

The Braceros: Mexican Workers in the Jim Crow South, 1949–1951

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In a common scene across the South in the late 1940s, men of color were refused service at restaurants and other businesses. Business owners stopped them at the front doors and turned these men away. At another restaurant, the men were pointed to the rear of the building where they could be served at a bar. Owners were so determined to keep these individuals out that they posted signs on doors and building entrances letting them know they were not welcome. What comes to mind for many Americans hearing of this injustice is the legalized discrimination against African Americans in the Jim Crow South and the signs for “Colored” and “White” displayed at drinking fountains, restrooms, waiting areas, and other public places.

This situation outlined above occurred in Marked Tree, Arkansas, and was different. The men who were being denied service were from Mexico. They were part of a government-sanctioned guest worker program to provide labor to pick cotton, “braceros.” In the Jim Crow South, the braceros were not seen as typical “immigrant” laborers (whose stories are often recounted as part of the narrative of the United States as an immigrant nation). They were seen and treated as African Americans. This article provides a brief background on the Bracero Program and on the context that gave rise to an investigation into racial discrimination against Mexican workers in Arkansas. We outline how this incident unfolded, supply primary source documents for classroom use, and provide ideas about how to engage students with this historical event in ways that are connected to the C3 Framework’s inquiry arc.¹

Context and the Documents

During and after World War II, planters and farmers in Arkansas and across the South faced a shortage of cheap agricultural labor. The war had reduced the available workforce, and a post-war economic boom spurred many African Americans to abandon agricultural work and migrate to the major cities. Simultaneously, Mexico was struggling with high unemployment and an absence of economic

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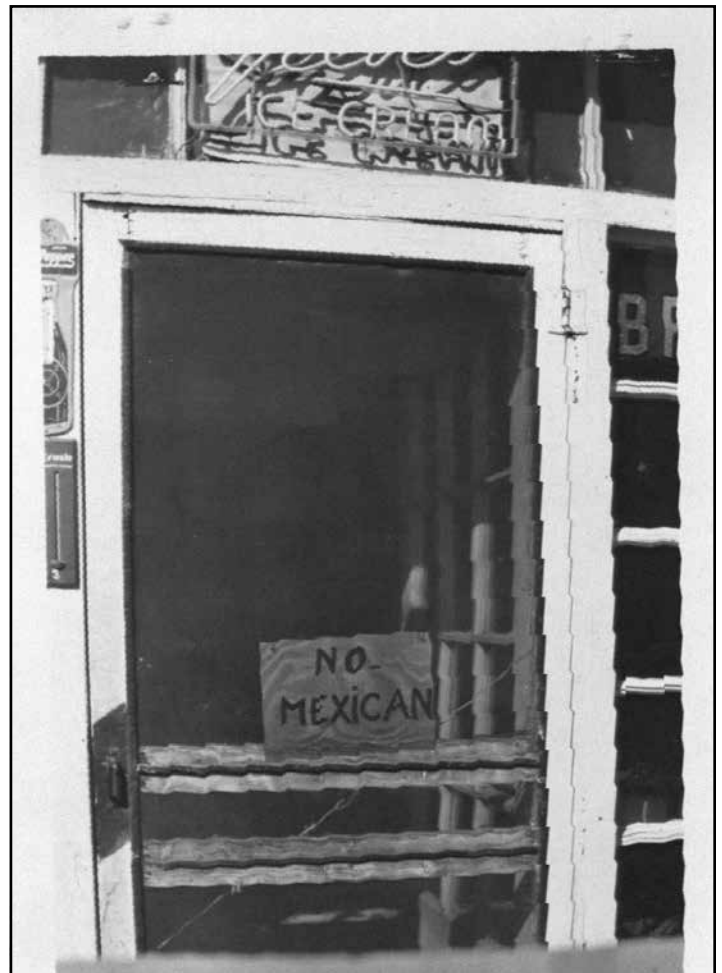


Figure 1. This photograph of the entrance to a restaurant was taken as evidence of discrimination against braceros in Marked Tree, Arkansas. “Rowland’s Café” – Attachment to a letter from Consul Rubén Gaxiola, Memphis, to Ministry of Foreign Relations, Mexico City, November 19, 1949, Folder TM-26-32, Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (ASHRE), Mexico City.

