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Former bracero recalls program's legacy

Antonio Nuño Gonzalez says it marked the beginning of his life as a truly free human being. A display panel on his life is part of a photo exhibit at Cal State Channel Islands on Mexican laborers brought to the U.S. from the 1940s to the '60s.

October 15, 2010 | Hector Tobar

Antonio Nuño Gonzalez stood in line in Mexico and waited for his papers to come to the United States.

Eventually he was packed into a cattle car with other men for the trip north. After crossing the border, he was sprayed with DDT and stripped naked for a physical examination so thorough he's still making ribald jokes about it more than 50 years later.

It was all worth it for the chance to do back-breaking work — picking cotton, strawberries, lettuce and other California crops, from the desert heat of Brawley to the verdant coastal valley of Watsonville.

His American employers housed him with hundreds of others in barracks, but provided three daily meals.

"My belly was full," Nuño said. "Eating! That was the profit I got out of it." For a man who'd known hunger in his drought-stricken Mexican village, that was plenty.

Nuño was a "bracero," a word derived from the Spanish word for arm, *brazo*, and the name given to temporary workers contracted from Mexico in the 1940s, '50s and '60s.

Launched during the labor shortages of World War II, the bracero program led to 4.6 million legal border crossings of temporary workers to the United States. Complaints by labor unions and others about braceros lowering wages for Americans helped bring the program to an end in 1964.

The story of the braceros is an American epic. And it's an especially important chapter in the history of Ventura County, whose fields and orchards received more of the laborers than in any other county in the United States.

In Ventura County today, thousands of families trace their roots to a bracero. Oxnard was home to the Buena Vista bracero camp, the largest in the nation, which at its peak housed 5,000 workers. For some, the bracero in the family past is a source of shame.

"There's a lot of silences around this," said Jose Alamillo, a Cal State Channel Islands historian whose grandparents were braceros. "The memories have been suppressed."

But Nuño, now 74, has never stopped talking about his strange and ultimately liberating experience. He won his first bracero contract in 1958. In many ways, it marked the beginning of his life as a truly free human being, he said.

"I'm not ashamed of being poor," he said as we talked in his Santa Paula home. "I'm proud of the fact that I came to this country. Once I had something to eat, I used the money to improve my situation."

Eventually Nuño became a permanent U.S. resident. He has four American-born children. None is a farm worker, but they all grew up hearing his story.

"I don't want people to forget that there was a time when the United States rented people from Mexico," he said.

The great drama of the braceros' journey is on public display this month at Cal State Channel Islands in Camarillo. Through this month, the campus is hosting "Bittersweet Harvest," a traveling exhibition of photographs from the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

Looking at those black-and-white images from the last century help brings into focus an angry debate from California's present — over the causes of mass Latin American migration and its impact on the United States.

"In many ways, this is still going on," Alamillo said. "We continue to turn to Mexico for cheap labor."

Nuño's story begins in the village of San Jose de Gracia, in the Mexican state of Jalisco. His mother and father simply had too many kids to feed — nine in all. His father worked the land for owners, trying to pay off debts that never stopped growing.

Nuño had but one year of grade-school education — just enough to know his ABCs. His father died when he was 16, and the family began to suffer great hunger. "If you've never been through that, you don't know what it's like," he said.

The bracero program was his family's salvation. More contracts took him to Stockton and Hollister. The last, in 1961, brought him to the Buena Vista camp. By then he was making the princely sum of $13 a day. The Mexican government, he was told, was supposed to put away 10 cents for every dollar he earned. But it never paid him.

"I love my Mexico a lot," he said in Spanish. "But its government — *ay dios*. They're totally without shame."

Eventually, he applied for a green card, paying a Tijuana attorney to help him. "That was the best $500 I ever invested," he told me. "It was like going to heaven. All my doubts and fears were gone."

His days as an itinerant worker were over. He landed a job with the Santa Paula-based Limoneira company and worked in its warehouses and packing plants until he retired. In 1994, he became a U.S. citizen.

I asked him if he harbored any ill will toward the workers who now cross the border illegally, bypassing the paperwork and the humiliations that cost him so much. He said he did not.

"They're suffering more than I did," he said. "They're risking their lives to get here."

Nuño can see the economics and politics behind the current immigration mess very clearly. It suits U.S. business interests and Mexican officials for people to come here without documents, he said. "Before, they paid to bring me here," he said. "Now they get their workers for nothing."

Having seen how complicated it is to legally bring low-wage workers to this country, officials on both sides of the border now just pretend those people don't exist.

The other day Nuño drove with his family to the Cal State campus for the opening of the bracero exhibit, which includes a display panel on his life.

"Wow, dad, you're really flying high now!" said his eldest son, a mechanic for the city of Ventura.

On the way back home, Nuño passed through the open fields that surround the campus, and saw workers, all of them Latino, stooped over long rows, planting strawberries.

Many things have changed in half a century. And many things have not.

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