

Keeping the New York State Home Front Going: Mexican Braceros in World War II

To the student: This question is based on the accompanying eight documents. It has been created in order to test your ability to work with historical documents. Some of these documents have been edited for the purposes of this question. As you analyze the documents, try to understand the source of the document and any point of view that is presented in the document.

Historical context: When the United States entered World War II after the December 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, over one million rural workers moved into the military, or to jobs in urban U.S. factories that were involved in wartime production. The result was a severe manpower shortage of farm and railroad labor that threatened the stability of the American home front. To address the critical needs, in 1942 the U.S. signed an agreement with Mexico to allow for Mexican workers to fill jobs on U.S. farms, with transportation and other costs to be paid by the U.S. government. The agreement was modified in 1943 to include the railroad industry. Although the farm labor *bracero* program lasted until the end of 1964, railroad *braceros* were returned to Mexico when World War II ended.

Task: Using information from the following documents and your own knowledge of history, answer the questions that follow each document in Part A. Your answers to the questions will help you to accomplish the writing assignment given in Part B, in which you will be asked to explain who the *braceros* were, what type of work they did on the railroads, their working conditions, and the position of the U.S. government in regards to their employment in the United States.

PART A Short-Answer Questions

Directions: Read and analyze the documents and answer the short-answer questions in the space provided. Prepare for the reading of the documents by studying the vocabulary definitions that are given before each document.

Document 1 Vocabulary

Alleviate: Ease, lessen, make lighter.

Maintenance of way: Repair and upkeep of tracks.

Prosecution: Carrying on, bringing legal procedures against.

"WHEREAS, the United States of America and the Employer wish to cooperate in making workers available to alleviate the present shortage of maintenance of way labor needed to keep the railroad lines of the Employer in suitable and safe condition for operation and thus to aid in the successful prosecution of the war,

Document 1: *Excerpt from United States of America, Amendment of Contract to Employ and Transportation Agreement, July 24, 1943. Courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration.*

Document 1 Short-Answer Questions:

1. In 1943, for what job is there a shortage of labor? _____

2. Why is this such an important job? _____

3. Using your own knowledge, what would have happened to the U.S. World War II war effort if trains on the homefront stopped operating?

Document 2 Vocabulary

Appropriated: Provided for by a budget.

Apportioned: Divided out into shares.

Administrator: Manager of the governmental department.

Pursuant: In agreement with the law.

Expenditure/Expended: Spending, spent.

Subsistence: The means by which one supports life.

Contractual: Provided for by a contract.

Reimburse: Pay back.

SEC.3. (a) Not more than \$13,050,000 of the funds **appropriated** by section 1 and not **apportioned** by the **Administrator** among the several States **pursuant** to section 2 shall be available for **expenditure** by the Administrator. The purposes for which such funds may be **expended** shall include, among other things, (1) the recruiting and transportation of workers and their families and necessary personal property, within the United States and elsewhere; (2) furnishing, by loans or otherwise, of health and medical and burial services, training, **subsistence**, allowance, protection, and shelter for such workers and their families; (3) advancing to workers of sums due from employers within the United States who are under **contractual** obligation to **reimburse** the United States for such advances; (4) other necessary facilities and services; and (5) operating personnel and expenses to carry out the above purposes.

Document 2: U.S. Government. Public Law 45, 1943, Section 3. Joint Resolution of Congress, April 29, 1943 [H.J. Res. 96].

Document 2 Short-Answer Questions:

1. What kind of document is Document 2? _____

2. What is the purpose of the document? _____

3. What services will the government provide to the workers, and what needs will they meet?

Document 3 Vocabulary

Utilized: Used.

Component: Part.

Bracero: Meaning "strong arm," Mexican migrant labor brought to the U.S. in order to fill a labor need.

Terminated: Ended.

Allied Victory: The victory of the countries working together to combat Germany and Japan during World War II.

Mexican nationals: Citizens of Mexico.

"United States railroad companies **utilized** the services of Mexican labor from 1943 to 1946. The railroad **component** of **bracero** labor involved an intensity of both Mexican-United States and union-management disputes. Both the farm and non-farm *bracero* programs were wartime emergency measures, but unlike the agricultural bracero program, which did not end until 1965, the non-farm program **terminated** within a year after the **allied victory** over Japan in the Second World War. There were fewer **Mexican nationals** employed in railroad labor than there were in farm labor, but with over a hundred thousand Mexicans working on American railroads, the railroad component was an important aspect of the Mexican wartime labor program."

Document 3: *Quote from Kirstein, Peter M. Anglo Over Bracero: A History of the Mexican Worker in the United States from Roosevelt to Nixon. San Francisco: R & E Research Associates, 1977.*

Document 3 Short-Answer Questions:

1. What years did the U.S. railroad companies use Mexican labor? _____
2. How many Mexicans were working on U.S. railroads during World War II? _____

Document 4



Document 4: A crowd of Mexicans in Mexico City wait to register for the U.S. Bracero program, circa 1943. Photo taken by Hilda Mayer and printed in "Snapshots in a Farm Labor Tradition," by Howard Rosenberg, *Labor Management Decisions* Volume 3, No. 1, Winter-Spring 1993. Available online at http://are.berkeley.edu/APMP/pubs/lmd/html/winterspring_93/snapshots.html.

