

CHAPTER ONE • Bracero Recruitment in
the Mexican Countryside,
1942–1947

On August 7, 1942, Gabino Preciado, president of the rural town of San Martín de Hidalgo, Jalisco, faced an unenviable challenge. Mexican president Manuel Avila Camacho had ordered him to embrace the spirit behind the recruitment of the townsmen into the Mexican Emergency Farm Labor Program, more commonly known as the Bracero Program.¹ With the repatriation of three hundred thousand Mexican American and Mexican immigrant children, women, and men during the 1930s still fresh in their minds, unskilled rural Mexican men would be asked to immigrate to the United States in pursuit of Avila Camacho's vision of national progress.

Avila Camacho's vision went beyond strengthening ties to the United States in a time of war. He believed firmly that unskilled rural Mexican men were an inferior race who could acquire the qualities, skills, and wages necessary for Mexico to advance socially and technologically only by being exposed to elements of more developed countries like the United States.² He believed the program suited unskilled rural Mexican men perfectly. According to this racial logic, rural Mexican men's mastery and implementation of US agricultural methods and skills "improved the character of [the Mexican] people, advancing Mexico's social and technological development."³ Temporary US contract labor would modernize them and, upon their return, indirectly influence generations of men throughout the Mexican countryside.

This chapter considers Bracero Program recruitment, focusing on San Martín de Hidalgo's appropriation and translation of Avila Camacho's vision. In doing so, it enriches historical interpretations that have overlooked how rural towns throughout

Mexico embraced the program's enactment, reinforcement, and redefinition of concepts of race, gender, and national and personal advancement.⁴ The Bracero Program exacerbated racial and gender inequality in Mexico as well as in the United States. Reduced to an intellectually, culturally, and socially inferior race worthy of exploitation in Mexico and the United States, unskilled rural Mexican families countered the program's logic with strategies to realize their own visions of advancement in Mexico and the United States. Yet rural Mexican men's visions consistently took women's labor for granted and preserved gender and race inequality, just as the vision of Mexican president Avila Camacho did.

FEDERAL VISIONS, LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION

Avila Camacho entrusted rural Mexican town and village presidents throughout the states of Jalisco, Michoacán, Sonora, Veracruz, and Zacatecas to recruit an estimated seventy-five thousand men for the Bracero Program. He issued a confidential mandate to them, announcing that the Mexican and US governments had agreed to the program after months of negotiation. Under its terms the US government would import Mexican men to build and repair railroads and harvest crops throughout the United States for three- to six-month contract periods. Contracted men, who would be known as braceros, would be exempt from the usual immigration requirements, such as literacy tests, head taxes, and other admission fees. In addition, they would be exempt from military service and protected from social discrimination. The US government guaranteed employment for at least 75 percent of their contract period at the "prevailing wage rate," as well as housing, meals, and transportation to and from the United States. Once their contracts expired, they would be required to return to Mexico. Both governments agreed to compensate fairly and to penalize program violations.⁵

Avila Camacho emphasized that braceros would return with something to show for their time in the United States. The program required the US government to withhold 10 percent of braceros' semimonthly earnings. These funds were to be deposited into a rural savings fund, then transferred to Mexico's Agricultural Credit Bank, and would be redeemable upon the braceros' return. Avila Camacho imagined that with these savings braceros would purchase agricultural equipment to plant and harvest plots of land efficiently and profitably and in this way would apply the program's knowledge, skills, and wages to help Mexico achieve economic, social, and technological progress.

The president of San Martin de Hidalgo, Gabino Preciado, received Avila Camacho's mandate. Rural Mexican town and village presidents like Preciado were

charged with recruiting men carefully and selectively. In the mandate they were cautioned against promoting the benefits of the program too aggressively. US grower associations administering the program were not too committed to the terms of the program and had never been obligated to provide such guarantees for US domestic workers. Even as the program stipulated that braceros would not be contracted to displace US domestic workers, that they would not serve as strikebreakers in labor disputes, and that they would work for the “prevailing wage” or the current average wage paid by the piece or by the hour to US domestic workers for the same job in the same region of the United States, the program actually facilitated administrative violation of these very conditions. The braceros were to be warned that US government officials, instead of conducting independent surveys of regional wages, would survey US grower associations and then accept their responses without investigating the accuracy of their claims. This process would depress wages, as grower associations would mobilize into regional associations that collectively set the regional wage far below the accepted wage for the tasks in question. US domestic workers would then refuse to work for such wages, making grower associations eligible for program contracts. Such covert and carefully planned program violations had the potential to go unnoticed and to confine braceros to exploitative and unprofitable employment. Preciado was among the presidents advised to consider that this program would not automatically promote braceros’ economic advancement and that it was in their interest to avoid promising more than the program could deliver in their local recruitment efforts. This would prevent the promotion of an unreliable process with improper incentives that could lead to a return migration reminiscent of repatriation.

The government officials of Mexican 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. The Mexican government speculated that single men would be more likely to skip out or to continue to work after their contract’s expiration.

Preciado was also urged to promote the program as crucial to the war against the Axis powers and participation in it as what Avila Camacho called a “manly act of loyalty to country and progress.”⁶ Braceros’ labor promised to strengthen wartime US-Mexico efforts and relations, since it would prevent US labor shortages. It would also lay the material foundation for braceros’ own advancement, since upon their return US training and savings for equipment and supplies would raise their earning potential by allowing them to grow and harvest crops more efficiently and skillfully.

