Bracero Families: Mexican Women and Children in the United States, 1942-64

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BRACERO FAMILIES: MEXICAN WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES, 1942-64

by

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B.A. January 2010, George Mason University

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Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
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MASTER OF ARTS

HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

BRACERO FAMILIES: MEXICAN WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES, 1942-64

Rachael Frances DeLaCruz
Old Dominion University, 2014
Director: Dr. Elizabeth Zanoni

The Bracero Program created a bilateral agreement between the United States and Mexico that legalized US agricultural growers to import Mexican workers on seasonal labor contracts between 1942 and 1964. The Bracero Program exclusively contracted men, allowing male laborers known as braceros to migrate according to seasonal patterns. Many braceros left their families behind in Mexico. However, some bracero families made the dangerous choice to remain together, with women and children migrating illegally to the United States. The experiences of these women and children are silenced in traditional documentary sources like government reports and sociological studies, as well as glossed over by historians who characterize bracero camps as masculine, homosocial spaces. These overlooked bracero families are the focus of this paper, which utilizes the oral interviews of braceros and bracero family members collected by the recent Bracero History Project. I argue that there was indeed a presence of women and children in bracero camps and that the presence of these women and children alleviated what was an alienating and isolating experience for all members of a bracero family by continuing the norms of Mexican communities and families. This analysis of bracero oral histories inserts the previously silenced experiences of these families into the history of American labor migration and borderlands studies.
This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Fred and Gilda, for teaching my how to read, write, and work hard.
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CHAPTER 1

"THEY WERE BRACEROS, BUT THEY WERE ALSO FAMILIES": LOCATING WOMEN AND FAMILIES IN BRACERO HISTORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

Introduction

I was born in Mercedes, Texas, May 12, 1955. My mother was at that point in time involved in the migration between the U.S. and Mexico, when [there were] a lot of the braceros, a lot of the people who were hired from across the border to work in agriculture. So she and seven of her children, especially the oldest children were involved in the harvest across the border in Texas. And eventually my mother was constantly thrown back into Mexico because she didn’t have a husband at that time, well she did but she left him for abuse.

- Juanita Parra, Oral Interview for Bracero History Project, January 11, 2008.¹

In this 2008 oral testimony for the Bracero History Project, Juanita Parra began her interview with the previous passage. Sharing her mother’s story not only allowed the family’s history to be recorded and passed on to future generations, but it also exposed a frequently overlooked dimension of the Bracero Program—the presence of women and children on bracero camps. Established in 1942, the Bracero Program was a bilateral agreement between the United States and Mexico that permitted U.S. agricultural growers to import Mexican workers on seasonal labor contracts. The Bracero Program exclusively contracted men, allowing male laborers known as braceros to migrate according to harvest and seasonal patterns mainly throughout Western, Southwestern and Midwestern regions of the U.S. While most braceros worked in the fields, some also worked on the railroads during World War II. Although the American government originally justified the guestworker program based on labor shortages caused by World War II, with pressure from the U.S. agriculture lobby, the program continued until 1964.

¹ Juanita Parra. Interview, Bracero History Archive, Braceroarchive.org.
Offering 4.6 million contracts to approximately 2 million men, with many braceros returning on multiple contracts, the Bracero Program was the largest international contract labor program in U.S. history.

During the first five years of the Bracero Program the United States imported approximately 290,000 braceros, with the majority working in agriculture. Between 1948 and 1964, roughly 200,000 braceros were imported by the United States every year, working in twenty-six states. The majority of braceros worked in cotton, citrus fruits, melons, lettuce, and truck vegetables.\(^2\) In theory, braceros were protected from poor working conditions under the binational agreement. Braceros were supposed to be guaranteed at least the prevailing wage of domestic workers, as well as decent and safe housing, meals, and transportation. However, these rules were frequently ignored in practice.\(^3\)

Since the Bracero Program's implementation, social scientists, including historians, have relied mainly on government sources to examine the Program from the institutional level; however, only in recent years have scholars placed bracero workers themselves at the center of bracero history. According to the common narrative, braceros left behind their families in Mexico, since women and children were rarely able to migrate legally to the U.S. during this time. However, some bracero families made the dangerous choice to remain together, with women and children migrating illegally to the U.S. The experiences of these women and children are silenced in traditional documentary sources like government reports and sociological studies, as well as glossed over by scholars who characterize bracero camps as masculine, homosocial spaces. These


\(^3\) Bracero History Archive, [http://braceroarchive.org/about](http://braceroarchive.org/about).
overlooked bracero families are the focus of this thesis, which utilizes the oral interviews of braceros and bracero family members collected by the recent Bracero History Project. Understanding the bracero families’ role in bracero camps is historically significant because, as Juanita Parra, the daughter of a bracero, recalled from her own experience on a bracero camp, “They were braceros, but they were also families. You can’t just take the braceros, and leave the families.”

Women, like Juanita Parra’s mother, migrated alongside the braceros, often illegally. It is clear from her account that it was dangerous for her mother to continue entering the U.S. without sanction. Yet, she and her family did so in order to find work, even though they were deported back to Mexico multiple times. Although the Bracero Program has typically been characterized as an all-male migration, oral histories and autobiographies, as well as contemporary sociological reports, demonstrate that Juanita Parra’s family were not alone. Rather, the presence of women and children was not unusual on certain bracero camps. I explore their presence in order to understand the complexities of Mexican migration, labor, family, and gender during the bracero years. After identifying the presence of families, I argue that the presence of these women and children alleviated what was an alienating and isolating experience for all members of a bracero family. On all-male camps, braceros faced threats to their masculinity as they confronted domestic labor for the first time. When women were present on bracero camps, they labored in both the fields and the home, thus allowing braceros to maintain traditional gender roles. At the same time, women and children did not have to suffer from the anxiety caused by the separation from their husbands and fathers. Overall, the

4Juanita Parra. Interview, Bracero History Archive, Braceroarchive.org.
presence of families on bracero camps made the bracero families feel less detachment by continuing the norms of Mexican communities and families. This analysis of bracero oral histories inserts the previously silenced experiences of these families into the historical memory of American labor migration and borderlands studies.5

Literature Review

The historiography of Mexican American history has blossomed since the 1960s, when Chicano/a scholars began to enter academia. While only a small portion of the existing literature focuses on the Bracero Program, between the 1960s and early 1990s scholars examined it on legal, political, and organizational levels. Only within the last few years have historians started to explore bracero daily life at length. This is not to say, however, that the braceros have been completely overlooked by historians, as they are frequently mentioned in literature on Mexican American, immigration, and borderlands history; but the field is lacking multiple critical examinations of the bracero experience.

One of the first books published on the Bracero Program was Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story written in 1964 by Ernesto Galarza, a Mexican writer, labor activist, and historian.6 Merchants of Labor, an exposé of the Bracero Program, was a foundational text in the field. Galarza provided basic descriptions of major events


and developments as well as a legal analysis of the Bracero Program. Galarza contended that the Mexican government did not have equal say in the bilateral agreement, because the U.S. government and growers controlled the program. The U.S. government supported the program because “on the face of it the new system introduced planning, created a stable administrative machinery, laid down standards and directives by which operations were governed, and gradually became a seemingly permanent part of commercial agriculture in California.”\(^7\) The government liked the appearance of controlled labor and migration, even if it did not actually achieve this goal. While Galarza demonstrated why the U.S. government supported the Bracero Program, he focused on the problems within the program. He provided examples of braceros who did not receive the wages, housing, or food guaranteed by their contracts. He discussed the variety of work braceros did, which included harvesting almost every type of crop, landscaping, and camp maintenance. Overall, he argued that the Department of Labor and employers manipulated the workers. Injustices endured by braceros included, but were not limited to, “displacement from jobs, harassment, depression of wages, deterioration of housing, the weakening of organization and the use of braceros in strikes.”\(^8\) With his main goal of ending the Bracero Program, Galarza argued that the program perpetuated an image of a better system, a system that was a symbol of international cooperation and better working conditions. However, Galarza demonstrated that this was not the reality. This contemporaneous work was crucial in setting the stage for future scholarship on the Bracero Program.

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\(^8\) Galarza, *Merchants of Labor*, 203.
Another important contemporary study of the Bracero Program was conducted by Henry Anderson in 1961. The report entitled *The Bracero Program in California with Particular Reference to Heath Status, Attitudes, and Practices* was a result of a project of the University of California at Berkeley, funded by the Haynes Foundation in Los Angeles. The study examined “the implications of the bracero program for public and personal health, and, even more specifically, with the question of whether or not braceros are undergoing changes in their ideas about health as consequence of their participation in the contract labor system.”

Following Galarza and Anderson’s work, Richard B. Craig, a political scientist, published another important study on the Bracero Program in 1971, entitled *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy*. Like Galarza, Craig analyzed the Bracero Program using a policy and organizational perspective. By examining government documents, such as Department of Agriculture reports, Senate Committee on Labor and Welfare reports, Immigration and Naturalization Service reports, etc., Craig provided insight into differing perspectives of the growers, the U.S. government, the Mexican government, and the anti-bracero, such as civil rights groups and organized labor.

Like Galarza, Craig contended that the growers, or agricultural interest groups, benefited the most from the Bracero Program. Craig argued that the Bracero Program only operated under the guise of international government control. In reality, interest groups controlled and manipulated the Bracero Program. He suggested that growers achieved what they wanted; while U.S. organized labor groups did not have the political

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power to stop it. Overall, Craig's study offered a useful look at the motivations behind the shaping of the Bracero Program.

The next significant bracero scholarship came almost two decades after the publication of Richard Craig's monograph. In 1992 Kitty Calavita published *Inside the State*, one of the most important studies on the Bracero Program. Like the previous scholarship, her book was also an organizational analysis of the INS during the bracero years. She examined how INS policies favored American growers. Like Craig, Calavita utilized government hearings and reports, Congressional Records, General Accounting Office reports, Congressional Service studies, and official reports of the INS and other agencies.

While all of the early scholarship on the Bracero Program made invaluable contributions to the field, a few weaknesses existed. One of the main issues with earlier writings such as Craig and Calavita was that they did not treat the bracero workers as historical actors. Because theirs were legal and institutional analyses based mainly on government records, their works did not include the voices of individuals. As these works did not explore the daily life of the bracero workers, they obviously did not attempt to discuss the role of women and children during the bracero years.

The most recent scholarship has explored these undiscussed parts of the Bracero Program. However, a significant gap in bracero scholarship followed Calavita's book. In fact, during the few years after Calavita's book, scholars did not give much attention to the Bracero Program at all. Instead the historiography related to Mexicans in the United

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States during WWII and the following decades focused on issues such as the Zoot Suit Riots, early civil rights activities, and the 1960s Chicano/a movements. The unifying factor among these more popular historical topics was that they generally treated non-migrant, settled people of Mexican heritage with American citizenship. There was a significant gap in the literature concerning the braceros and other non-citizen, Mexican migrants, who did not fall neatly into the nation-state based history of either the U.S. or Mexico. However, the transnational turn in U.S. history and migration history revived interest in the braceros, whose history, practitioners argued, cannot be bound within the confines of a single nation state. The new emphasis on a transnational approach was the first significant change in the bracero historiography.

The second significant trend affecting bracero historiography was the expansion of social history approaches that included discussion of women's and gender history, labor history, interdisciplinary approaches, and the collection and use of new sources. It is only in recent years that scholars have begun to try to understand the experiences of the bracero workers themselves.

