who were from rural towns would acquire skills and qualities to advance socially and financially in Mexico once they returned from the U.S.⁸ This belief inspired who was recruited into the Bracero Program. Ana Elizabeth Rosas states in her book, *Abrazando el Espíritu*, “The government officials of rural towns were asked to specifically target for recruitment experienced agricultural laborers with wives and children because their family obligations would motivate these workers to accept the offer and to comply with government-sanctioned return schedules.”⁹ Both the U.S. and Mexico stressed to potential Braceros that this was only a temporary system, and that they must agree to return to Mexico once their Bracero contracts had expired. Millions of men were encouraged to apply to become a Bracero. Many of these men were incentivized by the Bracero wages to apply for the program, especially because many of them came from poor rural villages and because Mexico was undergoing an economic depression at this time.

People in both nations were excited for the promising new arrangement. U.S. growers needed labor and Mexico was happy to provide it. Mexican men were hopeful that they could work to earn enough money to support themselves and their families. One Bracero, Ignacio Gomez stated, “There was a lot of poverty in Mexico...I was money-poor, food-poor, but rich in health.”¹⁰ Many of the men who applied to the program were also doing so because they believed it was their duty as the man of the house, if they had families, to do anything they could to support them. Evaristo was no different, as the oldest male child, he felt it was his duty to support his family financially. “I became a Bracero to help my parents buy a house. I wanted to help them.”¹¹ The financial benefit was one of the greatest reasons why men registered to become Braceros, but many others were also influenced by Mexican society’s expectations of men’s roles.

Several men were recruited by government officials or someone they knew within their rural communities. Men who had previously worked in agriculture and were experienced at doing this type of work were sought for the program. Evaristo was very young when the Bracero Program first began, but he does recall the excitement of those surrounding him. “There was a lot of communication here and there from those

⁷ Rosas, Ana Elizabeth. *Abrazando el Espíritu*.

⁸ Rosas, Ana Elizabeth. *Abrazando El Espíritu*. 1st ed. Vol. 40. American Crossroads. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014, chap. 1, E-Book.

⁹ Rosas, *Abrazando El Espíritu*, chap. 1.

¹⁰ “Journey/Jornado,” A Bittersweet Harvest, Smithsonian Museum, accessed November 19, 2020. <https://americanhistory.si.edu/bracero/journey>.

¹¹ Evaristo Guerrero, interviewed by Paola Alonso.

who were contracted and where they were going.” This was how he first learned about the program, and he personally knew a lot of the men who would become Braceros. This connection led him to be recruited by someone in his community in 1955 who would advocate for him and the work he did.

Jesus Rocha also knew several men who worked in the United States when he decided to become a Bracero in 1957. Jesus had already been recommended as a Bracero when he decided to enlist. “Well, the thing is, lists were coming out of San Luis Potosí, to Monterrey, and we were already listed, in a list, and from there from Monterrey they would take us here to Texas... I would go to the Municipal office in San Luis to enlist.”¹² Jesus wanted to become a Bracero to gain more financial stability and work opportunities. When asked what encouraged him to become a Bracero, he said, “I thought to myself that I wanted to sign up and see if I could advance in life later.”¹³ Jesus and Evaristo, like many of the other Braceros, were inspired to become Braceros due to their supportive communities.

Many potential-Braceros often traveled long distances to their nearest recruitment centers where they would have to wait for hours along with hundreds of other potential-Braceros in order to apply. Juan Sánchez Abasta, ex-Bracero, stated that he had to wait along with twelve or thirteen-thousand men.¹⁴ These men were so desperate for work and higher wages that they did whatever was necessary to obtain a Bracero contract. Another ex-Bracero, Pedro del Real Pérez, documents this desperation by saying, “For good or bad, the whole world wanted to come here. Well treated or poorly treated, either way, people wanted to come, we needed to come.”¹⁵ And so, millions of men traveled and waited in recruitment centers in order to have the possibility of being given a work contract.