Rural town and village presidents were instructed to paper their respective communities with promotional materials offering local men these inducements.

After carefully assessing the program, Preciado concluded that it was a risky yet crucial first step toward exposing San Martín de Hidalgo's men to the United States. He too was confident that men's mastery of US skills and earning of US wages would prove a welcome change from town life at home. Ironically, contracted men would perform work similar to what they had always done, namely unskilled and poorly paid manual agricultural labor, hence the term *bracero*—literally “arm man.” Preciado realized that despite the Bracero Program's promise, town families could participate only by paying for transportation to this program's selection center in the nation's capital: Mexico, Distrito Federal.⁷ Indeed, the transportation cost for each prospective bracero was an estimated 150 pesos, roughly the equivalent of four months of a typical unskilled town family's earnings. This made the town's unskilled rural working class, those most in need of new economic opportunities, ineligible. In San Martín de Hidalgo, only middle-class men could afford such recruitment fees. Their temporary absence would drain the town's economy and resources, doubling unemployment among the unskilled rural working class. Preciado needed the middle class's investment and purchasing power to keep businesses open and employment opportunities intact. His administration could not afford to lose middle-class families to immigration without a plan in place. This local assessment did not conform to Avila Camacho's vision or to the financial interest of Preciado's administration.

Even worse, participating families were required to pay for the public notarization of letters confirming the men's moral and physical eligibility to work in the United States and their financial ability to afford transportation to the program's selection center. After careful deliberation, Preciado strategically decided to enlist the town's middle-class families to finance rural working-class men's participation. By developing and facilitating a local discourse and financial agreements that went beyond Avila Camacho's mandate, he laid the foundations for a deceptive yet comprehensive local appropriation and translation of the program. Securing middle- and working-class families' participation would prevent further unemployment and complete disinvestment in the town. This required conveying a narrowly defined set of identities, roles, and values that would mobilize the town's women, children, and men to act collectively for the town's advancement.

To recruit these families effectively, Preciado aggressively pursued a local discourse on program conditions and incentives that would resonate among middle-class families. Convincing successful entrepreneurs, teachers, and professionals to immigrate to a country that had recently repatriated town families and to undertake

physically demanding labor in agriculture and railroad construction was difficult. Like other Mexican rural town presidents, Preciado speculated that the Bracero Program's conditions and terms could potentially advance braceros and, in turn, towns economically if the town's vision of advancement centered on women, children, and men working collectively across borders. Certainly, temporary US wages and training were preferable to unemployment. He promoted a vision of family progress through program participation to enlist families to weather the hardships that the program would involve. But casting participation as a means of rising out of poverty would offend middle-class families and draw unwanted attention to class differences, fueling existing town hostility between the middle and working classes.

Like Avila Camacho, Mexican rural town presidents idealized the contract labor that participants would undertake and the opportunities that would be available to them on their return. In doing so, they were complicit in his failure to protect prospective braceros and their families from exploitation and the hardships of family separation. Neither developed employment opportunities that accommodated short-term family separation or facilitated returning braceros' transition out of contract labor into profitable long-term settlement in Mexico. In San Martin de Hidalgo, Preciado recruited middle-class families by presenting the program as an excellent opportunity brimming with potential for middle-class entrepreneurs. Middle-class braceros were expected to return and invest their earnings into an already profitable business or trade. As for working-class families that were financially dependent on male laborers, their program participation and return would involve paying existing family debt, fulfilling recruitment loan agreements, and creating employment opportunities within and outside agricultural labor on their own.

Like Avila Camacho's vision, the vision developed by local officials did not prevent overwhelming debt and exploitation from occurring. According to Mexican government officials, only legal access to US skills and wages could make profitable long-term settlement patterns throughout the Mexican countryside possible. Families interested in economic betterment had no other choice but to struggle collectively and across borders. It was men's responsibility to work as contract laborers while their families patiently worked and waited behind.

COMMUNITY FORUMS AND THE LOCAL GENDER SCRIPT

To deflect attention from international, national, and local negligence and to fulfill recruitment quotas, Mexican rural town presidents developed a local script that

appealed strategically to middle-class families and excluded working-class families. Confident that the news of potentially earning an estimated sixty pesos for eight hours of agricultural labor in the United States—the equivalent of three weeks' worth of a local agricultural laborer's wages—would spread widely throughout their respective towns, Preciado, like many other Mexican rural town presidents, did not bother to recruit the town's working class because he simply assumed that working-poor men would add their names quickly to the list and because he feared that active recruitment of families from different class backgrounds with the same rhetoric would lessen middle-class families' support and enlistment. The middle class were needed as contract laborers and, ever more urgently, as lenders to others. Their willingness to lend large sums of money toward the recruitment fees of the working poor would ensure the participation of those most in need of economic betterment, a recruitment goal that fulfilled Avila Camacho's vision.

On August 10, 1942, Consuelo Alvarez, a middle-class town resident, helped her husband Jesus bake orders of sourdough bread, *pan dulce* (sweet bread), and cakes before rushing off to walk her children to school and attend a town forum on the Bracero Program on her family's behalf.⁸ She sat alongside fellow bakers, barbers, cooks, doctors, merchants, seamstresses, tailors, and other enterprising married and single middle-class women and men, but she noticed that agricultural laborers were absent. Men in attendance were given handbills announcing the Mexican and US governments' demand for their "*brazos, lealtad y hombría*" (arms, loyalty, and manhood)—essentially calling upon them to separate from their families in order to build and repair railroads and harvest crops throughout the United States.

