

Introduction

The story of the bracero program can inspire students to explore a wide range of subjects, including immigration, history, geography, economy and culture. The following lesson plans are intended to supplement and expand your curriculum.

Lesson Plan Title Learning from Photos

Subject: U.S. History (Social Studies)

Objectives:

Through discussions and fact-finding, students will learn about aspects of labor history and social justice from the *Bracero* labor program, which operated from 1942 to 1964. Also, students will access the internet and review historical documents and images on *braceros* and comment on immigration and labor in the United States.

Grade levels: 6-8/9-12

National Center for History Standards¹:

Standard 3C-The student understands the effects of World War II at home.

Standard 4A -The student understands the “Second Reconstruction” and its advancement of civil rights.

Standard 2. Understands the historical perspective

Materials:

- **Photographs:** several images are posted (photographs by Leonard Nadel) online at <http://www.braceroarchive.org> and from the exhibition, *America on the Move*, at the National Museum of American History http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthemove/themes/story_51_5.html
- See also Appendix 2 for other images from NMAH Nadel Photo collection.
- Computer with internet access
- Printer
- Pen/pencil and paper

Activities:

1. Have students discuss: What is immigration? What news, commentaries or stories have you read or heard about immigration to the United States? Do you know anyone who has immigrated, either recently or in the past, to the U.S.? This discussion is to prompt a dialogue between students and should not include a

¹ Standards available online: <http://nchs.ucla.edu/standards/era9-5-12.html>

lecture. Also, each student should have equal and ample opportunity to describe what she/he has heard or learned about immigration from outside the usual classroom context.

2. Have students write short comments or statements about immigration on the board or on paper to be read by all.
3. Ask students to access the internet and conduct an article search under the term “*bracero*.” Students should also access and print out photographs and oral histories from the Bracero History Project at <http://www.braceroarchive.org> Present to students the key historical facts about the *bracero* program (see Appendix 1) Students may also wish to view the story on the short handle hoe at <http://objectofhistory.org/objects/intro/shorthandlehoe>
4. Form students into groups. As groups, they will analyze photos of *braceros* and some documents including the online oral histories.
5. Look closely at the photo and attempt to date it—can you guess the decade when this photo was taken? What is the setting of the photo? Who can you see in the photo? Can you identify the objects in the photo? What actions are taken in the photo? Do you think this photo is posed or not? Ask student groups to discuss these answers with the class.

Primary sources:

Bracero oral histories

Bracero photographs from the Leonard Nadel collection at the National Museum of American History

Assessment:

For this lesson, students will access and analyze historical photographs to understand the conditions of the bracero program and share views on immigration. Students will be able to conduct research online and debate on whether or not they believed the bracero program was fair to migrant workers.

Appendix 1

Historical significance/Background:

The economic and social upheaval stemming from both the Great Depression and World War II forced the United States to seek out a source of inexpensive labor to meet its manpower needs in both agriculture and railway maintenance.

Due to this need, in 1942 a treaty was signed between the United States and Mexico to alleviate the shortage of labor. With many American men sent off to fight in Europe and elsewhere, the recruitment and processing of an available pool of laborers from Mexico created what is called the *bracero* program. *Bracero* is a Spanish term which can be defined loosely as “one who works with his arms”, or as a close equivalent, as a field hand.

Under this program, Mexican workers, many of whom were rural peasants, were allowed to enter the United States on a temporary basis. Between 1942 and 1964, the year the program ended, it was estimated that approximately 4.6 million Mexican nationals came to work in the U.S. as *braceros*.²

Many laborers faced an array of injustices and abuses, including substandard housing, discrimination, and unfulfilled contracts or being cheated out of wages. Nevertheless, the impact of the *bracero* program on the history and patterns of migration and settlement in the United States remains an important area to explore and assess, particularly in the contexts of civil rights, social justice, and Latino history in the United States.

Key facts and moments in *bracero* history include:

- August 4, 1942 – the Mexican Farm Labor Program Agreement is signed by the governments of Mexico and the United States, the first establishing the legalization and control of Mexican migrant workers along America’s southern border area
- April 29, 1943 – the Mexican Labor Agreement is sanctioned by Congress through *Public Law 45*
- The agreement guaranteed a minimum wage of 30 cents per hour and “humane treatment” for workers
- With many *braceros* remaining in the United States after their contracts ended, the Immigration and Naturalization Service began Operation Wetback in 1954.

² Pastor, M. and Alva, S. (2004) “Guest workers and the new transnationalism: Possibilities in an age of repression.” *Social Justice* 31, 1-2. 95. See also: Martin, P. (2000). “Guest worker programs for the 21st century”. Washington, DC: Center for Immigration Studies. Available online at <http://www.cis.org/articles/2000/back400.html>.

Many US-born children of Mexican *braceros* were wrongly repatriated, along with their parents.

- The *Bracero* program ended in 1964

Several short-term labor agreements existed until 1951, when Public Law 45 passed and was signed reluctantly by President Harry S. Truman.³ Although many labor groups viewed the program as a temporary fix to the labor shortages during WWII and considered the presence of Mexican workers as a detriment to employing American laborers, many large farm owners were still able to lobby Congress to change the agreement between Mexico and the United States and create *Public Law 78*. This law had to be renewed by vote on a biannual basis, until the program ended in 1964.

³ According to an essay from *Rural Migration News*, available online, http://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/more.php?id=10_0_4_0

Appendix 2
Photographs by Leonard Nadel – Bracero program
Smithsonian National Museum of American History



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NAD-2004.0138.17.01



NAD-2004.0138.49.04





NAD-2004.0138.03.37