The process for becoming a Bracero was very long and tedious. Prior to traveling to their nearest processing center, they had to obtain letters of support from local government officials that they would be good workers for the position and that their absence would not cause a shortage of work in their hometowns.¹⁶ Many of the men had to find funds and travel to processing centers where they would wait for weeks to go through a series of interviews and medical exams, without being guaranteed a work contract.¹⁷ If a man was chosen as a potential-Bracero, his next step before crossing the border into the United States would be to undergo a final medical exam. These medical exams checked the men for venereal disease or hernias, and were often a very

¹² “Jesus Zamarrón Rocha,” Bracero History Archive.

¹³ “Jesus Zamarrón Rocha,” Bracero History Archive.

¹⁴ “Journey/Jornado.”

¹⁵ “Journey/Jornado.”

¹⁶ Britton, John A. *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA*. Vol. 45. Society for History Education, 2012, 7.

¹⁷ “Journey/Jornado”. *Smithsonian Museum*.

humiliating experience for them. On top of the medical checks, the men were also sprayed with DDT, a harmful pesticide, to ensure that the Braceros did not enter the U.S. with lice.¹⁸ According to Ernesto Galarza in *Merchants of Labor*, “Here [at processing centers] the *braceros* were checked again by the Border Patrol and examined by the Public Health Service, principally for tuberculosis, venereal disease and lice infestation. Between 1952 and 1957, nearly 1,700,000 men were examined of whom 38,489 were rejected for medical reasons.”¹⁹ The standards for who was allowed into the United States were very high, and many of the Braceros had negative experiences during this process.

Many of the Braceros dreaded or feared these medical exams, especially because they risked deportation if they did not comply with them. One former-Bracero discusses his feelings of shame regarding the recruitment process with his daughter, which not many men were able to do due to machismo, “His immediate appreciation for his daughter’s emotional maturity influenced him to tell her that the Bracero Program’s selection and renewal procedures, conducted with the utmost disregard for his humanity, were a most lingering emotional wound for him. He told Azucena that he could not forget the shame of being required to answer personal questions; sign forms he did not have a chance to read or did not understand; strip to varying degrees of nudity to undergo humiliating photographs, physical examinations, and delousing procedures; and be corralled into large, open-air waiting areas as part of an assembly line of Mexican men managed by women and men of Mexican descent in Empalme, Sonora, Mexico.”²⁰ For many of the Braceros, the recruitment process was one that emasculated and humiliated them, feelings that would last their entire lives and set the precedent for their experiences in the United States.

While the Bracero Program was initiated in 1942, and was intended to only last until the end of World War II, it lasted until its termination in 1964. The program was extended several times due to the demand from U.S. growers for cheap labor. Galarza states that after the Allied victory of WWII, the U.S. Department of State notified Mexico of plans to terminate the program within 90 days. “Notwithstanding the views of the Department, some employers continued to plead an acute need for *braceros* and it was on their behalf that recruitment was extended through 1949.”²¹ Additionally, President Harry S. Truman attempted to slow down the Bracero Program in 1950-1952. Truman tried to do this by creating the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor in American Agriculture, introducing legislation to provide incentives for American agricultural workers, and investigating social and economic conditions of both domestic

¹⁸ “The Border/La Frontera.” A Bittersweet Harvest, Smithsonian Museum, accessed November 19, 2020.. <https://americanhistory.si.edu/bracero/border>.

¹⁹ Galarza, Ernesto. *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story*. McNally and Loftin, 1964, 82-3.

²⁰ Rosas, *Abrazando El Espiritu*, chap. 7.

