

CREATING FOREIGN POLICY LOCALLY: MIGRATORY LABOR AND THE  
TEXAS BORDER, 1943-1952

DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

Texas participated in the bracero program until 1943, when the Mexican government instituted a labor embargo against the state because of numerous reports of racial discrimination there. For the next several years, Texas officials worked to convince Mexican leaders to rescind the embargo through a wide variety of policies including investigating cases of discrimination, reforming aspects of the state education system, negotiating directly with Mexican officials, enlisting the cooperation of the U.S. federal government, and working to improve the image of Texas among the Mexican public. Texas created new government bureaucracies to coordinate these efforts, including the Inter-Agency Committee, the Council on Human Relations, and most importantly, the Good Neighbor Commission. Collectively, these efforts represent a striking effort by Texas leaders and private citizens to influence the foreign policy between their state, and sometimes their individual community, and the Mexican government. Despite these efforts, the embargo dragged on for years.

This dissertation argues that the slow resolution of the labor embargo was due less to the intransigence of the Mexican government than to the inability of Texas leaders to effect the kinds of changes within Texas society, such as passing legislation

to punish acts of discrimination, which would have convinced the Mexican government that their embargo was no longer necessary. First, the existence of the Jim Crow system in Texas was a constant brake on the nature of programs that could be considered by Texas. Texans were also quite conservative. Their view of government's appropriate role in society left them with the feeling that educating, investigating, and persuading marked the extent of their reach.

Other key lessons to be drawn from this study include the intractable nature of illegal immigration across the U.S.-Mexican border. This study also reveals something about how the Truman administration approached foreign relations with those nations on the periphery of the Cold War struggle. Truman hoped to protect vulnerable groups of laborers, both U.S. and Mexican. His approach to the issue revealed the part of himself that supported the Fair Deal, rather than the part that enunciated the Truman Doctrine.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The United States and Mexico are deeply intertwined economically, culturally, militarily, and geographically. As a consequence, the foreign relations between the two nations have been uniquely multi-layered. Beyond the actions and policies of decision-makers in Washington and Mexico City, this relationship was defined at the state and local level by governors, individual government employees such as border patrol agents, non-governmental organizations such as unions and advocacy groups, employers, and millions of ordinary citizens. The U.S.-Mexican border has become a significantly blurred boundary, where economic zones, cultural modes, and even sovereignty have eluded precise division. This boundary has also eluded exact control by the federal governments of either country. Developments along the border have shaped the course of the relationship, constrained the boundaries of the possible, and forced issues into the consciousness of presidents and secretaries of state.

In ways unique to this relationship, U.S. state governments joined the federal government in its interest in foreign policy toward Mexico. The movement of money, workers, and material into and out of border states made Mexico impossible

to ignore for the governors of Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, California, and other states beyond the border itself. Local leaders, such as the mayors of towns like El Paso, Brownsville, or San Diego were also vitally interested in what happened in Mexico, and how Mexico and Mexicans affected their communities. Outside of government, private organizations such as labor unions, chambers of commerce, advocacy groups, and churches were deeply concerned with and affected by this binational interaction. Finally, individual U.S. citizens interacted with Mexico and its people as tourists, friends, relatives, and in numerous other ways. In perhaps no other U.S. foreign relationship were more people at more levels so deeply concerned and involved.

This work captures some of the complexity of this relationship in the 1940s and early 1950s by focusing on interactions between the two nations at multiple levels. The goals, thoughts, and actions of federal leaders will be considered. To this traditional perspective will be added the actions, programs, problems, and worldviews of state and local leaders in an effort to show that meaningful foreign policy decisions were made not only in Washington and Mexico City. Border states such as Texas maintained active foreign policies with Mexico and other nations independent of the concerns of national leaders in the State Department and the White House. This project focuses on Texas to a large extent as a case study within which to examine these issues.