Consuelo read her older brother's copy because this document was not distributed to women. Despite the history of US repatriation and the fact that most in attendance had struggled to maintain their own businesses or trades to avoid this line of work, most of these families did not object to performing railroad or agricultural contract labor in the United States. Consuelo and other forum attendees were receptive to earning US wages. As she would later recall, at the time the Bracero Program had struck her as a sound investment of energy and money. San Martin de Hidalgo families believed that they stood to earn a healthy profit, especially if they did not have to take out a loan in order to enlist.

Preciado's decision to recruit middle-class families caught middle-class interest, while reconceptualizing the Bracero Program as a sound business venture. The program was thus promoted as a sound investment of energy, money, and time among middle-class families, and worthy of men of moral and physical strength. Discussions of Avila Camacho's racial logic were replaced by characterizations of

program participation as a loyal and responsible assertion of the masculinity of middle-class men, effacing the stigma of contract agricultural labor. Moreover, Preciado assured middle-class men that by serving their country they would improve their ability to provide for themselves and their families.

Notions of traditional masculinity and femininity also influenced Preciado's recruitment of middle-class women. Regular town hall meetings were already restrictively gendered, family-oriented events. During these meetings, women were prevented from expressing concerns and opinions beyond suggesting future meeting dates and times to organize town events that did not conflict with their household chores. Often they were restricted to hosting and organizing town fund-raisers and festivals after a town committee composed of men had settled on the events. Women's accommodation to the Bracero Program's conditions did not initially include increased decision making or purchasing power. Their potential empowerment through their adaptations to program conditions was overshadowed by discussions that neglected women's concerns regarding power relations within and outside their households, businesses, and trades.⁹

Convinced that women were often the driving force behind men's success, program officials encouraged women to adapt to the program's conditions, particularly family separation, by appreciating the long-term advantages of US wages. Without ever acknowledging potential changes in the decision-making roles in families and businesses, officials recruited entire families to support and participate in the Bracero Program. They assumed that men were entitled to control and demand women's labor and flexibility, so they urged women to work, under the direction of their male relatives, in already promising family businesses that male recruits would be leaving behind. Exaggerating the financial benefits and the brevity of their male relatives' absence was meant to efface doubts about how these families would manage to adjust emotionally and financially.

Throughout the Mexican countryside women were directed to accommodate their male relatives' participation in the Bracero Program by continuing to excel in their caretaking and homemaking while contributing to the preservation of town businesses. They were cautioned, however, that independent attempts to expand their resources or increase their earning power might actually jeopardize their families' long-term financial potential as well as their marriage and other family relationships. The increase in their family's earning potential that the Bracero Program would provide would automatically improve their quality of life. Participation would afford these families the luxury of expanding their businesses' personnel and purchase of equipment, demanding less of their labor and time.

It is important to stress that even before the Bracero Program middle-class women in San Martín de Hidalgo were responsible for much of their respective families' success and that middle-class female heads of household embraced their families' businesses or trades as their occupation. Their occupational skills and responsibilities also suggest deep involvement in their family's livelihoods. Laboring in support of bracero relatives was promoted as women's obligation to family and nation and as in their interest. Such a narrow conceptualization of middle-class women's interests and roles, however, overshadowed their own concerns and vision of economic betterment.

The gendered overtones of the Bracero Program's presentation did not escape the women. The biased approach made Consuelo want to walk out of the program's town forum. During this meeting she had been denied the privilege of asking questions and being treated as a businessperson. Consuelo reacted with bitter frustration: she had thought of nothing else than how an increase in her family's earnings would allow them to purchase a few acres of land to add a dining area to their bakery. They would expand their menu and clientele and finally be able to run a *lonchería* and *cenaduría* (an eatery that served lunch and dinner). They had already built large brick ovens, as well as an aluminum counter with wooden stools to accommodate customers craving coffee, cocoa, milk, or tea with their *pan dulce*. Her family's participation would finance the expansion of their business and would double their clientele and profits. In the end, such plans made her decide to overlook the town government's dismissal of her distinctly gendered concerns.

The promise of US wages also inspired Emilia Lozano to accommodate her husband's participation by agreeing to work longer hours cutting women's and children's hair to preserve their clientele.¹⁰ Her husband was a barber with a strong town following but in desperate need of new chairs, equipment, and the US dollars that could finance such expenses. The couple also anticipated making a fair profit from loan agreements. Emilia's plans were widely shared, since she intended to dedicate herself to working longer hours to preserve the family business. Her husband's participation in the Bracero Program might also make US beauty trends financially accessible for the business. Emilia was confident that their investment in US equipment and styles would expand their already strong following into neighboring towns.

These women's plans and visions were compatible with the Mexican government's visions of family cooperation and progress, but they also reflect profound familiarity with and interest in contract labor and its relationship to US consumer and labor trends. Emilia and many other women believed that emulation and appli-

cation of US styles would improve how they worked and catered to their customers. Middle-class families often knew about US equipment, products, and trends not only from some family members' previous experiences in the United States but also from subscriptions to US catalogs and magazines. Further, middle-class women's own idealized imaginings of the benefits of legal access to US wages drove their support and their male relatives' enlistment in the program.