²¹ Galarza, Ernesto. *Merchants of Labor*, 48.

and foreign migratory workers in the U.S.²² However, Truman could not persuade Congress to slow down or end the importation of Bracero laborers or satisfy the demand for Braceros from American growers. Despite Truman's efforts, Congress passed Public Law 78 which extended the Bracero Program for another decade.²³

Furthermore, shortly after the extension of the program, there was another attempt to reduce the number of not only Braceros, but Mexican immigrants in the United States in general. The Bracero Program encouraged Mexican workers to enter the country through legal channels, but many people were desperate to uplift their financial situation and chose to enter or remain in the United States to work. Many of the Braceros entered legally, but violated the terms of their contract and remained in the U.S. after it expired or abandoned their assignment to work extra hours elsewhere.²⁴ The growers in the U.S. showed that there was a demand for cheap and reliable labor, and that Mexican immigrants were willing to do the labor for much lower wages.

With higher numbers of Mexican workers in the United States, many Americans came to resent and fear them. American citizens and the government feared that Mexicans would begin to ingrain into American society. This not only presented itself in poor working conditions for Mexican laborers, but in xenophobia and discrimination as well. In response to this fear, the U.S. Justice Department authorized one of the largest mass deportations in American history in 1954 entitled "Operation Wetback."²⁵ This program was a quasi-military campaign that was led by General Joseph Swing, and deported hundreds of thousands of Mexican workers to the interior of Mexico.²⁶ The Mexican government consented to Operation Wetback, and agreed to fund the travel expenses for the repatriation of Mexican workers, which the Mexican press published and distributed in border towns like McAllen, Tx and infuriated Mexican nationals in the U.S. to know of Mexico's support for these actions.²⁷ While most of those who were deported were undocumented Mexican workers who entered the country through illegal means, this news still affected the xenophobia that Braceros endured while on their work assignments from white Americans.

The extension of the Bracero Program gave more young men the opportunity to become Braceros, including Evaristo and Jesus who enlisted in 1955 and 1957, respectively. He was too young for the program during World War II, but in 1955 at the

²² Robinson, Robert S. "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, no. 3 (2010): 381-402. Accessed November 17, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27868998>. 384.

²³ Robinson, Robert S. "Taking the Fair Deal to the Fields." 399.

²⁴ Rosas, *Abrazando el Espíritu*, chap. 3.

²⁵ Foley, Neil. "Braceros and the "Wetback" Invasion." In *Mexicans in the Making of America*, 123-47. Harvard University Press, 2014. Accessed November 18, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qdtbj.9>. P. 123.

²⁶ Foley, Neil. "Braceros and the "Wetback" Invasion." 142.

²⁷ Foley, Neil. "Braceros and the "Wetback" Invasion." 142.

age of 22, he was recruited into the program due to his community connections. Evaristo certainly met the criteria to become a Bracero. He was young, strong and agile, and he had worked in agriculture for several years. First, he was recommended as a potential Bracero by other men. "There were some men who put my name on a list with about 60 or 30 names, and then we would be contacted. The man who recruited me was named Don Pancho from my ranch. There were some older men and some young men. I decided to go because there was movement (work) here but there was no money."²⁸ He traveled to his nearest Bracero reception center to begin his application process. The normal process for becoming a Bracero entailed providing letters of support from local government officials, getting their names on a list of potential contractees, financing their transportation to recruitment centers, and undergoing a series of interviews and medical exams. "I took about six exams before I was done with all that."²⁹ He was eventually granted a contract. "They sent me to Reynosa/McAllen for 45-days, then I was sent to California." He was one of eight men from his hometown to be assigned to harvest in McAllen. Here, he harvested lettuce, avocados, tomatoes, and several other types of fruits and vegetables.

Throughout the time-line of the program, millions of men were assigned to Bracero contracts. There was a significant boost in the amount of Braceros being contracted during the years of 1951 to 1964 compared to the earlier half of the program. The number of Braceros massively jumped from 323,232 total from 1942-August of 1946, to 4,277,359 from 1951-1964, according to the authors of *Consuming Mexican Labor*.³⁰ The amount of Braceros sent from San Luis Potosi increased significantly as well. From 6,440 Braceros in the first half, to 211,703 in the second half.³¹ There was a demand for agricultural labor and millions of men willing to do the work, including Evaristo.