This work focuses on perhaps the single most significant issue between the United States and Mexico, the migration of Mexican citizens to the United States for

work. The 1940s and early 1950s is a useful period to study when considering migration issues. This period marked the beginning of the immigration trends that have become so important over the last half-century, characterized by high levels of both legal and illegal immigration. Immigration from Mexico had been significant in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the Great Depression reversed the flow during the 1930s, with Mexicans and Mexican-Americans streaming southward either by choice or compulsion. This trend reversed itself again with the beginning of World War II. In 1942, the U.S. and Mexican governments created the bracero program to bring Mexican workers onto American farms, thus beginning a policy of legal immigration that would allow tens of thousands of Mexican men legally to enter the United States every year. In addition, illegal immigration began to skyrocket to hundreds of thousands of persons per year, a number that included women and children, as opposed to the almost exclusively male character of the legal immigration.

The bracero program had particular importance for the government of Texas after 1943, when the Mexican government decided to exclude Texas from receiving agricultural workers under the program due to reports of rampant racial discrimination. This labor embargo was an affront to the pride of Texans. It belied their self-conception of having a special relationship with Mexico. It also represented an economic hardship for several important interest groups.

In response, the state government launched a series of programs that included direct contact with Mexican officials in an effort to have the blacklist lifted. Governor

Coke Stevenson quickly coupled these programs under the umbrella of the Good Neighbor Commission of Texas (GNC), created in 1943. Despite the GNC's efforts, the embargo would last in some form into the 1950s.

This dissertation argues that the labor embargo persisted because cultural factors within Texas prevented that state's leadership from adopting the type of solutions that the Mexican government demanded. Specifically, attitudes toward race relations, including the institutionalized Jim Crow system, and attitudes toward the proper role of government made Texas leaders unwilling to consider legal restrictions on discriminatory practices despite all of their efforts and seemingly sincere desires to eradicate discrimination against Mexicans in Texas. On a somewhat different conceptual plane, this work also shows that analysis of the formation of foreign policy needs to incorporate a diffuse group of actors, particularly when the presence of a frontier between two nations gives local actors an unusually large stake in the process. Texas government officials and even non-governmental actors actively worked to shape the state's foreign policy toward the government of Mexico.

The 1940s and early 1950s was a new era in U.S.-Mexican relations. A state of unease had existed since Mexico's revolution decades earlier. This tension peaked in 1938 when Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas expropriated foreign-owned oil holdings in Mexico, but World War II brought the two nations together. Mexico's contacts to the rest of the world were suspended, and its economic relationship with the United States grew closer than ever. New leadership in the form of President Manuel Ávila Camacho pursued a much more conciliatory approach than that which

had characterized the rule of Cardenas. Miguel Alemán Valdez was elected to the presidency in 1946, in the wake of World War II, and generally continued the policy of closer relations with the United States established during the Avila Camacho years.

Nevertheless, this calm and optimistic exterior masked some tensions in the U.S.-Mexican relationship. The Cold War brought with it a new set of concerns that dominated the thoughts and international agendas of U.S. leaders in Washington. Pursuit of Cold War goals was often complicated by the necessity of resolving bilateral issues associated with economics and the movement of people across the border.

To set the backdrop for later analysis of labor policy, this introduction briefly outlines the chief U.S. goals with regard to Mexico during the first five or so years of the early Cold War. One of the key goals of U.S. leaders was to limit communist influence in Mexico. They feared that the long-standing anti-Americanism present in Latin America might provide ripe soil for communist appeals.<sup>1</sup> George Messersmith, U.S. ambassador to Mexico from 1941 to 1946, was particularly susceptible to these fears. In 1946, Messersmith described efforts on the part of some Mexicans to secure his removal from the post of ambassador, and warned that these and other events were an “indication of the definite Moscow and Communist interest in attacking us here in Mexico.”<sup>2</sup> The ambassador further expressed fear that the 1946 election in Mexico would give support to communist groups since they had thrown their support

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<sup>1</sup> November 14, 1950, Soviet Capabilities and Intentions in Latin America Containment in Latin America—Folder 1 of 15 November, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>2</sup> Messersmith to Carrigan, January 12, 1946, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic*

behind the winning candidate, Alemán. He was very far from being a communist himself, but joining his coalition seemed to provide the most advantages for the communists, given Mexico's *de facto* one party political system. The individual Messersmith was most concerned about was the well-known labor leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano, about whom he said "the close connection between Lombardo and Soviet Russia is daily more obvious."<sup>3</sup> He went on to warn that the United States could not ignore these threats because "If we are not taking any interest in the Mexican elections, there isn't any doubt that Soviet Russia is."<sup>4</sup> Later in 1946, expressing alarm at the possible results of food shortages within Mexico, Messersmith called for urgent help. He direly predicted that "there would be a revolution and the red flag in Mexico in three months if its wheat needs are not met."<sup>5</sup>

