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5. Bracero Social Life

PERHAPS WORSE than being held under the thumb of their employers, the braceros were victims of terrible injustices stemming from inadequate camp facilities, inept officials, and racism. Their contracts prohibited racial discrimination, but it occurred because the employers disavowed the entire agreement as meaningless.

In the early years of the bracero program, the laborers lived in the FSA camp facilities since most farmers did not have private housing for their workers. Growers did not construct living quarters on their property, because during the 1930s, housing had not been necessary in order to secure labor. The construction of private labor camps to house the braceros was costly because the camps had to meet the standards of the WFA and pass inspection before anyone was allowed to stay in them. Finally, the federal government, not the employers, had undertaken the primary responsibility of providing shelter for farm workers through the FSA.

By the time the Mexican workers arrived the network of FSA camps had been placed under the WFA, where the philosophy and purpose of federal housing were altered dramatically. Camps were no longer seen as agencies of social rehabilitation and instead served as labor storehouses to meet the war shortage and nothing more. Accordingly, the WFA changed the designation from "farm family camps" to "farm labor supply centers." Along with the change in purpose, the spirit of democratic resident camp communities was replaced by a more centralized system of management.

Oddly, even after these changes the growers remained critical of the camps, which served as essential pools of farm labor. This stern opposition by farmers toward the camp system did not cease when the FSA relinquished the facilities to the WFA. Now growers perceived that the housing complexes existed solely to serve the farmer in providing much-needed labor for food production. Criticism went on because the WFA, like the FSA, exercised responsibility for main-

taining standards of employment, wages, and housing for the foreign workers and the agency stood in the way of farmers having their way.

Physically, the permanent housing complexes had started to suffer from a shortage of upkeep, but otherwise they were ready for the Mexican men. When the temporary camps were used to house braceros some minor modifications to the initial design were necessary. The community tent was converted into a single mess hall to feed the single men. Also, as the wartime labor program took on an air of permanency concrete slab foundations replaced the wooden tent platforms. Much of the equipment, however, had deteriorated badly from repeated use and was in a very sorry state of disrepair when the Mexican workers moved in.¹

As the use of braceros increased, the Office of Labor found that its permanent and temporary camp facilities were stretched to their maximum capacity with out-of-state and imported labor. Hence, the Extension Service, which was supposed to provide housing for interstate labor only, began to permit braceros in its camps when other housing could not be found. More often, however, the county extension agent assisted the farm labor associations in securing the necessary equipment, such as tents, bunks, and other items from the military, to set up private, makeshift camps. When the housing provided by the Extension Service, private facilities, and the Office of Labor are considered together, the volume of quarters available for the bracero program was impressive.²

As a rule, the braceros lived in camps set aside exclusively for them. At other times they were placed in the same facility with out-of-state workers but segregated in one section of the complex. In actuality few guidelines governed the conditions in the camps beyond the stipulation that housing should be "adequate." Other regulations specified that campsites could not be within twenty-five miles of each other, operate for a minimum of seventy-five days, and have fewer than one hundred residents.³ Since the camps were only a precondition for obtaining the workers, the guidelines were seldom followed to the letter. For instance, corners were cut in the construction of the camp facilities and these actions were then easily justified as expedient since the housing was only temporary. In some instances, minicamps were established with as few as forty men despite the government mandate.⁴

Overall, the braceros' quarters provided little more than a rudimentary place to sleep. At first appearance these facilities looked to be no more spartan than the camps used to house interstate workers or even the military, but they were worse. Not only did growers retain a sour attitude toward the camp system but some insisted that,

as Mexicans, braceros deserved nothing better than their own homes in Mexico. A letter to the *Northwest Farm News* asked, Why "send to Mexico for more men to partake—from a Mexican viewpoint—in the almost Heavenly standard of living of the American worker?"⁵

Between 1943 and 1947, most braceros were quartered in the mobile camps. One striking aspect of these camps was the poor appearance of the site. Some camps were erected on land that had only recently been plowed over from sage brush or otherwise idle acreage. Within a few days after the workers moved in, the foot and vehicle traffic created an intolerable dust problem that was harmful to the men and damaged the camp equipment as well.⁶ It was worse when the wind blew, and when loose dirt was not a problem weeds and grass quickly reclaimed the open ground until narrow footpaths mapped out the activities of the men. Often deep ruts developed, and if an attempt was made to level the ground, the situation was only made worse because more dust was created and a ready supply of irrigation water was not available to improve the appearance. The most practical solution was to plant trees, lay gravel, or establish a grounds maintenance program. However, the transient nature of the mobile camp and the fact that looks were not important overrode these considerations.

In some instances, the braceros arrived and found that the camp was not ready for occupation. On one occasion, the men arrived as construction workers were pouring the concrete bases for the tents.⁷ In another instance, a camp manager came to the camp ahead of the braceros and discovered that the tents were not ready and kitchen mess facilities and telephone service were not available.⁸ Under these circumstances, the workers were returned to the nearest town for food and necessary lodging.

Even after the camp was in place there was no guarantee that the tents, flimsy and fragile against strong gusts of wind, would remain up. Long and sustained use weakened the tents further and made them susceptible to collapse. At one Oregon camp, a wind storm arrived and within minutes it was impossible to see more than a few feet due to the thick dust. Before the strong windstorm had passed, twenty-one tents had been leveled and their contents scattered about the countryside.⁹

When the Mexican workers were not quartered in the tent camps, they were placed in makeshift shelters where conditions were as bad if not worse. In Idaho, an abandoned Civilian Conservation Corps camp was used to accommodate the Mexican men.¹⁰ The Oregon State Extension Service had the choice of placing the braceros at either the Hillsboro High School or the fairgrounds and opted for the

latter.¹¹ In Washington, farmers placed army cots against the walls of main grandstand at the Whatcom County fairgrounds; this the braceros had to call home.¹² In some communities, farmers obtained permission to erect tents at the city ball park. In another instance some old aircraft hangers served as housing for the contracted workers.¹³ Elsewhere, the braceros' kitchen facilities were an unused packing shed, and they dined on an adjacent loading platform.¹⁴ Other farmers solved their housing needs by leasing a campsite from the Milwaukee Railroad, then obtaining the necessary portable equipment from the nearby Ephrata Military Air Base.¹⁵ The list of improvisations were long and does not end here. As the war came to an end, former prisoner of war camps were appropriated from the military as quarters for braceros. These examples suggest that almost any type of facility and condition could qualify as a bracero camp.

As the first groups of braceros arrived in 1943, farmers were as unprepared to relate with them on a personal level as they were to house the men adequately. Very few farmers understood Spanish or were acquainted with Mexican culture and probably fewer even cared. Braceros were like-minded in that they brought with them a limited understanding as well as unreliable images of life in the United States. The evidence is clear, however, that they differed in their outlook. After they arrived braceros enrolled in evening English classes sponsored at local schools, when available, demonstrating an interest in the host culture. Beyond the obvious cultural differences, the expectations of the profit-conscious farmers and impoverished Mexican men were also at odds, causing a wider chasm to develop between them.

In essence, the braceros lived in much physical discomfort and psychological distress while they were in the Northwest. This stemmed from the emergency nature of the braceros program and facility with which the farm labor associations could sidestep the workers' contracts. The absence of a friend and protector in the communities where they were assigned also made life difficult. In the following pages a detailed examination of the work experiences, camp life, and social activities of braceros is developed. Although some of the individual cases may appear overdrawn and inflammatory, they are nevertheless accurate.