Document 4 Short-Answer Questions:

1. Where and when was the photograph taken? _____
2. Judging from the photograph, how do you think Mexicans felt about the World War II *braceros* program?

Document 5 Vocabulary

Coessens Park: Park in Amsterdam, N.Y.

Coroner: Officer who examines bodies to determine cause of death.

May Not Paid Regulation 12.5-62

Amsterdam Evening Recorder

AND DAILY DEMOCRAT

Weather
Cloudy
Warm

Vol. LXVI, No. 252. Recorder Established 1881—Democrat Established 1875—Consolidated 1901 Amsterdam, N. Y., Friday, June 15, 1945. Full Associated Press Report by Licensed Wire—Special City and Country Rates 5 CENTS Per Single Copy See Notice to Carriers

Eight Railroad Workers Killed Here by Train

New York Central Limited Plows Through Gang of 65 Section Hands to Take Toll

Three More Injured But Not Seriously in Horrible Tragedy East of Coessens Park This Morning; Mutilated Bodies Strewn Along Roadbed; All Were Mexicans Imported As Laborers; Dr. Julius Schiller, Acting Coroner, Makes Investigation to Learn Facts Leading Up to Catastrophe

Eight Mexican railroad workers lost their lives in the worst railroad accident in this section in modern times about 9:30 o'clock this morning, they being hit by a fast eastbound train at a point south of Coessens Memorial Park. The general hysteria that followed among the members of the 65-man crew that came from South Schenectady this morning, only a few of whom could speak only broken English, prevented an immediate conclusion as to the cause of the tragedy. Railroad repairs were being made on Track 1, westbound passenger track, when Train No. 10, the fast Chicago-New York Water Level Limited, headed east, on Track No. 2, swept down upon a group of the section gang who either stepped in front of the flyer or, as some said, they were being moved from one place to another.

In addition to the eight men instantly killed, three others were injured and were taken to Schenectady for medical aid.

Document 4: Excerpt of article from *Amsterdam Evening Recorder*, June 15, 1945.

Document 5 Short-Answer Questions:

1. How many *braceros* were killed in the railway accident? _____

2. How many men were on the New York Central railroad crew? _____

3. What evidence does the article give that all of the workers on the crew were *braceros*? _____

4. Why do you think it was so dangerous to work on railroad tracks? _____

Document 6 Vocabulary

Reserve: Something kept for emergencies.

Domestic: Of or in one's own country, not foreign.

Adversely: In an unfavorable way, bringing harm.

Certification: A formal guarantee.

MEXICAN WORKERS ARE A RESERVE

It has been a long standing policy of the Federal Government that there shall be no admission of foreign workers into the United States for employment unless all practicable sources of domestic workers have been exhausted.

Arrangements for temporary admission of Mexican workers for United States agriculture are made only after a State's public employment service has recommended such action because qualified domestic farm workers are not available at the time and place they are needed. The Department of Labor reviews the employer request and the State's recommendation. With the Department's request to the U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service to admit the requested number of Mexican workers goes a certification that employment of Mexican workers will not adversely affect the wages or working conditions of domestic farm workers who are similarly employed.



Document 6: *Excerpt from "Mexican Workers for United States Agriculture." U.S. Government Farm Placement Service. Pamphlet. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1953. Migration Division Pamphlets, Collection of Centro Archives, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, CUNY.*

Document 6 Short-Answer Questions:

1. What is the long-standing policy of the U.S. government in regard to allowing foreign workers to come into the country? _____

2. What certification has to go with the Department's request to admit foreign workers? _____

Document 7 Vocabulary

Prohibiting: Forbidding, outlawing.

Mandatory: Not optional, not leaving to choice.

**Last Mexicans
Leaving City
After War Job**
C-X 2-17-46

**Hundreds Came Here
To Assist Railroads**

By **FRANCIS J. O'CONNELL**

Of the hundreds of Mexicans brought here during the war years to relieve the manpower shortage on railroads, only 125 remain to be returned to their homes, a survey disclosed yesterday, and they will leave Buffalo late this week.

Government regulations prohibiting a renewal of contracts for the men made it mandatory that the railroads return them to their homes as soon as transportation was available.

"They did a good job when we needed help badly," one railroad executive commented, "but most of them are not sorry they are going home. The government's action with respect to renewal of contracts was simply to insure that they did not interfere with the re-employment of Americans returning from the battlefronts."

Document 7: *Excerpt*
from *Buffalo Courier*
Express article, February 17,
1946.

Document 7 Short-Answer Questions:

1. According to the railroad executive quoted in the article, what was the feeling about the job that the *braceros* had done? _____

2. Why was the government returning the *braceros* to Mexico at the end of the war instead of renewing their contracts? _____

PART B: Using information from at least five of the documents to support your thinking, and your own knowledge of history, write an essay describing the World War II *braceros* program for railroads. Explain who the *braceros* were, what type of work they did on the railroads, their working conditions, and the position of the U.S. government in regards to their employment in the United States. Your essay should be well-organized and include an introduction, several paragraphs, and a conclusion. You must use evidence from five of the seven preceding documents to support your thinking.