

COMMENTARY

## Opinion: I use my grandfather's experience to teach about the United States' Bracero Program

The Bracero Program set into motion demographic changes that continue to transform both Mexico and the U.S.

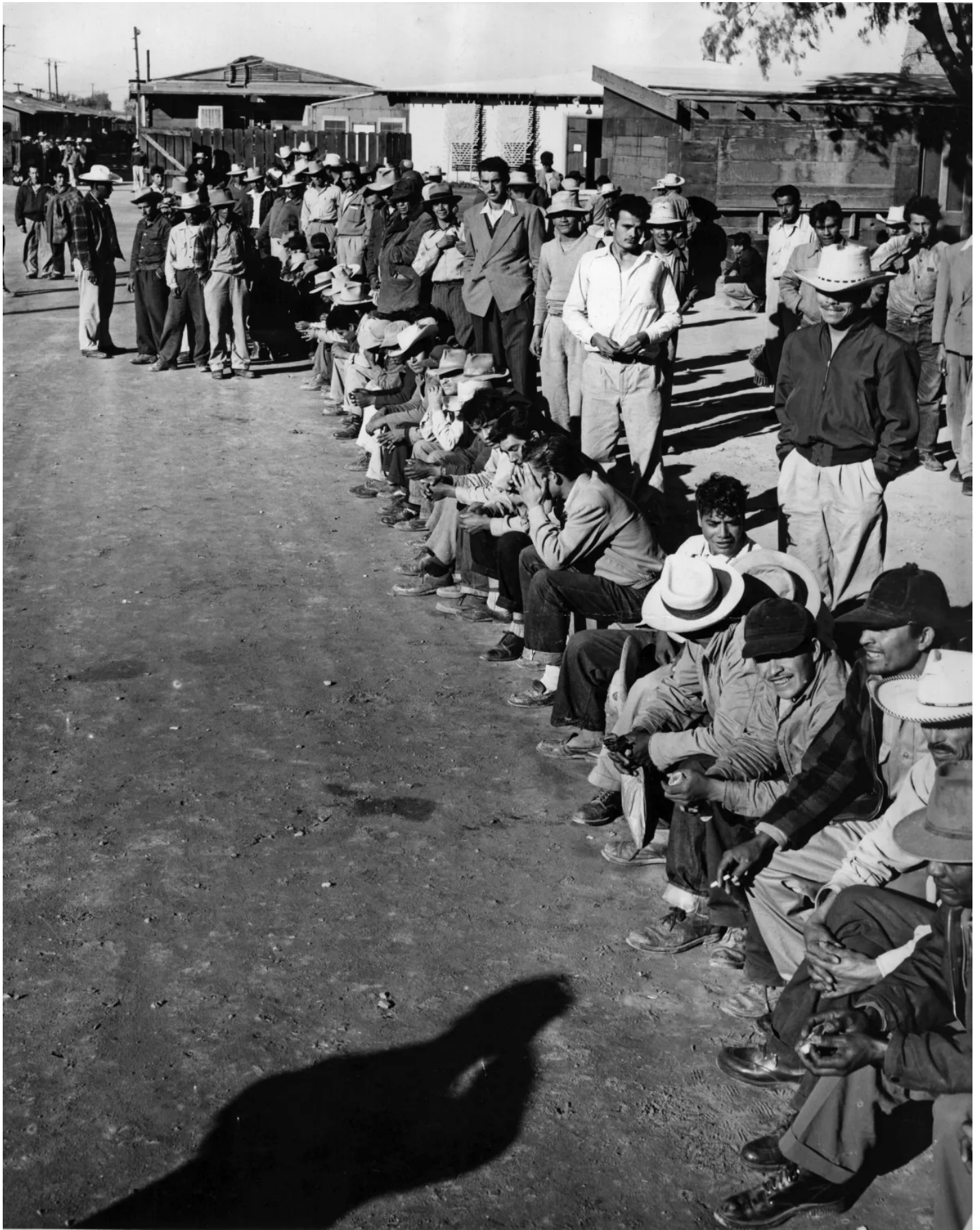
BY ISRAEL PASTRANA

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As a kid, I loved listening to my grandfather's stories about his real and imaginary exploits on both sides of la frontera.