Focusing on middle-class women's aspirations in relationship to their male relatives' Bracero Program participation, decision making, and earnings, the Mexican government's promotion of the program was meant to inspire and nurture women's commitment to their male relatives' participation in ways that were publicly compatible with local gender norms. Women were to labor for the sake of the entire family and encourage others by example. Developing their own visions of progress outside this framework of collective family labor was publicly discouraged.

Preciado's recruitment strategy achieved its desired effect. Upon returning to their businesses, trades, and neighborhoods, middle-class families encouraged working-class families to join the Bracero Program. Middle-class men overlooked class differences that had often separated them from the working class to describe and promote program participation as a feat worthy of strong and responsible men. They replaced Avila Camacho's racial logic with their own translation of this program's sacrifices and benefits. Moreover, middle-class families in San Martin de Hidalgo recruited working-class families into the program after agreeing to finance their loans. Prospective working-class braceros borrowed an estimated 250 pesos from middle-class families at a monthly interest rate of 8 pesos. Middle-class families aggressively pursued loan revenues as well as enlistment.

REPATRIATES' INTERVENTION

By August 18, 1942, many of this town's men, both middle-class entrepreneurs and poor agricultural laborers, had enlisted in the Bracero Program. Nonetheless, it had not been a smooth process. This was not the first time that this town's men had been lured to the United States. Between March 1920 and April 1928, midwestern and western US railroad and steel industries had contracted townsmen nationwide. The Mexican government's recruitment efforts did not allay an older immigrant generation's concern for the future of the working poor and inexperienced working class, a widely ignored yet receptive pool of prospective braceros. This older generation believed that immigration to the United States "was not a way to get to know the world."¹¹ Their own immigration histories informed their distrust of the US

and Mexican governments and, more urgently, this program's conditions. Such sentiments inspired them to take a different approach to recruitment.

This older generation, composed of former immigrants to and repatriates from the United States, warned working-class men that Preciado had not promoted the Bracero Program among them, that he did not want to be accountable for working-class men in desperate need of creating profitable life opportunities through the program. They explained that Preciado had personally recruited older heads of middle-class families and strategically sidestepped recruiting working-class families in order to avoid future accusations of deception and fraud. The targeted younger generation's future during and after program participation was highly suspect. High-interest loans and potentially exploitative employment conditions were a losing combination. Moreover, repatriates claimed that the Mexican government knew it would take very little convincing to lure thousands of working-class and inexperienced men to journey to the United States in pursuit of earning higher wages. They insisted that the Mexican and US governments were taking advantage of recruits' poor educations, limited life opportunities, and low wages to enlist them in an unprofitable and unhealthy mode of life.¹²

Repatriates' intense distrust of the program, coupled with their immigration histories, made them advise young would-be braceros who were working class to participate responsibly, using their participation to transition into profitable long-term settlement with their families. This older generation of immigrants pointed out that a contract would not translate automatically into such a settlement: careful planning would be necessary for dealing with family separation, increased debt, and tense ethnic, gender, race, and class relations.

Upon learning of the Bracero Program, many young prospective braceros sought out repatriates, who held meetings in the privacy of their homes, offices, and neighborhoods to discuss immigrant life in the United States with them and their families and to offer testimonials and advice on contract labor's short- and long-term implications. Repatriates remembered setting out for the United States without foreknowledge of US employment conditions and politics. Acting as concerned parents and town residents, they circulated what they considered important advice to demystify the Mexican government's idealization of the Bracero Program's conditions, because the working class "deserved better."¹³ Repatriates' advice attracted and resonated with concerned grandparents, parents, partners, and children left behind.

Repatriates knew that the opportunity to earn US wages was not something working-class men and their families could afford to refuse. Local employment opportunities were scarce and poorly paid, and families were overwhelmed by debt.

Working-class prospective braceros were pursuing contract labor to pay off existing family debt. These families struggled with exploitative sharecropping, an inadequate educational system, poor health care, and histories of poor life opportunities. Most town men had begun working as agricultural laborers at ages as young as eight. They were not educated, did not own land, and did not have mastery of a trade to transition easily out of contract labor. It was important that they manage their participation strategically: uninformed pursuit of contract labor would potentially trap them in exorbitant debt and dependence on contract labor as a permanent way of life.

Although these private and group conversations between the older and younger generation of immigrants often excluded women, concerned grandmothers and mothers often collaborated to organize such meetings out of concern for their families' welfare. The resulting conversations emerged as vehicles for women to express their advice and concerns indirectly. Maria Elena Medina remembers that she and other concerned women recruited repatriates to advise potential braceros about "keeping their own financial records, writing down departure and return dates, and obtaining their contractors' names." They entrusted repatriates to speak for them, to "say what we [women] had to keep to ourselves." Medina explained, "We could not become overcome with worry. We had to arm everyone with knowledge before letting them go."¹⁴

Repatriates encouraged prospective braceros to avoid drinking, gambling, and overspending and to master a work pace that was compatible with labor demands but also with their staying healthy. Concerned grandmothers and mothers considered such advice empowering. It was often the first time that transitioning into and out of contract labor, as well as reaching adulthood, had been discussed with these young men. Repatriates' advice and testimonials echoed parents' concerns and emerged as a meaningful form of expressing their own anxiety.