Although not all leaders completely shared the alarmist opinions of the Ambassador, nearly all were concerned with enlisting Mexico's support in the Cold War struggle. After 1950, Mexican support for the United Nations' actions in Korea became a primary concern. Although Mexico nominally supported the Korean War in the United Nations, it declined to send even a token force. Mexican Foreign Minister Manuel Tello informed the State Department that public opinion in Mexico would not allow his government to send troops outside of Mexican territory, although

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*Papers 1946* (United States Government Printing Office, 1969), 11: 970-971.

<sup>3</sup> Messersmith to Acheson, January 12, 1946, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers 1946* (United States Government Printing Office, 1969), 11: 972.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Hamilton to Clayton, May 2, 1946, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers 1946* (United States Government Printing Office, 1969), 11: 1051-1052.

he hastened to deny that communists constituted a significant influence over Mexican public opinion.<sup>6</sup> U.S. officials were concerned by this lack of participation. One State Department official wrote that while Mexico's basic loyalty was not in question, it was nevertheless true that "Mexico's reaction so far to the U.N. effort against aggression has been disappointing," and he went on to suggest that "we should redouble our efforts to make the Mexican Government and people feel their responsibility in this fight for freedom."<sup>7</sup>

The importance to U.S. policy-makers of global issues related to peace and security, even with respect to U.S.-Mexican relations, received its clearest expression in a policy statement issued by the State Department in October 1951. Before outlining the most important issues to U.S. policy with Mexico, this document included a general statement of objectives that read as follows:

Objectives in our relations with Mexico are to enlist her support in efforts to promote Inter-American and world-wide peace, develop better political, economic, and cultural relations, obtain more tangible support of the United Nations policy to resist aggression wherever it may arise, including the use of Mexican troops, assure maximum cooperation in case of total war, settle individual problems arising between United States and Mexican interests, as well as problems between the two Governments, and promote mutually advantageous economic development.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, April 6, 1951, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers 1951* (United States Government Printing Office, 1979), 2: 1476.

<sup>7</sup> Nufer to White, April 30, 1951, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (United States Government Printing Office, 1979), 2: 1483.

<sup>8</sup> Policy Statement Prepared in the Department of State, October 1, 1951, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Paper 1951* (United States Government Printing Office, 1979), 2: 1489-

What emerges from the sum of these statements is that the Cold War shaped the policy priorities of State Department officials. International security concerns were such in the late 1940s and early 1950s that they came to play an important role even in relations with countries such as Mexico, with which relations were stable and which was far removed from the central events of the early Cold War.

Mexico also had large-scale policy goals that stood to be influenced by border issues such as the bracero program. Mexico during the late 1940s and early 1950s was attempting to industrialize its economy, and to further that goal, it sought U.S. backing for large-scale financing from international organizations such as the Export-Import Bank. Mexico was also interested in modernizing its army through the acquisition of weapons and training from the United States through the Lend-Lease program and other agreements. The goals of both U.S. and Mexican leaders would be partially constrained by issues relating to the bracero program.

Since the bracero program will be central to the following chapters, the next section outlines the basic structures of the bracero program, and highlights some of the more important issues surrounding it. It was a program of great importance for the employers and communities within the United States who received these workers, and to the workers themselves and the government of Mexico that represented them.

The system of migratory labor known as the bracero program was instituted through a series of intergovernmental agreements between the United States and Mexico. After a temporary program in 1942, the first significant agreement was codified with the passage in the United States of Public Law 45, on April 29, 1943.



This law laid the groundwork for the functioning of the bracero program through December 31, 1947. During this five-year period, 219,500 Mexican laborers legally entered the United States.<sup>9</sup> Beginning in 1947, before the wartime measures had yet expired, the agreements with Mexico were reformulated under a series of executive agreements dated, March 10, and April 2, 1947, February 21, 1948, and August 1, 1949.

