CHAPTER THREE

Citizens of Somewhere

*Braceros, Tejanos, Dixiecrats, and Mexican Bureaucrats in the Arkansas Delta, 1939–1964*

“Wike’s Drive Inn (Restaurant),” reads the photograph’s caption (fig. 8). “It is at the outskirts of Marked Tree, Arkansas, heading towards Harrisburg, Arkansas. A well constructed and nice-looking establishment.” It was November 1949 when Mexican consul Rubén Gaxiola traveled to Marked Tree, Arkansas, to investigate alleged discrimination against Mexicans. He recorded his findings with a camera: “No Mexicans” signs prominently displayed in front of eleven establishments. Additionally, one of the town’s two movie theaters seated Mexican patrons only in the area reserved for blacks.1 Attaching the photos as evidence in his report to Mexico City, Gaxiola immediately recommended that Marked Tree’s employers, most prominently its largest planter, E. Ritter, have their bracero contracts canceled. Gaxiola hoped that swift action would set an example for the rest of Arkansas, “as an energetic protest against these discriminatory acts against Mexicans.”2

The signs would not remain for long. During the decade following their arrival in the Arkansas Delta, Mexican cotton workers successfully resisted Jim Crow–style exclusion through strategies this chapter will explain. The victory was ambiguous and gave way to a new, more fluid separation in which Mexicans had access to white public space but felt more comfortable socializing with African Americans. The first-class citizenship that Mexicans demanded with an end to their formal segregation never extended into the economic realm, where they fought for, but failed to win, broad guarantees of economic security.

Braceros’ tenure in the Arkansas Delta included the years of Jim Crow’s fall. Five years after Consul Gaxiola captured the “No Mexicans” sign, the U.S. Supreme Court negated the doctrine of “separate but equal” through its ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*; the following year, the nearby town of Hoxie became a national flashpoint for school integration, and two years after that, the federal government forced the desegregation of Little Rock.

To see a selection of original historical sources from this chapter, go to http://corazondedixie.org/chapter-3 (http://dx.doi.org/10.7264/N35T3HRo).
Central High School. As the legal structures of racial segregation crumbled in the face of black political organizing and federal government interventions, battles over race and rights moved increasingly into cultural and economic territory. The New Deal’s two-decades-old liberal promise, that U.S. American workers would enjoy basic economic security and regulated labor conditions, had still not been extended to rural workers thanks to the efforts of white southern conservative elites. Growers across the country lauded the arrival of the bracero program in 1942, which promised to deliver them Mexican workers on temporary visas to alleviate wartime labor shortages and the attendant upward pressure on agricultural wages. But the program continued for two decades beyond World War II, bringing more than four million Mexican men to perform agricultural labor in the country before it ended in 1964. In Arkansas (map 4), around 300,000 braceros worked the cotton fields between 1948 and 1964, in some years comprising more than a third of all laborers there. For Arkansas planters, the promise of the bracero program was the promise of continued access to cheap and available labor.

Figure 8 “Wike’s Drive Inn (Restaurant). It is at the outskirts of Marked Tree, Arkansas, heading towards Harrisburg, Arkansas. A well constructed and nice-looking establishment.” Attachments to letter from Consul Rubén Gaxiola, Memphis, to Ministry of Foreign Relations, Mexico City, November 19, 1949, TM-26-32, Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, Mexico City.
even as the postwar boom drew workers to cities and white elites’ control over African Americans deteriorated.

That promise, however, went largely unfulfilled. Mexico’s expanding economy and nationalist protective economic policies ushered in its “golden age” of economic growth and national cohesion during the World War II years, and this led ordinary citizens to have rising expectations for their material well-being and political recognition. Furthermore, braceros felt strongly compelled to maximize the remittances they delivered to the families that had endured painful separations for the sake of their labor in the United States.⁷ Once in Arkansas, braceros demanded the social and economic rights they felt were due them as workers, Mexican citizens, and patriarchs, setting off a battle in the Arkansas Delta among Tejano crew leaders, Mexican consuls, white planters, and white and African American tenants and laborers. At
stake were not just Mexicans’ social and economic rights but the fates of all of Arkansas’s cotton workers. The twin demands of racial equality and improved economic security for rural workers dogged white southern conservatives facing down New Deal liberals at midcentury, and braceros challenged them on both fronts. They rejected both poor labor conditions and social discrimination in Arkansas. White conservatives responded by steadfastly protecting their economic and political advantages over labor, even if this meant compromise in the area of race.

Though the U.S. federal government attempted to regulate the comings and goings of Mexican agricultural workers for the first time through the bracero program, a different federal government—the Mexican government—played a much more decisive role in negotiating the terms of braceros’ work and lives with the planters who employed them in Arkansas. Historians have painted 1948–53 as the period in which the Mexican government steadily lost control and bargaining power in the bracero program, or they have discounted the effectiveness of Mexican consuls entirely; but the case study of Arkansas reveals a more complicated story that varied greatly in different bracero destinations. During the late 1940s and early 1950s in the Arkansas Delta, the targeted local efforts of activist Mexican bureaucrats effectively curtailed white farmers’ unfettered access to low-cost Mexican labor. In so doing, Mexican migrants and bureaucrats placed a transnational weight on the Delta’s political scale, promoting the equivalent of New Deal liberalism to the dismay of farmers who had seen Mexican labor as a way to circumvent it.

When workers and their consulates pushed back, these local authorities used every means at their disposal—law, culture, and practice—to ensure Mexicans’ nominal access to white public spaces and to defuse racially charged conflicts as they emerged. In so doing, they appeased the Mexican consulate to ensure their continued ability to contract workers but fought braceros and their government on matters of economic consequence. As conservative white elites forced local residents, shop owners, and policemen to treat Mexicans differently from African Americans and nominally accept their presence in white public space, they further paved the way for increased contracting of braceros to the area, which in turn kept wages low. The social, cultural, and economic history of the Arkansas Delta’s “Mexicanization” in response to a transnational battle over New Deal liberalism thus set the stage for the future trajectory of race relations in the rural South, even if its implications would not be obvious until the largest influx of Latino workers to the region thirty years hence.
“Place Your Order”: Recruiting Mexicano Labor

Delta planters had complained of labor shortages since Emancipation, but during the Depression their actions ultimately forced thousands of workers out of the area. The federal government began in 1933 to pay planters to keep their fields out of production, in a successful bid to boost cotton prices. As in Mississippi, most Arkansas planters ignored requirements to share these payments with their sharecroppers, instead evicting them and using the cash influx to hire them back as wage laborers. Many white and black cotton workers left the Delta, and when World War II brought a newfound demand for cotton, planters could not count on the worker surplus they had long enjoyed. Long-standing forms of violent labor control were no match for the opportunities of a wartime economy, a mobilized society, and an increasingly powerful civil rights movement. Some Arkansas Delta planters held meetings with African American laborers and employed black preachers to convince workers to remain on their farms. But after decades of discrimination, abuse, and violence, black workers ignored their bosses’ pleas and once again left the rural South, in even larger numbers during World War II than they had during the “Great Migration” of the 1910s and 1920s. Cotton-picking contests and public relations materials marketed at white workers touted the economic and moral benefits of cotton picking, but these efforts also failed to stem the tide of white people out of rural Arkansas.

Though Arkansas planters had not recruited Mexicanos as aggressively as their Mississippi counterparts in the 1920s–30s, their turn to Mexican labor during the war had some precedent. Small numbers of Mexicans and Mexican Americans had worked in the Arkansas Delta for decades, and sometimes their presence was specifically sought to discipline African Americans. When black wage laborers in Phillips County refused to pick cotton for abysmally low wages in 1931, planters responded by recruiting 500 Mexican workers to their farms. By 1940, some Mexican immigrants had established a Mexican Patriotic Committee on the Sycamore Bend Plantation in Hughes, where their children attended a separate Mexican school even as many Mexicanos across the river in Mississippi attended white schools thanks to the efforts of Rafael Landrove and his circle.

When World War II began, Arkansas planters first redoubled their efforts to secure German prisoners of war and “negroes from the Bahama Islands” to pick their cotton. They also offered the highest wages in memory, $3 per hundred pounds of cotton, to recruit white workers from the hills of Arkansas and black workers from Memphis. Determined to find a cheaper
alternative, they quickly turned their sights to Texas, where large numbers of Tejanos sought an escape from low wages and racial oppression. The Texas Farm Placement Service (TFPS) had used violence to stifle Tejano mobility since the 1920s, prompting one Louisiana official to state matter-of-factly in 1950 that “Texas-Mexican[s] . . . are not allowed to leave Texas.” Yet as more Tejanos acquired trucks of their own and labor controls weakened because of wartime mobility, Arkansas planters advertised for workers in Texas’s Spanish-language newspapers and worked through middleman contractors. TFPS eventually cooperated with Arkansas’s agricultural extension service to regulate Tejano migration to the state, enabling an Arkansas county agent to offer triumphantly in 1946, “If you want some Mexican cotton pickers this fall, please come to my office and place your order.” Yet TFPS could hardly control Mexicano workers by this point: the 1947 harvest in one Arkansas county employed six times more privately than officially recruited Tejanos, in addition to nearly a thousand undocumented Mexican workers.