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In 2006, Deborah Cohen published an article entitled "From Peasant to Worker: Migration, Masculinity, and the Making of Mexican Workers in the U.S.," which examined fluctuating ideals of masculinity during the bracero years. The research for this article consisted of fieldwork and oral histories conducted by Cohen in Mexico in the 1990s. She interviewed former braceros and bracero family members. Based on this research, Cohen argued that the bracero workers' masculinity was threatened on the one hand by not being able to provide for a family and on the other by having to live in a homosocial environment. Thus, braceros were forced to learn to cook and clean for themselves while living and working in the United States. She suggested that they were able to reclaim their patriarchal status as Braceros by identifying as workers and fighting collectively for their rights. Cohen contended that this developed specifically in the transnational setting. Bracero identity was also based on race, class, and nationality. Finally, she argued that because they returned with new skills, the bracero experiences made them more flexible when they returned to Mexico. However, while it was the intention of the Mexican government that braceros would return having changed from peasants to capitalized yeoman farmers, the majority did not return to work in agriculture.

Expanding on this article, Cohen's monograph, published in 2011, examined the bracero experience from a transnational perspective, arguing that the Bracero Program

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16 Deborah Cohen, "From Peasant to Worker: Migration, Masculinity, and the Making of Mexican Workers in the US," *International Labor and Working-Class History* No. 69, Working-Class (Spring, 2006), 85, 90.
17 Cohen, "From Peasant to Worker," 95.
18 Cohen, "From Peasant to Worker," 99.
19 Cohen defines "Capitalized Yeoman Farmers" as those "would own the means of production (the farm) and up-to-date equipment (such as tractors, combines), wield knowledge of agricultural science, and operate as a small business, as opposed to subsistence farming, agricultural wage labor, or big industrialized farms." See Cohen's footnote on page 100.
was seen as a modernizing campaign by both the U.S. and Mexican governments. Defining “modern” as a shift from family farmer to capitalized yeoman farmer, she suggested that braceros were sent to the U.S. in hopes that they would be “modern” citizens upon their return to Mexico. However, Cohen demonstrated that in the end the male migrants were never “modernized” by the Bracero Program in the intended way. Cohen explored the themes of gender, citizenship, sexuality, labor, housing, food, etc. in order to understand what life was like for men on the large bracero camps of southern California. Cohen’s monograph is the most comprehensive look at bracero social history.

While not focused on bracero history, No Man’s Land, written by Cindy Hahamovitch and published in 2011, is the most significant contribution to the history of international guestworker programs. Hahamovitch’s narrative centered on Jamaican guestworkers in order to demonstrate the flaws of the H2 program, which allows U.S. employers to temporarily hire foreign workers. Hahamovitch demonstrates that the H2 program merely creates the façade of an effective system of controlled labor and migration. She included a brief discussion of the Bracero Program, illuminating the failures of this program as well.

Other recent scholarship includes Mireya Loza’s 2010 dissertation, entitled “Braceros on the Boundaries: Activism, Race, Masculinity, and the Legacies of the Bracero Program.” Loza used the Bracero History Archive oral histories to discuss issues such as race, ethnicity, labor, activism, gender, and sexuality in the Bracero Program. Loza’s work on gender and sexuality is focused on bracero camps as homosocial spaces. For example, she explored homosexuality on bracero camps. Her dissertation also

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diversified knowledge of the bracero experience by examining the role of indigenous communities in the program.\(^{21}\)

Ana Elizabeth Rosas has also made recent, significant contributions to the historiography by focusing on changing femininity in Mexico during the bracero years. In her 2011 article entitled “Breaking the Silence: Mexican Children and Women’s Confrontation of Bracero Family Separation, 1942-64,” Rosas explored how the Bracero Program affected the family. Cohen and other scholars had focused on how men in the Bracero Program felt isolated in the U.S. without their wives and their families; however, Rosas argued that the women and children who remained at home in Mexico also experienced alienation from their families.\(^{22}\) According to Rosas, “although the Mexican and U.S. governments (and subsequent historians) have overlooked women and children, the Bracero Program posed such a serious danger to the unity of families that women and children came together to protect themselves and reassure each other that ‘they were not alone.’”\(^{23}\) Rosas began to fill this gap in the historiography by demonstrating how together mothers and teachers in Mexico would help each other with domestic labor, caring for each other’s children, and disseminating information about the braceros received in letters. Her article was an important step in understanding the role of women and children during the Bracero Program.

While Rosas’ main focus was on the women and children who were left behind by the braceros, she also included a brief discussion of women who migrated to the U.S.

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illegally. It is these undocumented women, as well as undocumented children, with which this thesis is primarily concerned. In Kelly Lytle Hernández’s 2010 book, *Migra! A History of the US Border Patrol*, she discussed these particular undocumented migrants of the Bracero Program:

“The establishment of the Bracero Program in 1942, therefore, introduced an implicitly gendered, two-tiered system of labor migration to the United States: legal bracero migration, which was limited to Mexican men, and illegal non-bracero migration, which included the women and families excluded from the Bracero Program. The bracero era was a crucial period during which millions of husbands, sons, brothers and fathers were lifted into legal streams of migration, while women, children, and families were left to cross the border without sanction.”

Recent scholarship on migration and gender has made few references to these women and children who lived and worked alongside the bracero workers and even scholars interested specifically in braceros like Rosas and Hernández could do little more than acknowledge their presence. More commonly, scholars discuss women and families as aberrations in bracero history. Their mention in scholarship has been relegated to statements that only acknowledge the lack of attention paid to them. For example, Martha Gardner wrote in *Quality of a Citizen* that “Mexican nationals contracted to work under the bracero program were men, and little has been recovered of Mexican women’s historical experiences with the contract labor program as wives or family members.”

Bracero families are also mentioned by Mae Ngai in *Impossible Subjects*, where she explores the laws that governed Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, and Mexican immigration in the twentieth century. In addition to arguing that the Bracero Program was a form of ‘imported colonialism,’ Ngai stated that “families had to decide whether it was better to

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stay together and risk deportation, or to live apart for safety and in order to secure steadier work.\textsuperscript{26}

Similarly, Lilia Fernandez also contended that

Mexican women who dared to accompany bracero relatives or search for work themselves \textit{al norte} (up north) had to do so as illegal immigrants, a precarious and dangerous undertaking....This kept their numbers in the U.S. migrant communities quite low....Low numbers of Mexican women in migrant communities often led to gendered tensions in places like Chicago, where Mexican men sometimes courted Puerto Rican women.\textsuperscript{27}

Scholars like Gardner and Fernandez acknowledge the difficulty of analyzing women in the Bracero Program because of source limitations.

For these reasons, recent scholarship has not been able to delve deeply into the issues of undocumented women and children in the Bracero Program. This gap is understandable considering that up until the recent collection of bracero oral histories, few sources recorded the existence and experiences of these undocumented women. It is also not possible to know how many Mexican women actually migrated alongside the braceros between 1942 and 1964, because these women migrated illegally, and no formal record was kept. This lack of sources made it extremely difficult for scholars to give these historical actors the attention they deserve.

However, by documenting the story of women from their point of view as well as from the point of view of braceros, the Bracero History Archive has brought to light the stories of women and children and made them accessible as source material. It is time that scholars use these sources to integrate women and children into the larger history of the Bracero Program. For this reason, this thesis begins to fill the gap in the

\textsuperscript{26} Mae. \textit{Impossible Subjects}, 152.

historiography by exploring their lives and placing their experiences in the wider historical context of the Bracero Program.

By combining the oral histories with autobiographies and contemporaneous social science reports this thesis examines how the presence of women and children in a bracero camp affected the daily life (e.g. housing, food, labor, sexuality, vice) of the bracero camp in comparison to bracero camps that did not have women and children. I argue that there was indeed a presence of undocumented women and children on bracero camps and that the presence of these women and children alleviated what was an alienating and isolating experience for all members of a bracero family.

Historical Contribution

An overarching goal of this thesis is to demonstrate diversity within the bracero experience. The Bracero Program has always been explained as a particularly uniform experience, where single male agricultural laborers worked in the fields during the day, ate in a mess hall in the evenings, and slept in the barrack style housing at night. This understanding of the Bracero Program has its roots as far back as Ernesto Galarza. When bracero life was examined, observers looked almost exclusively at the braceros on large all-male camps.

Over the last few decades, following this trend, scholarship has moved little towards diversifying the bracero experience. Even the most current works on the social history of the Bracero Program still depict a rather monolithic image. For example, Cohen characterized the Bracero Program as a homosocial environment. She wrote “This world of migrants was largely a world of men. By day it comprised backbreaking labor;
long hours in fields dragging and filling sacks of fruit, cotton, or vegetables, by night some men (often upward of several thousand) called military-style barracks home, others shared small shacks with as few as five to seven migrants.²⁸ While Cohen made a quick reference to the various styles of housing, her overall picture of bracero life was a homogenous one.

The oral histories in the Bracero History Archive complicate the previous scholarship by telling stories of bracero existences that do not fit into these traditional understanding of the Bracero Program. The oral histories expose the voices of the men, women, and children silenced by the traditional sources. The uncovering of the diversity of the bracero experience is one of the most important ways that the Bracero History Project has furthered the historical understanding of the Bracero Program. By examining how family camps differed from the all-male bracero camps, this thesis makes a historical contribution by complicating a small, but important, portion of the history of the Bracero Program.

The second overarching theme is that of the messiness of the Bracero Program. The presence of women and children on bracero camps further debunks the myth of the Bracero Program as a cleanly managed migration and labor program. The reality was indeed much messier than either government wanted to admit.

In her work on Jamaican guestworkers in the U.S., Cindy Hahamovitch shattered the conception that guestworker programs, like the Bracero Program, have been successful in controlling foreign labor and migration. For twenty years, the U.S. government along with the compliance of the Mexican government legitimized the practice of importing and deporting Mexican men at the leisure of American growers.

²⁸ Cohen, “From Peasant to Worker,” 86.
However, despite the veneer of control, much about the Bracero Program was unruly. According to Hahamovitch, what the Bracero Program really made legal was “growers’ unregulated use of Mexican labor.” For this reason the Bracero Program was rife with reports of abysmal living and working conditions and extremely low wages, regardless of the criteria set by the Standard Work Contract, which legally documented the established labor conditions for each bracero including the location, duration, wage, etc. The Bracero Program also failed in the explicit goal of stemming illegal immigration from Mexico. Hahamovitch summarizes the reality of successes and failures of guestworker programs by stating that “Guestworker programs were a ‘riotous success,’ in other words, not because they helped control unauthorized migration or protected domestic workers from competition, but because they created the illusion of state control while giving growers precisely what they wanted.”

Hahamovitch thoroughly demolished the myth that the Bracero Program and other guestworker programs were well controlled labor and migration systems. The lack of organized management demonstrated various ways in which the Bracero Program was messier than either government admitted. This further complicates the history by reinserting women and children into the narrative. The presence of women and children on bracero camps, living and working alongside braceros, illuminates another way in which the Bracero Program was messier than previously believed.