The type of work a Bracero would do on his assignments varied by his location and what the growers chose for them specifically. Many of these tasks were very similar; for example, all Braceros would harvest, hoe, dig, weed and thin, and do other similar tasks that were important for farming. Many of the Braceros worked long and grueling hours, which is why young men with previous agricultural experience were preferred for these positions. The Braceros would often work what was considered "stoop labor", work that required them to be bent over at the waist for extended periods of time. Pain and discomfort also came from using a specific tool, the short-handled hoe or "El Cortito." El Cortito would require the Braceros to be bent over for hours while they used it to remove or thin weeds for harvest. Jose Natividad Alva Medina, a former Bracero, describes his experience using El Cortito as, "That's where we encountered el

²⁸ Evaristo Guerrero, interviewed by Paola Alonso.

²⁹ Evaristo Guerrero, interviewed by Paola Alonso.

³⁰ Britton, John A and Alicia C.S. Swords. *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA*. Vol. 45. Society for History Education, 2012, p. 9.

³¹ Britton, *Consuming Mexican Labor*, p. 8.

cortito, or what's called the short-handled hoe. And for sure, that is where I shed my tears." Former Bracero, Jesus Zamarron Rocha comments on the short handled hoe as well, "Well, the one [workload] that was heavier was the short hoe. It is that of being crouched all day, all day, without stopping at all, it is like that."³² The short-handled hoe was banned as an occupational hazard a decade after the end of the Bracero Program. The Smithsonian Museum states that the hoe became a symbol of the exploitative working conditions and campaigns by the United Farm Workers and others helped outlaw use of the hoe in 1975.³³

At only 22 years old, Evaristo boarded the train that would take him 400 miles from his hometown to McAllen and braced himself for new beginnings. "There were thousands of other Mexicans crossing the border with me, why would I be scared?"³⁴ He was fortunate enough to be placed with men from his hometown that he would be able to talk to, that would provide him a sense of comfort, but this was still a very small assignment. "From my rancho there were only two."³⁵ In McAllen, he did tasks that he was familiar with back in Soledad, he thinned weeds, and picked and harvested fruits and vegetables. "I worked with vegetables like tomatoes. The harvest was bad that year. I guess it was bad luck."³⁶ He only spent 45 days in McAllen, but he did enjoy his time here. When asked about how the contrats worked, Evaristo responded, "I was given paperwork when I was done, the only thing I was given was a card to be there that would keep immigration from getting me."³⁷ After his 45-day contract was completed, Evaristo returned to Mexico to wait for his next assignment.

Bracero contracts, especially for new Braceros, were very strict. Both Mexico and the U.S. stressed that this was only a temporary program and that they did not want Mexican nationals to remain in the U.S. longer than what was listed in their contracts.³⁸ Braceros were under strict instructions to return to Mexico promptly after their contracts were completed or risk having their contracts not renewed. If a grower in the U.S. wanted to keep the same Bracero, it would be their discretion to let the Bracero stay, sometimes even violating the six-month maximum for contracts.

After briefly waiting in Soledad, Evaristo received his next assignment to work in Los Angeles, California. "After McAllen we were sent back here to the ranch to wait for our next contract. There was a lot of contracting at that time. I got sent to Los Angeles that same year."³⁹ This time, Evaristo would be traveling over 1,500 miles to his new

³² "Jesus Zamarrón Rocha," Bracero History Archive.

³³ "Short-Handled Hoe, 1950s and 1960s." National Museum of American History. *The Smithsonian*. Retrieved 1 Dec. 2020. https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1352222.

³⁴ Evaristo Guerrero, interviewed by Paola Alonso.

³⁵ Evaristo Guerrero, interviewed by Paola Alonso.

