



## *Deportee and The Bracero Program*

### **Rationale**

This lesson can be used to introduce students to an early government program that brought Mexican immigrants into the country to supplement our labor demands.

### **Guiding Questions**

### **Mastery Objectives**

Students will have an understanding of migrant workers, the conditions they faced, and the treatment they received.

### **Vocabulary**

Migrant  
Bracero

### **Materials**

Copies of attached reading for each student

### **Standards**

Oklahoma C3 Standards for the Social Studies

7.2 Examine the ongoing issues of immigration, employment, climate change, environmental pollution, globalization, population growth, race relations, women's issues, healthcare, civic engagement, education, and the rapid development of technology.

In 1948, Woody Guthrie read a newspaper article about a plane wreck near Los Gatos Canyon in California. The newspaper article listed the names and towns of the flight crew, but described the passengers as simply “deportees”. Guthrie was outraged by the callousness on the part of the author to not include the names of the immigrants. This insensitivity inspired Guthrie to write the poem “Plane Wreck at Los Gatos” also known as “Deportee”. This poem was later set to music by a schoolteacher named Martin Hoffman.

The men and women on the plane were migrant workers that had been in the United States with the Bracero Program. The term *bracero* literally means “one who works using his arms” and refers to a manual laborer. During World War II, American workers left the fields and factories to fight abroad. Their absence created a labor shortage. In order to fill the demand for labor, the United States negotiated an agreement with Mexico that would allow experienced agricultural workers to enter the country legally.

Guard at collection point  
Monterey, Mexico  
Photograph by Leonard Nadal  
Collections.si.edu November 21, 2013



The workers were subjected to background checks. Because of this, there were no major criminal incidents involving the braceros. The screeners also looked at the hands of the bracero candidates; the ideal worker was experienced and would have calloused hands from working in the fields. Before reporting for work, the braceros were also stripped, disinfected and given a medical exam.



Braceros Getting Fumigated  
Hidalgo Processing Center, Texas  
Photograph by Leonard Nadal 1956  
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Once in the country, the workers had difficult work awaiting them. The workers thinned sugar beets, picked cotton, tomatoes and other crops. They were given short-handled hoes with which to do the work. While it made the work extremely difficult for the men, the farm owners preferred the tool because they thought it made the men work more carefully and prevented damage to the crops. Many men suffered damage to their backs from this method; an injury they would carry with them the rest of their lives. Eventually, the short-handled hoe was banned due to the increased risk of injury. Heatstroke and dehydration were also commonly suffered by the braceros.



Working the fields  
1956  
Photograph by Leonard Nadel  
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The Department of Labor oversaw the program and mandated that employers pay minimum wage to the workers. Much of the money earned was sent back to Mexico to their families. The American bosses withheld 10% of the pay earned by the men; it was to be paid to them upon their return to Mexico. Most of them never saw this money; millions of dollars were kept from the workers. This program lasted for 22 years, from 1942-1964. During this time, more than 2 million workers came to the U.S.

During this time, conditions in Mexico continued to deteriorate and many Mexicans risked crossing the border without the proper documents in order to find work to support their families. These “illegal” workers destroyed the practicality of the bracero program, causing it to come to an end. Once the program ended, many of the men returned to Mexico, but many also stayed and became legal residents of the United States.

In 2013, author Tim Z. Hernandez finished a mission he had started three years earlier: to identify the names of the passengers that died near Los Gatos Canyon. After 65 years, the victims of the plane crash were formally named and recognized.

Information adapted from:

*Los Braceros: Strong Arms to Aid the U.S.A.* KVIE Public Television Video [kvie.org](http://kvie.org)

Martin, Philip (2006-07-03). "The Bracero Program: Was It a Failure?" History News Network, 3 July 2006.

Retrieved from <http://hnn.us/articles/27336.html>

1. What inspired Guthrie to write *Plane Wreck at Los Gatos*?
2. Why were the migrant workers referred to as *braceros*?
3. Why would the hands of an ideal worker be calloused?
4. Who do you think benefitted the from the Bracero program and why?
5. Woody wrote *Plane Wreck at Los Gatos* to bring attention to what he perceived as an injustice. What injustices do you see today?
6. Write a poem to protest that injustice.

Plane Wreck at Los Gatos  
(also known as "Deportee")  
Words by Woody Guthrie, Music by Martin Hoffman

The crops are all in and the peaches are rott'ning,  
The oranges piled in their creosote dumps;  
They're flying 'em back to the Mexican border  
To pay all their money to wade back again

Goodbye to my Juan, goodbye, Rosalita,  
Adios mis amigos, Jesus y Maria;  
You won't have your names when you ride the big airplane,  
All they will call you will be "deportees"

My father's own father, he waded that river,  
They took all the money he made in his life;  
My brothers and sisters come working the fruit trees,  
And they rode the truck till they took down and died.

Some of us are illegal, and some are not wanted,  
Our work contract's out and we have to move on;  
Six hundred miles to that Mexican border,  
They chase us like outlaws, like rustlers, like thieves.

We died in your hills, we died in your deserts,  
We died in your valleys and died on your plains.  
We died 'neath your trees and we died in your bushes,  
Both sides of the river, we died just the same.

The sky plane caught fire over Los Gatos Canyon,  
A fireball of lightning, and shook all our hills,  
Who are all these friends, all scattered like dry leaves?  
The radio says, "They are just deportees"

Is this the best way we can grow our big orchards?  
Is this the best way we can grow our good fruit?  
To fall like dry leaves to rot on my topsoil  
And be called by no name except "deportees"?

### Phil Ochs - Bracero Lyrics

Wade into the river, through the rippling shallow water  
Steal across the thirsty border, bracero  
Come bring your hungry bodies to the golden fields of plenty  
From a peso to a penny, bracero

Oh, welcome to California  
Where the friendly farmer will take care of you

Come labor for your mother, for your father and your brother  
For your sisters and your lover, bracero  
Come pick the fruit of yellow, break the flower from the berry  
Purple grapes will fill your belly, bracero

Oh, welcome to California  
Where the friendly farmer will take care of you

And the sun will bite your body, as the dust will draw you thirsty  
While your muscles beg for mercy, bracero  
In the shade of your sombrero, drop your sweat upon the soil  
Like the fruit your youth can spoil, bracero

Oh, welcome to California  
Where the friendly farmer will take care of you

When the weary night embraces, sleep in shacks that could be cages  
They will take it from your wages, bracero  
Come sing about tomorrow with a jingle of the dollar  
And forget your crooked collar, bracero

Oh, welcome to California  
Where the friendly farmer will take care of you

And the local men are lazy, and they make too much of trouble  
Besides we'd have to pay the double, bracero  
But if you feel you're fallin', if you find the pace is killing  
There are others who are willing, bracero

Oh, welcome to California  
Where the friendly farmer will take care of you

This song, also about braceros, was written by Phil Ochs.

What is the tone of the song? What words or phrases contribute to the tone?

This song is rich in figurative language. What examples of figurative language can you find, and what do they add to the song?

What message do you think the songwriters are trying to convey?