29 Hahamovitch, No Man’s Land, 133.
30 Digital copies of Standard Work Contracts are available on the Bracero History Project website, braceroarchive.org.
31 Hahamovitch, No Man’s Land, 134.
Methodology

In combination with the aforementioned scholarship, this thesis will also utilize oral testimonies, sociological case studies, and autobiographies. While scholars like Cohen and Rosas relied on their own fieldwork to try to better understand the bracero experience, new studies may benefit from access to the Bracero History Archive. The Bracero History Archive is an interactive digital archive, created and maintained by the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, George Mason University, the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Brown University, and The Institute of Oral History at the University of Texas at El Paso. It is funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The online archive collects artifacts and oral histories related to the bracero experience. Professors, graduate students, and undergraduate students from the participating universities interviewed former braceros, relatives of braceros, and many others who had interacted with braceros. The Bracero History Archive currently provides public access to 644 audio files of the interviews, each about an hour long, through the website Braceroarchive.org.

In addition to the typical methodological issues associated with oral histories, which will be discussed in detail below, the online database poses a number of other challenges. While the Bracero Oral History Archive is an undeniably valuable source of firsthand accounts, the abundance of information and the relatively disorganized structure of the online database makes the archive a challenge to manage methodically. Each interview has a record with related metadata, which typically includes the interviewee’s name and the date of the interview. Some records include a synopsis of what is discussed in the interview. The archive provides a simple search feature, for those interviews that

have a synopsis available. For example, searching the term “women,” I located a number of interviews that discuss women who migrated with braceros, which I analyzed at length for this project.

Another difficulty with examining bracero history using the oral interviews is that the experience of braceros, women, and children examined in this thesis was not bound to a specific geographical region. Rather, they range from California to Texas to Washington to Minnesota, and many states in between. The variety of experiences in the sources did not allow this project to be narrowed down to a specific region. Commonalities between camps with women and children can be seen in any region. While the region cannot be narrowed down, the type of labor can. All of the bracero camps examined in this thesis were agricultural camps, even though a small number of braceros worked on the railroads as well. None of the oral histories encountered described life working on the railroads. Consequently, this project is focused on agricultural camps in the Southwestern, Pacific North Western, and Midwestern U.S. Not excluding any geographic regions, while limiting the oral histories to those that included “woman/women” in the synopsis, allowed for a fruitful yet manageable source base for this project.

The chaotic world of oral histories has proven to be particularly appropriate for this project, which argues that the Bracero Program was much messier and less controlled than previously reported. According to oral historian Daniel James, oral histories of marginalized subjects are wrought with conflicts, silences, and erasures. However, it is these unresolved issues that depict the complexity of lives and memories of the interviewees. James argued that “Oral testimony is messier, more paradoxical, more
contradiction laden, and perhaps, because of this, more faithful to the complexity of working class lives and working class memory.\textsuperscript{33} This is certainly true for the testimonies of the voices captured by the Bracero History Archive. The lapses, inconsistencies, deletions, and ambiguities of the bracero oral histories reflect the messiness of the Bracero Program.

The bracero oral histories constitute a unique source base because I did not conduct the interviews myself. Although oral histories have been accepted as legitimate historical evidence for decades, interdisciplinary debates regarding the standards on gathering and using this evidence continue. According to oral historian Ronald Grele, it is a shared belief among scholars that “the oral history interview was somehow different because it exhibited certain unique characteristics in its reliance upon memory and the social relations of the interview, which involved the historian directly in the face-to-face creation of the documents that he or she would later use or that would be used by others at some later date.”\textsuperscript{34} The discussion concerning the historian’s role in the creation of the document has been particularly important in the field of women’s oral history. In her chapter in the \textit{Handbook of Oral History}, Sherna Berger Gluck dealt with the question of what is different about women’s oral history. She wrote that often women’s oral history encouraged a relationship between the female interviewer and narrator, which was intended to empower both. These women’s oral histories were “an interactive dialogue designed to promote commonality and even friendship” through the use of “‘approving


nods, appreciative smiles, and enraptured listening and stimulated by understanding comments and intelligent questions.\textsuperscript{35} According to Gluck, the purpose of this less objective approach was to uncover the experiences of voiceless women, while hoping that the meandering discussion would produce valuable information in the end.\textsuperscript{36} Gluck concluded that “a feminist perspective is still the basic determinant [of women’s oral history], a perspective that not only understands how women’s experience is gendered, but that also understands the tensions between women’s oppression and resistance.”\textsuperscript{37}

This project will use the Bracero History Project to privilege this basic feminist perspective, even though this was not necessarily the intention of the documents as they were created. The oral interviews of women and about women were not produced as part of a women’s oral history project. However, according to Mireya Loza, an interviewer in the Bracero History Project, the project eventually “began to target women by validating their experience during the town hall meeting presentations and requesting that braceros invite their wives and children to share their stories.”\textsuperscript{38} Although the oral history archive includes the uncovered voices of women involved in the bracero experience, it is still difficult to recover information relating to women and children in the Bracero Program, because the Bracero History Project was not a specifically women’s oral history project trying to highlight “tensions between women’s oppression and resistance.”\textsuperscript{39}

Having not participated in the interview process myself makes the methodology of this project different than those of oral historians who both conduct interviews and

\textsuperscript{36} Gluck, “Women’s Oral History,” 361.
\textsuperscript{37} Gluck, “Women’s Oral History,” 381.
\textsuperscript{38} Loza, Braceros on the Boundaries, 15.
\textsuperscript{39} Gluck, “Women’s Oral History,” 381.
interpret them. For example, Mireya Loza detailed her experience interviewing former
braceros as an active part of the Bracero History Project. She herself conducted over 80
oral histories, traveling across the U.S. and Mexico. Loza wrote that

The emotional testimonies articulated the pain of family separation, traumatic
medical exams and dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) sprayings, the grueling
exploitation in the fields, and the recuperation of a sense of humanity and
personhood. During cathartic moments, braceros shed tears while viewing the
historic photographs and stood up and explained the context of images in the
Leonard Nadel Collection. ⁴⁰

Her depiction of her involvement in the project illuminated how her role as the
interviewer provided Loza with undeniable benefit. She was there to experience the
subtleties and emotions of many interviews. Undoubtedly, this experience contributed to
Loza’s interpretation of the sources. For this reason, I recognize that my interaction with
these sources lack the intangible and emotional aspect that Loza and most oral historians
experience.

However, having not participated in the collection of the oral histories, as many
oral historians do, I can approach the oral histories with slightly greater historical
objectivity. As only a user of the oral histories, rather than as both a collector and user, I
am more distant from the methodological complexities inherent in the creation of oral
histories. This distance allows me to view these important source materials in a uniquely
critical way.

In addition to the oral histories, I utilize another firsthand account: the
autobiography entitled A Migrant with Hope, published in 1977. In this autobiography,
Elizabeth Loza Newby detailed her life as the daughter of Mexican migrant farm

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⁴⁰ Loza, Braceros on the Boundaries, 14. The Leonard Nadel Collection is a collection of
images related to the Bracero Program taken by photographer Leonard Nadel. It available in the
Smithsonian Collection at the National Museum of American History.
workers. Her story began in 1948, when her father became a bracero worker. Between the ages of sixteen months and fourteen years, Elizabeth and her family lived in a truck, traveling from work site to work site.\textsuperscript{41} The Loza family consisted of Elizabeth, her mother, her father, and eventually her two younger brothers. This account will also be important to this thesis as Newby described the daily experiences of the migrant life from the perspective of a young, Mexican girl. I use Loza Newby's narrative to support the arguments gleaned from the oral histories, regarding her and her mother's role in cooking, cleaning, childrearing, and laboring in the fields while living with braceros.

I supplement the evidence found in these firsthand accounts with the 1961 report by public health sociologist Henry Anderson. For Anderson's fieldwork, he visited bracero camps throughout California. Because he included observations about bracero daily life, including labor, housing, and food, Anderson's report is a particularly valuable source, even if his observations remained limited to bracero camps in California.

By combining Anderson's report with the autobiography and oral histories I am able to offer new insight into the experience of those women and children who are invisible in other sources. These sources combined reveal that while it was often dangerous for women and children to migrate with the braceros, some families chose to remain together. I argue that even though women and children on bracero camps had domestic and agricultural responsibilities, their presence made the bracero experience less alienating for all the members of a family.

\textsuperscript{41} Elizabeth Loza Newby, \textit{A Migrant with Hope} (Broadman Press: Nashville, 1977), 17.
Meet the Interviewees

This section provides a short summary of the experiences of the Bracero History Project’s oral interviewees, whose experiences were imperative to this thesis. Although I will introduce the historical actors throughout the chapters, this bibliographic information is useful to put upfront, in case the reader would like to refer back to it.

*Ramona Acosta* was born in Phoenix, Arizona in 1925. Her parents were living in the U.S. illegally at this time. She was the oldest of four siblings born in the U.S., before her father was deported. Ramona, her mother, and siblings moved back to Mexico to be with her father when she was five years old. At age thirteen she returned to the U.S. with her family. According to her interview, she worked in the fields with braceros and other women, picking and packing fruits and vegetables. Three of Ramona’s cousins were braceros.\(^42\)

*Margarita Flores* was the daughter of a bracero, named Jesus Correra, who received his contract in Juarez, Mexico. Margarita’s mother’s name was Catalina. According to Margarita, she and her mother lived with her father on the Sparks Farm in El Paso, Texas. Margarita and Catalina lived there illegally for a year and a half. During this time, Catalina cooked for her husband and the other braceros. The family returned to Juarez and waited until they could legally immigrate to the US.\(^43\)

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Josie Carrillo Johnson was born in the U.S. Her father was a bracero and her mother was a Mexican American woman. As a child, she migrated with the braceros. As a little girl she worked in the fields bringing water to braceros. When she was older she picked and packed crops, mainly onions.

Consuela Lerma was born in Las Cruces, New Mexico in 1917. She began working for the Singer Sewing Company in 1949. She claimed to have taught sewing classes to the wives of braceros through Home Education Livelihood Program (HELP), funded by the government and local churches.44

Jose Leyva was born in Phoenix, Arizona. He lived on a camp with braceros, Mexican American migrants, and African American migrants. He had a good relationship with the braceros. They treated each other like family. His mother, aunts, and grandmother cooked for the braceros. He stated that the women on the camp worked in the fields with the men when they were not cooking and cleaning.45

Francisco Casas Martinez was born in Zacatecas in 1929. He received a bracero contract at age 18. He stated that women and children worked with them in the fields. He was not married when he arrived in the U.S. for the first time and he recounted having a few girlfriends as a bracero. He eventually married an American woman.46

Juanita Parra was the child of a bracero and female Mexican national. Juanita, born in Mercedes, Texas, claimed that her mother had been migrating with the braceros before she met Juanita’s father. Her mother was deported for not having a husband, because she had left her abusive first husband. Eventually Juanita’s mother and father met and later married, having Juanita in 1955. According to Parra, her family traveled alongside the braceros, following the harvests through Arizona, California, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming.\footnote{Juanita Parra, Interview, Bracero History Archive, \url{http://braceroarchive.org}.}
CHAPTER 2

"WE LIVED HAPPILY BECAUSE WE WERE TOGETHER":

BRACERO CAMPS AND COMMUNITY

Bracero Camps and Housing

One of the most important elements of life in any bracero camp was housing. Sometimes decent, sometimes extremely poor, housing arrangements inevitably shaped the bracero experience. The different types of bracero camps comprise one significant kind of diversity within bracero life. Although the historiography has focused on one type of bracero camp, a variety of housing existed within the Bracero Program. Using oral histories and a 1961 sociological report by Henry Anderson, this section examines bracero housing in order to demonstrate that women and children were present primarily in small “family” style camps, rather than in large ones. As a result of this pattern, families have been largely overlooked in bracero history, since scholars have traditionally focused on the larger camps. This chapter fills an important gap in the extant historiography of the Bracero Program by reexamining the different styles of bracero camps and housing, and by focusing on the daily life of braceros and their families in small camps.