³⁶ Evaristo Guerrero, interviewed by Paola Alonso.

³⁷ Evaristo Guerrero, interviewed by Paola Alonso.

³⁸ Rosas, *Abrazando el Espíritu*, chap. 1.

³⁹ Evaristo Guerrero, interviewed by Paola Alonso.

assignment. This was a bigger assignment and more men were contracted. "I met people from Guanajuato, Celaya, Queretaro. There were about six other men from my ranch that I went with."⁴⁰ This assignment lasted him about one year until 1957. Here, he had more liberties with the type of work he did. In addition to his regular tasks of harvesting and weeding, he was now able to help with the livestock, which is something that brought him a lot of joy. While working in Los Angeles, growers from a nearby farm spoke to the grower where my grandfather was working to ask if he could spare any Braceros to work at his farm. My grandfather was one of the lucky Braceros approved for this transfer, which would be one of his favorite experiences yet.

While my grandfather enjoyed all of his work assignments, he spoke of his assignment working at Takahashi Farms in San Diego with the most fondness. Takahashi Farms was owned by the Japanese-American family, the Takahashis. My grandfather got along well with the entire family despite the language barrier. He specifically got along well with his patrón, Howard A. Takahashi, who he nicknamed Javier Takahashi along with the other Braceros. Evaristo and Howard had a great relationship, my grandfather would often share the food that he would cook with Howard. He recalls that Howard especially enjoyed his rice and beans.

Howard was very supportive of my grandfather and actually gave preferential treatment to him on the farm. When I asked my grandfather about what kind of responsibilities he had at Takahashi Farms he jokingly said, "I was a boss so I could do anything. I never demanded anything but I always got what I needed"⁴¹ While he said this humorously, many Braceros did experience more privileges if they had good relationships with the growers they worked for and if they proved themselves to be responsible. Bracero contracts listed very specific tasks that the Braceros would be allowed to work on, but growers frequently allowed some Braceros to learn more "advanced" tasks to perform on the ranches.⁴² Braceros who were able to perform these tasks were ensured to be kept with the same grower and ranch during the contract renewal process, "It was for such skilled tasks that farm employers made certain that the "specials" were retained within the *bracero* program... Employer views on this matter were voiced by the *California Farmer*: "It is only fair that the grower who has spent his money to train workers should get these same workers back next year."⁴³ It was very beneficial for a Bracero to be a fast-learner and establish a good working relationship with the grower, which is exactly what Evaristo did at Takahashi Farms.

Besides having great relationships with his patrónes, Evaristo also enjoyed his companionship with his fellow Braceros. "They were all good people, there were no

⁴⁰ Evaristo Guerrero, interviewed by Paola Alonso.

⁴¹ Evaristo Guerrero, interviewed by Paola Alonso.

⁴² Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 92.

⁴³ Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 92.

problems there.”⁴⁴ Many of the Braceros were also young men from poor, working class families so they enjoyed discussing the similar experiences they had. The relationships Braceros had with each other provided them with a sense of support and belonging in foreign environments. My grandfather states that although he enjoyed the work he did, sometimes speaking with the other Braceros made toiling for long hours more tolerable. They would enjoy spending time with each other doing various activities, but mostly they enjoyed making conversation with each other, especially in a land where they did not understand the language of the majority. When their shifts were over, they would cook for each other or relax and listen to the radio together. On their off-days they would play cards or billiards, or even go into town. My grandfather’s favorite pastime during his off-days would be to go into town with the other Braceros and watch films in theaters. “There were about seven or eight of us that got together and went to the cinema. We watched a lot of films, there were many in Spanish.” These theaters catered to the growing Hispanic population and played Mexican films. There were many in California, but they were also popular in other states like Texas. Jesus Zamarron Rocha also enjoyed socializing with other Braceros in the U.S. “We got along really well, we agreed on everything. On days off we would go to the dance, we would go around the shops.”⁴⁵ Many of the Braceros enjoyed bonding with each other and experiencing life in the U.S. on their days off.