Texas authorities’ willingness to send at least some laborers to Arkansas also reflected the border state’s newfound access to Mexican labor via the bracero program. Delta farmers resented their southwestern competitors’ easy access to Mexican workers, complaining that “these wetbacks come over and pick the cotton over in southern California and Arizona and New Mexico,” giving those states the unfair advantage of lower labor costs. Circumventing official channels, some Arkansas planters hired contractors to bring them braceros who had been sent to work in Texas. When Texas and U.S. authorities caught four busloads of braceros headed out on an unauthorized journey to Arkansas, they fined the contractors in charge.

Tired of haggling with Texas authorities, Arkansas farmers large and small launched efforts to recruit their own braceros in 1948. In Crittenden County, for example, more than a hundred farmers attended an initial meeting about bracero recruitment and between them placed requests for 500 workers. Near the end of the 1948 picking season, the county’s extension agent wrote, “The farmers, as a whole, are very well pleased, and it looks as if there will be a demand for 5,000 such workers next year. This program is working out like a lot of others—once we get involved in a program, it is difficult to get away from it.” Smaller farmers placed orders for as few as five braceros while larger planters like Lee Wilson employed up to 1,600, with the median in 1952–53 around thirty braceros per farm. Soon, county seats like Osceola became the sites of unfamiliar scenes: Tejano crew leaders and bracero crews, newly arrived from Texas, parked in the center of town, awaiting direction to farms from county extension agents. Most arrived in the fall, often from summer
contracts in the Midwest or elsewhere, and remained in Arkansas for less than three months, the duration of the picking season.28

“Golden Age” Mexicans Encounter Jim Crow Arkansas

Poor black and white cotton workers had resisted low wages through the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (STFU), out-migration, and a thousand acts of daily resistance. If Arkansas’s cotton farmers were “well pleased” with their initial experiences with bracero workers, it was because they saw braceros as uniquely willing to get the job done at low wages and with minimal resistance. Yet unlike migrant Tejanos, who effectively had no political power far from their Texas homes, braceros had more meaningful citizenship rights because of their connection to the newly robust Mexican state. Though that state’s bracero management efforts could lead to disillusionment, particularly among the women and children braceros left behind, its claim to be the authentic protector and representative of the Mexican people at home and abroad emboldened braceros to petition for the guarantee of their rights in Arkansas.29

Workers signing up for the bracero program, whether for money to begin or support a family, as an independent adventure of masculine modernization, or both, likely knew something of the Mexican migrant experience in the United States from friends and relatives who had already journeyed to work there.30 Particularly in the early years of the program, most had not heard about Arkansas. In 1948 at the age of twenty, Gabino Solís Aguilera rode three buses from his hometown of Pueblo Nuevo, Guanajuato, to the bracero contracting center in Monterrey. There he waited more than a week, all the while watching his precious pesos disappear to lodging costs. When he finally was called for a contract to Arkansas, he knew that “I was one of the first braceros who went there.”31 The two-day journey from bracero contracting sites along the U.S.-Mexico border in southeastern Texas to the cotton fields of the Arkansas Delta gave workers their first taste of the poor conditions to come. While bracero contracts enumerated very specific rules for transport vehicles, sleeping arrangements, and food along the way, Tejano crew leaders often remained ignorant of these rules, were instructed by Arkansas farmers to ignore them, or flouted them of their own accord. I. G. García and J. P. Yepes reported that they were given nowhere to sleep overnight, no restroom facilities, and nowhere to sit during the long ride.32 Antonio Vega Aguiniga and the braceros in his group were given only three sandwiches to eat during the 800-mile journey from Laredo to Pine Bluff.33 On the other
hand, Tejano crew leader Pedro Villarreal Jr. was instructed by farmers to feed braceros only bread, but he pitied the workers and bought them canned sardines in addition. 

On arrival in Arkansas, braceros were distressed to see that they would stay in abandoned sharecropper cabins, “extremely old houses which were abandoned by the blacks,” as many described them. In the program’s later years, some were housed in barracks. Miguel Jáquez López recalled that the Arkansas town where he worked in the mid-1950s was very beautiful, “but the only thing that was not beautiful was the barracks where we lived.” They lacked indoor plumbing, so he and other braceros bathed in a nearby river—something Jáquez López had not had to do in the three other states where he had worked as a bracero. Documentary evidence suggests the lack of bathroom facilities was typical among Arkansas bracero work sites. Workers routinely cited problems including “grass filled mattresses, insufficient tables and benches, and insufficient cooking utensils.” One worker told of being made to sleep in the farm’s garage alongside its tractors. In another case, workers on C. E. Scott’s plantation in England, Arkansas, lost all of their possessions and barely escaped with their lives when their cabin caught fire from a heating stove that had been installed “to avoid the furnishing of blankets and mattresses to the workers.” With long distances from field to town and no public transport, braceros’ mobility was limited and varied. Employers would offer them rides into town on weekends, sometimes charging handsomely for the service, but braceros had little access to transportation on their own. While some braceros recalled in later interviews that they did not mind conditions in Arkansas, more felt that their living environments mocked the bracero program’s promise of a modern agricultural work experience in the United States.

Braceros knew that their contracts required planters to bring them to the doctor when sick, cover them with medical insurance, and pay them a minimum salary, but in practice bosses often ignored these mandates. Jack McNeil recalled serving as an interpreter at doctors’ visits during his days as head of the Parkin Farmers’ Association, but many braceros requesting medical attention were “completely ignored.” And whether or not they received medical attention, many, if not most, laborers in these early years of bracero contracting were denied the subsistence pay guaranteed to them in the event that sickness or poor weather prevented them from picking on a particular day.

Perhaps the most important clause in bracero contracts, however, was their wage guarantee—something that black and white wage laborers did not have. Indeed, in the era before the minimum wage in agriculture, braceros were the
first of any class of workers in southern fields to have any economic rights at all. These internationally negotiated rights upended planters’ fantasies about braceros. “The only item of cost of production . . . which may be reduced is that of harvesting,” explained one planter to his sympathetic congressman. “This can only be reduced if the labor supply of Mexico is available.” From planters’ perspectives, the purpose of Mexican labor importation was to avoid bidding for white and black labor on the open market, competing with higher urban wages in Memphis and beyond.

Yet in their public discourses, white planters proclaimed that local laborers were not too expensive but rather too lazy. “The higher the wage, the less a Delta Negro picks,” alleged one official in a 1950 congressional hearing. But other witnesses at the hearing disagreed. A Tennessee official noted that during periods when cotton picking paid more, “you can’t get a maid in Memphis” because African American women preferred to earn more money picking cotton. African American truck drivers who drove workers from Memphis to the Delta to work for the day insisted that these workers “pick hard every day” and that if the wage were $3 per hundred pounds of cotton, there would be no trouble filling their trucks with workers before dawn.

The problem, then, was not black laborers’ willingness to pick cotton but rather their willingness to do so when wages for cotton picking were lower than those for urban work in Memphis.

To compete with wages in Memphis and the Delta’s cities, Arkansas planters often paid African Americans more than braceros during the first years of the bracero program there. This violated the bracero contract, which guaranteed Mexicans the prevailing wage in the area—a flawed premise to begin with, as the availability of braceros discouraged farmers from raising wages for locals. Nonetheless, braceros knew about these guarantees and were determined to receive them. Gabino Solís Aguilera recalled earning $3.00 per hundred pounds of cotton in Arkansas in 1948 and believed his earnings were the same as those of black workers. Yet countless braceros, among them José Aldama, Dagoberto Caballero, and Heriberto Salas Ochoa, alleged that they were earning $2.50 per hundred pounds of cotton picked, while local labor, presumably white hillbillies and African Americans who lived in the area or came in from Memphis, earned $3. Additionally, braceros claimed that they were consigned to the second or third pickings, while locals were given the prized first picking. Left unchecked, farmers hoped to pay Mexicans less than blacks earned and therefore to save money by transitioning from a predominantly black to a predominantly Mexican labor force. Indeed, M. C. Baumann conceded in 1952 that, while he had been paying black workers $3
per hundred pounds, “he has employed no domestic labor since the arrival of the Mexican workers.” Baumann paid those Mexican workers $2.50.49

Planters believed that Mexicans could chop and pick cotton not only cheaper but also faster. Several white observers recalled that many Mexicans picked at least a hundred pounds more per day than whites and blacks: 500–700 a day rather than 350–500.50 Some African Americans also adopted this view of Mexicans’ efficiency. “Man, they could chop a lot of cotton,” was the word around town, remembered Calvin King, the son of black farmers.51 White and black workers had been fighting dismal wages in Arkansas’s fields for a generation; while hundreds of Mexicans, too, would protest low pay, a larger number calculated that dollars, which could become the foundation of their economic and therefore personal lives, were worth exerting themselves to the limits of their physical capacity.52 Jesús Ortiz Torres explained that he pursued bracero contracts in Arkansas and other work sites because of “the obligation one has” as a married man; those unwilling to work as hard as he did “won’t have anything, not a family or a wife, nothing.”53 Reflecting on men like Ortiz Torres, farmer John Gray concluded, “After the Mexicans came in, nobody could compare with the kind of help they were.”54 As Gray’s statement so plainly showed, braceros did not step into a labor vacuum in rural Arkansas; rather, their arrival altered the economic possibilities for white and black wage laborers.