In 1961 Henry Anderson, a sociologist, published a report that examined the health of braceros in California. In order to gauge bracero health he had to examine their housing arrangements and the compliance and enforcement of the Standard Work Contract.¹ According to Anderson, there were four types of bracero camps in California, each differing in their compliance to the Standard Work Contract. The four styles of

¹Anderson, The Bracero Program in California, 68.
bracero camps consisted of association camps, corporation camps, fringe camps, and family camps. Anderson's definition of the four styles of housing has been adopted by historians. For example, Cohen cited Anderson, in stating that California had four kinds of labor camps: those owned by large growers, which were older and had often housed both immigrant and domestic workers; growers' association camps, which were relatively new or remodeled barracks housing more than one thousand workers each; fringe camp, which had previously been chicken sheds or storage; and family camps for growers with fewer than five workers. Although Cohen described the same four styles of bracero housing as Anderson, this sentence was one of the few references she made to family housing. Cohen only analyzed large-scale association and corporation camps. Indeed, it is understandable that historians have not discussed daily life in fringe and family camps, as less information exists on these types of camps.

Small scale bracero camps sit in a blind spot in the current scholarship. However, in 1961 Anderson was able to provide a limited amount of information regarding both large-scale association and corporation camps and the smaller fringe and family camps. For example he noted that employers with fewer than five braceros were exempt from the State Labor Camp Act, which regulated working conditions. This exemption partially explains why scant documentation of family and fringe camps exists. He also explained that family camps...

...are even more difficult to locate than the fringe camps. It might seem that since enforcement is at a minimum, compliance is at a minimum too. But from what little is known, it appears that such is not the case. Some rather basic characteristics of human nature serve in the capacity of enforcement agents, and at times seem to do a better job than federal and state inspectors. The man who

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2 Anderson, The Bracero Program in California, 66.
3 Anderson, The Bracero Program in California, quoted in Cohen, Braceros: Migrant Citizens, 118.
4 Anderson, The Bracero Program in California, 68.
hires only two or three braceros is a small operator. Unlike the corporation farmer, he himself usually gets out into the fields with the braceros who work for him. He knows them on a personal basis. It is difficult for a man to remain indifferent to the welfare of employees he sees every day, whose names he knows, and beside whom he works.\(^5\)

Anderson defined the fringe or “marginal” camp as follows:

It is relatively small. It is isolated, well away from public thoroughfares. It is often partially hidden in a thicket or willows or some other type of cover. It may consist of the flimsiest sorts of some other type of cover—perhaps nothing more than chicken coops. The man who operates a fringe camp is in many cases a speculative farmer: a man who leases land on a year-to-year basis, and grows ‘one shot’ crops such as melons from which he may make a great deal of money or may lose everything, depending on the state of the market when his crop is ready to pick.\(^6\)

Although it is more likely that women and children lived on family-camps, as the oral histories will demonstrate, it is also possible that women and children may have been present in fringe camps. However, from the data available, it is difficult to distinguish between the two types of camps in the sources. Therefore, even though the following section will argue that the majority of camps with women and children were family camps, it is still important to have an understanding of the fringe camp, as it too represents a difference from the more common model of the larger bracero camp, and a site where undocumented women and children were more likely to reside.

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\(^5\) Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California*, 68.

\(^6\) Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California*, 68.
The larger amount of documentation on large-scale camps does not mean that smaller family camps were not an important part of the Bracero Program. Family camps constituted a significant number of bracero camps in California. According to Anderson, other states were actually more likely to have family housing than California, because other states had a larger number of former family-style “wetback camps.” Since Anderson did not offer data on every state involved in the Bracero Program, examining California can provide a general idea of bracero housing.

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7 Anderson, The Bracero Program in California, 61.
Crop-Area-Activities Reporting Single Male and Family Housing, With Family Housing as Per Cent of Total, 1951, 1955, and 1960

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Crop-area-activities offering single male housing only</th>
<th>Crop-area-activities offering family housing</th>
<th>Family housing as per cent of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23-Jun-51</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>82.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-Apr-55</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>51.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-Mar-60</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 A reproduction of the table Anderson adapted and arranged using California Department of Employment, "Weekly Farm Labor Report."

Using data adapted from the California Department of Employment Anderson created the chart in Table 1. The table demonstrates that the Crop-area-activities, or farms, offering single male housing increased from eight to fifty-two between 1951 and 1960, while Crop-area-activities offering family housing during the same time period decreased from thirty-eight to nineteen, dropping from 82.6 percent to 26.7 percent of the total housing. Anderson used this information to emphasize the growth of the single male bracero camp. However, this data also demonstrates that in 1951, almost 10 years after the Bracero Program began, 82.6 percent of the California housing was family housing. Even in 1960, just four years before the program ended, there were nineteen camps offering family housing, which comprised 26.7 percent of total housing. These numbers are certainly significant, especially considering this was during the years of high bracero use in California.

The housing described by bracero families is important for two reasons. First, it establishes their presence on bracero camps. Second, their descriptions expose

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8 Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California*, 60.
differences between housing on family camps where women and children were likely to live and housing on all-male camps. The presence of women and children affected many different aspects of bracero daily life, setting the experiences of these smaller family camps apart from large-scale, all-male camps.

While Anderson’s report is immensely helpful in understanding bracero camps, it nonetheless has its limitations. Anderson’s work and other contemporary sociological reports cannot provide historians with detailed information about how braceros, women, and children experienced the housing. The Bracero History Archive contains oral testimonies from men, women, and children who lived and worked on these family camps. Based on their accounts of the bracero housing, it becomes clear that women and children were more likely to have been present in smaller family-style camps. Oral testimonies, like that of Juanita Parra, who lived and worked alongside the braceros as a child, allow this project to delve a little deeper into how women and children encountered housing during the bracero years.

Parra, as well as Margarita Flores, provide similar descriptions of family-style housing where they and their families lived and worked. According to Parra, the camps were made of multiple little huts or wooden houses, which were in poor condition. The small houses consisted of one bedroom, a kitchen, and a sofa. They slept on small cots and used an outhouse. Parra believed they all did the best they could to make the homes livable. Parra’s account of the housing situation where she, her mother, father, and siblings lived alongside braceros and other families echoes Anderson’s description of a family camp.

11 Juanita Parra. Interview, Bracero History Archive, Braceroarchive.org.
Similarly, Margarita Flores, who also lived in El Paso, Texas alongside braceros as a child, recounted that her family stayed in a small room with three small beds and one table with chairs. Unlike in the home of Parra, Flores’ living quarters contained an indoor toilet.¹² Both Parra’s and Flores’ description of housing echo the description Anderson made of family-style bracero camps. Thus, the oral testimonies suggest that the family camps described by Anderson were sometimes homes to Mexican families during the Bracero Program.

Further documenting her families’ presence on the bracero camp, Margarita Flores also provided the Bracero History Archive with a photographic collection, which contains images of her, her father, her mother, as well as other braceros on the Sparks Farm in El Paso, Texas. Figure 2 shows a young Margarita Flores and her father sitting together in a field on a bracero camp. Figure 3 displays her and her father standing outside of a house on the bracero camp, which was likely a family-style camp. The photographs of the Flores family are visually powerful evidence of their presence, which make the silence surrounding women and children on bracero camps particularly strange.

¹² Margarita Flores, Interview, Bracero History Archive, Braceroarchive.org.
Figure 2. Bracero Jesus Carrera and his daughter Margarita on a hacienda in Baja California, Bracero History Project, braceroarchive.org.

Figure 3. Jesús Carrera with Margarita. Bracero History Project, braceroarchive.org. They are standing in presumably bracero housing on the Quicks Ranch in Baja California.
Housing constitutes a common subject of oral history accounts and photographs in the Bracero History Project. The housing in which women and children lived with their bracero husbands and fathers was typically characterized as small and simple, consisting of one or two rooms, adorned with a few pieces of furniture. In these settlings, women and children were often present and their presence altered the bracero experience for bracero men, women, and children.

Community Continued and Alienation Eased

One of the main differences between all-male bracero camps and family camps was the experience of isolation. Braceros on homosocial camps experienced estrangement from their family and community. At the same time, the women and children left behind by braceros also experienced this feeling of loss and separation. However, the presence of women and children eased estrangement on family camps because community norms, including gender roles, could continue with less disruption.

Alienation constitutes a common subject in migration history, as it is frequently experienced by immigrants as they encounter unfamiliar languages, foods, customs, etc. in their host countries. Braceros certainly experienced estrangement during their time on homosocial camps in the U.S.¹³ Cohen explained the experience of bracero detachment, listing all of the aspects of life that braceros, removed from their families and communities, missed when living and working in the U.S.:

In the United States, braceros were 'separated...from families and friends,' 'isolated from American communities,' 'confronted with new foods not to their taste,' and forced to capitulate to demanding bosses 'known to exploit them.' In Mexico they were husbands, sons, and brothers; lived in families, units of men, women, and children, and often older relatives; socialized with friends, had sex

¹³ Cohen, Braceros: Migrant Citizens, 113-144.
with wives, courted girlfriends, and came and went as they saw fit. Each family member derived responsibilities and freedoms as a function of age and gender, and as part of that unit and in relation to its other members and community norms. Ideally, men worked outside the house and left domestic chores to women folk, a line that was not crossed. ¹⁴

As Cohen’s ethnographic work made clear, isolation from communal and familial norms—including gender expectations—produced bracero alienation and anxiety. ¹⁵

While Mexican men experienced disaffection during the Bracero Program, they were not the only ones impacted in this way. The separation of family members was a serious source of stress and anxiety for the women and children left behind by their bracero family members. Ana Rosas discussed the effects of family separation during the Bracero Program and how the wives and mothers who remained in Mexico dealt with such separation. Rosas argued that Mexican family dynamics were disturbed by the Bracero Program in many ways. First, for most braceros, it was the first time that these families experienced separation. ¹⁶ Second, married women left behind had to act as single mothers. ¹⁷ Many worked during the day, typically earning significantly lower wages than men, and returned home to care for their children. Sometimes the children even had to go to work due to the absence of their fathers. Children experienced particular distress during the periods of separation. After experiencing the sudden abandonment by one parent, they often feared their other parent would leave as well. ¹⁸ According to Rosas, information about braceros was often not passed on to children. The silence surrounding

their parents caused further anxiety for them. Some women lived as single mothers for up to five years while their husbands were gone; others never saw their husbands return as many braceros chose to abandon their families. Rosas focused on how women in Mexico created strategies for coping with “the Bracero Program’s dangerous erosion of fragile family relationships.” She argued that mothers and teachers handled the strains on the family caused by the Bracero Program by forming support networks.

While Cohen and Rosas discuss the distressing effects that separation during the Bracero Program had on Mexican men, women, and children, scholars have yet to explore the lives of families who participated in the Bracero Program, but did not separate. Rosas acknowledges these families, stating that “Facing the Bracero Program’s separation of their families under such terms, drove some mothers to pursue the dangerous path of undocumented immigration into the United States.” I have placed these families—families who chose to stay together during a time when the U.S. government strongly discouraged the Mexican families from migrating North across the border—at the center of this study.