Evaristo stated that he never experienced any discrimination or xenophobia from white Americans, but this unfortunately was not the case for all of the Braceros. If the Braceros wanted to go into town, they would face discrimination and be segregated from white Americans. Alejandro Ruteaga Rivas, an ex-Bracero, commented, “They discriminated against us and the blacks . . . they removed us from white restaurants and stores . . . they intimidated us.”⁴⁶ One son of a former Bracero recalls what his father told him about being discriminated against, “We were not welcomed by anybody, white, black, other Mexican immigrants, or Mexican Americans. They saw us as competition.”⁴⁷ While many of the Braceros were scared to go into town and face aggression from Americans, other Braceros found themselves welcomed in various ways. As previously mentioned, my grandfather enjoyed watching Spanish movies at movie theaters in town. Theaters in the U.S. capitalized on a new market and provided various showings for the Braceros and Hispanic community in many states. Talk shows and songs in Spanish were also played frequently on the radio, and the Braceros enjoyed being able to hear their language and some of the songs they were familiar with. Additionally, some of the Braceros enjoyed being in the U.S. so much that they

⁴⁴ Evaristo Guerrero, interviewed by Paola Alonso.

⁴⁵ “Jesus Zamarrón Rocha,” Bracero History Archive.

⁴⁶ “In the U.S./En Los E.U.” A Bittersweet Harvest. Smithsonian Museum, accessed November 24, 2020. <https://americanhistory.si.edu/bracero/in-the-us>.

⁴⁷ Rosas, *Abrazando el Espíritu*, chap. 1.

would find themselves a wife, usually Hispanic, and settle-down to establish a life in the U.S. Antonia Duran, a wife of a former Bracero, stated, "I always prayed that if I married this person that he could stay here, that he would like California and he wouldn't go back."⁴⁸ Many Braceros had more opportunities to start a new life.

Besides facing discrimination from American society, Braceros were also subjected to poor treatment from their growers in the United States. Much of the Bracero experience was placed in the hands of the U.S. growers, including housing, meals, pay rates, health care, and working conditions. Many of the Braceros remarked their poor experiences with living conditions like in this passage described in *Consuming Mexican Labor*, "If Braceros wanted to continue working, they had to accept a pay schedule that changed from day to day, cope with rancid that was deducted from wages, and accept illegal deductions for blankets and work supplies. They had to live in whatever housing was provided, whether a tent or a "converted" barn or chicken coop. They risked personal safety riding in overcrowded flatbed trucks. They had to be willing to endure the loneliness and isolation of living in a country whose language they did not speak, and in a labor camp where surveillance was the order of the day and outside contact was infrequent or nonexistent."⁴⁹ One former Bracero, Guadalupe Mena Arizmendi, stated that he had to sleep in a barrack with over 900 other people⁵⁰. Some growers did not give the Braceros the full amount of money they were entitled to, finding any reason to deduct pay from their promised wages. The Braceros were also subject to being fed molding and poor-quality food that was taken out of their pay. So many Braceros came to the United States with high hopes of gaining money to support themselves and their families were granted a contract stating that they would be taken care of and paid well, only to arrive in the U.S. to realize that they were betrayed and would not be receiving the quality they were promised.

The Bracero Program affected both the United States and Mexico in several ways, especially in shifting societal standards in both countries. The Bracero Program also affected the men who enrolled and their families back home in Mexico. One of the ways the program was able to do this was through the lens of machismo and gender roles. For instance, the Bracero Program sought young men from lower-class rural towns to work in agriculture. These men were the pinnacle of masculinity in Mexico, with the word Bracero literally translating into "arm men." These men set the standard for the ideals of physical masculinity, in which they were strong and able to work manual labor. However, one of the ways that the men for the program were recruited was to

⁴⁸ "In the U.S./En Los E.U." A Bittersweet Harvest. Smithsonian Museum.