Concerned female relatives also invited repatriates to bring generations of male relatives together to accept and support the Bracero Program participation of younger male relatives. To ease tensions between disapproving grandparents and parents and their sons and sons-in-law, former repatriates met and spoke with these men. Older and younger male relatives often disagreed on whether program participation was affordable and worthwhile. Older male relatives feared that the program's conditions would result in their sons' permanent, reckless bachelorhood and exorbitant debt. Repatriates and concerned female relatives took comfort in helping male relatives settle on the terms of their family's separation through in-depth discussion of the program's implications for young men's transition into

adulthood. Older relatives demanded that young men assure them that they would act responsibly throughout their contract period and upon their return.

Other grandparents and parents agreed that they needed US wages desperately but opposed contract labor because they worried that their younger relatives would become transient men. These men feared that their sons' unsupervised transition into adulthood would distract and prevent them from building homes and raising families. Bringing their male relatives together for productive conversations to discuss the conditions that were compatible with family harmony comforted grandmothers and mothers, even if it entailed their exclusion.

Neighborhood meetings that women attended often addressed some of women's fears without drawing attention to any particular women's concerns or to their respective husbands' shortcomings. Women did not assert their own emotional and financial needs, concerns, or doubts at these meetings. This would have reflected poorly on them, their marriages, and their husbands. Instead, they utilized these forums to express their support of measures that might prevent male relatives' neglect and permanent family separation. Women prepared *aguas frescas* (drinks), coffee, entrées, *leña* (firewood), and pastries and set up tables and chairs to cater to families attending what other town residents assumed were birthday celebrations. Fearful of drawing unwanted government attention, women coordinated these meetings carefully. Maria Teresa Rodriguez had never been to the United States, so her husband "did not take her concerns or advice seriously."¹⁵ Moreover, he doubted that as his wife she would ever support their temporary separation. Confident that this neighborhood meeting would finally address her concerns and that these would resonate with the concerns of other neighborhood couples, she helped organize it.

Neighborhood meetings appealed to women and men because they believed that lessons learned from lived experience were empowering and that it was their responsibility to equip themselves with the firsthand knowledge of repatriates. Families in attendance listened attentively and elaborated on repatriates' advice by drawing attention to contract labor's implications for their reputations and livelihoods. Men's failure to complete their contracts would be viewed back home as irresponsible conduct, ruining their reputation in town as well as their future prospects. Through these meetings, women also came to understand that their own collaboration with the Bracero Program would have to follow gender norms. Town respectability and collateral were contingent not only on men's successful contract completion but on women's management of a household, property, business, or trade under honorable conditions that did not include interacting with and catering to men who were not relatives.

Repatriates' approachability and receptiveness enhanced their credibility and popularity among working-class women. They set a positive example. Repatriates strove to incorporate women into these conversations by asking and addressing their questions concerning family separation. This prevented the emergence of power struggles between women and men. Often by the conclusion of these meetings, women's collaboration, coordination, and participation in setting up the meetings were determined to be socially responsible acts on behalf of their families and neighborhood. The women's tactful approach prevented power struggles between women and men from surfacing but also deflected attention away from women's successful community leadership in what were really acts of protest against local and national neglect. Women's organizing of these meetings and participation in them marked the utmost boundary of male relatives' tolerance toward women's leadership, which always had to be portrayed as a form of caretaking. In all other matters, women were expected to follow their male relatives' direction. Nonetheless, the meetings marked the beginning of collaborations between repatriates, working-poor women, and young men committed to their own visions of personal advancement.

Repatriates' outreach to braceros and their families went beyond informal meetings. Preciado relied on former repatriates like Manuel Ricardo Rosas in skilled employment sectors to administer a critical phase in prospective braceros' recruitment. Program administrators required letters of recommendation and formal written agreements financing loans from middle-class families to pay Bracero Program recruitment fees. To facilitate this process, Preciado enlisted Rosas and the entire town's skilled employees to write and issue program loan agreements and letters attesting to prospective braceros' strong work ethic and moral character. They felt that if braceros got fired and needed new employment or faced persecution or arrest, these papers would help protect them, since they to a certain extent documented that the men in question were not aimless wanderers but reputable citizens in their home country with solid work histories who had proven themselves worthy of initial admission into the United States. Rosas wrote letters of recommendation, but not before offering, with the help of former coworkers and repatriates, a few words of advice.¹⁶

Rosas and other repatriates told prospective braceros to tape their documents onto a sturdy separate sheet of paper, write their home address on this sheet, and fold it into sixteen squares so that they could easily carry the documentation with them at all times, as the repatriates had done previously when working in the United States (figure 1). Once they crossed the US-Mexico border, different rules would



SERVICIO DE MIGRACION

NUM. 66081

TARJETA DE IDENTIFICACION EXPEDIDA POR EL SERVICIO DE MIGRACION EN SEGURO

Two black and white photographs of a man and a woman. Below them are handwritten signatures: *Manuel R. Rosas*, *Manuel R. Rosas*, and *J. P. Delgado*. A circular stamp contains the text "SERVICIO DE MIGRACION Y SELLO PRINCIPAL RESPECTIVO" and "JUN 19 1932".