Technically, the braceros were under the guardianship of the federal government, so camp managers were required to make monthly reports on daily feeding, sanitation, the camp governing council, maintenance, occupancy, and other activities to the WFA headquarters in Portland. The official record of the braceros' daily activities

provides a close look, over several years, at a complex and unpleasant social experience filled with hard truths and clear meaning. However, much can never be known because the political sensitivity between Mexico and the United States over the MFLP compelled the Office of Labor to control the release of information to the public as well as what was placed in its own files.¹⁶ The Mexican side, as told by the workers, is less frequently available in State Department and USDA records, because they were purged of the more embarrassing documents.¹⁷ Much less is known from the federal records or other sources about the men in private camps, because the WFA had little jurisdiction unless some complaint was filed. Even then, most farmers considered their property as their own castle and closed it to all trespassers.

Life was difficult for the braceros because they were young men from the rural areas steeped in traditional Mexican culture. Typical were the eighty men housed at the Lyndon, Washington, camp, where the majority were between twenty and thirty years of age and only two were over forty.¹⁸ For most, their sojourn to the United States marked the first separation from their immediate and extended families, which were (and are) important in Mexican culture. Thus they arrived ill-prepared to cope with the unfriendly and unfamiliar circumstances and tensions surrounding the war. Not surprisingly, many men became distraught and feigned illness or wrote to their families asking that they be recalled for reasons of supposed illness or death before the end of the contractual obligation. In one week alone at the Preston, Idaho, camp, twelve men went home before their contracts had expired.¹⁹ Federal officials from Portland expressed concern that braceros in the Northwest would use any means to return early. They "definitely want to be sent home now," observed one official. "If there is a way to hasten their departure, they will find it . . . either by refusing to work or violation of the ceiling."²⁰ In 1945, the chief of operations at Portland reported that one in ten braceros contracted to the Pacific Northwest was either missing or had been granted an early repatriation.²¹

Some men did have genuine reasons for requesting an early return. A month after his wife died in Mexico, a bracero learned the tragic news and became so overcome with grief that he could not work and was repatriated.²² Psychosomatic disorders among the men, stemming from despondency over camp life and absence of home and family, constituted legitimate reasons for wishing to return to Mexico. A writer with the *Northwest Farm News* empathized with the men living beneath the grandstands at the Lyndon, Washington, fairgrounds. He reported that they had little to do at night except huddle

in their blankets and listen to the radio with little if any comprehension. "They sing a lot and whistle too," he wrote, "as they work in the fields or lounge about in the evenings. It helps dispel the homesickness which sometimes bothers them, even as it would afflict anyone so far from his native land."²³ One former bracero recalled that eight to ten days after they arrived from Mexico, nostalgia and hard work were "enough to make anybody cry."²⁴

Upon arriving, the workers' first order of business was to check in with the manager. More than any other person, he was central to the bracero program and the difference between "good" and "bad" camps. Camp managers in the Northwest rarely received any special administrative training or classes in the Spanish language. One camp manager pointed out to the Portland office that he had requested and been promised an interpreter but never received one.²⁵ On occasion and in pressing situations, camp officials would enlist local residents into translation duty.

Compounding the language problem, the attitude, conscience, and resourcefulness of the camp director also shaped the braceros' camp life. Some managers honestly tried to improve the comfort and safety of the camp, but many others were indifferent to their charges. One manager so feared reprisals from alienated men that he had the local sheriff present at the camp as the men prepared to depart at the close of the work season.²⁶

In the Northwest, the braceros lived in mobile tent camps designed to be erected where needed among the widely dispersed agricultural areas. As a rule, six workers lived together in a sixteen-by-sixteen-foot tent furnished with folding cots, one blanket per person, and stove heaters when available.²⁷ Although each worker was entitled to bring seventy-seven pounds of personal effects from Mexico, in reality most arrived with little more than a change of clothes. Within time, the workers scavenged for discarded crates or boxes and placed them inside the tents for storage and seating. These makeshift creations, along with personal pictures of loved ones, tokens of remembrance, or knickknacks purchased locally, completed the interior.

Under the terms of the work agreement, braceros were entitled to but rarely received adequate and equal housing to that offered the domestic workers. During the summer, the men were often driven from the tents by 100 degree temperatures, and in the fall and winter the fabric structures offered little protection from the inclement northwestern weather. Stoves, if provided, were virtually ineffective because the loose sides of the tent allowed heat to escape quite easily. Moreover, the frequent lack of adequate supplies of kerosene,

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coal, or dry wood meant that the stove heaters were often useless.²⁸ As early as October, the camp manager at Hazelton, Idaho, found it nearly impossible to keep the braceros inside their assigned quarters because insufficient fuel and the lack of stoves in some tents resulted in "unusually cold" lodgings.²⁹ Cement floors, frozen water pipes, absence of heat, and badly worn tents at the Caldwell, Idaho, camp exacerbated the already intolerable temperatures.³⁰

The struggle to heat the tents was complicated by the federal bureaucracy. The camp manager at St. Anthony, Idaho, suggested that the tent walls should be insulated by three-foot-high wooden walls in order to lessen the loss of heat.³¹ This and other recommendations went nowhere due to long bureaucratic delays. All decisions or modifications concerning the use of almost any critical material in the camps had to clear the Office of Labor and the War Production Board. Sometimes requests for changes were answered with rebukes, as in the following response to an Oregon camp manager: "It is up to the War Production Board and not the District Engineer to determine whether the savings of critical materials of one kind warrants the use of critical materials of another."³²

Since the camp managers were restricted in what they could do to cope with the cold, ingenuity on the part of all concerned was an invaluable resource. Sometimes the men would pile their blankets together and sleep underneath them, often wearing every piece of clothing at their disposal. Workers commonly used cardboard to insulate their flimsy structures.

Although the specter of hypothermia was ever present, the braceros faced a more serious threat from fire as they struggled to keep warm with a combination of kerosene, old stoves, and highly flammable tents.³³ Besides frequent tent fires, there were also destructive explosions. In one instance in October 1944, some braceros living at Marsing, Idaho, barely escaped injury when an oil-burning water heater exploded and destroyed everything around it.³⁴ Careless use of cigarettes and matches, cooking facilities, or faulty electrical connections could just as easily ignite a fire that would engulf the entire camp.³⁵ Fire at one camp leveled the kitchen and dining area used to serve the braceros.³⁶ The following year the same camp suffered a worse blaze that destroyed the men's quarters and personal possessions.³⁷ The risk of fire and the danger it posed to the entire camp were very real. As was the case with other signs around the facilities, the fire notices, although printed in Spanish, were unreasonably complicated. At one camp a long horn signaled attention. A long horn followed by a short blast meant that the recreation area, the camp manager's house, and the health clinic were on fire. A long

horn and two short ones indicated the braceros' quarters, kitchen, and restrooms. Two long horns meant the first twenty-five homes were on fire. Three long horns involved the last twenty-five homes and large storage buildings.³⁸

When fires occurred in the mobile camps, the fire alerts served to do little more than to empty the tent camps because the entire water system was above ground and often frozen. Water barrels with hand-pumped fire extinguishers were also useless during freezing temperatures. "We have these 2-1/2 gallon water extinguishers which are no good in cold weather and our fire hydrants freeze up at night," complained a worried camp manager. "We try to keep the water faucets dripping at night but the Mexicans are taught to conserve water in Mexico and turn them off at night."³⁹ Worse yet, some towns had a limited water supply and would cut it off to the labor camps when it was needed by food-processing plants.⁴⁰