Oral histories can provide insight into these families and their role in bracero camps, including one of the most fundamental ways that camps with families differed from all-male camps: the continuation of a familiar community. Cohen and Rosas both argued that Mexican families and communities were disrupted by the Bracero Program, and they were. However, some families chose to remain together. Cases where families

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migrated together, Mexican community norms, like those listed by Cohen, were more likely to be maintained.

The sentiment of the importance of keeping the family and community together was expressed in the oral histories as well. Margarita Flores stated that "the most important thing for my father was his family." She described how he had missed his wife Catalina and his daughter Margarita terribly during the period of his original contract. However, according to Flores, because her father's boss was a very just man he let Catalina and Margarita come to the ranch and offered the family a small home. Margarita commented that "we lived happily because we were together." A similar feeling was voiced by Ramona Acosta, who also stated that her family was happy because they were together. This sentiment immediately followed her description of how much her father missed his wife and daughter as a bracero *solito* (loner). Braceros and families who migrated together did not have to adjust to the separation. Braceros did not suffer from missing their families, and families did not suffer from missing their husbands and fathers.

The oral histories suggest that bracero life was less alienating because the presence of families created and continued community norms regarding labor, cooking, childrearing, and sex. Sexuality and vice, common themes in labor and immigration history, were certainly not absent from both the contemporary and recent works on the Bracero Program. While the earlier reports and scholarship sought to condemn sex and alcohol in bracero life, often exaggerating its pervasiveness, recent scholarship

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demonstrated that heavy alcohol consumption, prostitution, and homosexual acts did occur in some occasions.\textsuperscript{27}

Using the arguments of current scholars combined with examples from the oral histories, it becomes evident that actions viewed as vice were less likely to have transpired with the same frequency on family camps for two reasons. Unlike in the homosocial camps, braceros on family camps often had the companionship of their wives. Furthermore, the presence of families continued community norms, pressures, and morals, which discouraged partaking in prostitution and homosexuality.

Both contemporary and recent scholars have examined the issue of bracero sexuality and vice. Anderson, for example, dedicated a section of his report to “illegal and immoral influences” in the Bracero Program. He observed braceros drinking alcohol and keeping company prostitutes during their leisure time. He claimed that laws against vice were practically impossible to enforce, suggesting that “although some bracero camps are surrounded by high fences, and a few are even kept under guard, barbed wire and armed guards are no protection against ennui and loneliness.”\textsuperscript{28} By citing “ennui and loneliness” as contributing to prostitution, Anderson’s report suggests that separation from families, particularly wives, was to blame for braceros’ vice. He cited the following 1958 Congressional Committee testimony of Rev. James L. Vizzard, S.J. of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference:

\begin{quote}
Although the basic morality of the Mexican people is as good or even better than might commonly be found in this country, the circumstances in which they live and work here are obviously conducive to a breakdown of moral practices. I have heard many reports from priests and other church workers in many parts of the country of excessive drinking, high-stake gambling, drug addiction, and prostitution. I have for instance heard eye-witness reports of the signs tacked on
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{27} Cohen, \textit{Braceros: Migrant Citizens}; Loza, \textit{Braceros on the Boundaries}.

\textsuperscript{28} Anderson, \textit{The Bracero Program in California}, 167.
the barracks doors indicating the schedules and prices of the prostitutes who prey on the weaknesses of men separated from their homes and families.\(^29\)

Similarly, Anderson cited a local newspaper’s critique of bracero men, which stated that “the cleanup of Westmorland’s now ghost-like Fifth Street, which was the one neonlighted honky-tonk after another; prostitution, narcotics vending and gambling prospered on the wages of itinerant fieldworkers who, brought in from Mexico, were literally men without women.”\(^30\) Anderson, Rev. Vizzard, and the congressman believed that the existence of vice among braceros was caused by the distance from their families, with specific emphasis on their separation from wives and girlfriends.

While the tone of Anderson’s report seemed generally to express concern for the well-being of the braceros, others were concerned about the braceros’ effect on local communities. For example, in Daniel Martinez’s 1958 case study of the Bracero Program in Cucamonga, California, he argued that the Bracero Program negatively affected the labor conditions, standard of living, health, and job stability of the local Mexican American community. He focused one section of his writing on the particular way bracero vice corrupted the local community. According to Martinez,

In order to get a clear picture of conditions as they exist, the author visited all the bars in the community when the Braceros were making their weekend visits. All of them were filled to capacity, mainly with Braceros. In each saloon there were about ten women to encourage the Braceros to buy drinks, and also quarters for prostitution were made available by the proprietors.\(^31\)

It is likely that Martinez, a Mexican American, exaggerated the demoralizing effects of braceros on the local community, as many Mexican Americans disliked Mexican

\(^{29}\) Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California*, 162.

\(^{30}\) Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California*, 163.

\(^{31}\) Martinez, “The Impact of the Bracero Program on Southern California,” 56-57.
migrants, whom they saw as detriments to their own fight for equality. However, it seems clear from these sources that some braceros drank excessively and engaged in prostitution on occasion. Furthermore, these studies all claim that separation from families and communities as the underlying cause of bracero vice.

Cohen addressed the inhospitable sentiment expressed by Martinez and felt by others in the local communities. She argued that “the barrack’s homosociality aggravated suspicions about the men and their sexuality, further marking them as foreign and distinct from the local community.” Cohen’s argument that the local community mistrusted braceros for their abnormally gendered living quarters is legitimized by the excerpts from Anderson and Martinez. At the time, the homosociality of the camps caused an exaggerated fear of the immorality of the braceros. This feeling of fear was not unique to this situation. It paralleled the sentiment that nativists during the Chinese Exclusion era used to justify laws that excluded Chinese immigration based on the predominately male nature of Chinese migrant communities. Nativists believed Chinese men were morally suspicious, because they did not conform to white middle class notions of family and gender roles.

While depictions of braceros as sexual deviants corrupting local communities seems absurdly exaggerated, current scholarship does highlight changing bracero sexuality. For example, Mireya Loza examined the various ways the sexuality of some braceros shifted while separated from the pressures of their families, friends, and wider

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community expectations. She described how many braceros participated in extramarital affairs while away from their wives. In protected, all-male camps, far removed from the community norms of their Mexican hometowns, men faced less ostracism if they partook in such vices as heavy drinking, prostitution, and homosexual acts. According to Loza, shaded from the gaze of their families and communities, braceros could more easily engage in non-normative sexual acts such as prostitution and homosexuality. Loza's analysis of homosexuality is supported by other literature in labor history, such as Frank Tobias Higbie’s monograph, *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880-1930*. Higbie discussed the commonness of homosexuality in another group of all-male transient workers, suggesting that these practices became acceptable when men were removed from their communities, particularly women. Cohen, like Loza and Higbie, also argued that the male workers on homosocial camps were more likely to have shifting sexuality because they lacked societal pressures and spouses. According to their logic, braceros in smaller family camps, where community and family norms prevailed, had less opportunity to escape societal expectations.

The oral histories tend to focus more on the labor performed by braceros, women, and children; however, they also suggest that braceros who traveled with their families participated in less vice. According to Josie Carillo Johnson, families spent the whole day together. Those braceros whose wives and children were present in the camps had more pertinent patriarchal responsibilities. It was much more difficult to slip away and spend money on vices, like prostitution, when their children, whom they were responsible for

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36 Loza, *Braceros on the Boundaries*, 141.
38 Josie Carillo Johnson, Bracero Interview, Bracero History Archive, Braceroarchive.org.
feeding, lived in the same house. Since the role as father was an important part of Mexican masculinity, braceros with children present, had much more pressure to put their families first.

The presence of wives solved the threat to their masculinity for some braceros. The bracero oral histories demonstrate that bracero men whose wives accompanied them maintained their traditional roles as husbands and wives by being intimate, and by having children. As demonstrated in the testimonies of Juanita Parra, Ramona Acosta, and Josie Carrillo Johnson, all of whom had bracero fathers, bracero husbands and wives were having children while migrating with the Bracero Program. All of these women were born in the U.S., while their fathers were working in bracero camps. Their births, along with the births of their siblings, demonstrate that braceros with wives present maintained the traditional gendered expectations, both as husbands and fathers.

With families present, braceros suffered from fewer feelings of division and separation, as community expectations were better maintained. That is not to say however, that life was easy for the women and children who followed the braceros. For, while togetherness kept many families happier than they would have been if separated, women and children were still responsible for agricultural and domestic labor. Just as many women and children had to take on new roles when left behind in Mexico by their

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40 Although Josie Carrillo Johnson’s mother was Mexican American, rather than a Mexican national, her father was a bracero. Since she, her mother, and siblings traveled with the braceros, this case seemed pertinent. The relationship between braceros and Mexican American women is a complex and fascinating topic, which needs to be examined further in future research.
bracero husbands or father, families who migrated north also encountered new expanded roles and responsibilities in bracero camps, as they labored both in the fields and in the home.
CHAPTER 3

"MIGRATING WITH THE HARVEST": THE LABOR OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN BRACERO CAMPS

Agricultural Labor

I actually remember being in a little town called Paris, California. And there were lots and lots of families....Lots, even families. There were braceros, and then there were families... I know that the braceros were kind of in a group. But they would also allow the families to work. The families especially [were allowed] to work because they had lots of kids, so they were allowed to work.1

-Juanita Parra, Oral Interview, Bracero History Project

Juanita Parra’s interview for the Bracero History Project did not just describe her own family’s role in the Bracero Program. During her travels around the U.S, Parra encountered other families following their bracero relatives. Parra’s experiences indicate that not only did women and children accompany the braceros, but they actively worked alongside them in the fields.

It is particularly important to highlight how women and children worked next to braceros since scholarly studies of the Bracero Program have focused exclusively on the labor of men. Deborah Cohen, for example, described bracero camps and fields as “a predominantly all-male world,” centering her discussion of agricultural labor on the experiences of the male workers who lived in large-scale bracero camps.2 She structured her portrayal of labor around the fact that it was a homosocial environment, arguing that male relationships developed through homosocial living quarters and labor experiences.3

While Cohen’s image of bracero labor is valid, it does not address all bracero

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1 Juanita Parra, Interview, Bracero History Archive, Braceroarchive.org.
experiences. Scholars have described the early mornings and long days in the fields suffered by men in the Bracero Program, but they have neglected to depict the women and children who stood (and knelt) beside them.⁴

Focusing only on all-male, large-scale bracero camps distorts the reality of agricultural labor by making it appear much more organized and homogenous than it was in reality. The presence of families points to an important, and often overlooked, aspect of the Bracero Program—its “messiness. The stories of women and children who were present in bracero camps demonstrate that the Bracero Program was much messier than either the U.S. or Mexican governments would admit, since an explicit goal of the Bracero Program was to deter illegal immigration from Mexico to the U.S. and to prevent permanent settlement by Mexican migrant laborers. For this reason, the Bracero Program offered temporary contracts that required braceros to return to Mexico when their contract expired. Similarly, the program excluded women from bracero labor contracts, as there was a fear that the presence of women and children would encourage Mexican migrants to permanently settle in the north.⁵

The oral histories explored in this chapter help deconstruct the myth that the largest guestworker program in U.S. history was a cleanly managed program of migration and labor. Up until the creation of the Bracero History Project, sources on bracero families have been extremely scarce. Fortunately, the oral histories provide valuable insight into the role of women and children’s labor during the bracero years. This section

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uses oral histories not only to further demonstrate the presence of families in bracero camps, but also to provide a more complex history of bracero labor, one that was not always homosocial.

