

National Endowment for the Humanities
Grants to Preserve and Create Access to Humanities Collections
The Bracero History Project

The Center for History and New Media (CHNM) at George Mason University, in collaboration with the University of Texas-El Paso and the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, proposes to create a national online clearinghouse for dispersed digital collections related to the post-war bracero guest worker program. Over the course of a two-year period, CHNM and its partners will accomplish two main goals. First, we will locate institutional and private collections relating to bracero history nationwide through a proven program of surveys, direct institutional outreach efforts, and local "town hall" style meetings. Second, we will deploy a standards-based system for collaborative, online documentation of these collections and train local partners to use the system to document their own collections. The result will be a central, Internet-accessible database for all things Bracero and a new model for collaborative documentation and access to dispersed subject-based collections.

Between 1942 and 1964 the bracero guest worker program enabled millions of Mexican nationals to come to the U.S. to work on predominately agricultural labor contracts. Although the program began life as a temporary war measure, it became a fixture in the agricultural work landscape until it was finally terminated in 1964. Over the course of its lifetime, the bracero program became the largest and most significant U.S. contract labor guest worker program of the 20th century. In all over 4.5 million contracts were awarded through the 22 years of the program. (*Note: No federal funds will go to support work at NMAH; instead, NMAH would make an in-kind contribution to the project.*)

The presence of braceros in the U.S. had a significant effect on the relationship between Mexico and the U.S., the business practice and technology of industrial farming, and the development of Mexican American communities. Mexico also experienced dramatic change through the loss of many workers, an economic boost from remittances, and the introduction of new cultural traditions to rural communities. A broad-based collection of bracero history should provide a window into the history of work, immigration, race and gender relations, and the history of the U.S. in the 20th century more generally. Yet the transnational, transcultural, and essentially local nature of bracero history has meant that existing collections are dispersed and largely inaccessible among hundreds of small institutions and private collections. There exists no large, authoritative collection of this important chapter of American history.

Over the past two years, a nationwide movement has emerged to uncover the wealth bracero history that exists in small holdings across the country. Led by the National Museum of American History, the University of Texas-El Paso, and CHNM, *The Bracero History Project* has started building a national consortium of small and large libraries, museums, universities, and cultural institutions interested in collecting and preserving the history of the bracero program. Through direct institutional outreach efforts and a series of town hall meetings at Salinas, San Jose, Chicago, and El Paso, *The Bracero History Project* has already uncovered rich holdings of images, documents, and

objects in local institutions; oral histories from bracero program participants and their descendants; previously developed educational materials; and references to key secondary sources. But the wide geographic dispersion of records, the number of small collections, and varying local sensitivities remain significant obstacles to building a central repository, and a broader, deeper, and more hands-on approach to collecting is required. Likewise, CHNM has developed a standards-based digital archival system (<http://echo.gmu.edu/bracero>) to allow partners to document and provide online access to their dispersed collections. But these partners need training, encouragement, and support in using the system. In addition, the collaborative nature of a clearinghouse collection requires strict quality control, evaluation, and dissemination. With NEH support, *The Bracero History Project* will meet these challenges: extending its successful outreach and collecting model to institutions nationwide, offering support for local partners in documenting their collections, and providing central access to this important piece of U.S. History.