Figure 2. Joint Investigation Report Alleged Discrimination in Marked Tree, Arkansas, October 8, 1951, Folder TM-26-32, ASHRE.

Memphis, Tennesse,
October 8, 1951.

JOINT INVESTIGATION REPORT ALLEGED DISCRIMINATION MARKED, TREE, ARK.

I.- NATURE OF COMPLAINT.

A joint investigation by the writer, Consul A. Cano and Vice-Consul L. Zorrilla was conducted on October 6, 1951. This investigation was based on Consul's complaint No. 2817, dated 10/4/51, in which among other violations, was the allegation that Mexican workers Agustin Gallego and Jesus Ortiz Lutieros were refused service at the Holand Cafe.

Upon our arrival in Marked Tree we immediately contacted Louis Ritter, President of E. Ritter Company and his associates, C. A. Dawson, J. D. Dubard and Louis Ritter, Jr. I explained our mission to Mr. Ritter and invited he and his associates to join us in our survey. Mr. Ritter declined, stating that he was on his way to Little Rock; Mr. Dubard stated that he was unable to walk at the present time, due to ailment; Mr. Louis Ritter, Jr, agreed to accompany us on our tour but at the second place we visited he dropped out the party, stating that he had to eat lunch, thereafter we proceeded alone. The following facts were revealed.

II.-FACTS REVEALED.

"Bridge Inn Cafe": Owned by H. O. Roland. Mr. Roland stated that he had served Mexicans in the past but had discontinued doing so due to difficulties arising because of the fact that there was no one to interpret. Beer is served at this place and he felt that he could avoid trouble by not serving Mexicans.

The Consul and I selected a Bracero, who was dressed in clean work clothes, and sent him to several places with instructions to order coffee. We followed him and observed the reactions. They were as follows:

"Bryants Cafe": Waitress refused service by waving the worker outside.

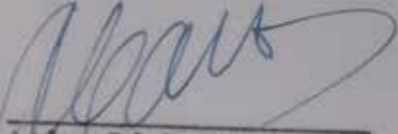
"Knott Hole Cafe": This is a beer joint and immediately upon entering the bartender and several customers told the Bracero and motioned to him to go the rear of the place where there is a separate bar for Mexicans.

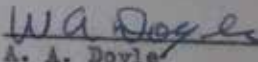
"Curve Inn Cafe": This restaurant is located approximately 4 miles out Highway 83. The owner met the Bracero at the door and refused entry.

"Wikes Drive Inn": The worker purchased cigarettes and then sat down ordered coffee. He was refused service.

An inspection was made of the police records and indicated that during the month of October, 1951 fifty-seven (57) Mexicans were arrested for drunkenness and were fined the minimum, \$13.10. For the same period one hundred two (102) citizens were arrested; fifty-three (53) for drunkenness, of this number twenty-five (25) were fined \$16.50, twenty-seven (27) were fined \$13.10 and one was fined Twenty-nine Dollars (\$29.00). Through November 13th, inclusive, a total of thirty-four (34) persons were arrested and fined for drunkenness, of this number six (6) were Mexican Nationals and twenty-eight (28) were citizens.

City Mayor, L. C. Brown, was contacted and informed of our findings. We went into details of the matter with him and he stated that he was cognizant of the importance of our work, and renewed his pledge to exert all efforts to eliminate any discrimination. He agreed to meet with the City Council and other officials and to bring the matter before them, at which time a renewed pledge will be submitted.


A. Cano Del Castillo
Consul of Mexico


A. A. Doyle
USES Representative

WAD/mp

Figure 3. Letter from the Mayor of Marked Tree, Arkansas dated November 21, 1949, Folder TM-26-32, ASHRE.