The camp grounds, particularly at the temporary sites, were often covered with dry weeds and grass, making them potential tinderboxes. This was certainly the case in northeastern Oregon, where the natural vegetation consisted of waves of bush grass. When the braceros arrived in this area their camp was covered with dry and very combustible ankle-high grass. Faced with an obvious fire hazard, the camp manager approached the Blue Mountain Corporation as owners of the property and employers of the men and requested them to improve the grounds. The corporation promised to do some controlled burning and to bulldoze firebreaks around each tent, but months later nothing had been done to lessen the potential of a disastrous fire.⁴¹

Although the braceros complained strongly about their living accommodations, they grumbled most about the poor quality of food served in the camps. Under the terms of the worker agreement, each bracero was entitled to receive adequate food at cost in camp facilities. This not always possible, however, due to food shortages, administrative loopholes, or indifference. The cost of meals in the camps varied—Washington braceros paid \$1.30 per day in 1943.⁴² By 1946, the braceros were charged \$1.41 in Idaho and Washington and \$1.45 in Oregon.⁴³ The sanitation and nutritional value of the food rested with the WFA regardless of whether the Office of Labor, Extension Service, growers associations, or private catering companies operated the food service. Food, a prerequisite to good morale and worker production, was costly, yet it is difficult to understand how the federal government and growers could allow it to become such a problem.

When the camps had been under the jurisdiction of the FSA, most

of the residents were families who prepared food in their own homes. As the single Mexican workers were moved in, the Office of Labor, as well as the Extension Service and growers, had to scramble about for central kitchen equipment. Another problem was the procurement and preparation of food that would fit the taste and diet of the foreign workers. In light of wartime rationing, food of all types was hard to obtain, but it was particularly difficult to find Mexican specialty items. When this was not a problem, experienced Mexican cooks capable of preparing traditional dishes were hard to find in the Northwest. Finally, kitchen facilities were inadequate to prepare some types of Mexican food on a large scale. In 1944, federal officials ordered the camp manager at Wendell, Idaho, to suspend all food services because of a lack of refrigeration and a single vehicle to bring fresh provisions from town.⁴⁴ Some kitchens required the men to furnish their own makeshift containers for coffee or milk.⁴⁵ The kitchens themselves posed particular problems because they were usually housed in large tents. The mess tent at Wilder, Idaho, for example, measured 150 feet long.⁴⁶ Not only was such a large tent unstable in strong winds but dust entered easily and quickly blanketed the food. At other locations, the kitchen's capacity was simply inadequate to feed the number of workers living in the camp.⁴⁷ The two basic problems, food preparation and facilities, were never completely resolved in the Northwest during the entire period of PL-45. Office of Labor officials conceded, "It was difficult to prepare many of the Mexican type dishes on a mass production basis, even when the 'know how' existed and the ingredients were available."⁴⁸

In the Northwest, as in California, meals were the source of more discontent and work stoppages than any other single aspect of camp life. In July 1943, Mexican workers at the Skagit County camp north of Seattle went on strike in order to call attention to the terrible kitchen services. Workers there started their daily routine with breakfast at 4:30 A.M. Seven and a half hours later, they stopped work to eat a noon lunch consisting of meat, egg salad, or jelly sandwiches. A sweet roll and one half a pint of milk were also provided. The camp, improvised at the county fairgrounds, had no refrigeration; therefore, by lunch time the sandwiches, prepared the day before, were unappetizing and the milk was "sour or blinky."⁴⁹ The type of sack lunches served in the Northwest were found in most bracero camps throughout the country. Three years after the start of the bracero program in the Northwest, the standard fare served to the men in the fields consisted of one meat sandwich, one jelly sandwich, one sweet roll, an orange, and half a pint of milk (in the workers' own containers).⁵⁰ Although the men had a strong dislike for

white bread and lunch meats, cooks served such sandwiches because they were easy to prepare. In California, camp kitchens continued to serve sack lunches for many years after the war.⁵¹

The braceros' pattern of strikes related to food service is telling testimony that this aspect of the bracero program was poorly developed. Three months after they arrived in 1943, workers stopped work over the quality of meals.⁵² Three years later, braceros at the Athena, Oregon, camp went on strike to demand better food.⁵³

The braceros expressed their displeasure with the food in other ways. In one camp, the local sheriff was called to quell a "near riot" when the men dumped their evening meal on the floor in protest. After investigating the incident, the sheriff and other city officials concluded that there was little reason for the disturbance other than that the food "did not rate 100 per cent" with the Mexicans. Infuriated by the braceros' behavior, the sheriff issued an ultimatum to the workers—either clean up the mess, which they begrudgingly did, or go to jail.⁵⁴

Contributing to the discontent over meals was wartime rationing, which meant that desirable quantities and varieties of food were not always available. The Agricultural Workers Health Association (AWHA), a government-sponsored cooperative which provided health care to farm workers in the Northwest, supported the complaints of the braceros. In 1945, it reported that the poor-quality, iron-deficient food was the main cause of nutritional anemia among the workers.⁵⁵ This disclosure prompted the Mexican embassy to take action that led to improvement in the quality of food served to northwestern braceros.⁵⁶ The Office of Labor in its own investigation failed to find a problem with the preparation of food, nutritional content of the diet, or the camp kitchens. Instead, the report concluded that the scarcity of commodities due to rationing was the root cause of the problem.⁵⁷

Despite wartime shortages and other problems, sometimes the federal government adopted measures to try and provide more nutritious and appetizing food. Six months after the bracero program started, the State Department obtained permission from the Mexican government to allow braceros to volunteer as cooks.⁵⁸ As soon as the authorization was announced, Gregorio Rodríguez took over as head cook at the Burlington, Washington, camp—the scene of the first food strikes. In his first lunch menu, he replaced the jelly sandwiches with fried eggs, meatloaf, cold canned salmon, onion slices, lettuce salad, tortillas, milk, and chile salsa. To the workers' delight, this meal was followed by an overall marked improvement in the food services in the camp.⁵⁹ At Gooding, Idaho, the camp manager

reported that "meals turned out with better success by the day" after bracero cooks were placed in the kitchen.⁶⁰

Although Mexican cooks could prepare a variety of traditional food items, the problems of limited facilities and availability of supplies remained. These limitations made satisfying the workers well-nigh impossible, and the Mexican cooks soon learned this. In a turn-about of events, an obviously frustrated Mexican cook, instead of the workers, walked off his job during breakfast at one Oregon camp.⁶¹

At times, the federal government was compelled to take action and open the bottlenecks in procurement. When Idaho's congressman warned the USDA that braceros were "threatening to quit work because they could not get bread for sandwiches," the government quickly released two tons of flour a day.⁶² Such quick results were unusual, since most recommendations to make more food available to the braceros were not acted upon by the federal government.⁶³

The poor kitchen services were exacerbated by the camp managers, who were often inept and inexperienced supervisors. At Weiser, Idaho, a hopeless but outspoken manager described the workers' food as a "lamentable situation" because "any jam or jelly has soaked through the bread; cheese had begun to harden, and prepared meats run the chance of becoming spoiled before the sandwich is eaten."⁶⁴ On the other hand, a more resourceful manager at Milton-Freewater, Oregon, instructed the growers to return to the camp to pick up the sack lunches between 10:00 and 11:00 A.M. so that the meals would be fresher and more appetizing.⁶⁵ The attitude of the camp official at Payette, Idaho, illustrates how managers could also worsen food-related problems. At the beginning of the work season, the camp kitchen had three hundred spoons. By the middle of the year, there were seven spoons left and in November a single spoon remained for 110 men. Though more were available, the camp manager refused to request them because he believed the workers were stealing or losing the spoons.⁶⁶