**Interpreting Race**

Black and particularly white Arkansans probably had some awareness of anti-Mexican stereotypes originating in the U.S. Southwest, and at least one Arkansas Delta community educated Mexican children at their own plantation school in 1940.55 Across the river in Mississippi, most but not all Mexicans could attend white schools by this time, having fought for and won that right a decade earlier. Still, Mexicans’ and Tejanos’ numbers in Arkansas were small by the end of the Depression, and no single stereotype or racial definition of “Mexican” dominated thinking there. The Tejanos and then braceros who arrived in large numbers in the 1940s found that relationships with the white and black people they encountered were ambiguous, contingent not only on race but also on class. Some Arkansans found Mexicans to be harmless or exotic, others perceived them as an economic threat, and still others adopted outdated Texan stereotypes, separating poor, working-class “peons” from upper-class Mexicans.

By the late 1940s, most of the Arkansas Delta’s African Americans envi-
ioned a future away from its cotton fields and did not begrudge Mexicans’ arrival. Many of their families might have left the fields in the 1910s–20s if not for planters’ violence and intimidation. During the sharecropper evictions of the 1930s, African Americans who still believed agriculture was their best or only option organized for better wages and security through the interracial STFU. But by the end of that decade, the union was severely weakened, offering African Americans little hope to improve their lives within the Delta just as new opportunities opened up in the war industries of the North and West. Wartime spikes in cotton wages notwithstanding, African Americans streamed out of the area in the 1940s. One African American former STFU organizer spoke out publicly against the bracero program in 1950, but by that time he represented a rapidly shrinking number of black Arkansans who sought futures in agriculture.

Recalling her upbringing in an African American sharecropping family, Delores Atkins said that her parents “always wanted us to do something different because this was hard work, and we knew we were working for nothing.” Accordingly, she remembered, “We were trying to get something to eat and get some clothes to wear, so we didn’t worry about anybody else,” least of all Mexicans coming to do a job they despised. Indeed, when the NAACP’s The Crisis reported on Mexicans abandoning a Delta plantation in 1952, its coverage pitied rather than envied workers “forced to accept whatever the farmer chooses to pay” and subject to arrest, “as often happens,” when they defied planters’ wishes. Though Calvin King’s family owned its own land, he recalled that “there was plenty of chopping to go around, plenty of picking to go around,” and noted that Mexicans “were coming in as a lot of African Americans were trying to get out.” For them, the pain of cotton picking extended beyond the physical effects of bloodied hands and hungry stomachs, to include a longer history of slavery and violence that they hoped to escape—in the words of one historian, “un-freedom.”

In contrast, some poor white people still envisioned a future for themselves farming in the Delta, clinging to the myth of white male upward mobility within cotton production even as agricultural land became concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer owners. Braceros seemed to threaten these white men’s aspirations. James O. Scarlett wrote to his congressman in 1952, “I am a very poor man with a family of seven including myself. . . . How can the thousands of sharecroppers, renters and laborers carry on and face Mexican peonage?” By referring to peonage, unfree labor, in an area that used this practice primarily on immigrants and African Americans, Scarlett mourned
Braceros, he believed, had dealt his dreams their final blow.

For those who did not envision cotton picking as a long-term livelihood—that is, most African Americans and middle-class white people—the influx of Mexican workers sometimes resembled an international or intercultural exchange, rather than a race or economic threat. Bobby Wood, whose family owned a filling station and store, recalled that as a teen in the mid-1940s, “I learned a lot of Spanish words. . . . I enjoyed [serving Mexican patrons] very much.” Delores Atkins recalled that feelings of excitement and curiosity at the newcomers’ arrival also affected black children. She remembered laughing with her friends as she listened to braceros’ Spanish, “excited because I hadn’t heard anybody speak that kind of language before.” For both Wood and Atkins, Tejanos and braceros added a touch of cosmopolitanism to an otherwise black-and-white small-town existence.

Texan stereotypes from a previous century, which separated Indian and mestizo “peons” from European-descended upper-class Mexicans, influenced the views some white farmers and authorities had of Mexicans during the first few years of their presence. A lawyer for the Mexican consulate expressed outrage at a white farmer’s presumption that “we, the lawyers and consular representatives of the Government of Mexico, should understand the situation because like bosses, we belong to a ‘superior’ class which is predestined to exploit the masses, whose only goal in life should be completing the tasks of beasts of burden.” Still, at times even consular officials could be treated with racial suspicion. When a Mexican official arrived in Pine Bluff to conduct an investigation of bracero conditions there, local officials at first tried to direct him away from the town’s one hotel and toward a campground, presumably because the all-white hotel did not want to accommodate him. Only once the Mexican consul insisted and the Arkansas officials conferred among themselves was the consul given a room at the hotel.

Perhaps white residents’ most consequential view of Mexicans in the first years of their presence, however, was farmers’ sense of being “very much satisfied” with Mexican labor. “They thought of them as, ‘That was labor.’ That wasn’t a buddy,” explained Bernard Lipsey, whose Jewish family’s grocery store in Lepanto depended heavily on Mexican consumers during the 1950s. Both smaller farmers who picked cotton alongside braceros and larger planters who viewed them as “input factors” fantasized that Mexicans represented the ideal labor source to replace more troublesome and expensive whites and blacks. They were soon to find out otherwise.
Racialized Laborers or Citizens with Rights?

Having already invested their money and personal credibility in a bracero journey, many braceros were willing to tolerate Arkansas’s poor living and working conditions in exchange for the dollars they could earn there. But thousands of others were not. When Gabino Solís Aguilera first arrived in Arkansas in 1948, he found the area to be “peaceful. . . . I ended up there and I was happy with it.” But that same year, a bracero in Pine Bluff found the conditions so depressing that he attempted suicide. Charting a course in between these two responses, thousands of braceros employed varied resistance strategies to improve their lives and earnings in Arkansas. Indeed, just two years after the first braceros were contracted to Arkansas, a growers’ spokesman observed, “In 1948 . . . we thought our labor problem was solved, but we soon found that instead of having a seasonal labor supply we had a year-round headache.” This comment referred specifically to the interventions of the Mexican and U.S. federal governments, but braceros themselves were the original source of planters’ woes. Unlike Solís Aguilera, a steadfast minority of braceros actively pushed for greater economic and social rights. Their challenges to farmers and authorities were entwined with both the financial and cultural expectations they had brought into the program. Braceros needed to maximize their earnings to meet familial obligations, but they also petitioned for modern living and equal social conditions to reaffirm their sense of themselves as modern men and rights-bearing citizens of Mexico. These braceros appealed directly to farmers for improved wages and conditions, organized their own strikes, fled farms altogether, and went to great lengths to appeal to the Mexican consulate for help.

Braceros dissatisfied with their wages and working conditions sometimes began by lodging their demands directly with farmers. Tejano crew leader Joe García recalled braceros demanding a raise from their contracted rate of $2.50 per hundred pounds of cotton. García brought the concern to farmer E. D. McKnight, who approved a twenty-five-cent raise. Others communicated directly to employers. A group of braceros who had worked for Royce Stubblefield in Monette wrote a letter to Stubblefield once they were back in Mexico, stating that the truck driver who transported them to the border was supposed to disburse money for transit from the border to their home towns in Mexico but did not do so. Pablo Soto Amaya and Cristóbal Vázquez Martínez asked farmer C. E. Hardin to bring medical attention to some sick compatriots; when Hardin did not comply at first, the braceros continued.
to ask “an infinite number of times.” These braceros perceived farmers’
dependence on their labor and believed they had enough bargaining power
to demand their compliance with the bracero contract.

Even repeated an “infinite” number of times, however, simple requests
from small groups of braceros usually were insufficient to win change. In
escalating their efforts, braceros drew on a nationalist Mexican consciousness
that promised, and in some ways delivered, modernity and improvement.
Most young male braceros in the late 1940s and early 1950s were products
entirely of Mexico’s liberal postrevolutionary regime but not the years of ac-
tual violent revolution. Solís Aguilera, of typical bracero age, was born in 1928
after the regime’s consolidation of rule. He was reared during the populist
land redistributions and oil nationalization of the 1930s and educated, if only
for a few years, in schools that had become deliberate parts of the nationalist
project. He came of age in the 1940s, a decade marked by uneven economic
expansion and the growth of the state apparatus, and signed on to the bracero
program, which promised to be an engine of both. Whereas Mississippi’s
Rafael Landrove had developed his expectations during the Porfiriato and
revolution, Solís Aguilera and his fellow braceros were products of a populist,
nationalist, and statist era in Mexican history.