In practical terms the contracting of laborers proceeded according to a clearly outlined process. The governments of Mexico and the United States worked out the basic framework of an Individual Work Contract. Both the employer and the incoming migrant would have to sign this contract. In addition, the employer would have to fill out an Application for Permission to Retain and/or Import Mexican Agricultural Labor. Before this application on the part of the employer was approved, the need for foreign laborers had to be certified. Mexican nationals were to be admitted only under the conditions that there was a specific need that could not be met by domestic sources, and that the Mexican workers would not displace U.S. workers.<sup>10</sup>

Once the need had been certified, employers were authorized to begin recruiting. At the recruiting center, which was always in the interior of Mexico rather than on the border itself, the laborers were given a physical exam by medical

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<sup>9</sup> The President's Commission on Migratory Labor, *Migratory Labor in American Agriculture: Report of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1951), 38.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

examiners from both Mexico and the United States and then matched with prospective employers. The employer was then responsible for transporting the worker to the border, where he was subject to another medical exam, and the contract was reviewed and staff from the Mexican consulate inspected the employer's transportation. Finally, the employer could then transport the workers to their final destination, again at the employer's expense.<sup>11</sup>

This process is interesting for several reasons. Its tightly prescribed set of rules made it unique among foreign work contracting agreements at the time. The Mexican government was interested in creating a series of protections for its citizens. It was concerned about domestic public opinion, and not particularly desperate to have their workers travel to the United States. As the President's Commission on Migratory Labor in American Agriculture put it, "Mexico is the only country which requires an intergovernmental agreement; by coincidence, Mexico is the country which is ostensibly least interested in having its nationals do farm work in the United States."<sup>12</sup> Because of this, in addition to the inspection of transportation, there were also rules regarding housing, and guarantees of minimum wages. As the program was originally designed, braceros were to be paid the prevailing wage, with a floor of 30 cents an hour, and they were guaranteed work for 75 percent of the workdays they were under contract.<sup>13</sup> These provisions often meant that the Mexican laborers were

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 42-43.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>13</sup> Richard B. Craig, *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy* (Austin: University of Texas press, 1971), 44.

paid better than their U.S. counterparts. As a result of these concerns, there was a large-scale presence of government officials from both sides of the border throughout the process.

The contracting of legal workers in Mexico paralleled by the large flow of undocumented migrants. In contrast to the wartime agreement, in the postwar period the United States periodically agreed to legalize illegal migrants already in the United States beginning in 1947.<sup>14</sup> After 1947, the legalization of these illegal migrants constituted the majority of contracting through the period discussed here.

Legalization agreements occurred in 1947, 1949, and 1950.<sup>15</sup>

Illegal migration was tied to migratory patterns within Mexico. Mexican workers migrated to the northern regions of the country to perform agricultural labor. When they would arrive in the border regions, workers on the Mexican side of the border earned an average of \$1.10 per day (in U.S. dollars) in 1947. These wages were in a steady decline. By 1949, average earnings were down to 69 cents per day. On the U.S. side of the border, average wages during this period were more than 50 cents an hour for legal workers during this period, and steadily increasing. The pull of earning many times what they could get in Mexico, as well as the saturation of the market on the Mexican side of the border, induced many migrants to risk an illegal

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 38-42.

<sup>15</sup> President's Commission, Ibid., 74.

crossing. Although undocumented workers could not expect to earn as much as legal workers, they could still earn much more than their expected wage in Mexico.<sup>16</sup>

In a final note on the mechanics of the process, it is also interesting that the states receiving migratory workers altered dramatically in the postwar period. During the war, workers tended to be concentrated on the Pacific coast, with the vast majority going to California alone. Washington, Oregon, and Idaho also received considerable numbers. After the war, on the other hand, Texas had the most, when it was not embargoed from receiving them, with New Mexico and Arkansas being other top consumers of Mexican labor.<sup>17</sup>

The complicated and highly regulated process of labor contracting was designed to protect Mexican workers from abuses that they might experience if left to their own resources. However, enforcement was spotty at best, and for undocumented workers such protection was non-existent. The following chapters examine both the U.S. and Mexican government's efforts to deal with that flow of illegal immigrants, as well as the efforts of Texas and U.S. officials to secure access to legal workers under the bracero program for Texas employers.