⁴⁹ Britton, *Consuming Mexican Labor*, p. 16.

⁵⁰ "Broken Promises/Promesas Rotas." A Bittersweet Harvest, Smithsonian Museum, accessed 25 November, 2020. <https://americanhistory.si.edu/bracero/broken-promises>.

appeal to their masculinity, their ability to provide financial support for their families.⁵¹ Scholar Deborah Cohen states that recruiting men with families ensured that they would return to Mexico whenever their contracts were over. Furthermore, despite the fact that many men that were hired were young and single, the program also hoped to lead them in becoming the ideal patriarchal figure upon their return by withholding 10% of their wages to be sent home and to prevent them from gambling, drinking, or spending money on prostitutes.⁵² Once the men began their journey to the U.S. and arrived at the fields, they no longer made regular contact with women and were surrounded by men all hours of every day. "This world of migrants was largely a world of men. By day it comprised backbreaking labor: long hours in fields dragging and filling sacks of fruit, cotton, or vegetables. By night some men (often upward of several thousand) called military-style barracks home, others shared small shacks with as few as five to seven migrants."⁵³ This shift was very difficult for many of the Braceros, many of whom now had to start performing tasks that they were not used to such as cooking, cleaning and shopping. During the interview with Evaristo, my grandmother recalled a man that was having difficulty with this shift in roles. "He said, 'Why should I be washing these dishes? As if I were a woman!' Well then, don't eat!"⁵⁴ These new responsibilities and new environments resulted in many of the Braceros to form support networks with each other. The Braceros passed on knowledge from their experiences onto newcomers and helped them navigate this new experience. Evaristo's friendship with the other Braceros helped him a lot, "When I was there, I never struggled to find something to eat."⁵⁵ Despite their feelings of emasculation, the Braceros helped each other traverse these difficulties.

Many of the Braceros, whether they stayed in the U.S. or returned to Mexico, will agree that their experiences in the program changed them forever. Jesus Zamarron Rocha continued to work as a Bracero until the end of the program in 1964 and moved back to Mexico, but then decided to return to the United States to work to support his family. "I was lucky to find a good job there in Chicago. I was working on a punch press machine making aluminum lids. And then the bosses there, they did love me well and they even gave me permission to go to Mexico. When I had time to be there, they gave me a five-month permit to be there with my family and they would guarantee work when I returned."⁵⁶ Many Braceros had to make the difficult decision to return to

⁵¹ Cohen, Deborah. "From Peasant to Worker: Migration, Masculinity, and the Making of Mexican Workers in the US." *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 69 (2006): 84. Accessed December 6, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27673023>.

⁵² Evaristo Guerrero, interviewed by Paola Alonso.

⁵³ Cohen, "From Peasant to Worker", 86.

⁵⁴ Maria Guerrero Nieto, interviewed by Paola Alonso, November 7, 2020.

⁵⁵ Evaristo Guerrero, interviewed by Paola Alonso.

⁵⁶ "Jesus Zamarrón Rocha," Bracero History Archive.

Mexico where there were less financial opportunities or to continue to work in the United States and risk not being able to see their families for years. Jesus and Evaristo decided on two different paths for themselves after their time as Braceros were finished.

In 1959, Evaristo's contract with Takahashi Farms was coming to an end. After two years of working in San Diego, Evaristo decided that he was satisfied with his time in the program and that he would return to San Luis Potosi to see where life would take him. He did have the opportunity to have his contract extended and continue working with the Takahashis, but he refused. "They offered to renew my contract but we wanted to leave. I finished my contract and it was my time to go."⁵⁷ Upon his departure, Howard told him that if he ever needed anything, to write to him or visit him whenever he could. So, at the age of 26 and after four years of working as a Bracero, Evaristo returned to Rancho Nuevo. He continued to work in agriculture in Mexico, like he did before he left for the U.S. and like many of the other ex-Braceros did as well.