Braceros’ collective actions drew on these nationalistic expectations in
ways both subtle and overt. On an Arkansas farm during the picking season
of 1948, braceros were disgusted by poor housing “once inhabited by blacks”
and pay of $2 per hundred pounds of cotton when the contract guaranteed
$3. They elected two of their own, José Lúis Landa and Manuel Gallegos,
to lead them in a work stoppage. This internal, informal selection of one or
two spokespeople—probably those who spoke some English—was typical
of bracero politics in Arkansas. On September 16, Mexican Independence
Day, Landa, Gallegos, and their group of sixty-five workers went on strike.
They returned to the fields for a brief time after a Tejano interpreter insisted
that $2 was the most the boss would pay. But soon, they “[knew] that there
had been strikes in other fields,” declared Landa and Gallegos, “and there
was a visit from the Consul of Mexico in New Orleans, and it was then that
they started to pay us $3.” The braceros’ choice of Mexican Independence
Day for their strike reflected their use of Mexican nationalism as an internal
rallying cry for resistance to abuse even when official Mexican government
representatives were nowhere in sight. While their counterparts in New Or-
leans and Mississippi twenty years earlier tended to rely on Mexican national-
ism mostly as a strategy to create middle-class identities and make claims
on consulates, by the late 1940s at least some Arkansas braceros had come to think of themselves as full citizens of this modernizing nation, linked through this identity to diverse compatriots.85

Braceros struck to maximize the wages they could earn but also to demand dignified treatment, more control over their labor, and acceptable food and cooking arrangements. On one Phillips County farm, 300 workers wanted to replace their Tejano crew leader with a leader from their own ranks. To make their point, they “mutinied and were engaged in throwing their bunks and bed clothes through the windows and doors of the barracks in which they were lodged.”86 Braceros employed by the Miller Lumber Company in Marianna were upset that they were forced to buy food at the company restaurant, wanting instead to be provided with cooking utensils to make their own food at lower cost. They went on strike and refused to eat in the restaurant. Afraid of losing the workforce altogether, the company caved and provided cooking utensils and facilities.87 In at least some cases, Arkansas planters succeeded in requesting the deportation of braceros, like Esteban Saldaña, who had led their compatriots in strikes.88

Other braceros—by some estimates, at least one in seven—resisted their conditions in Arkansas by leaving the farms altogether.89 Though farmers sought Mexicans to replace a black labor force that had moved north, they found themselves confronting the same problem with braceros. One planter complained that some braceros never had any intention of working in agriculture and would quickly disappear, while others vanished as soon as they learned how much they could earn in cities.90 Still smarting over the exodus of their black workers, planters reacted strongly to indications that braceros planned to leave their farms. In 1953, Mississippi Delta farmer E. J. Ganier asked the local sheriff to arrest bracero José Dionisio Sosa because Sosa had threatened “to influence other workers so that they would leave the place.”91 Unlike braceros in California and Texas, who tended to desert the program for the Southwest’s urban centers, Arkansas’s braceros left the farms for a destination to which planters had already lost countless racialized laborers: Chicago. And as in the case of blacks, local authorities openly served planters’ needs by arresting workers who tried to leave their jobs.

The escape plans of Juan Braya Carlos, Angel Ramirez López, and Eduardo Gracios Mora particularly provoked the wrath of white authorities in 1953. The men arrived to pick cotton on the farm of A. H. Barnhill in Bay, Arkansas, and immediately rejected the dilapidated housing they were provided. Barnhill asked the local sheriff to arrest the departing workers and return them to him. When the patrolman found the workers, he asked them if they

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wanted to go back to Mexico, to which they responded, “No.” Asked if they wanted to go to Chicago, the workers shrugged their shoulders and said, “Maybe.” Yet an inspection of the braceros’ living quarters suggested that their intentions had been firmer; a map of Illinois lay in the run-down house, “with the City of Chicago face up.” The workers claimed the map was not theirs but was already in the house when they arrived, allegedly left behind by earlier groups of braceros or the African Americans who had previously fled the objectionable conditions on Barnhill’s farm.

As this story also illustrates, local law enforcement joined with federal immigration officials to restrict braceros’ mobility, keeping them on their Arkansas farms by force if possible. After all, these local police officers had long used their authority to keep black workers on the job. When Feliciano Parano Chávez demanded payment for forty-six pounds of cotton he had picked, employer M. C. Jenkins first threatened him with a knife and then got him thrown in jail. Similarly, more than 200 braceros left their plantations for Forrest City when a surplus of labor meant they were receiving neither work nor pay. Local Border Patrol agents arrested them, and the group was held in jail while officials determined who would pay for their return to Mexico. As with a previous labor force trying to head “north,” law enforcement authorities readily used their power to help planters control their workers.

Building the Mexican Nation—in Arkansas

Yet unlike Arkansas’s African Americans and Tejanos, who were U.S. citizens in name only, Mexican braceros had meaningful citizenship rights in Mexico that allowed them to turn to a government filled with officials of their own. Beginning immediately with their arrival in 1948, braceros began lodging complaints with the nearest Mexican consulates, at the time in New Orleans and San Antonio, through extreme means if necessary. Before long, the Secretariat of Foreign Relations opened a consulate in Memphis specifically to oversee the Delta’s bracero contracting. Though growers usually insisted that workers were happy and only the consuls themselves wanted to create trouble, in fact workers reached out to involve their consulates in their struggles. “No sooner” had Mexican workers arrived in Arkansas, noted Mexican officials, than “they began to present themselves to our consulate in New Orleans as well as this consul general” in San Antonio, decrying mostly wages and living conditions in violation of the bracero contract. The complaints arrived via both phone and letter and represented not just individual workers but also groups.
While braceros resisted their conditions in Arkansas by making demands of crew leaders and farmers, staging ad hoc strikes, and fleeing to Chicago, they believed that whatever its limitations and shortcomings, the Mexican government represented their greatest source of political power. Indeed, black and white workers had utilized all of the former strategies, even organizing the STFU, but faced brutal repression. The liberal ideas of the United States and those of Mexico had long influenced and echoed one another, and Mexican workers in pursuit of greater rights could have appealed to either liberal tradition. Potential U.S. allies, however, did not provide the type of advocacy they sought. Though the STFU enjoyed a brief resurgence in the 1940s, the organization and its affiliates in the national Congress of Industrial Organizations wanted to end the bracero program, not represent braceros. Outside the U.S. liberal tradition, churches eagerly sought out braceros, with Baptists at one point employing seventeen Spanish-speaking preachers in Arkansas and Catholics doing their best to compete. But there is no evidence that Catholic or Protestant clerics advocated on braceros’ behalf.

Independent, nonstate organizations in the Mexican liberal tradition also could have helped the braceros, if those efforts had gained any traction in the first place. Activist Ernesto Galarza’s independent National Farm Labor Union and its Mexican sister organization, La Alianza de Braceros, focused their efforts in California and Mexico, enjoyed little success, and by the mid-1950s also aimed primarily to end the bracero program entirely. Through repression of the Alianza, Mexican bureaucrats succeeded in preserving their paternalistic role as braceros’ best hope for change in the Arkansas Delta.

In the post–World War II period, during Mexico’s so-called golden age of nationalist protective economic policies and cultural production, Mexican workers in Arkansas resisted poor economic and social conditions by appealing to local Mexican consulates, which in turn took up both the racial and economic arguments with southern white planters and their political allies. Consul Angel Cano del Castillo first responded to Arkansas braceros’ petitions from his post in the Dallas consulate but in 1950 moved to Memphis to open his government’s office there. Though a thirty-year veteran of Mexico’s Foreign Service, Cano often eschewed diplomacy in his strident defense of braceros even as his government slowly ceded control of the program as a whole.

Cano rapidly developed a reputation among planters and braceros for his willingness to take up even the smallest of workers’ petitions, and some braceros went to extreme lengths to call their plight to his attention. While some braceros could simply write the consulate and receive responses in care of the
Braceros in the Arkansas Delta

farms where they were employed, others had to circumvent planters’ attempts to monitor their phone conversations. In another case, a hundred Mexican men set out for a hundred-mile walk to see the consulate in Memphis when they refused the bad food and low salaries on Terry Jamison’s plantation; forty-nine made it while the other fifty-one got stuck along the way. These men trudged for hours through the chilly Arkansas fall because they believed they could find meaningful help in their country’s Memphis outpost. Far more than their counterparts decades earlier in the Mississippi Delta, these men believed that as full citizens in a modern nation, Mexico, they were due better wages and working and living conditions in the United States; they hoped and expected that Mexican consular representatives would use their political power to enforce superior conditions.

Cross-Border Liberalism and the Fate of the New Deal

In this moment of expanding national states, braceros’ choice to work through the Mexican federal government touched a nerve in rural Arkansas. For nearly two decades, New Dealers in Washington, D.C., had engaged in a political balancing act: fomenting a class-based coalition on the basis of federally guaranteed economic security, while doing so in the context of white supremacy and the need to keep white southern Democrats, known as Dixiecrats, in the fold. Economic security, then, could not extend also to African American agricultural and domestic workers. Democrats thus excluded those industries from the labor rights legislation that gave industrial workers a minimum wage and work condition guarantees. Meanwhile, the federal government allowed other aspects of the New Deal, notably the AAA crop reduction payments, to benefit white southern elites at the expense of their workers. Evicted Delta sharecroppers formed the STFU in 1934, organizing across race lines to demand “decent contracts and higher wages,” organizing rights and improved housing conditions, and overall security—in other words, many of the rights that had been granted to industrial workers over the previous two decades.

To planters’ chagrin, the postwar period’s liberal ideals had gained currency in Mexico, too, inspiring braceros to lodge demands notably similar to those of displaced local cotton workers. Between 1948 and 1953, braceros filed at least 400 complaints with their consulate. Each complaint represented an average of two to three men, with some representing dozens of braceros. About a third focused on unpaid wages, with transportation, lodging, discrimination (usually wage discrimination), and medical care each represent-
ing a significant share as well. Mexican workers were petitioning, in effect, for economic security. Miguel Santiago complained that he had been forced to pay for his own medicine, when it should have been the farmer's responsibility. Braceros demanded that Byron Landres pay them for additional days of work they lost when the labor contractor's truck broke down on its way to Arkansas. Others demanded pay, as stipulated in the contract, when poor weather made it impossible to pick cotton. In all, braceros advocated for shifting the burden of risk from workers to employers.