CITY OF MARKED TREE
ARKANSAS

Office of Mayor

November 21, 1949

Mr. D. O. Rushing
Employment Service
122 East Second Street
Little Rock, Arkansas

Dear Sir:

E. Ritter and Company and the St. Francis Valley Farms Company, and others interested in the employment of mexican labor in the picking of cotton, through Mr. R. E. Own and Mr. W. H. Bingham, requested me to accompany them to see the various places of business in the City of Marked Tree concerning signs on their doors "No Mexicans Allowed". I was informed my presence at these places was for the purpose of informing you what attitude these places of business would take towards eliminating these signs.

I accompanied Messrs. Owen and Bingham to these places of business and after an explanation to them that these signs constituted a detriment not only to Marked Tree but to Northeast Arkansas, the owner of each place of business readily agreed to, and has removed these signs. You are assured that the officials of the City of Marked Tree will do all that it is reasonably possible to do hereafter to prevent discrimination against mexican labor and we have the promise of the cooperation of all persons interested in the continuance of the prosperity of our part of the state.

Yours very truly,

/s/ J. G. Waskom
J. G. Waskom
Mayor

jgw/ddw

opportunity. This convergence of events is what led to the implementation of the Bracero Program, a series of agreements memorializing an arrangement between the United States and Mexico to temporarily bring Mexican agricultural workers to the United States. From 1942 to 1964, braceros were sent to agricultural regions across the nation. Although most were recruited to the Southwest and Midwest, some were also sent to the South. Between 1948 and 1964, around 300,000 braceros worked in Arkansas.²

The braceros agreed to short-term contracts to provide labor in areas the U.S. government had certified as having a shortage of domestic labor. Their contracts provided them certain protections and benefits, such as housing, affordable meals, payments of a wage equal to the prevailing wage for domestic workers, and transportation back to Mexico at the end of the contract (although it was not uncommon for braceros to immediately enter into a new contract). The day-to-day lives of the braceros were mostly consumed by work, but many did interact with the people in nearby towns.

In the late 1940s, significant numbers of Mexican workers began to arrive in Arkansas; and, as they started interacting with locals, business owners soon responded by segregating facilities and denying services. The treatment of the foreign workers was similar to the treatment of African Americans in the South, but there were important differences. First, the racial discrimination Mexicans encountered in Arkansas was not sanctioned by law. Jim Crow laws in Arkansas were aimed at African Americans, and they mandated that African Americans be separated from whites in schools, buses, voting booths, and other public facilities. These laws called for the separation of “Negros” from whites, without mentioning other races. Second, the braceros were Mexican citizens. This meant they had some advantages as well as constraints as they lived and worked in the United States. Because the Mexican workers were not U.S. citi-



Figure 4. Photograph of Juan M. Donato, a bracero who worked in Arkansas. Courtesy of Maria Donato.

zens, they did not have certain political rights such as the right to vote. However, their Mexican citizenship gave them access to the Mexican government for assistance. It was the responsibility of the Mexican government through its consuls to protect Mexicans from discrimination and abuse. As U.S. citizens, African Americans did not have an outside government to protect them. State and local laws had legalized their discrimination. By contrast, the Mexican government sought to protect the Mexican workers in Arkansas and challenged the secondary status ascribed to them by whites in the southern town of Marked Tree.

Although the Mexican government’s advocacy on behalf of braceros was not consistent throughout the country,³ the government was actively involved in Marked Tree. Braceros in Arkansas had a clause in their work contracts that provided protection against discrimination. But as Mexican workers entered the black-white segregated society in Arkansas, they found themselves subject to the pre-existing segregation and discrimination. They were denied service at restaurants and stores and had to sit apart from whites in theaters. On the entrances of some businesses, they saw signs that read “No Mexicans.” (See Figure 1) The Mexican government launched an investigation and pressed U.S. officials to take action to stop the discriminatory treatment of Mexicans.

The investigation, memorialized in a report (Figure 2), concluded that many businesses were indeed discriminating against Mexicans. Signs excluding Mexicans were visible on doors, windows, and front entrance walls. One bracero stated that business owners let them know clearly that Mexicans were unwanted. One owner directed him to the rear of the building to be served with African American patrons.

