

GIVE BRACEROS THEIR MONEY! (5/01)

Braceros, they were called - literally, men who worked with their arms. They began crossing the border from Mexico in 1942, an army of contract laborers moving swiftly, quietly and efficiently through the fields of California and the great American Southwest. For 22 years, they grew and harvested our fruits and vegetables for pay and under conditions that few U.S. workers would tolerate.

The braceros, imported under a program established by the U.S. and Mexican governments, had no choice but to accept whatever was offered. Those who dared object faced a quick trip back across the border, where other desperately poor men waited anxiously to take their places.

They toiled long hours under the blistering summer sun at their arduous, back-breaking work -- stooping, pulling, lifting, provided only the most primitive of tools and rarely even fresh drinking water and field toilets. They were paid as little as 30 cents an hour, never more than \$1.

The braceros' living conditions were no better. Most were housed in crumbling wooden shacks or dormitories in farm labor camps that dated from the 1930s. Their meals consisted of the cheapest food growers could find.

Even the Council of California Growers acknowledged the existence of "filthy, disgraceful conditions."

The growers' abuse of braceros helped convince Congress to kill the bracero program in 1964 and finally deny them the unlimited, government-guaranteed supply of cheap, docile, non-union and captive Mexican labor they had relied on for two decades to keep pay and conditions at the lowest possible levels.

Now it turns out that many of the 4.5 million Mexican nationals who worked as braceros actually were treated even worse than was previously reported.

In what was described as a move to make certain they did not return home from their summer's work empty-handed, 10 percent of their pitifully meager pay was withheld and supposedly deposited in a Mexican bank by their government. The braceros were to collect the money on returning to their poverty-laden towns and villages where work under any conditions was scarce. The deposits, made between 1942 and 1950, totaled perhaps \$3 billion, but few braceros collected their share.

Some former braceros say they were never told of the deduction or were told, when trying to collect, that there was no account in their name. Some were promised payments, but never got any. Others say they got only partial payments, with a promise for more that never materialized. And some simply were intimidated by the process required to claim the money.

Manuel Garcia y Griego, a University of Texas professor who's studied the matter closely, told the New York Times he didn't "even know for a fact that anybody got their money back. Assuming some people did, there were certainly a lot of people who did not . . . if you add interest, we're easily talking about hundreds of millions of dollars."

That was the final indignity for the outrageously exploited braceros. It's too late for an estimated one million of them who have died. But court actions and other efforts now underway on both sides of the border may at last give their heirs and the survivors, many still living in poverty, what they worked so hard to earn so long ago.

Simple justice demands it.