These demands emerged from a liberal worldview deeply opposed to that of planters—a view in which states and employers, not workers, absorbed the economic risks of markets, weather, and other unforeseen factors. When Esteban Saldaña convinced his fellow braceros to go on strike because a poor cotton crop made it impossible to earn decent wages, he framed the struggle as a “fight for our rights.” A U.S. Labor Department official acknowledged this liberal worldview in a private conversation with Arkansas's representative E. C. Gathings in 1953. Decrying Memphis consul Angel Cano's “megalomaniac” actions on behalf of Mexican workers, the official noted that neither drought nor economic conditions would sway the consul into accepting less for Mexican workers. “Cano takes the position that these things have no bearing,” complained the official. “He says we gamble on the weather.”

A Mississippi Delta official, testifying before Congress in 1950, expressed farmers' fundamental concern: that organized labor would say, “All right, you have entered into an agreement with the Mexican Government to furnish certain facilities, bedding, housing, insurance, a guaranty of minimum work hours. . . . We feel that we want that for our domestic workers as well.” The question of who would “gamble” on unforeseen circumstances and make a “guaranty” struck at the heart of the New Deal reforms and welfare capitalism that urban industrial workers had already begun to enjoy.

Though southern planters had thus far resisted U.S. government attempts to bring a minimum wage to agriculture, they proved unable to defeat the Mexican government's advocacy: in 1952–53, Mexicans became the first agricultural workers in Arkansas to earn a minimum wage. Bracero agreements stated that braceros should be paid the local prevailing wage or an amount “necessary to cover their living needs,” whichever was higher. But during the early 1950s, consulates also set a floor for the bracero wage scale: $0.50 per hour or $2.50 per hundred pounds of cotton. During the 1953–54 picking season, farm jobs in other bracero-receiving areas had prevailing wages as low as $0.45–$0.60 per hour in Texas and as high as $1–$1.25 per hour in Oregon. In Arkansas, however, prevailing hourly wages were $0.30–$0.40.
in Arkansas was the prevailing hourly wage substantially below the bracero program’s $0.50 floor. Thus, only in Arkansas did the Mexican government effectively set a minimum wage for its workers.

The minimum wage for Mexicans threatened the economic advantage over all laborers that Arkansas planters had fought so hard to maintain. Farmer Earl Beck Jr. worried that “if we would all start paying 50 cents an hour to the Mexicans our common day labor would expect the same, no matter if they are worth it or not.”122 The head of the Parkin Farmers’ Association declared, “I do not believe that our farmers or our government should be put in the position so that Mexico can dictate the wage for our farm workers.”123 Planters had recruited braceros specifically to keep labor costs down, yet they now faced the prospect that Mexican government intervention would erode the regulation-free work environment they had so desperately fought to maintain.

A bizarre dispute between Consul Cano and U.S. Employment Service (USES) representative Ed McDonald in 1953 well illustrated planters’ fears that the bracero program would cause all cotton workers to demand higher wages. To resolve an earlier conflict with the consulate in advance of the 1953 picking season, A. H. Barnhill, a farmer from Bay, Arkansas, signed an affidavit promising to pay Mexican workers $3 per hundred pounds of cotton and to provide them with improved insurance. Cano was satisfied and acted to remove Barnhill from the contracting blacklist for the upcoming season. McDonald protested, however, arguing that Barnhill was offering too much on both counts and that his largesse would force all the area’s planters to pay more for labor that season. Ironically, he wanted Barnhill to remain on the ineligible list because he was offering too much to braceros. Cano insisted that he could not keep employers on the blacklist for treating braceros too well. If an employer offered to house workers in a hotel, Cano mused, would McDonald deny him workers because this was more than other farmers offered? “I cannot justify being placed in the position of asserting the rights and privileges of your country-men under the Migrant Labor Agreement,” Cano concluded.124 With prevailing wages in Arkansas lower than minimum bracero wages, however, Cano’s actions ultimately gave white and black workers fodder for demanding improved wages and working conditions for themselves.

In their attempts to intervene on behalf of Mexican workers, consular officials sought to bolster their image as champions of their countrymen in the United States. To retain legitimacy as Mexicans’ representatives and stave off independent strikes, consular officials would have to deliver on at least some of their promises, and evidence suggests that they did. No matter, it seemed,
was too small to merit “protection” and attention from Consul Cano and his office’s bureaucrats. The office regularly collected unpaid wages in amounts as low as $1—the equivalent of two to three hours of work—per bracero and distributed them via check to braceros’ homes in rural Mexico. Consul Cano demanded a $2.50 refund from farmer R. S. Bretherick for braceros who were inappropriately charged for their kitchen utensils. He followed up on bounced checks. He contacted insurance companies directly to ensure they made good on their bracero policies. By the early 1950s, Arkansas planters had experienced confrontations with sharecroppers, the departure of unsatisfied workers, and even organized labor strikes. But this was the first time they had to answer to any government for the routine abuse and theft to which they had subjected their workers for decades.

Though interventions on small matters provided a constant nuisance to farmers, the consulate’s most significant tool for battle was the threat of blacklisting, which could threaten farmers’ labor source, often after the crop had been planted. At various points, entire states, including Texas and Idaho, were prohibited from employing braceros due to widespread discrimination. But historians have noted that the Mexican government’s bargaining power in the bracero program slipped away after 1948, in part because the U.S. government undermined it by allowing undocumented workers to enter the country. In 1949, the Mexican government lost the right to blacklist entire areas and could blacklist only individual employers. By 1954, the Mexican government had relinquished the right to unilaterally blacklist altogether. Yet while Texas farmers had easier recourse to Tejano or undocumented labor, the threat of blacklisting carried more weight in Arkansas and other states far from the border and established Mexican American communities even as the Mexican government’s control over the process slipped away. Indeed, the Arkansas case presents a different narrative, in which specific conditions and an activist consul decisively enabled the Mexican government to exert control over the local racial and, to a lesser extent, economic order.

Outraged by the conditions braceros endured in Arkansas, consulate officials first attempted to blacklist the town of Pine Bluff, in the Delta’s southwestern reaches. Mexican officials wanted to exercise their paternal authority, cancel the area’s contracts, and send all braceros out of the area regardless of whether they wanted to leave. The only exception would be the one farm that had agreed to correct all of its contract violations. U.S. federal officials, in contrast, wanted only to make “voluntary departure” available to Mexican workers, letting those who wished to stay remain on the farms. The U.S. officials prevailed, and the consulate prepared a form that each bracero would
sign to indicate his preference: to return to Mexico or to stay in Arkansas until the contract’s end. The distinction proved decisive in undermining the Mexican government’s ability to follow through on its promise to represent its workers. Out of nearly 2,000 braceros in the area, only 285 chose to leave. Consular officials attributed this to “improved conditions,” but given the time lapse of mere weeks, more likely the majority of the workers preferred to tolerate poor living and working conditions rather than return to Mexico empty-handed. Mexican men’s determination—often depicted as desperation—to bring dollars home undermined the Mexican government’s nationalist bargaining stance in 1948.

In subsequent years, however, the Mexican consulate in Memphis did succeed in blacklisting employers and went to extreme means to do so even when U.S. officials did not cooperate. Cano refused to renew contracts for employers who had matters such as unpaid wages pending with the consulate. Longview Farms’ bracero request in 1950 was rejected because of contract noncompliance the year before. John B. Luckie owed back wages to braceros from 1951, and he remained unable to contract for at least the following five years since he had refused to pay up. A. H. Barnhill, the farmer who had his workers arrested when they attempted to leave for Chicago, remained on the ineligible list four years later as a result of the incident, despite appeals to be removed. Though not successful every time, the consulate’s threat of blacklisting in Arkansas posed a real threat to planters’ access to Mexican workers.

Those planters had fought off U.S. federal intervention into the labor conditions on their farms for decades, only to face this intervention from a different federal government during the bracero program. When J. S. Cecil found himself on the ineligible list, he threw up his hands and declared that he did not want any more Mexican workers anyway. But consular interventions and contractual obligations notwithstanding, most farmers desperately wanted to continue employing Mexicans, and they fought hard to do so. They made their case to Representative Gathings, Senators John McClellan and J. William Fulbright, the Mexican embassy in Washington, the consul himself, or USES representatives. Leo Powell tried to circumvent his blacklist status by contracting braceros under his father’s name. Convinced that the only real problem with the bracero arrangement was Consul Cano’s “personality problem,” planters conspired with Gathings and Fulbright to have Cano removed from his post. They portrayed Cano as an outside agitator, suggesting that braceros themselves had no problem with their living and working conditions in Arkansas. A. H. Barnhill, for example, complained, “It was not until after
they talked to the consul that they complained of the blankets being wet.” His comment, of course, ignored the fact that bracero complaints brought Cano to his farm in the first place.

The Mexican government’s “protection” of Mexican workers more effectively promoted the New Deal’s ideals in rural Arkansas than did New Dealers themselves. Federal Labor Department bureaucrats tried to use regulation of the bracero program to insert federal oversight into the backwaters of rural Arkansas, the fiefdom of white conservative Dixiecrats, but their representatives on the ground in Arkansas were sympathetic to farmers, not workers. For example, Labor Department officials based in Pine Bluff told Mexican officials that their only job was to ensure that planters had enough labor, not to regulate wages or conditions. Ultimately, liberal federal bureaucrats in Washington, D.C., were still more than a decade away from forcing any type of labor regulation on the white southern planters who, in the 1950s, remained key constituents in the Democratic Party.

Mexican citizens and the Mexican state, in contrast, ultimately did succeed in exerting some of the authority given to them in the bracero contract. Under pressure from two federal governments, planters felt that their long-held monopoly on rights in the employer–employee relationship was under assault. This was not what they had in mind when they first began to contract braceros.