MEDIA FILIACION DEL INTERESADO

ESTATURA 1.70 COMPLEJO 1.70
 COLOR NEGRO PELO NEGRO
 CEJAS 1.70 OJOS 1.70
 NARIZ 1.70 BOCA 1.70
 BIOTE 1.70 BARBA 1.70
 SEÑAS PARTICULARES 1.70

DATOS COMPLEMENTARIOS

EDAD 24 AÑOS AÑO EN QUE NACIO 1905
 PROFESION OFICIO U OCUPACION Obrero

OTROS DATOS QUE INTERESAN

LUGAR DE NACIMIENTO San Martin de las Andes
 NACIONALIDAD POR NACIMIENTO ARGENTINA
 NACIONALIDAD ACTUAL MEXICANA
 RELIGION Catolica RAZA mestiza
 LUGAR DE RESIDENCIA San Martin de las Andes
 NOMBRE Y DOMICILIO DE SU PARENTE MAS CERCA
 Apacita Rodriguez San Martin de las Andes

CONSTANCIA SOBRE LEGAL INTERNACION

JUN 19 1932

Form T 408

3 PM
 INLAND STEEL COMPANY
 INDIANAPOLIS, INDIAN. ARBOR WORKS

REFERENCE CARD

Name *Manuel Rosas*
 Check No. *6211*
 Pay Off Date *6/3/32*
 Emp. *W. J. Jacobs*

NOTE

PRESERVE THIS CARD AND PRESENT IT AT EMPLOYMENT OFFICE SHOULD YOU EVER BE EMPLOYED THEREBY PERPETUATING YOUR SERVICE RECORD.

AS PER NOTICE OF W.A. 1ST 1932 SAVINGS IS DISCONTINUED AS OF DEC 31 1932 PAYABLE APR 1ST 1933 CALL FOR YOUR EQUITY AT THAT TIME

INLAND STEEL CO.
 EAST CHICAGO, IND.

6211 MANUEL R ROSAS 14703
 6211 4 25
 74
 20318 EAST HSE CHA.

FIGURE 1. Manuel Ricardo Rosas's personal documentation of his US immigration and employment records (front side), 1932.

apply. Mexican immigrant men were discriminated against, questioned, and deported with nothing but the clothes on their backs. It was their responsibility to carry documents confirming their legality and to keep their families informed about their assigned destination. This older generation advised them to understand that foreigners would not care “who you were nor who you must return to eventually.”¹⁷

It was risky for the repatriates to make these recommendations to prospective braceros. Very few town residents had the courage to discuss publicly anything other than loan agreements and the promise of US wages. Prospective braceros and their families signing loan agreements without assurance of a contract or information on the Bracero Program’s terms had to accept that they were making an important decision without much knowledge about its ramifications. Repatriates’ and skilled employees’ concerns emboldened the prospective braceros to assert their distrust. By acknowledging that crossing the US-Mexico border involved learning to negotiate language barriers, working under strict management, and enduring the violation of contract terms, social exclusion, and racial discrimination and exploitation, the older generation was doing a great service to those who would follow.

Repatriates’ and women’s ingenuity in negotiating the program’s emotional demands evidenced their commitment to family and their careful negotiation of gender norms. Repatriates aggressively tried to instill accountability, goal setting, and an obligation to family in working-poor men and their families in order to prepare for their transition through contract labor and long-distance family relationships. Their efforts do not imply that working-poor men would otherwise idealize contract labor or be incapable of judging the program for themselves. Rather, they illustrate how an older and younger generation came together to pursue progress through immigration and develop an alternative discourse to program recruitment, one that in some ways confronted the racial logic of contract labor.

WORKING-CLASS VISIONS OF PROGRESS AND THE MASS APPEAL OF EMIGRATION

Working-poor prospective braceros were at a crossroads. They were unaware of Avila Camacho’s vision for their betterment. The Bracero Program’s unfolding confirmed that they would continue to inhabit a distinct and inferior racial category unless they transitioned successfully into and then out of contract labor. Throughout the history of San Martin de Hidalgo, working-class men had been restricted to poorly paid, unskilled agricultural labor and had been discriminated against on

account of their lack of education, income, and property. In light of repatriates' stories, they realized that contract labor would also require negotiating racially discriminatory conditions and attitudes concerning their ability, background, labor, and rights, as well as gendered expectations concerning their emotional relationships, settlement, and success in the United States. Contextualizing contract labor, and more specifically the opportunity to earn and return with enough collateral to liquidate debt and enter into other trades, motivated them to pursue a delicate balance between being racialized—treated as expendable, illiterate, vulnerable, and unskilled laborers—and overcoming such racism and discrimination as determined and informed, goal-oriented men.

The town's working-class prospective braceros began this process by articulating their own visions of progress. They appropriated Bracero Program discourses to strengthen their resolve. These visions were contingent on taking advantage of town resources already in place in addition to recognizing and utilizing emerging trends. Like middle-class families, working-class prospective braceros asserted that access to US wages would strengthen their earning potential. They were confident that plans centered on the firsthand knowledge of repatriates and their own visions of economic advancement would enable them to eventually make the transition into desirable long-term settlement.