Other camp supervisors did everything possible to improve the food services, including simple but important considerations designed to prevent health risks. The camp manager at Stanwood, Washington, translated signs reading "Wash Your Hands" into Spanish and recommended that similar safety regulations in other camps be translated. Otherwise, he stated, the signs amounted to little more than "wasted effort."⁶⁷ In 1944, workers staged a one-day strike in order to convince the manager to modify the time when the evening meal was served. At this particular camp, the braceros returned from the fields at 9:00 P.M.—two hours after the kitchen closed. Although the cook eventually extended the serving hours, it was done

after the men resumed work because the growers refused to negotiate "as long as they [the braceros] were idle."⁶⁸ Many other problems nagged the food services program. Most braceros, even after spending some time in the United States, could not acquire a taste for non-Mexican dishes such as roast beef.⁶⁹ At other times, the braceros left corned beef untouched because they thought it was uncooked horsemeat.⁷⁰ At this same camp in Oregon, the camp manager was "flabbergasted" that the men preferred sack lunches over hot lunches during the noon meal.⁷¹ Given the inadequacy of the food services, some workers exercised their right not to join the camp mess and ate elsewhere. Within time, however, they returned to the camp kitchens, given the high cost and unchanging menu at restaurants.

Kitchen services were lacking in other ways. At Preston, Idaho, a cook was dismissed because she tested positive for syphilis. Several days later, the camp manager was shocked to find the same woman back in the kitchen.⁷² Although the cook was fired again, this incident illustrates the laxity in supervision of food preparation. Workers were not provided containers to carry coffee or milk, so they used anything that they could find without much thought to sanitation. This doubtlessly contributed to bracero camps in the Northwest having an unusually high incidence of food poisoning. The most serious outbreak of food poisoning occurred in 1943 on a hop ranch near Grants Pass, Oregon, where 500 of 511 fell sick and 300 required hospitalization.⁷³ The next year, five of eight men were hospitalized after eating sandwiches containing spoiled meat.⁷⁴ In 1946 in an eight-month period, there were five outbreaks of food poisoning.⁷⁵ The Pacific Northwest was not unusual in this respect, for elsewhere gastrointestinal disorders also developed as the most common health problem among Mexican workers.⁷⁶

Growers tried various angles to reduce kitchen costs in their own camps. Food expenses in the grower-operated camps were a major concern to the growers because the braceros were entitled to free subsistence during the time that work was not possible or available. The Oregon Seed Growers League, the Washington State Peach Council, and other growers' groups complained that they had to assume the responsibility of providing free food during conditions that were beyond their control.⁷⁷ They pointed out to Congress:

Our sponsoring committee must pay board on all Mexican nationals for everyday they do not work. Our committee just does not have the funds to pay this board for the hundreds of Mexicans we know will be idle for parts of that period. The situation

is more or less the same throughout the state so they cannot be very well loaned. If we let them go we will not have them back for the fall's work of harvesting beets, hops, potatoes, apples, peaches, pears, hay, etc. If your committee could persuade some [branch] of the government to help us with the payment of this board during this slack period it would help to avoid food losses.⁷⁸

The WFA responded that the farmers were ultimately responsible since they had accepted the workers' contracts. In 1946, farmers did achieve a small but significant victory when the WFA agreed to assume part of the expense for board during periods of inclement weather.⁷⁹ This was an important concession to northwestern sugar beet growers because harvest operations often ran well into the month of October when freezing temperatures kept the men from working.

From 1945 on, the Northwest division of the Office of Labor began to encourage the local sponsoring farmers' labor associations to assume the responsibility of feeding the men by contracting with private catering services. This move, not followed at the time in other parts of the country, had the advantage of relieving the division of the task of securing ample supplies of scarce foods and kitchen help and tedious paperwork. It did little, however, to improve the food services and in some instances the quality and amount of food served per worker generally lessened. "One complaint from the Mexican Nationals with regard to the food is that there is not enough of it," wrote a camp manager where the kitchen was operated privately. "It seems as though the workers are not given a second helping. As I recall when the Labor Branch operated kitchens we always permitted second helpings."⁸⁰

The food program deteriorated further under the private companies because the federal government placed a limit on the amount that could be charged for food per worker. When the cost of providing the food to the workers exceeded that amount, the profit-motivated catering companies used ways of making up the difference. Cooks frequently prepared large quantities of one particular food and served it meal after meal until the workers tired of it. The favorite dish of the cooks but least appreciated by the workers was beef stew, because lesser-quality meats and an abundance of rice, beans, and potatoes could be used as ingredients. There were other problems with the catering companies that were contracted to feed the Mexican workers. Most of them were home based in California

and their experience in providing food services to bracero camps in that state was not entirely applicable in the Northwest. In one instance, the Immigration and Naturalization Service workers reported that "in place of having a meat sandwich, a jelly sandwich, and a peanut butter sandwich for lunch" the workers "preferred to have a bean sandwich, and instead of having beef stew and other American foods, they wanted tortillas." The company made an effort to meet the workers' request, but tortillas made of flour were not satisfactory, and an effort to import corn or *masa* (corn dough) from Mexico was considered impractical.⁸¹ At times, the out-of-state companies turned their individual operations over to local representatives that used every form of chiseling to lower costs in the mess halls. All things considered, the move to allow private commissary companies to contract for food services in the bracero camps turned out badly.

The end of the war and of food rationing, as well as greater availability of equipment, meant improved food services and fewer food-related complaints. In fact, by 1947 some of the Mexican-run kitchens at the camps were rated as "excellent."⁸² Yet, until the end of the bracero program in the Northwest or elsewhere, the feeding services remained one of the most glaring weak spots of the bracero program.

Food services were a serious problem, but more critical was the braceros' exposure to toxic fumigants in the camps. During the summer, the tents provided little protection from insects, rodents, and snakes which infested the camps. The outdoor privies and open garbage pits and the common practice of disposing of waste water above ground served to attract these pests even more. To combat the nuisance and disease carried by these unwanted intruders, the camps had to be flooded with highly poisonous hydrocyanic acid. The fumigant was effective but not without posing a risk to the workers when they re-entered the camp.⁸³ Less toxic DDT mixed with kerosene was also sprayed at two-week intervals in the camps to combat fly infestations.⁸⁴ Judging from the ineptness of some camp managers, workers were doubtless exposed to these noxious fumigants.

Leisure time activities, a key to the physical and social well-being of most persons, was just as precious to the braceros, yet the men had little to do during their off hours. Sporting equipment was not provided to the bracero camps, although it was available to non-Mexican camps under the Lanham Act (1940). Left to their own resources, the men found ways to pass the time by fashioning rings out of scrap pieces of pipe or putting together suitcases and simple furniture out of crates and plywood ends.⁸⁵ In some camps, the workers pooled their resources and purchased radios out of curiosity and to

break the monotony. Since there was no Spanish-language broadcasting, the braceros understood few words other than "hello" and "thank you." In the mobile camps, the braceros operated their radios as long as the motor-driven generator was in operation. At night, the heavy drain of power caused by lights and other equipment interfered with the radio's reception.