Against “Discriminatory Acts against Mexicans”

While the vast majority of issues raised by braceros and consuls related to wages and working, living, and transport conditions—concerns that echoed the STFU and the New Deal’s economic agenda—others took on matters of race. Contrary to farmers’ frequent assertions, braceros themselves, not consular interlopers, initiated battles over discrimination. Both braceros and their consular officials were acutely aware of blacks’ inferior position in the Delta, and they were committed to ensuring that Mexicans, as citizens of somewhere, not suffer the same fate. Just as Mexicans sought to influence their treatment on the farms, so too did they work to control it in the Jim Crow landscape of the Delta’s towns.

Mexican bureaucrats in this period advanced a version of Mexicanidad that had evolved somewhat from earlier expressions in New Orleans and Mississippi. Mexico’s New Orleans consulate in the 1920s and 1930s did not control the supply of Mexican labor into the region and thus relied on whitened cultural representations and calls for international cooperation to influence...
the treatment of Mexicans. Now consular officials utilized power—the imperfect yet real power to control current and future bracero contracting—to defend a cultural nationalism claiming that since the region’s blacks were poor citizens of nowhere, seemingly without rights, Mexicans should not stand to be treated like blacks. “This region still exists in a semi-feudal state,” wrote one official in 1948. “All you see is, on the one hand, bosses living like princes in the Middle Ages, and on the other, ‘servants,’ in general black Americans, existing in a state of extreme poverty.” Another official wrote that the area’s blacks “dedicate themselves to the agricultural work of the region and to the servitude of the so-called ‘whites.’” The official thus expressed skepticism of the white racial category’s validity in the first place. Mexicans were not white in the consuls’ discourses, but they also did not have to be. They were modern, first-class citizens.

Like their counterparts in 1920s Mississippi, Arkansas’s Mexicans and Mexican Americans remained alert to signs they would be treated like African Americans and lodged complaints with consuls when they were. The most severe and overt acts of discrimination were reported in the majority-white counties on the northern end of the Arkansas Delta, particularly Poinsett and Mississippi counties, rather than the majority-black counties to the south. In the middle of the 1949 cotton-picking season, Tejano Nick C. Amador and two Mexican nationals approached the Mexican consulate in Memphis. The workers were picking cotton near Marked Tree, in Poinsett County, and reported that anti-Mexican discrimination there was rife. As described at the start of this chapter, Consul Rubén Gaxiola initiated a joint investigation together with the U.S. Labor Department and recommended the cancellation of the area’s contracts. A week later, Gaxiola traveled to the town to gather information. He took photos of eleven establishments that bore “No Mexicans” signs (figs. 8 and 9). Mexicans tended to be served in establishments open to blacks (see fig. 1). Though Gaxiola did not interview proprietors in Marked Tree, the words of a restaurant owner in nearby Osceola suggest a likely reason for Mexicans’ exclusion: “We have a very high class trade that would leave if my place was filled up with Mexicans. I would close up before I would serve them.” The Arkansas Delta’s white people, in other words, simply considered Mexicans to be below their station racially and economically. Himself conscious of class, Consul Gaxiola noted details of the establishment’s construction and appearance with each photo of an offending sign, explaining whether it was a “nice” establishment or more shabby. He also noted that in the town’s movie theater, run by the son of its largest employer, E. Ritter, Mexicans were consigned to the seats reserved for
blacks. Gaxiola did not express outrage at the conditions African Americans endured in Arkansas. Rather, he remained silent about Jim Crow as a whole, decrying only “discriminatory acts against Mexicans.”

Though they had openly and mightily resisted bracero minimum wages, work guarantees, and the monitoring of their housing and transportation conditions, local officials and farmers immediately agreed to bring social discrimination against Mexicans to an end. Little Rock–based members of the Farm Placement Service explained to Ritter that failure to do so could lead to the cancellation of Marked Tree’s contracts by mutual agreement of the U.S. and Mexican governments. After a decade of rural out-migration and battles with the STFU, the area’s planters were determined to hold onto their new labor force. So Marked Tree’s mayor personally approached the offending businesses, as did Ritter, and by Christmas of 1949, all of the signs were down. Regardless of Mexicans’ racialization and exclusion in the southwestern United States, local officials in Arkansas responded to transnational political pressure by immediately admitting Mexicans to white establishments. In exchange, the town remained off the blacklist.
Yet a few months later, Mexican workers in Marked Tree again wrote their consul to report discrimination. The very same “No Mexicans” sign was back up on Wike’s Drive Inn (see fig. 8). Many other businesses had taken down signs to appease the consulate, but they still refused to serve Mexicans or Tejanos.\footnote{154} Despite farmers’ desire to have continued access to Mexican labor, many white Arkansans were not prepared to begin admitting Mexicans and Mexican Americans to their establishments. Over the next year, the consul repeatedly pushed to have the Marked Tree area contracts canceled. Local officials signed affidavits promising to afford Mexicans the same rights “as the local citizens.”\footnote{155} Business owners wrote declarations affirming their intention to treat Mexicans equally.\footnote{156} Local officials showed movies “favorable to Mexico” in town.\footnote{157} Still, the discrimination continued.

To assess the validity of the allegations, consular and USES officials met up in Marked Tree to conduct an “experiment,” sending a bracero “dressed in clean work clothes” to order a cup of coffee in several establishments. Bryant’s Cafe refused him service. At Knott Hole Cafe, the bartender as well as several customers pointed the bracero to the back of the establishment, where a separate bar was available for Mexicans.\footnote{158} The following month, the consul learned that Marked Tree police waited outside of bars in an area now dubbed “Little Mexico” to arrest Mexicans whether or not they were drunk.\footnote{159} As Mexican and U.S. officials plainly saw, anti-Mexican practices in Marked Tree were reflective of both official policy and popular sentiment. In neighboring Trumann, too, the chief of police admitted that discrimination against Mexicans persisted. There, four Tejanos told USES and Mexican consular officials of widespread discrimination in local restaurants.\footnote{160}

During battles over discrimination in Arkansas, Consul Cano occasionally made explicit arguments that Mexicans should be classified as white in all instances, a stance at odds with Mexico’s national celebration of mestizaje. For example, he cried “insult” when Marked Tree’s police chief used the phrase “whites and Mexicans” four times in conversation.\footnote{161} Cano recognized that this semantic distinction between whites and Mexicans connoted an intended racial distinction between the groups and insisted that they be discussed as one racial group, not two. The plea departed from the vast majority of consular action and discourse, which focused on Mexicans’ claim to equal treatment as a result of their citizenship in a modern nation, thus supporting rather than contradicting Mexican nationalist ideologies of the time.

In Marked Tree, the consulate received USES agreement late in the picking season of 1951 to blacklist Ritter, though they did not succeed in withdrawing labor from the area’s other farmers and associations, nor were they
able to cancel Ritter’s contract at midseason. Yet even this partial victory placed enormous pressure on Ritter and other town leaders. Making a last-ditch attempt to secure workers for the 1952 picking season, local officials employed new and inventive means to stymie discrimination. The Marked Tree City Council published an ordinance in the Marked Tree Tribune, stating that any person or business discriminating against Mexicans would be fined between $10 and $50, “and each act of discrimination shall constitute a separate offense.” The police department removed incentives that previously encouraged officers to make superfluous arrests of Mexican workers. The farmers’ association even purchased outright two restaurants that refused to comply with the mandate against discrimination. The full weight of local officialdom came down on the side of ending anti-Mexican discrimination in white establishments.

While the steps were extensive, the measures’ very severity offended the consulate. If Marked Tree’s white residents had to be pushed that hard not to discriminate against Mexicans, he reasoned, surely their racism was too deeply ingrained and “the anti-Mexican sentiment still prevails.” Marked Tree remained unable to contract workers in 1952, and farmers contracting braceros to neighboring towns had to affirm that they would not put them to work in the Marked Tree area. Finally bending to pressure and the stack of antidiscrimination affidavits signed by Marked Tree officials, Mexican government officials agreed late in the 1952 picking season to once again permit contracting to Marked Tree. A year later, officials from nearby Trumann submitted their own sheaf of affidavits vowing not to discriminate against Mexicans, in the hopes of being removed from the blacklist as well.

Though the consulate was not able to enforce every threat of blacklisting and contract cancellation, by 1953 it had flexed enough power to have most white establishments in the Arkansas Delta admit Mexicans. Consulate documentary records show that discrimination complaints after 1953 were few, far between, and far less severe than they had been previously. More important, oral history interviews suggest that while the long-term results of these political battles over anti-Mexican discrimination were uneven, overall Mexicans in Arkansas did gain admission to white establishments in Arkansas by the mid-1950s. Claude Kennedy, an African American man whose father owned a small farm near Marianna, recalled how Mexicans’ superior access to public space only stoked his indignation at the Jim Crow system. “They could go to the movies with whites, where black people still had to go upstairs,” Kennedy said. “That was something that black people could not understand.” He remembered his mother, a schoolteacher, explaining to him why Mexicans
were not subject to the painful discrimination of Jim Crow. “Their govern-
ment would not allow them to be treated that way,” he recalled. “That was
the agreement. It was common knowledge that you can use them, but you’ve
got to give them the respect of being equal to the white man. They could
go anywhere they wanted to go.” Bernard Lipsey, the son of Jewish store
owners, remembered a Mexican American boy attending the white school
with him around 1957, before Lepanto’s schools had desegregated. Though
Mexicanos had attended a separate school in at least one Arkansas town in
1940, the boy’s assignment to the white school in the late 1950s had seemed
natural to Lipsey at the time, suggesting that within the binary world of the
Arkansas Delta, locals had come to accept that Mexicanos would nominally
fall into the white category.