Once Evaristo returned home to San Luis Potosi, he also returned to his normal life of working and socializing. He had a great skill of befriending people and was very popular. His status as a Bracero and his status of being single meant that he was able to afford to dress nicely, and he made good impressions on others. In one instance, he accompanied one of his friends to provide support for him when he went to ask for his girlfriend's hand in marriage from her parents. The girl's parents were very excited and happy to provide consent for their daughter's hand... to my grandfather, who they believed was the boyfriend. They did not approve of the friend and they never got married, but this does show that my grandfather met the criteria for being a good candidate for marriage.

In 1960, Evaristo would meet Maria Nieto at a party of a mutual friend. Maria Nieto was born on November 1, 1941 in a town just outside of Soledad de Graciano Sanchez. Maria had a very difficult childhood after her biological mother died and suffered abuse from her step-mother and father. She became self-sufficient at a young age and gained more freedom when she was older. She was nineteen years old when she met Evaristo in 1960, and he decided to court her. He would meet up with her when she would go into town to mill corn into flour for tortillas. Most of their interactions would be like this and take place in public since it protected the modesty of Maria, which was very important in Mexican society.

Eventually, Maria decided that it was time for their relationship to take the next step, and they decided to elope in 1961. Eloping was very common during this time, and was not always negative. In their case, Evaristo could not ask Maria's father for her hand in marriage due to their distant relationship. They decided that eloping would be the best course of action for their relationship since Maria did not need permission from her parents to marry. Much of the legislation surrounding marriage and relationships in

⁵⁷ Evaristo Guerrero, interviewed by Paola Alonso.

Mexico originate from the era of Spanish colonization. In 1776, parental consent for marriage was required for those younger than twenty-five, usually under threat of disinheritance.⁵⁸ This age was then lowered to twenty in 1884, and lowered again to sixteen in the 20th century.⁵⁹ Maria was able to consent to her own marriage, which was beneficial because otherwise, she would have required parental consent but her distant and absent relationship with her parents meant she would then have to ask consent from the next family member, beginning with her mother and paternal grandfather.⁶⁰ By waiting until she was twenty years old to marry, Maria empowered herself to take control of her legal rights and what she wanted in a relationship with my grandfather.

Evaristo and Maria married on September 25, 1961 at the courthouse in Soledad, and then they had a church wedding one month later. Their wedding was the most common way of marriage at the time. Marriage through civil and church ceremony was the most popular form of marriage, with 51.5% of couples in 1950 having married this way.⁶¹ They went on to have twelve children together, with their first child being born in 1962 after their first year of marriage. Evaristo's legacy as a Bracero lives on through his children and grandchildren, who have all heard his story.

Evaristo Guerrero's Bracero experience is unique to him, but parallels the complexities of the overall Bracero experience. For many, the Bracero experience was an opportunity to gain financial independence and get ahead in life. For others, it was a very difficult journey that was defined by discrimination and strenuous labor. Most Braceros had a combination of positive and negative experiences throughout their time working in the United States. Each Bracero's story is unique but contributes to the larger history of the program. The Bracero Program changed the legislation, society, and culture of both Mexico and the United States, and continues to impact the lives of the men who worked under the program.



A young Evaristo Guerrero in November of 1957 operating a tractor. This was taken while he was working on a field while being contracted to work in California.

⁵⁸ French, William E. *The Heart in the Glass Jar. The Mexican Experience*. Lincoln: UNP - Nebraska, 2015, 83.

⁵⁹ Hayner, Norman S. "The Family in Mexico." *Marriage and Family Living* 16, no. 4 (1954): 370. Accessed December 1, 2020. doi:10.2307/348445.

⁶⁰ French, *The Heart in the Glass Jar*, 84.

⁶¹ Hayner, "The Family in Mexico", 370.