My grandfather grew up in the aftermath of the Cristero War (1926-1929), ferried lumber from Los Angeles to Tijuana to fuel the city's extraordinary growth, and even claims to have found some of the legendary bandit Joaquin Murrieta's buried treasure. But my favorite stories were about his time as a bracero in the agricultural fields of California's Central Valley. Today, more than 60 years after my grandfather joined millions of Mexican men in the Bracero Program to work legally while on short contracts in the U.S., I have the privilege of teaching about it to students in my history classes at Portland Community College.



Jan. 25, 1954: Mexican nationals processed and waiting for work at Calexico during Bracero program. (Frank Q. Brown/Los Angeles Times Archive/UCLA)



COMMENTARY

## Opinion: For some, being in the Bracero Program was a labor of love and sacrifice

Aug. 9, 2022

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Magdaleno Cibrian Canales was born in 1934 in Mascota, Jalisco, a small town not unlike those described by anthropologist Roger Rouse as both a “nursery and nursing home” for migrants in the U.S. My grandfather was just a toddler when the first braceros left Mexico City and arrived in Stockton. At the age of 15, my grandfather hopped a train and headed north to Mexicali, a border town teeming with aspirantes, working-age men in search of a coveted bracero contract.

Though he had not left home with the intention of becoming a bracero, the program’s allure proved too hard to resist. In October 1956, at the age of 21, my grandfather exchanged a prized wristwatch to bypass the line at the bracero recruitment center.

According to my grandfather’s bracero contract, which hangs framed above his kitchen table, he was contracted by the Southern Tulare County Farm Labor Association to harvest citrus fruit for 90 cents to \$1 an hour or the “prevailing piece rate.” At the conclusion of his six-week contract, my grandfather was returned to the El Centro Reception Center where his documents were stamped with the words “Employment Terminated.” Though my grandfather never returned to the U.S. as a bracero, those six weeks abroad radically changed the course of his life and that of future generations.

In my college history courses, I rely on my grandfather's experience to add nuance to our discussions about the Bracero Program. In exchanging his wristwatch for the opportunity to cut the line, my grandfather participated in one of many illicit economies that sprung up wherever braceros or aspirantes congregated. The six-week contract that he signed had evolved over time to protect growers from the autonomous actions of braceros who sometimes "skipped" their contracts and joined the undocumented labor force.

My grandfather's decision to return to the U.S. without a bracero contract was also a common practice; though some men did renew their contracts, many more used the knowledge and connections they learned as braceros to make their own way in el norte. They did this not only to escape the humiliation and exploitation that the Bracero Program had become synonymous with but also for the opportunity to work under conditions that they themselves had some power to dictate.

There are also parts of the bracero experience that my grandfather doesn't talk about. The humiliating physical examinations and the chemical delousings captured in Leonard Nadel's famous collection of photographs were never part of my grandfather's stories about the Bracero Program. These photographs — which serve as haunting reminders of both the brutality of the Bracero Program and the indefatigable spirit of those who participated — were taken in the same year that my grandfather worked as a bracero. Reminding them of the late Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot's observation that "one 'silences' a fact or an individual as a silencer silences a gun," I ask my students to consider my grandfather's reluctance to speak on these topics when examining Nadel's photographs.

Perhaps the most important lesson I can teach my students about the Bracero Program is that it set into motion demographic changes that continue to transform both Mexico and the U.S.

In Washington County, Oregon, where I now teach, [ex-braceros and their families settled down and built a vibrant Latino community](#). Generations later, I had the opportunity to collaborate with Latinx student activists, some of them with ties to the Bracero Program, to create an ethnic studies program at Portland Community College.

Today, as a result of these efforts, students who are Black, Indigenous and people of color at the college have more opportunities to learn about themselves, their culture and their history. To learn more about the movement for ethnic studies and the historical connections between Latinx communities in Oregon and California visit [#StandUpFG: Latinx Youth Activism in the Willamette Valley](#), a digital exhibition I created for Five Oaks Museum.

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