The results of the investigation gave the Mexican consul in Memphis, Tennessee, where Mexico had recently opened a consulate in response to the growing use of braceros in the region, reason to use a unique tool at its disposal. The consul threatened to remove the authorization for braceros to work in this part of Arkansas as a result of the discriminatory conditions. This sparked a response in Marked Tree. White officials moved quickly to demonstrate they were putting an end to discrimination against Mexican workers. A federal Employment Services Division employee sent a telegram to the Mexican consul stating he had checked all the cafes in the Marked Tree vicinity and found no remaining discriminatory signs. In addition, the mayor of the town penned a letter stating that discriminatory practices had ended. (See Figure 3) However, these statements pronouncing an end to discrimination against Mexican workers were hollow.

Discrimination toward Mexican workers continued. “No Mexican” signs reappeared. Some businesses, in fact, had never taken their signs down and had refused to cooperate with city officials. As a result, joint investigations were conducted with the Mexican consul and the Employment Security Division. They concluded that the discrimination continued. The Mexican consul pushed to have Marked Tree declared ineligible for the Bracero Program.

Fearful of the economic impact, the town passed an ordinance declaring it illegal to discriminate against Mexicans. The ordinance highlighted the importance of Mexican labor to the area. The Chamber of Commerce declared that

the quickest way to eliminate discrimination was for the chamber to purchase the two businesses that still refused to serve Mexicans and then form a committee to operate these businesses.

In the end, only one farmer was blacklisted in Marked Tree from the Bracero Program. Shortly after this incident, the Mexican government gave up the power to blacklist within the Bracero Program.⁴ Historian Julie Weise provides a fuller recount of the events in Marked Tree, which ends with the apparent loss of this protective labor tool due to a variety of forces.

In the following pages, we highlight how teachers can use the accompanying documents, guided by the C3 Framework's Inquiry Arc and its four dimensions, to lead students through an investigation of what happened in Marked Tree.

Using the Documents in the C3 Framework

Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries

To begin the inquiry process, show students the photograph of the “No Mexican” sign in a business establishment window (Figure 1), explaining that it was displayed in an Arkansas town in the late 1940s. Ask students to brainstorm questions they have about the sign and encourage them to make connections with other times and places in American history or with contemporary events. Students will likely draw connections to “Colored” and “White” signs of the Jim Crow era. Others may make a connection to current discussions of construction of a wall on the border with Mexico. Perhaps others will relate the image to the refusal of certain businesses to provide services (such as providing cakes and flowers) on religious grounds to gay and lesbian couples seeking to get married. Through this process, teachers can activate background knowledge to see the ways that students are making (or not making) connections to other ideas in history.

Now have students do a first read of the results of the joint investigation (Figure 2) to generate further questions both about the incident and how it connects to larger issues in history. One compelling question to explore might be: Are we entitled to civil rights in a foreign country? Other questions to discuss are: Do workers have power? What connec-

Ask students to brainstorm questions they have about the sign and encourage them to make connections with other times and places in American history Students will likely draw connections to “Colored” and “White” signs of the Jim Crow era.

tions are there between economics (or people's economic interests) and civil rights?

Students may have supporting queries that relate directly to the events in Arkansas such as, How does context impact discrimination (e.g., economic need of the town of Marked Tree; or the support of the Mexican government)? What was happening in Arkansas that fueled the need for the Bracero Program? These questions can become the foundation for the activities that follow.

Dimension 2: Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools

Although multiple disciplinary lenses could be used to examine this incident in Arkansas, we focus on having students practice historical thinking when analyzing the documents associated with the events in Arkansas. In particular, these documents can be used to help students develop Dimension 2's indicator for change, continuity, and context: “Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.” (D2.His.1.9-12)

The ways Mexican workers were being treated in Arkansas are both similar to and different from how African Americans were treated. The documents reveal that the Mexican workers were degraded by being refused service and being forced to use separate facilities from those of whites. This echoes the treatment of African Americans during Jim Crow. However, as the documents note, the Mexican workers were operating in a different context with respect to their political and economic power. The marginalization of African Americans in Arkansas was enshrined in legal statutes. The economic role of African Americans was wrapped up in a post-Civil War legacy of sharecropping and labor exploitation that kept African Americans in an economically precarious situation in the agricultural South.⁵

Although Mexican workers were not coming into Arkansas in an economically powerful position individually, they were coming in under the auspices of an international agreement. This afforded them collective labor power that was distinct from that available to African Americans. The foreign workers' ties to the Mexican government and their recourse to the Mexican consul provided them some political protections unavailable to African Americans in the South. This exploration of context surrounding events in Arkansas is just one example of the disciplinary thinking students

can do with these resources. Students can also evaluate the usefulness of these documents to answer various historical questions or examine their limitations as evidence.