Juanita Parra, daughter of a bracero and a Mexican national, best articulated the details of this widespread female labor experience in her oral interview. She began by stating, “My father and mother were involved in agriculture. I know that at that time, my father must have been involved with the Bracero Program.” Her family, consisting of her mother, father, aunt, uncle, and siblings, all migrated alongside other braceros. She stated that “because they were so close, they travelled together as a family. And [we went] wherever the harvest was or wherever the braceros were taken, we were migrating with harvest.” Parra recounted the various states in which her family worked after she was born in 1955, which included Arizona, California, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming. Bracero families like the Parra family traveled through and worked in the various geographic regions that participated in the Bracero Program. The geographic diversity expressed through this oral history further elucidates that women and children were present on bracero camps in more than one or two states.

Juanita Parra did more than just migrate across the country with the braceros. When she was old enough, she also worked beside her parents picking crops, such as strawberries, pecans, and walnuts. She recalled the difficulties of the labor, stating “I remember how physically hard it was, waking up at 3 or 4 in the morning… It was hardship.” She even indicated that she has had recurring sinus problems throughout her

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6 Juanita Parra, Interview, Bracero History Archive, Braceroarchive.org.
7 Juanita Parra, Interview, Bracero History Archive, Braceroarchive.org.
8 Juanita Parra, Interview, Bracero History Archive, Braceroarchive.org.
life due to the chemicals used to burn weeds in the fields. Like her bracero father, Parra, her mother, and her family worked hard and often in these dangerous environments.

In her interview, Josie Carrillo Johnson, the daughter of a bracero and Mexican American women, also described her role in bracero agricultural labor. She stated that she and her family would wake up when it was still dark in order to get as much done before the hot sun set in. She and the other laborers would be loaded into a truck to be driven to the fields. At the early age of five, Josie Carrillo Johnson went to work in the fields with her mother and bracero father. At age five her task was to bring water to the braceros. When she was older, and physically stronger, she helped her family pick and top onions. She explained the process of topping onions, which involved pulling them from the ground and then taking shears to clip the top off of them. Her family was paid 10 cents per pound. According to Johnson, her mother kept written records of how much they would pick each day. Josie Carrillo Johnson’s account demonstrates that when present, both women and children had important roles in bracero labor, including providing water, harvesting crops, and keeping records of the family’s work.

There are multiple other accounts of braceros and their family members that remember women and children working in the fields during the Bracero Program. Some of the testimonies mentioned this participation in agricultural labor in passing. For example, Francisco Casas Martinez, a bracero who worked in Arizona and California, recalled their presence, stating that everyone worked in the fields, including women and children. Casas Martinez observed women cutting lettuce and strawberries as well as

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9 Juanita Parra, Interview, Bracero History Archive, Braceroarchive.org.

11 Josie Carrillo Johnson, Interview, Bracero History Archive, Braceroarchive.org.
pruning and cleaning the crops. While Casas Martinez did not provide a particularly detailed account of women and children’s role in agricultural labor, his memories suggest the regular participation of women and children in agricultural work alongside men. His casual mention of family labor indicates that in his experience as a bracero it was not unusual to work beside women and children.

Similarly, the testimony of Ramona Acosta, the daughter of Mexican nationals, provides further evidence of women and children’s presence in the field. Acosta described how even though her mother remained at home, as a teenager she worked with the braceros and other women in the fields, picking and packaging fruits and vegetables. She claimed that she was not the only woman working in the fields, but rather there were many.

These descriptions of women and children’s experiences in agricultural labor mirror the experiences of the braceros depicted in secondary literature. While marginalized in the historical scholarship on the Bracero Program, Parra and other oral histories show that women and children frequently worked in the same environment and in the same difficult conditions as their bracero husbands, fathers, and brothers.

These testimonies reveal a number of patterns regarding female and child agricultural labor. First, it is evident that many women worked the same long hours as the braceros, waking as early as early as 3 or 4 in the morning. Second, women and children were often subject to the same dangerous working conditions as braceros. Third, women and children’s main task in the fields appears to have been picking, cutting, and packing fruits and vegetables. There was, however, one main difference: women were not only

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responsible for laboring in the fields, but they were also tasked with laboring in the home. While women and children labored alongside their male family members in the fields, men did not typically labor in the home alongside their wives and daughters. Laboring in the fields during the Bracero Program signified a change for many women and children. Traditionally, Mexican women would work in the home and men work outside them home.

Domestic Labor

Domestic labor in the Bracero Program is not a new topic. Cohen discussed domestic labor of migrant men, while using it to argue that life in the U.S. for braceros "was all about crossing lines, physical and imaginary." She argued that braceros not only crossed the political border, but they also crossed the borders of gender norms. Back in Mexico, cooking and cleaning were considered solely “women’s work.” Men were expected to labor outside of the home, while women were expected to labor inside of it. Braceros knew that like in Mexico, “food needed to be prepared, dirty pants washed, and ripped shirts sewn.” However, unlike in Mexico, there were no women to do these tasks on homosocial camps. Thus, workers on all-male camps faced the burden of domestic labor for the first time in their lives. Cohen describes this first encounter with domestic labor: “For braceros more generally the same-sex environment of their living spaces provoked anxiety about themselves as properly gendered beings, and its location outside Mexico saddled seemingly mundane decisions with new weight, rousing questions over

14 Cohen, “From Peasant to Worker,” 94.
15 Cohen, “From Peasant to Worker,” 88.
16 Cohen, “From Peasant to Worker,” 94.
ties of belonging.” While Cohen described the anxieties caused by domestic responsibilities on homosocial camps, this section explores how having families present on the camps lessened the braceros’ domestic labor-related anxieties and responsibilities. The presence of women and children lessened these anxieties in two main ways. For one, women were expected to maintain their traditional responsibilities for domestic labor—tasks such as laundry, cleaning, and childcare remained within their purview. Thus, braceros at these camps did not suffer the same affront to their masculinity as those who lived on homosocial camps. Second, since Mexican women were more likely to cook traditional Mexican meals, braceros were able to eat food they were accustomed to rather than unfamiliar American food. Thus, while women’s cleaning and childcare allowed men to maintain traditional understanding of Mexican masculinity, women’s cooking allowed them to sustain other parts of Mexican identity and culture. Less domestic labor anxieties for men, however, often meant expanded responsibilities for women.

Homemaking and Childcare

Braceros on homosocial camps encountered a number of new and unfamiliar domestic chores. One common domestic task that braceros encountered for the first time was laundry. Since laundry was considered strictly women’s work back in Mexico, performing this type of labor constantly challenged a bracero’s masculinity. According to Deborah Cohen, braceros in homosocial environments had two choices for their laundry: do their own or pay local women to do it. Cohen argued that both options threatened the bracero’s masculinity because

17 Cohen, “From Peasant to Worker,” 89.
18 Cohen, Braceros: Migrant Citizens, 128.
On the one hand, not paying for laundry service demonstrated the prioritization of family needs over this migrant's own, for in saving money he could send more to his family and, thus, more quickly reclaim his title as household patriarch. On the other, his claim to proper masculinity was in part undone by doing the women's work that washing clothes supposedly was; this could be righted only when he had access to women's labor and reestablished the proper gendered boundaries of domestic responsibilities.¹⁹

Although many braceros found it emasculating, many, like the unknown bracero seen in a photo collected by the Bracero History Project, decided to place the financial needs of their families above their sense of manhood and save money by doing their own laundry.²⁰ (See Figure 4) However, if braceros chose to maintain traditional domestic roles or felt too exhausted by long days in the fields they would pay local laundresses, often African American women, who came to bracero camps once a week. As Cohen argued, this option did not perfectly preserve gender roles either. Thus, laundry on homosocial camps posed a regular threat to the masculinity of the braceros.²¹

Figure 4 Bracero does his laundry in a bathroom at a California Camp. Bracero History Project, braceroarchive.org.

²⁰ Cohen, *Braceros Migrant Citizens* 128.
However, in her discussion of domestic labor in bracero camps, Mireya Loza highlighted that the exposure to domestic chores created an opportunity for bracero men to adapt to these types of labor and begin to empathize and understand the value of women’s domestic contributions. She gave the example of one bracero, Feliz Flores, who washed his own clothes and cooked his own meals. Loza argued that while most braceros had difficulty transgressing gender roles “Flores felt that every man had to learn how to do it to understand the ‘friega’ (‘troubles’) that their wives went through.”²²

Since Loza and Cohen both focused their works on homosocial camps, it is understandable that they would discuss domestic labor as a source of anxiety for braceros. However, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, women and children were often present on small family-style camps. When present, they were responsible for the laundry and other chores, such as cleaning and childcare, thus eliminating this particular threat to the braceros’ masculinity related to domestic labor.

Domestic responsibilities on bracero camps in which women were present caused many women to work a “double day.” They would do wage work in the fields during the day and come home to their domestic responsibilities in the evening.²³ The double day felt abnormal to Mexican men on homosocial camps, as they were not accustomed to domestic labor. For example, Cohen cited Andres Morales, a former bracero who picked cotton in Mississippi, as stating, “I wanted to save money, [so] in the beginning I washed my own clothes....But it was hard work, and after working all day, I didn’t want to do it. So I had a woman wash my clothes....it was worth it.”²⁴ While braceros disliked and

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²² Loza, Braceros on the Boundaries, 81.
²⁴ Cohen, Braceros: Migrant Citizens, 128.
avoided working the double day, it was considered the norm for the female migrant workers. Examples of this can be seen in Elizabeth Loza Newby’s autobiography. Loza Newby, the daughter of a bracero, described how her family traveled and lived in an army surplus truck. She stated that she and her mother were responsible for cooking, cleaning, and childcare. Many of her comments on this issue were in the background of her narrative. For example, when describing how the truck functioned as her family’s house for thirteen years, she stated, “As I grew older, I helped my mother keep the truck spotlessly clean.” Later, she made another casual mention of her domestic labor as she began an anecdote about her father coming home, saying that “One late summer afternoon, as I was hanging some laundry out to dry, I saw a car fast approaching our truck home…” These passing statements are actually quite telling of gendered everyday domestic responsibilities on bracero camps. As the woman of the household, her mother was responsible for cleaning and Loza Newby, as the only daughter, was expected to help as well.

Loza Newby further discussed her and her mother’s responsibilities and their experiences with the double day in the following passage:

...and since, I was the only girl in the family, a great deal of work was expected of me. For examples, I was supposed to take care of my younger brothers and also to do all of the house work and preparation of meals, while the rest of them worked in the fields. Because I hated to see Mom go to work in the fields all day, I tried to make life as easy for her at home as I possibly could. Always I arose early, started the fire and cooked breakfast before anyone else was awake. Trying to keep up with my work at school, in addition to all that was expected of me at home, became a serious struggle.