The plans of young working-class prospective braceros usually consisted of borrowing money from relatives or middle-class families to go toward their recruitment fees, learning skills and trades in the United States, then returning home to use them. Carlos Rodriguez, for example, was determined to learn how to fix automobiles so he could earn enough to buy his own. Realizing that very few working-class families in town owned or could afford automobiles, he envisioned that working in the United States would make this skill set and vehicles accessible to him as he became middle class and serviced that community's fleet of cars. After all, older immigrants had hailed the United States as "the automobile mecca of the world."¹⁸ Although Rodriguez's goal was compatible with Avila Camacho's vision, it implied transcending poorly paid agricultural labor. Young prospective braceros clearly had their own visions of what the program could provide.

Jose Ramirez planned that after working as a bracero in the United States he would have enough money to purchase an automobile and build a newsstand.¹⁹ Demand among town residents for the latest editions of international, national, and surrounding town newspapers, as well as comic books and magazines, had increased with news of the program. The town's thirst for information regarding the United States was growing, and Ramirez was confident that his US wages would also

facilitate his purchase of a radio and large loudspeakers to air broadcasts of news and other popular programming and his sale of the most popular publications. He also envisioned selling sweets and other homemade treats to offset the cost of gasoline as he made his way to and from Guadalajara and the surrounding towns to pick up subscriptions. Confident that access to US technology, trends, and wages would lay the foundations for prosperous settlement, he signed a program loan agreement to pursue a contract. He was determined to transcend poverty in Mexico and the United States.

Meetings between generations of immigrants and men's plans for the future laid the foundations for a bracero culture that centered on the importance of transitioning out of the program by becoming informed and having clear goals. Nonetheless, the town's miscalculation of the program's mass appeal, as well as its economic and social impact, forced families to reconsider program conditions. Desperate for US wages and unable to obtain or afford loans to pay for program recruitment fees, many Mexican working-class men instead journeyed to the United States as undocumented Mexican immigrants. Mexican government town officials were unprepared to deal with this phenomenon. Both contract and undocumented immigration transformed families' plans for progress into a transnational struggle over local development that took advantage of working-class children, women, and men left behind to labor.

Preciado did not attempt to manage the adaptation of the town and its families to the absence of these men. Those left behind were on their own. The volatile combination of labor shortages, overworked women, and streets teeming with children plagued rural towns and villages throughout Mexico. San Martin de Hidalgo was no exception. This town's adaptation to contract and undocumented immigrant labor was complicated by the racial, class, and gender characteristics that the middle class perceived in this town's working class, as well as by the middle class's distinct vision of how families could better themselves: a model of investing US wages in their own businesses that applied more to middle-class than to working-class families.

The Mexican nation's preoccupation with national consumer patterns and trends among the urban middle class deflected attention and funds away from rural towns and villages confronting an unstable local economy and strained social relations. The Bracero Program's impact on rural, working-class families left behind was not a national priority. Instead, national authorities prided themselves on fulfilling program recruitment quotas successfully and on mobilizing urban middle-class families to invest aggressively in US-manufactured apparel, equipment, and trends in emulation of a modern way of living and working. The families' exposure to different customs was restricted to their purchase of US consumer styles and trends,

reducing Avila Camacho's vision of economic development to an efficient model for managing Mexican men's immigration to the United States.

The Bracero Program's mobilization confronted middle-class town families with labor shortages and led to the unskilled working class laboring longer shifts for lower wages. Women and men struggled to keep up with demands on their labor and time. Orders for apparel, dairy products, dry goods, meats, vegetables, and other products were late most of the time, and wages declined significantly. Members of middle-class families worked fifteen-hour shifts to fill large orders or juggle several trades. The working poor worked thirteen-hour shifts to earn an estimated three pesos a day.²⁰ This roughly equaled one hour's wages in poorly paid unskilled US agricultural labor. Excessive pressure on town families' energy, time, and resources included children, especially among the working poor. School-age children missed days of instruction to help relatives with household chores and trades. Such demands on child labor and time resulted in the expulsion of elementary and middle school students on account of poor attendance and health.

Six months into the Bracero Program, working-class braceros acknowledged that their quality of life had not improved and that it would likely become worse on both sides of the US-Mexico border. Additionally, undocumented Mexican immigrant men began to emigrate, increasing the number of families left in Mexico to compete for poorly paid unskilled jobs. Working-class braceros understood that they urgently needed uninterrupted access to US wages despite the dehumanization and dislocation they were experiencing. It was important for them to convey the similarities between their own individual circumstances and their families' adaptation to long-term separation if they were to renew their families' confidence, resourcefulness, and trust, as they and their families engaged in a transnational struggle to make possible the braceros' eventual return.

LESSONS LEARNED

The immigration histories of working-class braceros reveal that their experience of long-term family separation and discretionary return was informed by lessons they learned before even setting foot in the United States. Their descriptions of program selection convey that becoming a bracero entailed undergoing dehumanizing, racially infused eligibility processes: Artemio Guerra de Leon, for example, recalled that he and other men had waited three hours in the nude to undergo program selection.²¹ "Braceros often dwelled on the dehumanizing treatment involved in selection and processing when they were trying to convince their families that it

was better to secure continuing, uninterrupted US employment, either legally (through renewals or special-immigrant contracts that were difficult to secure) or illegally, after their Bracero Program contracts had expired, and thus to endure long-term family separation, than to return to Mexico again and again to undergo the expense and humiliation of repeated program contracting.