Since Mexican contracted workers were to be kept busy at work in order to maximize their potential, the WFA was not terribly concerned with the absence of leisure time activities in the camps. In 1945, the federal government recognized the detrimental effects on the workers and published the first issue of *El Mexicano*, a Spanish-language newsletter for braceros. *El Mexicano* carried general news from Mexico and about braceros in the different regions of the United States, but its main purpose was to exhort the men to work. The first issue described how five thousand nationals had harvested the largest crop of apples in the last twelve years in the Yakima and Wenatchee valleys, Washington, and in the Hood River Valley, Oregon. It went on to say that saving the pea crop in the Milton-Freewater area between Washington and Oregon was "owed to them."⁸⁶ The issue concluded with the "Corrido de los Trenes Especiales" (Ballad of the Special Trains), written by Enrique García. The following verses pinpoint the message and purpose of *El Mexicano*:

Well, what do you say, men?
 Sir, we have nothing to say.
 We are going to the United States
 To help with the war.
 Everybody at the border
 Is very sad
 Because they don't have permission
 To enter the United States.
 Friend, don't worry.
 Answer [your critics] with pride.
 It is a sacred responsibility
 To defend democracy.
 Don't fail at work,
 Friends, please,
 Because you cast a bad hue
 On our tricolor banner.⁸⁷

Notwithstanding the fact that *El Mexicano* was little more than a clever way of urging the braceros to press on by instilling in them a

sense of purpose and pride in their work, the newsletter was well received by workers eager for news from home. With the exception of a *Guía de Inglés* (Guide to English) which was also distributed free by the WFA, *El Mexicano* was the federal government's only effort to provide news and information to the braceros across the nation. As far as can be determined, no other similar publication or piece of recreational equipment became standard government issue at the bracero labor camps.

The publication of *El Mexicano* so late in the bracero program illustrates the WFA's lack of attention to the overall needs of the Mexican men. Also, the concept of *El Mexicano* was not original since plans had been developed earlier in Washington State for a statewide bracero newspaper.⁸⁸ The *Guía de Inglés* was not new either; some camps developed a basic ten-page dictionary of Mexican-English vocabulary for the benefit of the men.⁸⁹

The WFA did play a leading role in organizing camp celebrations to commemorate Mexican Independence Day, September 16, 1810. The Office of Labor sanctioned the festival because officials recognized it as an excellent way to sustain morale and a dedication to work among the imported work force. State farm labor officials also encouraged local communities to cooperate with the celebrations at the labor camps. In California, where Mexico's national holidays were also observed, Mexican government officials frequently delivered patriotic speeches, a practice described by Ernesto Galarza as "worn thin" and ineffective by 1944.⁹⁰ In California, Mexican American communities had traditionally celebrated the day in a festive manner that was more attractive and familiar to the braceros. Outside of some parts of eastern Idaho, the braceros in the Pacific Northwest lacked this community with which to identify and were limited to the activities planned by the WFA.

Independence Day festivities in most northwestern camps were largely improvised activities that included races, tugs-of-war, jumping contests, and watermelon busts. Films, boxing matches, and mock bullfights were also organized and provided a welcome break from the daily routine. The braceros decorated the camp tents with crepe paper in the colors of the Mexican flag. Cooks made a special effort to please the men during this day. Camp Prescott braceros at Medford, Oregon, were given the opportunity to choose the day's menu, so they requested and got cabrito (roasted kid and a Mexican favorite) served at the city park.⁹¹ At Wilder, Idaho, the workers held an impromptu evening dance, but because "Mexican Señoritas" were not available, some men agreed to dress in women's clothes in

order to provide partners for the camp population.⁹² In a similar situation at Lincoln, Idaho, braceros were more fortunate, because growers agreed to transport "señoritas" from Pocatello's small Mexican American community.⁹³

Another much-celebrated occasion in the camps was Cinco de Mayo, the 5th of May, the anniversary of the defeat of the French at Puebla by Mexican forces in 1862. At Medford, Oregon, in 1944 more than one thousand persons attended, including Senator Rufus Holman (a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee), the mayor of Medford, members of the chamber of commerce, students from local high school Spanish classes, many farmers and their wives and families, and "several of the local barmaids." The local radio station broadcast the day's activities while music from the camp jukebox and musicians from the camp population gave the day some authenticity. Guests at the camp entrance were greeted by an enormous welcome sign depicting a scene of a burro, serape, and cactus and five large Vs for victory in the national colors of Mexico and the United States. Three pigs were butchered for the noon meal and participants dined on two thousand handmade tortillas, enchiladas, fifty gallons of ice cream, and one thousand soft drinks. As a symbol of friendship, the flags of both countries were raised as bugles called the crowd to attention. In the evening, the camp hosted a dance, complete with orchestra, where the growers' wives and daughters danced with the Mexican workers.⁹⁴

The Mexican men looked forward to the celebration of these national holidays and considered them as more than an opportunity for a day of rest because news was exchanged between camps. At the Medford celebration, each bracero paid \$3.00 and raised an estimated \$1,000.00 to cover the expenses for the day including the cost of the evening dance orchestra.⁹⁵ The farmers took these events less seriously and could have done without them; at the Medford camp, the employers' contribution to the camp fund amounted to \$50.00. At Gooding, Idaho, the men were charged \$1.00 to attend the day's celebration.⁹⁶ Even during the 4th of July, a holiday of more significance to the growers, work went on as usual but at time-and-a-half wages.⁹⁷ Neither the farmers nor the federal government should have been expected to foot the entire expense of these celebrations, since these parties were for the benefit of the workers. But in truth, the observance of Mexican national holidays gave the workers a feeling of self-worth and pride, and employers benefited in the form of sustained productivity.

The annual celebrations were no substitute for the WFA's and

employers' indifference to the social needs of the braceros during the rest of the year. Soon, northwestern braceros, like their compatriots in California, recognized that the celebrations served the self-interests of the growers and voted to continue to work rather than celebrate the 16th of September.⁹⁸ For that reason, when Oregon Governor Earl Snell presented each worker with a specially prepared souvenir copy of a statement exalting Miguel Hidalgo, the liberator of Mexico, it probably meant little to them.

Among the workers, a strong and active camp council could function as a planning board for social and recreational activities. The camp council concept was inherited by the WFA when it took over the camp system. Under the FSA the camp council was a democratically elected body of residents that participated in the decision-making process at each camp. Mexican officials, as they did during labor disputes, encouraged the braceros to exercise their right to organize the camp council. Due to their sheer numbers in some camps they were easily elected to the camp council.⁹⁹ Still, a large Mexican majority did not ensure adequate representation on the council. At least one of the workers in the bracero camps had to understand English in order to make the council effective. Where they did serve, braceros sometimes made up the entire body, but often they shared power with Anglos or Jamaicans.¹⁰⁰ Bracero representation on the camp council resulted in activities familiar to the Mexican men, including soccer and baseball teams and organized competitions between camps.¹⁰¹

Catholicism is a powerful force in Mexico, and it was overlooked in the workers' contract. Therefore, the camp councils were responsible for asking local priests to attend to the spiritual needs of the camp. At the Burlington, Washington, camp, Sunday mass began at 5:30 A.M. for the benefit of the workers.¹⁰² Throughout Idaho and Oregon, councils helped set up temporary altars on the camp grounds so mass could be said on a regular basis.¹⁰³ It is doubtful that every resident attended church services or would understand the English-speaking priests, but the fact that mass was regularly scheduled in the camps does indicate that a spiritual need existed among the Mexican men. At Wilder, Idaho, religious services at the camp were so well attended that mass for the Mexicans was scheduled twice a week.¹⁰⁴ Not to be outdone by the Catholics, the First Baptist Church, among several denominations, competed for the attention of the workers by handing out free Spanish-language Bibles to the camp population.¹⁰⁵ By the 1950s, Catholic leaders became concerned enough with the proselytizing efforts of other denominations

that they initiated a missionary program that allowed Mexican priests to travel to the United States to work among the braceros.¹⁰⁶