Dimension 3: Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence

As students proceed through the previous two dimensions—developing questions and evaluating evidence (and iteratively using their evaluation of the evidence to refine their questions)—Dimension 3 enables them to develop claims to answer questions and evaluate and use evidence in support of those claims.

To continue with the previous example, as students use historical thinking to understand the context within which these events occurred and the similarities with and differences from the experiences of African Americans, they can begin to develop claims utilizing their evidence. Once these claims are developed, they can be challenged to think of other evidence they might need to gather and evaluate. There are excellent resources for examining the experiences of braceros at the Bracero History Archive (braceroarchive.org), including oral histories and photographs. The Smithsonian Institute has an online exhibit about the braceros titled “Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program 1942–1964” (<http://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/bittersweet-harvest-bracero-program-1942-1964>). Students can also examine the work of other authors who have compared the experiences of Mexican and African Americans, such as historian Neil Foley in *Quest for Equality: The Failed Promise of Black-Brown Solidarity*.⁶

This is also an opportunity for students to examine the strengths and weaknesses of their claims and to make adjustments. These documents provide a limited amount of support for any particular claim. Students could think about what other evidence they should seek out. They may choose to look at additional documents available from the time

period. We encourage teachers to invite historians from local museums, colleges and universities, and professional archivists to interact with students in person or via video around these documents. This provides students with the opportunity to see how experts evaluate and subsequently value sources as evidence.

Dimension 4: Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action

Invited experts can also provide an authentic audience to whom students can communicate their conclusions. After interacting with an expert around the documents, students can present their claims together with their supporting evidence. This provides an authentic opportunity to receive feedback that may challenge their conclusions. In addition, students could use the critical thinking developed around social, political, economic and racial justice issues to examine the opportunities and constraints of various groups currently advocating for civil rights.

Conclusion

The events in Arkansas provide a powerful opportunity for students to engage critically with issues of race, labor, civil rights, and, to some extent, international relations in American history. The example of Marked Tree challenges students to consider the role of race, economic power, regional differences, and citizenship status in historical events. These primary source documents provide students with the opportunity to construct an understanding of the past to make better sense of the present. Indeed, students will most likely go beyond the black-white binary and examine how written and unwritten laws affected two groups of color. In this case, Mexican citizens were theoretically protected in the United States. African Americans who were U.S. citizens, however, were disadvantaged because their disenfranchisement was essentially legal.

As Juan M. Donato, a Mexican bracero who worked in Arkansas and the father

of co-author Ruben Donato, recalled, “Me contracté de bracero. Quería trabajar. Cuando trabajé en Arkansas, vi esos letreros que decían ‘No Mexicans.’ Los Americanos nos odiaban. Trabajé en el algodón con los Africanos Americanos. Ellos siempre me trataban bien. Nunca regrese a ese estado.” To translate, the Mexican worker recalled “I signed up to work as a bracero. I wanted to work. When I worked in Arkansas I saw the signs that read ‘No Mexicans.’ The Americans hated us. I picked cotton along with African Americans. African Americans always treated me well. I never returned to that state.” 🌍

Notes

1. *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, Md.: National Council for the Social Studies, 2013)
2. Julie M. Weise, *Corazón de Dixie: Mexicanos in the U.S. South since 1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).
3. Gilbert G. Gonzalez, *Mexican Consuls and Labor Organizing: Imperial Politics in the American Southwest* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).
4. Weise, *Corazón de Dixie*.
5. James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).
6. Neil Foley, *Quest for Equality: The Failed Promise of Black-Brown Solidarity*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

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