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25 Loza Newby, A Migrant with Hope, 18. The title of the autobiography in Spanish is Bracera con esperanza. Her father began migrating in 1942. Thus, this paper assumes that her father was a bracero.
26 Loza Newby, A Migrant with Hope, 26.
27 Loza Newby, A Migrant with Hope, 25.
Here Loza Newby detailed a number of different domestic tasks that composed a large part of both her and her mothers’ lives. She was also responsible for her two younger brothers while her parents were working in the fields. The fact that both of her parents labored in the fields during the day is important, because it is a further example of how women, when present on bracero camps, worked beside the men in fields during the day and handled domestic responsibilities at night. Since Loza Newby disliked seeing her mother doubly burdened with agricultural and domestic labor, she tried to do as much of the domestic work as possible.

Loza Newby’s mention of her role in childcare is critical, as women were responsible for caring for the children on the camps. Childcare constituted a significant difference between homosocial camps and family camps, because the one domestic chore that braceros on all-male camps never encountered was that of childcare. Childcare was only an issue on camps with women, since without women children of braceros were not present. However, on family camps someone had to care for the children, and that responsibility belonged to women.

Women on bracero family camps often combined childcare with agricultural labor. Jose Leyva, a Mexican American born in Phoenix, lived on a camp with braceros, Mexican American migrant workers, and African American migrant workers. He stated that some migrant workers had documents (the braceros) and some did not. Leyva recalled that when women were not cooking, they worked in the fields with braceros and often they took their children with them.28 Leyva’s observations of families on bracero camps demonstrate the assumption that women were responsible for the children and that

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28 Jose Leyva. *Interview*, Bracero History Archive, Braceroarchive.org.
they negotiated these responsibilities around other duties such as cooking, cleaning, and field work.

Since Mexican culture expected men to be fathers, the presence of the children on bracero camps may have further eased the offence to bracero manhood. As on many cultures, Mexican men’s sense of masculinity was linked to their positions as fathers and providers. Manhood was characterized by "being a head of a household that included a wife, children, extended family, and often unrelated members." Thus, men on homosocial camps suffered from not being able to fulfill their fatherly duties. However, the presence of children on family camps allowed bracero fathers to satisfy their patriarchal responsibilities.

All of the previous examples of domestic labor further complicate the image of the Bracero Program by demonstrating that not all braceros were responsible for their own domestic chores. Only those braceros on all-male camps experienced this shift in gender roles. Braceros who had women completing the domestic labor did not experience the same shock to their societal norms as those living in a homosocial environment.

According to both the oral histories and the autobiography of Elizabeth Loza Newby, women and female children handled cleaning and childcare on family camps. The presence of women seemed to have made the bracero experience less alienating for Mexican men by helping to preserve traditional roles associated with their manhood.

The Role of Food

While the bracero experience for Mexican men on family camps was less alienating because men were not confronted with domestic labor, braceros also benefited

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from the presence of women because their wives and daughters maintained the gendered responsibility of cooking and women cooked familiar and comforting Mexican meals.

Braceros' distaste for American food was such a strong source of alienation that it often led to malnourishment on camps where only American food was available.\textsuperscript{30} Thus, of the various domestic tasks on a bracero camp that demanded completion, food preparation was perhaps the most important. The type of food available on a camp often depended on the presence of women. Family camps with Mexican women were more likely to maintain traditional Mexican dietary customs, which was significant because the differences between American and Mexican food was often a source of discomfort and anxiety for the braceros.\textsuperscript{31} Through cooking, Mexican women created an environment for the braceros that was less foreign, and thus less isolating and alienating than all-male bracero camps.

Understanding the role of food on the bracero experience is not only important because it was a basic and universal element of daily life, but it was also a significant component of the Bracero Agreement itself. Article 12 of the Standard Work Contract stated that, “The Mexican Worker, within one week after his arrival at the place of employment, shall decide whether he wishes to obtain his meals at the restaurant of the Employer, when the Employer maintains that facility, or whether he desires to prepare his own meals.”\textsuperscript{32} The Standard Work Contract also guaranteed that employers would provide braceros with meals “on the same basis as he provides such facilities to domestic workers.”\textsuperscript{33} If the employers did not have restaurant facilities then they were responsible

\textsuperscript{30} Anderson, \textit{The Bracero Program in California}, 94-96.
\textsuperscript{31} Cohen, “From Peasant to Worker,” 93.
\textsuperscript{32} Quoted in Anderson, \textit{The Bracero Program in California}, 80.
\textsuperscript{33} Anderson, \textit{The Bracero Program in California}, 80.
for supplying "necessary cooking utensils and facilities, including fuel ready for use for cooking purposes," for those braceros wishing to cook their own meals.34

While the Bracero Agreement technically gave braceros a choice of how to obtain their meals, employers typically discouraged them from cooking for themselves.

According to sociologist Henry Anderson’s 1961 report on bracero health in California, "The braceros in California who prepare their own meals are limited to a handful working for small growers. Braceros cooking for themselves probably do not constitute more than 1% or 2% of all those in the state."35 Figure 5 is an image of braceros being served meals in one of these large California mess halls. These mess halls were operated by the employer, by a commissary company, or by concession to a labor contractor.36 In these scenarios, the braceros often complained of disliking the food. According to Anderson, Persons were given positions of authority in the bracero program who spoke no Spanish, who knew nothing of Mexico or Mexican customs, likes or dislikes. The pioneering contract workers of those days were apparently fed a typical American diet. The authorities were nonplussed when the food often went uneaten. They could only attribute the braceros apparent lack of appetite to homesickness—or perversity.37

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34 Anderson, The Bracero Program in California, 80.
35 Anderson, The Bracero Program in California, 81.
36 Anderson, The Bracero Program in California, 85.
37 Anderson, The Bracero Program in California, 95.
Mexican cultural preferences made it difficult for the braceros to eat the American food they were served for all three meals of the day. Braceros were used to eating a light breakfast, consisting of "coffee and pan dulce (sweet bread)."\textsuperscript{38} However, according to data gathered by Anderson, on "association camps in which the breakfast menus included dry cereals, pancakes, scrambled eggs, and other standard American items...These things are ignored by many of the men."\textsuperscript{39} In Mexico eggs were typically eaten raw or ranchero style and cereal was "cooked, heavily sweetened, and flavored with cinnamon."\textsuperscript{40} These differences in taste were problematic because it sent braceros to labor in the fields without proper nourishment.

\textsuperscript{38} Anderson, \textit{The Bracero Program in California}, 96.
\textsuperscript{39} Anderson, \textit{The Bracero Program in California}, 96.
\textsuperscript{40} Anderson, \textit{The Bracero Program in California}, 96.
According to Anderson, lunch was often another source of discomfort for the braceros. On many large California camps, employers gave braceros bagged lunches that included orangeade and two bologna sandwiches (See figure 6). Because of their distaste for bologna sandwiches the braceros would often not eat their lunches either, again leaving them malnourished.41 Braceros interviewed by Cohen remembered disliking yellow American cheese and lunchmeat on white bread. Braceros faced difficulties at dinner as well, for they found that American pasta and rice lacked flavor. Both Anderson and Cohen’s interviews demonstrate that braceros preferred the staples of the Mexican diet: beans, chiles, and tortillas.42

Figure 6 Braceros sit down and have bagged lunch on the edge of a field in California, Bracero History Project, braceroarchive.org.

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41 The Bracero Program in California, 95.
It is evident that cultural preferences made braceros averse to the food provided by employers. However, the braceros that were responsible for their own meals did not necessarily fare much better. While braceros cooking for themselves were not common in California, Anderson stated that "In several other states, the situation is just the reverse. In parts of Texas, for example, most bracero camps are former ‘wetback’ camps, with a minimum of facilities. Growers in these areas are not accustomed to feeding their workers. The bulk of men, therefore, board themselves." Just because these braceros cooked for themselves did not automatically mean that they would be eating like they did back home in Mexico. As Anderson colorfully pointed out in the following passage, braceros, as men, were not familiar with doing this type of domestic labor:

A further argument against braceros cooking for themselves is that most are unqualified to do so. In the United States, many men take pride in their culinary talent, even if it is limited to steaks or salads. In Mexico, there are no such 'male specialties.' Cooking is women’s work. Unless he has had a very unusual background, the average bracero is quite unprepared to purchase the foodstuffs his diet requires, or to prepare them in a palatable and nutritious manner. What Anderson was referring to in this paragraph was the gendered differences surrounding food in most cultures. As Hasia Diner explained in her book *Hungering for American: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration*, "Food is also modified by gender...Women and men usually had different roles to perform when it came to getting and making food." In the case of Mexicans during the mid-twentieth

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44 Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California*, 82.
century, as was the case in many U.S homes, cooking was strictly considered female work.⁴⁶

However, as with other domestic labor, the homosocial environment in which the braceros lived caused a shift in gender roles regarding food, since some men did take on the role of food preparation. Cohen argued that shopping for and preparing food was a source of anxiety not only because the food was strange, but also because performing these domestic tasks threatened their masculinity. She argued that braceros who cooked for themselves represented a significant change in gender roles between the heteronormative Mexican homes and homosocial bracero camps.⁴⁷

Accordingly, because of their lack of experience with cooking and grocery shopping, braceros encountered many difficulties as they attempted to take on this traditionally feminine task for the first time (See figure 7). Anderson noted that “the few camps where braceros cook for themselves suggests that when thrown upon their own resources, braceros tend to lean heavily toward such foods as soda crackers, canned sardines, cinnamon rolls, canned beans, and soda pop.”⁴⁸ Their lack of experience with purchasing and preparing constituted another reason why many braceros lacked proper nourishment.

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⁴⁷ Cohen, “From Peasant to Worker,” 87.

⁴⁸ Anderson, The Bracero Program in California, 82.
Cohen suggested that braceros not only found cooking difficult, but also met complications with grocery shopping. She illuminated their struggles with this chore using an anecdote told by former bracero, Federico Garciniego. Garciniego recounted how he and other braceros had to do their own cooking and shopping, so they would go to the store every Sunday, their day off. He and his fellow braceros did not speak or read English very well. He described how

we saw these cans of what looked like meat...So we figured, okay we’ll buy them...The meat wasn’t great, but...on tortillas, with beans, it was okay. So the following week, we bought them again. We ate that meat...until one man—he had been there for a while and he could read some English—he asked if we knew what we had bought. We said, ‘no, not exactly,’ but that it was some sort of meat. So he told us....We had been eating dog food. It wasn’t bad, but we didn’t buy it anymore.49

49 Cohen, Braceros: Migrant Citizens, 125-126.

Figure 7 Braceros prepare their own meals in a camp near McAllen, Texas. Bracero History Project, braceroarchive.org.
This story reveals the distress and confusion experienced by braceros when they became responsible for their own food provisioning and preparation, not only for the first time, but in a place with strange foods and where they did not speak and read English.

Whether they cooked it for themselves or it was served to them in a mess hall, it is clear that braceros generally disliked the food they encountered in the U.S. This most likely contributed to the braceros' feelings of anxiety and isolation. According to Hasia Diner, "Migrants, as they settle down in the new places, regardless of how long they plan to stay in their new homes, attempt to recreate familiar foods. They find ways to prepare them, cooperating with each other to make them available on a community basis." The presence of women on bracero camps made this venture of recreating familiar food more successful. Familiar food helped maintain a sense of comfort and security by recreating the foods of these migrants' homeland.