The camp councils organized recreational committees, such as the Club Recreativo Mexicano at Midway, Oregon, to plan social activities. A popular recreational project in many camps was the purchase of jukeboxes. The braceros stocked the players with Mexican records brought up from the Southwest by the workers themselves or else obtained directly for distributing companies in California or Mexico.¹⁰⁷ In any case, the selection of Mexican music was limited and the few records that were available were played repeatedly. The camp manager at Wilder, Idaho, soon tired of the repetitious and unintelligible songs, especially after the workers connected the jukebox to the camp's loudspeakers for added effect.¹⁰⁸ Fed up, the camp manager at Medford, Oregon, quipped that the jukebox and Mexican records were "getting plenty of use."¹⁰⁹

Mexican movies projected outdoors on tent walls were a bright spot in an otherwise dull camp routine. At most camps, and as long as the camp manager consented, the camp councils obtained films from distributors located in California and Utah.¹¹⁰ To cover the "prohibitive" cost of the films, all camp residents were expected to contribute to the camp council.¹¹¹ Where the cost of the films was shouldered equitably, sometimes enough money was raised to schedule two films per week or present double features. Camps held "movie night" inside the mess halls or outside on any suitable surface. At Hillsboro, Oregon, the camp population gathered at dusk to watch the evening's feature on the wall of the Boys and Girls Club Building at the Washington county fairgrounds.¹¹² In Idaho, eastern Oregon, and eastern Washington, October's "cool evenings" marked the end of the film schedule unless indoor facilities were available.¹¹³

Among the films making the rounds of the bracero camps and enjoying great popularity were *La Zandunga*, *Jalisco nunca pierde*, *Huapango*, *Dos mujeres y un don Juan*, *Ojos tapatíos*, and *El héroe de Nacozari*.¹¹⁴ These films and others were popular among the braceros because they starred the leading Mexican stars of the golden years of Mexican cinema: Pedro Infante, Arturo de Córdova, Pedro Armendariz, and Emma Roldán, to name a few. Another reason for their popularity were the themes emphasized by Mexican producers of the late 1930s and early 1940s: an exaltation of rural life in pre-revolutionary Mexico, veneration and respect for family and authority, resignation to poverty and personal hardship. Simply stated, the films not only aroused nostalgia for the homeland but also appealed to the Mexicans with their conservative and nationalistic

message.¹¹⁵ The braceros cheered the underdog and empathized with the romanticized life portrayed on the screen, thereby temporarily forgetting the harsh conditions that had compelled them to come to the United States in the first place. Still others seemed to equate their experiences as braceros to life on the canvas walls and inspired them to persevere in spite of their adversities. The popularity of these films was so great that growers would occasionally transport several hundred men by truck to a camp where one of the movies was being featured.¹¹⁶

When films were not available, the camp council organized other activities to pass time during nonworking hours. In some camps, such as Walla Walla, the braceros could attend English-language classes at the YMCA or listen to the local high school band when it performed at the camp.¹¹⁷ In 1945, the braceros at this camp hosted two Christmas parties in one week and invited the Whitman College Spanish class.¹¹⁸ The men had been in Walla Walla since April, so the chance to sing and dance with "the college girls," together with the Christmas spirit, explains the festive mood at this camp.¹¹⁹ That same year and nearby at Kennewick, the camp council also organized a gala Christmas Eve party where gifts were exchanged in the camp and Santa Claus handed out stockings filled with oranges, apples, candy, and nuts. That evening the workers feasted on a Christmas turkey dinner contributed by the Washington Egg and Poultry Cooperative.¹²⁰

At Caldwell, Idaho, the bracero camp joined with the Boise League of Women Voters and presented "Mexican Serenade," a program of Mexican music at the Crystal Ballroom of the Hotel Boise. A talented quartet of workers presented songs such as "La chinita," "Allá en el Rancho Grande," and "Solamente una vez" during a three-hour public performance. In an impressive gesture of good will, a local radio station broadcast the program, allowing an estimated two thousand nationals in camps in the Boise and eastern Oregon areas to listen.¹²¹ This broadcast may well have been the first Spanish-language broadcast in the Pacific Northwest. More important, it demonstrated the degree of meaningful cooperation that was possible between the community and the bracero camps. Unfortunately, this kind of mutual cooperation was rare.

Aside from the celebration of Mexican independence, religious services, the Mexican films, or sports, little else existed for the braceros to do during their off hours in camps. Except for the nurse and on special occasions described above, women were not allowed on the camp premises. In some camps, gambling was a popular pastime

that would last the entire weekend. A former bracero recalled admonishing the younger men not to gamble their earnings away. "After all," he would tell them, "the sole reason they were in the United States was to take money back to Mexico."¹²² Liquor was discouraged or banned outright in most camps, so to escape the boredom the workers would go to the nearest town.

Although the workers' contracts specified that personal items could be purchased at places of their own choosing, it said nothing about how the men were to get to business establishments several miles away. Since the camps were often five miles or more from the nearest community, the braceros had to provide their own means for reaching town. Few men, after working hard for most of the day, were in any mood to walk into town and back, so taxi cabs provided the most convenient means of transportation. In many communities, the braceros were an important source of income for the cab companies since they were busy shuttling workers to and from town. Braceros at Camp Marshall near Salem, Oregon, were issued special identification cards to show taxi drivers in order to insure their return to camp.¹²³ Even in taxis the Mexicans were under the watchful eye of the Office of Labor. There were unwritten restrictions in some communities, such as Nampa, Idaho, where cab drivers were advised not to allow the men to take liquor into the camp.¹²⁴

When taxis were not used, the workers used other public transportation. At Marsing, Idaho, the local bus company would dispatch a vehicle to the camp on payday and every second Saturday of the month to bring the workers into town.¹²⁵ Otherwise, the men made arrangements with their employers for transportation, or business establishments often provided one-way rides. As a last resort, the men turned to hitchhiking, a practice that was dangerous. At night and along the narrow rural roads, men were often struck by passing traffic. Near Marsing, Idaho, a bracero traveling with a companion suffered a fractured skull when he was hit by a passing automobile.¹²⁶ A more serious accident occurred when Alejandro Simanacas and some friends climbed on top of a gravel truck going to Caldwell, Idaho. Simanacas, who had arrived from Mexico five days earlier, slipped and was fatally injured.¹²⁷ These were not exceptional or isolated cases. Carelessness on the part of drivers as well as the unfamiliarity of the Mexicans with the rules of traffic on American roads were reasons for these accidents. Braceros did not purchase automobiles because almost none could drive, automobiles were beyond their means, and vehicles of all kinds were hard to come by during the war.

Given the widespread anti-Mexican sentiment faced by the workers in many northwestern communities, it is surprising that the braceros left their camps in the first place. Other than Saturday evenings, the braceros' first opportunity to get to town was on Sunday, when most stores except for beer parlors and pool halls were closed. Yet taverns in some communities did not welcome the Mexicans. In fact, Marsing, Idaho, temporarily banned liquor sales on Sundays when braceros were in the area. The prohibition on the sale of beer was in the interest of good public relations and tranquility in the worker camp, according to the village board of trustees.¹²⁸ In Washington State such measures were unnecessary since the state's blue laws forbade the sale of liquor on Sundays. In effect, the workers had little else to do on Sunday except congregate on the street corners or public parks of many northwestern communities.