This work addresses and adds to several trends in the historical literature. First, it remedies the dearth of attention paid to U.S.-Mexican relations in the early Cold War. A few works, such as Stephen Niblo's *War, Diplomacy, and Development*, cover this period as a part of broader studies centered on how World

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 71-71,130.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 55.

War II affected Latin American development, and general surveys such as Lester Langley's *The Fragile Relationship*, which covers U.S.-Mexican relations over Mexico's entire history, give some attention to the period, but much remains to be done.<sup>18</sup> This lack of attention to the early Cold War is a trend characteristic of the study of U.S. relations with all of Latin America, not just Mexico. Latin America has been viewed as a secondary concern to Truman and other top policy makers during the formative years of the Cold War. However, in many ways Mexico provides an interesting case study for analysis during this period precisely because the Cold War was a secondary concern.

Another historiographic trend that is significant here is the recent interest in borderlands studies as a separate category of inquiry. The works of Oscar J. Martínez and other historians have highlighted the usefulness of this framework for the U.S.-Mexican border in particular.<sup>19</sup> These studies focus on borders as spaces of flux where identities, loyalties, citizenship, economic relationships, and a host of other factors are constantly negotiated and renegotiated. Borderland studies often focus on these cultural and identity issues. This work is informed by those efforts, with the hope of also adding back into the mix the traditional foreign policy concerns of interests, power, and security in order to create a more complete picture.

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen R. Niblo, *War, Diplomacy, and Development: The United States and Mexico, 1938-1954* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1995) and Lester D. Langley, *Mexico and the United States: The Fragile Relationship* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991).

<sup>19</sup> Oscar J. Martínez, ed., *U.S.-Mexico Borderlands: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1996).

The bracero program specifically has received significant scholarly attention. María Herrera-Sobek has written several studies of migrant communities that examine the culture of the migrants.<sup>20</sup> Other historical studies have focused on the mechanics of the bracero program, such as the health screening or recruiting.<sup>21</sup> These books provide valuable insights, and the present work seeks to add to them by more fully incorporating the state, national, and international political perspective.

## Overview

The first substantive chapter, chapter two, deals with the creation of GNC. It examines the commission's functioning as it interacted with the Texas state government, the U.S. federal government, the Mexican federal government, and some of the Mexican state governments along the border. Governor Stevenson tasked the GNC with gathering information, facilitating community action, and dealing directly with the Mexican consuls to bring the relationship between Texas and Mexico back onto a positive footing. In addition, this chapter introduces the ways in which interest groups such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and the Texas Cotton Ginners' Association worked to influence policy and public opinion in Texas. Key to this study is how these various organizations dealt with the fundamental issue of discrimination, since the Mexican government used

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<sup>20</sup> María Herrera-Sobek, *The Bracero Experience: Eliteloire versus Folklore* (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, 1979) and *Northward Bound: The Mexican Migrant Experience in Ballad and Song* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> See Kitty Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S* (New York: Routledge, 1992) and Richard B. Craig, *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy*

discriminatory behavior against Mexicans in Texas as the reason for instituting the labor embargo. This chapter follows the GNC from its creation in 1943 through 1947 when it achieved its first tangible success by securing some limited contracting of Mexican workers for Texas.

Chapters three and four, which divide the 1947-1948 period chronologically, focus on the rise and fall of two international agreements in 1947 and 1948, which would bring workers legally into Texas for the first time in years. The 1947 agreement allowed for the legalization of Mexican illegal immigrants already in Texas, the so-called "drying the wets" plan. This agreement faltered because of noncompliance in Texas and would not be renewed at the end of 1947 when the entire bracero contract was under renegotiation. In October 1948, the newly renegotiated bracero program that applied for the rest of the country but excluded Texas would fail, again because of the noncompliance of Texas growers. This time, the agreement came undone because of one particularly dramatic event known as the El Paso incident. These chapters discuss why these two agreements failed and what their failure reveals about the influence of the border region on national policy. These two chapters further examine the role of interest groups in shaping migratory labor policy along the border. In particular, they highlight the role of the Stilley Plan, named for Jay Stilley, the Executive Secretary of the Texas Cotton Ginners' Association. In early 1948 Stilley, seeing that members of his organization were unlikely to receive Mexican migratory laborers, emphasized private and voluntary measures whereby he could convince the Mexican government that Texans were serious about eliminating