Accepting Mexicans as white for Jim Crow purposes, however, did not
mean local white people accepted them socially; conversely, Mexicans’ ac-
cess to white public space did not connote a feeling of affinity with white
Arkansans. Both white and African American observers also remembered
that, like poor white cotton workers, Mexicans certainly were not made to
feel welcome in every town establishment; unlike most poor white people,
Mexicans often favored black sides of town in their leisure time. The son of
a white farmer, John Collier, remembered that when he rounded up brace-
ros in Parkin to return to the farm on Saturday nights, those who did not
report for the ride were most likely to be found in black “honky-tonks,” beer
joints, or seeking the services of black prostitutes. Some white employers
encouraged these relationships. Bracero José Gutiérrez, who worked near
West Memphis, recalled that his white supervisor brought black prostitutes
directly to braceros on the plantations and took Mexicanos to gamble in black
casinos in West Memphis. “I don’t know anything,” Gutiérrez would insist to
the boss’s wife when she asked what they had done there.

In subsequent recollections, both braceros and African Americans remi-
nisced about genial relations between the two groups. “We got along well
with [blacks], they were very friendly,” said Gutiérrez. Harrison Locke, an
African American man raised near Brinkley, recalled local authorities forbid-
ing Mexicanos from black establishments, even though they felt “more com-
fortable” in them. And though Claude Kennedy resented Mexicanos’ ability
to sit in the white section of the local movie theater, he also remembered that
Mexicanos’ racial position in that theater did not fully encompass their lives in
Arkansas. Once, Kennedy was getting a haircut at a black barbershop when
a Mexican man who spoke no English came in. From the man’s attempts to
communicate, Kennedy understood that he had been a barber in Mexico
who missed practicing his trade. Kennedy and the barber let the man cut Kennedy’s hair, even though the result left his locks a bit longer than they would have liked. The bracero likely felt grateful to this black man for helping him reconnect with his identity as a man with a trade rather than a farm laborer like any other. As the stories show, Mexicans in 1950s Arkansas fought for access to white establishments because they rejected discrimination, not because they disdained African Americans or considered themselves white in the Jim Crow sense of the word.

The Limits of Ending “Discrimination”

In economic matters as opposed to racial ones, braceros achieved fewer and more inconsistent gains. Though most continued to be housed in former sharecroppers’ cabins, in some areas they successfully pressured farmers to find more “modern” accommodations, such as an old Air Force hangar in Blytheville. Many planters and planters’ associations did begrudgingly comply with bracero contract stipulations that they be paid the prevailing wage or $2.50 per hundred pounds of cotton, whichever was higher, though others did not. And just as white elites had feared, this sometimes meant raising wages for local workers. “We have approximately 150 domestic workers living on the place,” said officials from a plantation in Helena in 1953, and “we started the season paying them $2.00 but on arrival of the Mexican workers we raised the domestics to $2.50.” In these cases, the Mexican federal government effected changes that the U.S. federal government still had not: regulating the wages and conditions of southern agricultural workers. Yet in many more cases over the course of the 1950s, planters responded minimally or not at all to bracero and consulate demands for compliance with the economic components of the contract.

As planters relied increasingly on braceros to pick their cotton over the course of the 1950s, local wage laborers suffered more than sharecroppers and tenants. Delta planters benefited from having at least some stable year-round workers, and there is no evidence that the bracero program caused them to massively evict the white and black sharecroppers and tenants who remained on their land. Some tenant farmers, among them African Americans, even hired braceros on a casual basis from the plantation owners who had contracted them. But local white and black wage laborers correctly perceived that planters had hired braceros to replace them. In 1958, E. Z. Hensen, presumably a white man, complained to Arkansas’s governor that, as a result of the influx of Mexican labor, he and his neighbors were now unable to
find employment as cotton pickers. Employers’ statements corroborate his story. “The minute the Mexicans arrived I fired my domestic labor,” said one employer. The employer speculated that those workers had moved to Tennessee, Mississippi, or Oklahoma in search of work. Another planter admitted in 1956 that he had the opportunity to hire domestic workers but refused them in favor of braceros. Indeed, while 13,000 predominantly African American day laborers from Memphis picked cotton in Arkansas in 1949, half as many did so in 1959. The arrival of braceros combined with the slow advance of the mechanical cotton picker to put black and white wage laborers out of work.

Like their white counterparts, and unlike rural black sharecroppers, black cotton day laborers in Memphis were angry at their displacement by braceros. Though unwilling to live on the farms where their families had suffered generations of exploitation, they counted on the ability to ride buses to the fields to earn extra money when they needed it. Furthermore, as more braceros became available, planters refused to raise day-haul wages to parity with bracero contracted wages. In 1954, African American truck drivers in Memphis complained to Memphis black community leader George W. Lee that Mexicans were earning more than blacks for cotton labor in the Arkansas Delta. A Republican, Lee lodged a formal protest with Memphis’s Republican congressman, Carroll Reece, claiming that African American laborers were paid thirty cents per hour for cotton chopping while Mexicans were paid fifty cents. Black day-haul laborers felt outraged, and Lee addressed their concerns as he tried to build political power in a city dominated by a white Democratic machine.

On July 14, 1954, Lee staged a huge picnic in Memphis’s Lincoln Park for the workers to present an “Appreciation Petition” to himself and Reece for their attempts to bring blacks’ wages to parity with those of Mexicans (fig. 10). Drawing on these workers’ immediate personal and family histories of rural labor, the petition decried foreigners’ superior treatment over those whose “fore-parents have toiled in the hot and chilly rains from season to season to plant, cultivate and harvest cotton.” More than 1,000 black workers ate barbecue and watermelon, singing songs and playing games with their children before piling into crew leaders’ buses to go register to vote. In the midst of a surge in black voter registration in the early 1950s, black day laborers sought to counteract Mexicans’ labor competition by forcefully claiming their own long-denied citizenship rights. Yet, though rich in meaning, there is little evidence that the picnic and petition led to any substantive change. Neither NAACP nor Urban League chapters in Little Rock, the Arkansas Delta, or...
Memphis ever noted or addressed the effect of Mexican labor on the fates of African American day laborers.194

As newly urban African Americans couched their protests in the language and symbols of emancipation and citizenship, rural white wage laborers embraced the populist rhetoric of the STFU in demanding the same rights as braceros. Like their black counterparts, they gained little political traction in their appeals. “This year they got their cotton choppers out of Old Mexico,” wrote Lee Beegle of Trumann to Gathings in longhand. “There is rottener stuff going on here than anywhere else in the world. . . . I think that no man should have more land than he can make and gather.”195 Wrote another white man six years later in 1961, “Why should the Mexicans that are brought into Arkansas for farm work be treated better than a United States Citizen? . . . His living quarters must meet specifications. His electricity, gas, dishes, bedding, etc. are furnished. There is a minimum wage paid him, if weather does not permit him to work. . . . I would rather be a citizen of Mexico, so I could be

Figure 10 African American cotton day laborers in Memphis attending an “appreciation picnic” on July 14, 1954, for George W. Lee and Representative Carroll Reece, after Lee and Reece decried wage disparities between black and Mexican cotton laborers in Arkansas. Photo proofs, the George W. Lee Collection, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library.
sent here to work on their kind of terms.” Unlike industrial workers who had similar guarantees, he contended, American agricultural workers were the “lost sheep of the employment world.”196 Poor white and black workers in the mid-South struggled to use the bracero program as a wedge to demand greater employment security and higher wages for themselves. These were the very things they had sought but not acquired through the STFU.

Meanwhile, powerful white conservative Democrats like Representative Gathings and Senators Fulbright and McClellan treated the transnational struggle over the rights of Mexican workers as one front in a larger battle to resist the imposition of labor and civil rights in the mid-South. These elected officials pressured the U.S. Department of Labor to keep the program running but bracero wages and guarantees at a minimum.197 Their constituents’ primary motivation was getting their crops out of the ground at the lowest possible price, as the mechanical cotton picker still had not obviated the need for hand labor.198 And at the same time, as they watched the battles over integration in the Delta and Little Rock, these white men knew an old order was slipping away.199 They were determined to not see the bracero program transformed into yet another liberal assault on their racial and economic dominance. In 1958, for example, in a signed letter to Gathings, 150 planters protested new housing requirements for braceros.200 Tying bracero rights to two bogeymen of the New Deal coalition, one grower blamed unfavorable changes in the program on the “Hebrews and Africans” who had supposedly taken over the federal government.201 Planters had recruited braceros to help preserve their economic and political advantages under white supremacy, yet they now feared the program would undermine them.

As hundreds of growers wrote their senators and representatives to demand the program’s continuation and protest attempts to regulate wages and housing conditions, they continued to face charges of discrimination that threatened their ability to contract Mexican labor. The consulate had largely succeeded in ensuring Mexicans had access to white Jim Crow establishments by 1953. But now in several towns, Mexicans complained to their consulate of rampant abuse by police officers who had arrested and fined them on accusations of being drunk. Indeed, police logs in Blytheville showed more Mexicans arrested than white and black residents combined during a sample week in October 1956.202 Similar complaints emerged from Trumann, Lepanto, Joiner, and Auverge.203 Some observers conflated Mexicans’ drunkenness with their innate racial qualities, explaining that these men from “the lower strata of Mexican society . . . got their Indian blood inflamed by alcohol and ended up in jail.”204 Rather than fight back as they
did on economic matters, Arkansas authorities acknowledged, “We have no defense against such charges if found to be based on fact.”