On Saturday evenings, the braceros found many establishments closed, except for theaters which discriminated against nonwhites, taverns, or bawdy houses. Perhaps mindful of the fact that Sunday was a day off and to forget their problems, many of the young men quickly got drunk. To cope with the nuisance of the intoxicated men, the Milton-Freewater Police Department did not even bother with the names of those involved in drunk cases; instead, the camp manager was asked to come and pick them up.¹²⁹ Ostracism led to drunkenness, and that became a problem among the braceros. The solution for the Saturday night disorders in many communities was to post "No Mexicans, White Trade Only," signs in beer parlors and pool halls.¹³⁰ The banning of Mexicans from taverns and the like was the start of more discriminating practices against the braceros.

In the Northwest, Idaho developed the most notorious reputation for discrimination. Prejudice became so common and deep-seated that in 1946 the Mexican government threatened to forbid its workers to go into the state and two years later made good on its threat.¹³¹ Consequently, Idaho, like Texas, was blacklisted by the Mexican government for its mistreatment of braceros.¹³² The action of the Mexican government was prompted by the blatant racism of some Nampa and Caldwell merchants and businesses who posted "No Japs or Mexicans Allowed" signs.¹³³ A Mexican labor inspector found that "signs in both Nampa and Caldwell business houses forbid the Mexicans to enter. Seven beer parlors in Caldwell and 11 in Nampa have such signs posted."¹³⁴ The members of the Notus Farm Labor Committee, which had contracted the braceros, denounced the Caldwell Chamber of Commerce for violating the provisions against discrimination in PL-45 and cautioned that the practice jeopardized their labor supply. The committee requested that certain stores re-

main open in the evening so workers could make necessary purchases without harassment.¹³⁵ "We have worked hard to get that labor in here and it is doing us a service," declared a committee spokesperson. "If by our discriminating signs we are to lose the labor it will be a blow to the farmers of this area."¹³⁶ The committee also asked the local camp councils to instruct the workers "to not congregate in too large of groups in any of the business houses at any one time" as a way of lessening the prejudice.¹³⁷ The chamber of commerce promised cooperation, but whether the request not to congregate made braceros less conspicuous and hence more acceptable is questionable. However, the farmers' pressure on the community did open the doors of some establishments to Mexican patrons.

Antipathy against the braceros developed outside Idaho as well. In Seattle, the Reverend U. G. Murphey, chairman of the Evacuees Service Counsel, which worked on behalf of Japanese Americans relocated in internment camps, was unsympathetic toward the Mexican men, and although PL-45 did not provide for permanent residency, he opposed the settlement of braceros.¹³⁸ Meanwhile, the superintendent of public schools at Boardman, Oregon, asked Senator Rufus C. Holman why the "15,000 Mexicans in Oregon" could not be conscripted into the military. Ignorant of the exclusion of braceros from military service, he reminded the senator that "the majority of the men [were] under 35 years of age and eligible."¹³⁹

At Stanwood, Washington, braceros usually met to sing and play guitars at a soda fountain until some high school students and a local marshal decided they "were going to put a stop to their singing" and run them out of town. "We don't need these Mexicans here anyway, the town would be much better off without them," remarked the marshal. He promised to go to each merchant and make a list of establishments that wanted the Mexicans' patronage. The braceros would have to "stay away" from where they were not wanted.¹⁴⁰ Following a "near race riot" between the marshal and students and the braceros, the farmers association, city officials, and business owners met to discuss the risk of losing the workers on grounds of discrimination. The city threatened some arrests, but before long the incident and the concern over discrimination were forgotten.¹⁴¹

Not long thereafter, the camp manager at Medford, Oregon, reported that a Mexican national was attacked in public "without provocation" and severely injured by five young men. After the assault, the battered man was arrested on a charge of being intoxicated. During the arraignment, the judge acknowledged that "those who made the attack, should have been arrested instead." As it

turned out, the bracero had been staggering and presumed drunk "due to the beating received and not due to alcoholism as claimed."¹⁴²

The cases cited did not occur daily, but they did form a pattern of racial antipathy toward Mexicans. The Mexican government received repeated complaints from the workers, and communities were warned about condoning the practice. Still, the disregard for the civil rights of Mexican workers continued until braceros in Idaho asked Mexican consul Pesqueira to intercede on their behalf against the discriminatory practices. It was their protest, coming on the heels of earlier complaints about conditions in Idaho, that finally resulted in the state being placed off limits to Mexican laborers in October 1948. "I have been directed by my government," wired Pesqueira to Idaho growers, ". . . that employers in Idaho are hereby suspended from importation of nationals of my country for any purpose until further notice. This suspension is prompted by discrimination against our nationals on social and economic grounds and by violations of the international agreement and the individual workers' contracts."¹⁴³ Pesqueira and his attorney went on to say that although "Mexicans are not allowed in some taverns and eating houses, mainly in southern Idaho," the same "discrimination was found, too, in Eastern Oregon and Washington."¹⁴⁴

Braceros experienced much animosity because the Northwest, as other states in the West, had a long history of racial antipathy against certain groups such as native Americans, Asians, and blacks. When braceros arrived in the area, this antipathy was easily transferred to the Mexicans. Especially during the war, the Mexican aliens were victims of the xenophobic and nationalistic upswell of the times. To what degree anti-Mexican sentiment in the Northwest was due to the notoriety of the "zoot suit" riots of 1943 in Los Angeles is difficult to ascertain. Certainly communities in the Northwest were aware of the riots, because the national press covered the violent racial disturbances between servicemen and Mexican American youths called pachucos. The Mexican government was deeply concerned about the effect of the Los Angeles riots on the treatment of braceros in California and the Northwest because it raised the issue with the WFA.¹⁴⁵

As noted, blatant discriminatory acts against Mexicans were not everyday or so ingrained in the social fabric of the region that broad-minded citizens were nonexistent. Townspeople in Twin Falls, Idaho, for one, invited the camp residents to various clubs and community gatherings.¹⁴⁶ When a carnival and rodeo show was held at Filer, Idaho, the community arranged for free entrance for all braceros.¹⁴⁷ At Weiser, Idaho, a bank president agreed to remain open on Monday

nights as a courtesy to the workers.¹⁴⁸ Braceros did not experience discrimination in Preston, Idaho, according to the camp authorities.¹⁴⁹ In Ontario, Oregon, business establishments welcomed the patronage of the nationals, and relations between the community and the camp were "excellent."¹⁵⁰

With the hope that her letter would "have a better chance of reaching the President," a woman wrote to Mrs. Roosevelt to express her concern over the ill-treatment of contracted workers.¹⁵¹ "Something should be also done about the Nazi minded element, by that I mean the people who are persecuting these boys," she stated. In her mind this type of discrimination was "pure sabotage" because it jeopardized Idaho's labor supply.