To counter lingering widespread idealization of the Bracero Program back in Mexico, braceros who returned told others about intra- and interethnic tensions in the agricultural labor camps. Ramon Rea Rios shared that his father had told him, “We were not welcomed by anybody, white, black, other Mexican immigrants, or Mexican Americans. They saw us as competition.”²² Rea Rios explained, “It was stressful to keep all the divisions in my head [remember all the unwritten segregation rules] when working, trying to get some sleep, and bathing.”²³ Their dehumanization and dislocation often led braceros to distrust one another and separate into regional groupings. All the divisiveness, braceros told their families, made contract labor emotionally as well as physically draining. Braceros wanted to convince their families that the interethnic hostility they confronted was similar to the demeaning treatment that their wives and children were receiving from the middle-class families that employed them. They hoped that this would convince their families that they were making sacrifices and were desperate to transition out of contract labor.

Middle-class braceros also wrote their families to justify their contract renewal. Arturo Buendia told his family that although he had “worked hard to prove that he was good enough to deserve braceros’ approval” and earn US wages, he could not return.²⁴ He had not earned enough to expand his hometown business. Middle-class braceros also renewed their contracts and appealed to their families in ways similar to those used by working-class braceros.

Working-class braceros’ stories of their lives in the United States did not lessen their families’ anxiety and fears. Instead, families became disillusioned by their bracero relatives’ willingness to continue to follow in the course articulated by the Mexican government. Though braceros described missing their families and feeling overworked and financially strapped, they continued to enlist their relatives’ support as laborers. Families often resented braceros’ requests that they continue to labor under existing conditions without addressing their individual concerns or needs as citizens, laborers, and relatives. Their immigration stories, long-term family separation, and discretionary return reminded families that their bracero relatives controlled their labor in Mexico from afar.

Eight months into the Bracero Program, families throughout Mexican rural towns like San Martin de Hidalgo were working sixteen-hour shifts for less than

fifteen pesos a week, terms that reflect a drop in wages and an escalation in exploitation.²⁵ Additionally, middle-class families took advantage of what they considered had become the increasingly desperate situation of working-class bracero families by hiring family members to work for them under exploitative conditions. Punctual payment of Bracero Program loan agreement conditions left working-class bracero families with very little left over. Middle-class families realized that working-class families, even with their male relatives earning US wages, were unable to pay for much-needed winter clothing, nutritious meals, and adequate health care for their children.

In accordance with Mexican rural town gender norms, female relatives did not oppose, in public or in writing, their bracero relatives' proposals for long-term separation and discretionary return. They did not bring up the continued deterioration of their quality and standard of living. Weary of their bracero relatives returning without enough money to liquidate their program loan agreements, female relatives assumed instinctively that "their access to uninterrupted wages in either country was better than unemployment and unpaid program loan agreements."²⁶ Families settled for, at best, receiving remittances to finance program loan payments and complement their increasingly lower wages. They were convinced that if their previous efforts had not elicited much more than promises and remittances toward liquidating their program loan agreements, they could not do much more to inspire a different and more profitable response.

Instead, the wives of working-class braceros recorded remittance receipts carefully and, after paying their monthly loan installments, deposited leftover funds in their family savings account. Their husband's and children's sacrifices made them uncomfortable, and they feared braceros returning with only the clothes on their backs, demanding accurate records of how their earnings had been spent. When received, bracero letters convinced women that their male relatives were in denial about the hardships their families were experiencing back home. They took comfort at least in financing the liquidation of their program-loan agreement and, despite their situation, made it a priority to try to create better life opportunities for their children.

By 1945, working-class bracero families had learned that such a priority was no longer a central component of their bracero relatives' vision for family betterment. Even after the town's working-class braceros had completed a contract or two, they told their families that their plans continued to require their families' support as laborers and endurance of long-term separation. Braceros' failure to finance their children's enrollment in quality education, repair their homes, purchase land, begin

businesses or trades, or enter into agricultural labor under more profitable conditions confirmed that they were unable to immediately better their families' financial position by transitioning into desirable long-term settlement.

Working-class braceros continued to depend on but often overlook the sacrifices of overworked working-class children, women, and older men as caretakers, laborers, and citizens. Yet they developed and financed a local bus-transit system to provide and nurture the profitable mobility of young men between fifteen and nineteen years of age. Returning braceros were committed to providing these young men—too young to secure Bracero Program contracts or pursue undocumented entry into the United States and too poor to enroll in local schools—with supervised internal mobility that could improve their quality of life and standard of living. Returning working-class braceros considered this generation of young men, usually their sons and siblings, worthy of financial investment. They realized that the young men's life opportunities, like their own, were limited by racially charged exploitation to poorly paid agricultural work and other forms of unskilled labor. Nonetheless, bracero relatives were confident that by obtaining transportation to and from surrounding towns and Guadalajara, Jalisco—one of the largest cities their town's home state—these young men would gain employment, skills, and wages that would prevent their entry into Bracero Program loan agreements, contract labor, and undocumented entry into the United States. Working-class braceros were committed to providing young men without families of their own and unbound by program loan agreements the mobility to thrive outside both the Bracero Program and the limited local employment opportunities.

Despite this benefit to the town's youth, other town residents refused to endorse the Bracero Program. Their assessment of the emergencies facing the US and Mexican governments led them to argue that the program was not in fact the most desirable, sound, or humane approach to dealing with the US government's alleged need for a labor surplus of Mexican-immigrant contract laborers; indeed, the program was bound to make an already unmanageable situation worse. Subsequent events would bear them out.