

*Harvest of Loneliness*. Dir. by Gilbert G. Gonzalez and Vivian Price. Prod. by Gilbert G. Gonzalez. Films Media Group, 2010. 58 mins. (<http://harvestofloneliness.com>)

Between 1942 and 1964 approximately 4.5 million Mexicans served as legal guest workers on farms and agricultural fields in the western United States. Known as *braceros* (derived from *brazo*, the Spanish word for arm), these temporary workers left a mixed legacy in the history of labor relations and immigration between the United States and Mexico. Labor organizers have almost universally condemned the *bracero* program as exploitative and abusive; while some farmers and government officials have praised the program as a practical solution to the need for temporary labor during times of harvest.

As its title may suggest, *Harvest of Loneliness* has nothing positive to say about the *bracero* program and its legacy. For instance, according to Henry P. Anderson, a public health scholar who was one of the first to study *braceros* in California—and the author of *A Harvest of Loneliness: An Inquiry into a Social Problem* (1964)—“the *bracero* program was used as labor-busting device pure and simple. The very existence of the program on the books was the most ingenious anti-labor device ever concocted by the mind of man.” Similarly, Carlos Marentes, the director of the Center for Border Agricultural Workers, condemns the *bracero* program as “the biggest human rights violation in the entire history of the United States, with the exception of slavery.”

Both Anderson and Marentes appear frequently on screen, but the most eloquent testimonies are provided by former *braceros*, as well as their wives, widows, and children. Based on their accounts, the filmmakers reconstruct the flow of farm workers from rural areas of Mexico to processing centers along the border and finally to agricultural fields in California, Arizona, Texas, and Utah. They attest to being herded and fumigated like livestock, forced to live in squalid conditions, being cheated on their pay, and much more. The film concludes with the former *bracero* José Ezequiel Acevedo fighting away tears while recalling, “It was a time of suffering. I believe that. I don’t wish it on anyone. That’s as much as I can tell you.”

Unfortunately, many of these powerful testimonies are undercut by the haphazard way the film presents some of its evidence. Not surprisingly, the filmmakers rely heavily on the superb photographs of braceros taken by Leonard Nadel in 1956 (and now in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History). But it is quite disconcerting to hear former braceros in the film describe their mistreatment in the processing center at Empalme, Mexico, while the screen displays a series of Nadel's photographs from the processing center at Monterrey, one thousand miles away. Similarly, while former braceros talk about the harsh working conditions in Arizona (picking cotton and living in hot, crowded barracks), the photographs on the screen come from Nadel's visits to camps in Texas and California. Perhaps the conditions for braceros were similar in all of those places during the twenty-two years of the program, but documentary filmmakers have a responsibility to inform their viewers when their presentations of time and place are less than exact.

One of the film's points is that the current proposals for temporary guest workers in the United States—such as the Agricultural Job Opportunities, Benefits, and Security Act (AgJOBS)—would be just as exploitative as the former bracero program because they would rely on cheap labor. If so, then why is AgJOBS supported by the Farmworker Justice organization and many liberal members of Congress? Other than quick sound bites from President George W. Bush linking border security with temporary jobs and from Rep. Loretta Sanchez, a California Democrat, calling for more job opportunities in the United States, the film does not allow the case for a new temporary worker program to be presented.

Finally, I wish that the filmmakers had explained more about what may have caused the bracero program to end in 1964. Other sources have suggested such factors as improvements in technology (such as mechanical harvesters), better cooperation between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Labor, and greater public awareness of the program's inequalities. Instead, *Harvest of Loneliness* segues almost immediately to the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement

and its devastating effect on Mexico's agriculture and economy, suggesting that the bracero program of 1942–1964 made Mexican workers overly dependent on seeking jobs in the United States, whether legally or not. However, judging from the emotional recollections of the former braceros and their families—such as Acevedo—none of them have any intention of ever returning.

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