So long as these boys are here, helping on the home front, (and they are doing a good job of it) [*sic*]. It seems to me that they should enjoy the same rights and privileges as a United States citizen, and so long as they are not drunk and disorderly they should be able to go in any place that a white man can go, and be waited on in a like manner. Does not our Constitution demand liberty and justice for all?¹⁵²

Labor officials agreed that intolerance was destructive since the efficiency of the Mexican workers was "hampered considerably through social discrimination."¹⁵³ In the opinion of a camp manager, the public did not really comprehend the nationals and their significant contribution to the war because the "difference in language is a bar to free conversation and exchange of ideas."¹⁵⁴

Braceros faced another severe form of discrimination from health officials. Some hospitals refused to treat them, and this prompted the chief of operations of the Office of Labor in Portland to suggest that the federal government establish infirmaries in areas where Mexicans could not obtain medical care.¹⁵⁵ Sometimes the workers were denied treatment on racial grounds, while on other occasions health practitioners doubted the men's ability to pay their medical expenses and feared they would be left with outstanding bills. As the following instances illustrate, their apprehensions were sometimes justified. Early on the morning of May 9, 1946, the New West Asparagus Farms was transporting some braceros from Grandview, Washington, to its fields in Sunnyside when the bus in which they were riding was struck broadside by an automobile operated by Jesse Montgomery, an employee of the Yakima Golding Farms. Montgomery's automobile, since it was used in connection with his employment, was insured by his employer. Police authorities, after inves-

tigating the mishap, determined that Montgomery was negligent and fined him \$25. The bus carrying the workers was insured by New West, but their insurance denied any medical liability on the grounds that New West's driver was not at fault. In the meantime, a legal firm representing the injured workers collected a fee of 33 percent of the amount of lost wages paid to the braceros of the Yakima Golding Farms. The attorneys also obtained a release from the workers for any further liability from both insurance companies, leaving the doctors with outstanding bills.¹⁵⁶ In another case, a bracero was injured while fighting forest fires and died before he could be hospitalized. The U.S. Forestry Service disclaimed any liability on the grounds that the farm labor association, which originally contracted the bracero from Mexico, was liable.¹⁵⁷

In some communities, the braceros were held responsible for health problems over which they had little control. Since food poisoning was so prevalent, the men were thought to be naturally filthy. Tied to a lack of cleanliness, venereal disease among the camp population led communities to label the men as immoral and objectionable. Venereal disease was serious, especially in camps like the one at Blackfoot, Idaho, where seven men were treated for syphilis during September 1944.¹⁵⁸ In the Yakima Valley, gonorrhea and syphilis were particularly prevalent among the camp population.¹⁵⁹ At many camps, the men contracted venereal diseases from prostitution, which flourished on payday and the days following. Medical officials in the WFA noted that in many communities where bracero camps were located, "leading citizens will not lift a finger to do anything about juvenile delinquency, complete lack of hospitals, prostitution, gambling, etc., which has been existent for a number of years."¹⁶⁰ This was particularly true at Nampa, Idaho, where prostitution houses in Ontario and Nyssa, Oregon, and Marsing and Boise, Idaho, afflicted the Meridian camp with venereal disease.¹⁶¹ The sweeping generalizations about the men's values obscured the public's ability to recognize that vice was already present and not introduced by the braceros. In fact, each worker was screened for venereal disease in Mexico as a precondition to entering the United States. But in the Northwest, the braceros faced tough social circumstances including few leisure activities, discrimination in most places except brothels, and an absence of their own women. For these reasons it is not surprising that the basic morality of some of the braceros did disintegrate. Yet they remained of sound moral character because there is not a single case of criminal activity listed in the records of the bracero program for the Northwest Division. When medical authorities and community hospitals treated the bra-

ceros, the workers usually received minimal attention, especially in hospitals that the WFA described as "not too satisfactory."¹⁶² On one occasion in 1945, a Mexican worker received a gunshot wound in the abdomen (cause not stated) and later died. The Agricultural Workers Health Association, which worked with the braceros, strongly condemned the doctor who treated the victim. "Burial visually eliminates medical incompetence," stated a spokesperson for the association, and "it is indeed unfortunate in such cases that the physician cannot be given as the cause of death."¹⁶³ That same year in Idaho some braceros had been summoned to fight forest fires. On the third day a tree fell on one of them, Ramón Carrillo, and injured his leg. He was examined at the hospital in Grangeville, found fit, and returned to duty. Back fighting forest fires he continued to experience considerable pain in his leg. Six or seven days later Ramón was examined once more, but the doctors found no reason for his suffering. Finally, Ramón made his own way to a nearby War Food Administration office where he explained what had happened. Subsequent X-rays disclosed that Ramón's leg was fractured. Twice he wrote to Mexican Consul Carlos Grimm at Salt Lake City but did not succeed in receiving compensation for the time lost from work. Then in despair he sent a letter in Spanish to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. "They do as they please," he complained to the president, "because I cannot speak English."¹⁶⁴ Ramón was more fortunate than another worker, who failed to recover from anesthesia administered to set a fractured arm.¹⁶⁵

The workers arrived in good health because medical examinations in Mexico excluded those with malfunctions, illnesses, or diseases. Once in the Northwest, they experienced respiratory and digestive illnesses and injuries related to a combination of poor diet, inadequate camp and working conditions, and accidents. These health problems were not life-threatening, but discrimination and the incompetence of private medical authorities made them so. In 1945, eleven of eighteen deaths among braceros in the Northwest were caused by accidents, four by pneumonia, and the remainder were due to heart attack, encephalitis, and uremia.¹⁶⁶ This prompted the U.S. Public Health Service to organize a four-day conference at Boise to discuss the health problems of the Mexican workers the following year.¹⁶⁷ Even as braceros and other farm workers received inadequate medical attention, they were called to support local medical facilities. In 1946, the Caldwell, Idaho, camp contributed \$398 to the Caldwell Memorial Hospital Fund. During the same period, the camp surpassed the local Red Cross's quota of \$50.00 and donated \$87.55.¹⁶⁸

Over the years, the braceros' experiences in the camps and with

the local townspeople worsened. They were taken for granted, and as far as the federal government was concerned, the growers' constant outcry over the terms of the workers' contract was reason to water down its provisions. Two years after the start of the bracero program, the Oregon State Extension Service noted "rapid deterioration" of the mobile camp equipment.¹⁶⁹ Following the end of the war, the men were moved out of the dilapidated tent quarters and into the former German prisoner of war farm labor camps at Nyssa, Oregon, Nampa, Idaho, and Wapato, Washington.¹⁷⁰ Although these permanent camps were an improvement over the mobile quarters, the workers were hardly impressed with the prisonerlike layout of the camps.

In most camps, the cooks continued to serve unappetizing meals lacking in nutrition. For the most part, the braceros had few organized social activities. The fact that the men worked long hours often was a convenient excuse for not providing some camp recreation. "There has been no organized recreational activity," explained a camp manager in 1944, "because the men leave to work shortly after day-light, and it is dark when they return home."¹⁷¹ Where social functions were organized, the braceros were expected to continue to pay the expense.¹⁷²

In a noted improvement in camp sanitation, camp managers began to use hydrogen peroxide in scrubbing water and chloride of lime in the toilets by 1946.¹⁷³ In a spirit of cooperation, the camp manager at Medford, Oregon, installed blackboards and helped the workers order books from Mexico so they could learn to read and write Spanish.¹⁷⁴ Relations between the Mexicans and northwestern communities remained poor. One camp official pointed out that relations tended to improve when "the money earned by the workers, both Mexican and domestic alike, has been spent downtown," because it put the merchants "in a good frame of mind."¹⁷⁵

The braceros experienced loneliness and estrangement but to what degree cannot be measured. "These workers are separated from their homes and families by thousands of miles," wrote an employee of the WFA. "They have had to adapt themselves to habits, customs, and climatic conditions that differ considerably from their own. Yet, these workers have shown an admirable spirit of cooperation and generally have conducted themselves in a way that is a credit to their people."¹⁷⁶ Another sympathetic manager summarized what others missed by their insensitivity toward the braceros: "I have learned much from these men and have a deep respect for the honesty and ambition of many of them."¹⁷⁷

Amazingly, most Northwesterners failed to understand the strained social circumstances endured by the braceros. Worse yet, neither the farmers nor the communities, both desperately in need of the services of these men, understood that the ill-treatment lowered worker productivity and actually came close to endangering essential war food production.