Though many Tejanos and undocumented Mexicans worked in the area throughout the 1950s, planters remained sufficiently dependent on contracted braceros that the threat of blacklisting still pressured them to act.

Though white elites could not ensure that no braceros complained of discrimination to their consulate, they could attempt to preserve their labor access by fostering improved “community relations.” Such efforts seemed particularly urgent since braceros were unaccompanied men. African American men had long been subject to violence and lynching when accused of sexual advances or worse, sexual assaults on white women. Just across the river in the Mississippi Delta, a black teenager, Emmett Till, was beaten and murdered for supposedly whistling at a white woman in 1955. The racial threat of black masculinity was never far below the surface in this region, and farmers could not risk allowing locals to feel threatened by thousands of Mexican men with their “Indian blood inflamed,” as violence against the men could create additional troubles in recruiting a now-crucial labor source.
Local authorities and farmers in several Delta towns thus promoted the opening of special recreational centers “to help alleviate the differences between the mixture of cultures,” in the words of one county agricultural agent. These centers in church basements provided Mexican men with “harmless entertainment,” luring them into socializing separately from both whites and blacks to avoid conflicts that might draw the consulate’s attention. A local photographer documenting the Phillips County center depicted Mexican men playing guitar, putting together puzzles, drawing, and singing under the watchful tutelage of dark-haired, light-skinned women—possibly local whites, possibly Tejanas—who appear to be in charge of the activities (figs. 11 and 12). Similar centers opened in Lepanto and Forrest City. A local white woman in charge of the Forrest City center claimed proudly that volunteers working at the center had a “heart warming experience.” Still fastidious about ensuring that braceros were not treated overtly like second-class citizens, Mexican officials approved of the facilities, so long as their existence did not “impede [workers’] access to other public centers.” Ultimately, both consular officials and local white elites accepted the racial accommodation
that the centers represented: Mexicans would be permitted to access white establishments but in practice would be discouraged from doing so.

Overall, farmers’ rush to bracero contracting in the early 1950s and subsequent negotiations between local and international actors over economic and racial matters directly shaped local labor markets, social relations, and even racial thinking. Farmers deliberately pushed black and white families out of cotton wage labor, local ordinances outlawed a type of discrimination, and new social spaces designated as Mexican emerged in towns once defined by black and white. Yet by the years of the bracero program’s demise in the early 1960s, planters naturalized the changes that had occurred over the course of the previous decade. Like growers in the Southwest, they attributed their newfound dependence on braceros to the laborers’ essential racial qualities.211

In Arkansas these discourses specifically compared braceros to the mid-South’s poor white and African American day laborers, their most obvious alternatives. Though they had deliberately displaced these groups by recruiting braceros and paying them higher wages, farmers blamed poor southerners, particularly African Americans, for their own disappearance from the cotton fields. “This [day-haul] labor is not dependable,” lamented one farmer in 1964. “Our Government’s efforts to provide a portion of the basic necessities of life to these people results in their having a greater indifference to work.”212 Complained another in 1965, “The state and government are feeding and supplying too many people’s needs. . . . What are the white people sitting by and saying nothing for.”213 Fifteen years after farmers dispatched black preachers to convince African Americans to stay on their farms, the farmers now discounted blacks as potential laborers altogether.

While cotton planters from Texas to Mississippi relied increasingly on mechanical cotton pickers and reduced their dependence on hand labor over the course of the 1950s, Arkansas planters, flush with bracero arms but holding less capital than their Texas counterparts, did not make this change until the early 1960s.214 Where nearly 40,000 Mexican men labored under contract in Arkansas’s fields in the peak year of 1959, just over 2,000 did in the program’s penultimate year, 1963.215 Under pressure from the labor movement, the United States ended the bracero program in 1964. The following year, the Voting Rights Act made a surplus of black workers a political liability more than an economic advantage; those workers could now vote.216 Mechanization seemed more attractive than ever, and by 1967, 93 percent of Arkansas cotton was harvested by machine.217 While the bracero program brought long-term Mexican settlement to other regions of recruitment, a stunningly
low number of braceros—probably fewer than ten, out of hundreds of thousands that had passed through—remained in Arkansas.218

In the Shadow of Jim Crow

The major decade of bracero contracting to Arkansas was the one in which legalized de jure segregation fell. Braceros arrived in Arkansas in the wake of a war fought in segregated battalions; they left just before the passage of the Civil Rights Act. In the intervening years, the Supreme Court struck down the doctrine of separate but equal and Arkansas Dixiecrats lost the battle over school integration with civil rights leaders and the federal government. Having spent decades fighting against both racial integration and agricultural employees’ demands for labor rights, planters sought temporary Mexican workers, who seemed the ideal solution to meet labor needs without further threatening a crumbling social order. Unfortunately for planters, the racialized workers who arrived had—in many ways, like their Memphis- and Chicago-bound black counterparts—come to see themselves as modern citizens with rights and, in Mexicans’ case, as citizens of a nation that championed the cause of working people.219 Unlike their rural black counterparts, Mexicans had access to a transnational source of power strong enough to effect rapid change: the emigration-minded Mexican government and its local activist consulate.

Race and class overlapped imperfectly in battles over the New Deal, and only in the Arkansas Delta, with its majority-black population and exceedingly low wages, did Mexican activism abet both strands of the liberal agenda: economic security and an end to de jure racial discrimination. Mexican workers, appealing to their consulate for support, succeeded in forcing farmers to reject overt anti-Mexican discrimination and to admit dark-skinned foreigners into white establishments as early as 1948. By all accounts, this gain stood, if imperfectly, throughout braceros’ tenure in the Arkansas Delta. In the economic arena, where farmers resisted the consulate more vehemently, Mexicans’ gains were more inconsistent. Notably, however, Arkansas was the only state where bracero minimum wages exceeded the local prevailing wage. Thus, at key moments in the early 1950s, braceros did force white planters to pay a minimum wage in agriculture—the first in the state’s history—not only to braceros but, inadvertently, also to black and white workers.

Mexican workers—Guanajuato’s Ignacio Canchola García, Durango’s Cristóbal Vásquez Martínez, Zacatecas’s Margarito Reyna Torres, Veracruz’s Angel Ramírez López, and thousands of others—raised these demands.220
The success of their challenges to Jim Crow and their sometime ability to claim higher and fairer pay depended directly on the intervention of a robust Mexican government retaining real control over farmers’ access to labor. After all, as Mexicans’ initial exclusion from white spaces and preference for frequenting black bars and businesses showed, the race and class politics of the Arkansas Delta did not “naturally” afford Mexicans rights or acceptance of any sort. The Mexican government’s control over contracting declined substantially in the early 1960s, leaving in its wake a region where locals were generally willing to view Mexicans favorably and tolerate their presence in white establishments but where Mexicans’ wages were stagnant and working conditions were deplorable. Bracero Juan Loza, who worked near Helena in 1962, recalled once but not always being asked to leave a white lunch counter there. He also remembered one Sunday that year when he and other braceros went to Helena’s Catholic church. They sat together in a pew, and a white couple joined them at the other end of the bench. “When the mass was over, it was only us there,” he said. “I don’t even know when they moved.” Rejected but not ejected by the church’s white members, Loza’s predicament encapsulated that of braceros in Arkansas in the early 1960s. These men eluded the rigid structures of Jim Crow but did not escape the economic, social, and cultural caste system it had created.

Mexican workers and their consular allies had succeeded for more than a decade in bringing piecemeal reform to the Delta. They gained recognition as not black and sometimes secured improved housing, better food in their labor camps, wage floors, and full payment of the wages due them. Braceros valued these victories for their own dignity as workers, men, and Mexican citizens. Yet while planters’ victories were also incomplete, they proved to be more durable. The bracero program allowed the Arkansas Delta to rely on a cheap, racialized cotton labor force longer than anywhere else in the Delta region. By the time civil rights and labor activists pushed President Lyndon Johnson to sacrifice the once-“solid” Democratic South, sign the Civil Rights Act, expand federal protections to black agricultural workers, and begin an agricultural minimum wage during the mid- to late 1960s, Arkansas planters had already pioneered a new model to circumvent these changes. Their violent efforts to preserve white supremacy had driven away the very African American workforce on which they once depended. Now they worked hard at the local level to tamp down overt anti-Mexican discrimination, thus ensuring a continued supply of Mexican laborers. This supply of laborers would enable them to keep wages low, minimizing the impact of liberal reforms on their bottom line.
The specific nature of this social, economic, and cultural transformation in the Arkansas Delta established a logic that would shape the rural South’s “Mexicanization” in subsequent decades. For the rest of the twentieth century, the agents of this Mexicanization were largely undocumented immigrants without the limited protections of an internationally negotiated work contract. Local southern authorities after the bracero program thus sought improved relations between whites and Mexicanos not to please a foreign government but rather to make their communities attractive to Mexicano workers.

Though Arkansas was the only state in the black–white South to recruit large numbers of braceros, Florida and Georgia also recruited them occasionally, though never in numbers larger than 5,000 per year. As the next chapter will discuss, the Arkansas experience, bridging the Jim Crow and post–Jim Crow eras, portended the future struggles of white, black, and Mexicano workers in those states and throughout the rural South during the 1960s–90s.