Evidence of Mexican women cooking for braceros appears in Anderson's report, Loza Newby's autobiography, and the oral histories. Anderson briefly mentioned women, claiming that, "In a few camps, Mexican women who are in the United States on visas are employed to supervise the cooking in bracero camps." Although he stated that these women were on the camps legally on visas, this was a rare occurrence as the U.S. made it extremely difficult for women to migrate legally during the Bracero Program. The women who arrived with visas constitute yet another aspect of the Bracero Program yet to be explored, and serve to demonstrate another complicated aspect of the Bracero Program. Regardless of their purported legal status, it is important to note that female

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51 Anderson, *The Bracero Program in California*, 100.
Mexican nationals were documented by Anderson as having been present on the bracero camps and responsible for the food.

Elizabeth Loza Newby also discussed her role in food purchasing and preparation. Beginning another anecdote, Loza Newby wrote, “When I was sent to the store to buy a sack of flour...” Although once again just a passing comment, it is still important in demonstrating the pervasiveness of domestic chores, such as grocery shopping, in the lives of Loza Newby and other female migrants. She also stated, “Always I arose early, started the fire and cooked breakfast before anyone else was awake,” when describing her responsibilities. According to Loza Newby, as the oldest female child, she was responsible for grocery shopping and cooking for her bracero family.

The oral histories provide more detail concerning the relationship between women and food on family camps. For example, Juanita Parra fondly discussed her memories of food on the bracero camps. She recounted, “There’s nothing like eating a tomato fresh of the vine...a peeled broccoli...mother fed us everything we worked in. We ate that, we fed ourselves with that.” Parra, like many braceros, ate the fruit and vegetables from the fields in which they worked. Other than these fruits and vegetables, she, her family, and the rest of the braceros were fed by her aunt, her mother’s sister. Parra’s aunt and uncle, both Mexican nationals, were responsible for feeding the braceros, who ate three times a day: in the morning, at noon, and in the evening. According to Parra, “the braceros were fed by the rancher. That’s how her tios (aunt and uncle) became the people who were

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feeding the braceros.”  

She explained that “Because of [her uncle’s] background in business, he knew how to work that.”  

Then she stated that her aunt became the cook, but her uncle cooked sometimes as well. Parra did not clarify whether her uncle was a bracero or contractor, but it is likely that he was a contractor. In Parra’s experience, the food was paid for by the rancher, but cooked by Parra’s aunt. Parra also remembered seeing “homes and a cafeteria unit” on the camp. She would visit the camp and see her aunt making tortillas for the braceros. She stated that “my tía, just like her mom was a great cook.”  

She recounted smelling the food, and seeing the braceros come in for the food. Parra, who was also fed the same food by her aunt and uncle, remembered that her tios “would feed [the braceros] very well.”

Margarita Flores also recounted the role her mother had in feeding the braceros. Flores’ mother prepared food for her father and other braceros, including burritos for lunch. Thus, on the Sparks Farm in El Paso, Texas, the braceros did not have to suffer through the adjustment to white bread and lunch meat. Rather, Catalina Flores, seen in Figure 8, was able to provide them with a familiar, and thus comforting, meal of burritos.

\[57\] Juanita Parra, Interview, Bracero History Archive, Braceroarchive.org.
\[58\] Juanita Parra, Interview, Bracero History Archive, Braceroarchive.org.
\[59\] Juanita Parra, Interview, Bracero History Archive, Braceroarchive.org.
\[60\] Margarita Flores, Interview, Bracero History Archive, Braceroarchive.org.
Food also played a prominent role in the memories of Josie Carillo Johnson, who was the daughter of a bracero and a Mexican American woman. Although she and her mother were not Mexican nationals, her father was. Carillo Johnson provides one example of the way all-male Bracero Programs sometimes created families made up of members with different citizenship status. She recounted that her entire family would migrate with braceros. Her mother was responsible for feeding her bracero father and siblings. Carrillo Johnson remembered that

My mother fed us well. I mean we ate beans and potatoes, and that was it. Our diet was beans, and potatoes, and we'd get a little chile on the side and that's what we ate...rice, beans, and potatoes, fresh tortillas every day. I do remember we ate okay. My mother made sure she provided...Everything she made, she made
stretch, you know, she had seven kids. That was one thing...we were never left...as long as my mother was there, we had plenty of food.61

It appears that in Josie Carrillo Johnson’s situation, her mother fed only her bracero husband and their children, not other braceros. While her mother’s food did not reach all of the braceros, it most likely served as a comfort to her bracero husband, as he did not have to trouble with eating unfamiliar foods served in a mess hall. And according to Carrillo Johnson’s account, her family cooked traditional Mexican foods such as rice, beans, chile, and tortillas.

The reflections of Carrillo Johnson, like those of Flores, Para, and Newby, all show the ways in which women affected the food and mealtime experiences on family-style bracero camps. In that way the bracero Carrillo was like other braceros whose wives lived with them on family-style bracero camps. Since the presence of Carrillo’s mother, like other Mexican women, allowed for the familiar tortilla at lunch rather than the distasteful white bread. Considering Anderson’s detailed accounts of how their aversion to American foods often left braceros malnourished, the role of women in certain bracero camps is particularly significant. Women in bracero camps eased bracero anxieties regarding food by both maintaining traditional gendered role of cooking and cooking familiar, Mexican foods.

By examining women’s domestic labor including cooking, cleaning, and childcare, it becomes clear that they had a profound impact on bracero daily life. While braceros on all-male camps endured their first encounters with doing their own laundry and purchasing their own foods, braceros on family camps were able to pass these responsibilities to their wives and daughters. The domestic labor performed by braceros

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61 Josie Carrillo Johnson, Interview, Bracero History Archive, Braceroarchive.org.
on homosocial camps served as a source of anxiety as it threatened their masculinity. However, braceros on family camps did not suffer the emasculation associated with doing their own washing and cooking. Rather, these braceros were able to preserve their masculinity by adhering to gender specific understandings of labor and, on camps with children, perform their role as fathers and patriarchs. Similarly, women staved off bracero discomfort, related to unfamiliar foods, by cooking them traditional Mexican meals. In both of these ways, the presence of women caused bracero life on family camps to differ from all-male camps by making their experiences less alienating.

However, the presence of women on bracero camps signified the transfer of the “double day” from the braceros to the women. Women in bracero camps were saddled with the duel domestic and agricultural responsibilities. Not only did they labor in the fields all day, picking and packing fruits in harsh conditions, but they also returned home to care for their children, clean their home, do the family’s laundry, and cook.

Examining the various ways women and children participated in labor on bracero camps elucidates the flaws in the Bracero Program. The previous excerpts from the oral histories show that the program failed in preventing the illegal immigration of women and children alongside bracero family members. Contrary to most depictions, the bracero experience was not a homogenous one. The history of the Bracero Program was diverse and heterogeneous, consisting of large-scale, small scale, all-male, and family camps. It is clear that the presence of women and children on bracero camps made the guestworker program messier than the U.S. and Mexican governments acknowledged.
CHAPTER 4
CONCLUSION

For some time I had been both bothered and intrigued by the fleeting mention of women and children in the historiography of the Bracero Program. Thus, when I began this project, I simply wanted to find some evidence of these undocumented migrants on bracero camps. Using the oral histories collected by the Bracero History Project, I was gradually able to uncover the presence of women and children in the Bracero Program. The oral histories captured the stories of voices, previously silenced. Many, if not most of these women and children were poor, undocumented, transient, and many were illiterate, thus, making the collection and use of traditional sources almost impossible. For this reason, there remains a gap in the historiography. I sought to begin filling this gap with my research.

As I started detecting patterns in the sources, I narrowed my research to answer the question of how daily life on bracero camps with women and children differed from daily life on all-male bracero camps, particularly concerning gender, sexuality, and labor. I combined the oral histories with the autobiography of Elizabeth Loza Newby and the 1961 sociological report of Henry Anderson. Juxtaposing my findings with the existing scholarship on homosocial bracero camps, I demonstrated that all members of a bracero family experienced less alienation than those families separated during the Bracero Program.

The second chapter presented basic evidence of the presence of women and children on bracero camps through examining housing and community. By comparing the
oral testimonies to the descriptions of different types of bracero camps, I suggested that women and children were more likely to be present on small family-style camps, rather than the large-scale, barrack style camps typically associated with bracero housing. Because scholars have tended to focus on these large-scale, barrack style camps, the presence of women and children has been largely overlooked. By highlighting the differences in bracero housing, I was able to support the overarching argument that the bracero experience was much more diverse than originally believed.

The second section of this chapter explored how community, including gender roles and sexuality, varied in the different types of bracero camps. While braceros on homosocial camps experienced disaffection because of the separation from community norms, braceros, women and children on family camps experienced less estrangement because they were better able to maintain community and familial expectations. For example, braceros were less likely to partake in vice if their families were present, because they experienced less isolation and more societal pressures. Rosas, Cohen, Loza had previously demonstrated the ways that all members of bracero families experienced anxiety caused by familial separation. However, the oral histories suggested that the bracero families who migrated expressed contentment that they were together.

While bracero families may have been happier living together, life was hardly easy for families in bracero camps. The third chapter examined labor patterns of women and children. I argued that while the presence of women made it less alienating for braceros because they maintained their traditional roles in domestic labor, women and children also worked in the fields alongside the braceros. Using the oral testimonies, I highlighted the agricultural duties performed by women and children, which typically
included picking and packing fruits and vegetables. While women worked in the fields during the day, they returned home in the evenings to cook, clean, and care for the children. Their role in cooking also made the bracero experience less alienating because Mexican women were more likely to cook comforting, traditional Mexican meals. This differed from the unfamiliar American meals served on homosocial camps.

The information on bracero women and children presented in these two chapters allowed me to argue that the Bracero Program was much messier than either the U.S. or Mexican governments admitted. The presence of undocumented families demonstrates that the Bracero Program was not a cleanly managed system of controlling Mexican labor and migration. These two chapters also revealed that individual bracero experiences cannot be treated as fixed or uniform. Not all braceros worked on large-scale, barrack style camps, nor did they all live on homosocial environments. Rather, the experiences of braceros were diverse.

While this thesis focused on the way that women and children affected the bracero experience for all members of the family, there are likely many other avenues for exploring the diversity within the Bracero Program. The abundance of information available due to the Bracero History Project allows for further research regarding all aspects of the Bracero Program. For instance, examining the way braceros interacted with Mexican American women would be a viable topic for related future research. Similarly, there are a number of oral histories from women who performed clerical work at Bracero Processing Centers on the border. There are numerous projects that have the potential to demonstrate both the messiness and the diversity of the Bracero Program.
Because of the richness of the oral history archive provided by Bracero History Project, I was able to uncover the lost voices of the women and children who migrated alongside the braceros. I argued that there was indeed a presence of women and children in bracero camps and that the presence of these women and children alleviated what was an alienating and isolating experience for bracero men, women, and children. On homosocial camps, braceros encountered challenges to their masculinity as they confronted domestic labor for the first time. However, because, when present, women labored in both the fields and the home, braceros were able to maintain traditional gender roles. Similarly, women and children experienced less anxiety because they did not have to endure separation from their husbands and fathers, like those bracero families who were left behind in Mexico. The presence of families on bracero camps made the bracero experience less distressing by creating an environment in which the norms of Mexican communities and families continued. The role of the women and children on bracero camps examined in this study highlight the diverse experiences within and the messiness of the Bracero Program.
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APPENDIX 1

PERMISSION FOR REPRODUCTIONS OF PHOTOGRAPHS

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Best,
Michael

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Rachael and Eileen,

We understand that Michael Broder responded to this inquiry. Michael did contact the Public Health Library before he responded. If you have any other questions, please let me know.

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