discrimination and should be allowed to receive braceros. He popularized this plan both in Texas and among Mexican officials. Although it was never fully put into practice or accepted, it became an important rhetorical tool for Mexican and U.S. officials and an important example of how interest groups worked to shape policy both through and outside of government channels.

Chapter five traces a significant transformation in the labor embargo as it officially ended, but more precisely morphed into a new shape in 1949. Texas was finally included in the new bracero agreement negotiated in that year, but a new form of labor embargo emerged in which individual counties or communities could be excluded if Mexican and U.S. officials found evidence of discrimination there. The work of the GNC, and other interested Texas agencies, thus transformed into a town-by-town approach. Chapter five traces this transformation as well as examines the effect of continual non-compliance with the agreement in Texas.

The last chapter focuses on the Truman administration's effort to understand and control the problems associated with migratory labor in the United States, particularly those issues related to legal and illegal immigration from Mexico. Truman created the President's Commission on Migratory Labor in 1950 and tasked it with studying the issue in its domestic and international contexts. The commission's recommendations were largely antithetical to the position of Texas growers, and the resulting fight over how to implement them will be detailed in this final chapter.

This work relies upon material from archives of the U.S. federal government, state governments, newspapers, and a number of other U.S. documents. It



complements and expands upon the U.S. perspective through the inclusion of source material from Mexican archives, newspapers, and other historical documents.

Studying the U.S.-Mexican border provides opportunities to blend old and new approaches to the study of U.S. foreign relations. Such an approach will make the story of official state-to-state relations more nuanced by the inclusion of some of the complex interactions taking place along the U.S.-Mexican border. The resulting picture reveals some of the fascinating and rich interaction that takes place across this boundary where not only two governments but also two peoples meet.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE ORIGINS OF THE GOOD NEIGHBOR COMMISSION: RACE, ECONOMICS, AND POLITICS IN TEXAS, 1943-1947

Texas' problems surrounding the issue of migratory labor occurred within a political context in which large landowners wielded significant political power. Politically, Texas has been a one-party system through much of its history. The Civil War solidified the Democratic Party as the dominant party in Texas politics for more than 100 years. The Democratic Party was the party of the South, the party of conservatism, and the party of economic power. Landowners and other economic elites traditionally wielded political power consistent with their economic clout.

During the 1930s, a slightly more liberal flavor of Democratic politics gained ground in Texas. The New Deal created opportunities for a different breed of Democrat. New Deal Democrats emphasized the social responsibility of government and were much more willing to use the power of the government to address nagging social questions than were more conservative Democrats. At the national level, the most shining example of this style of Texas politician was that of Lyndon Johnson, who rose from humble beginnings to national prominence using his role in a New Deal agency as a springboard. Within Texas, the Democratic Party saw a significant

shift toward liberalism in the 1930s with the beginning of James Allred's term as governor in 1935. The Governor set about enacting liberal programs at the state level to complement the national New Deal. In doing so, Allred took advantage of a new coalition that included "unemployed persons, working-class whites, labor union members, Jews, university people, some professionals, Latinos, and African-Americans."<sup>1</sup> African-Americans had traditionally been one of the bulwarks of the weak Republican Party in Texas, but during the 1930s more and more African-Americans became Democrats, drawn by the economic promises of the New Deal.

During the 1940s, conservative Democrats would make a resurgence as the economic difficulties of the Great Depression receded. However, liberalism would not disappear, and Governors Coke Stevenson, Beauford Jester, and Allan Shivers would have to work to placate both wings of the party during that decade. All three of these leaders tended toward conservatism, with Jester being perhaps the most willing of the group to accommodate liberal political views. This conservatism placed Texas leaders at odds with the Harry Truman administration on a number of issues. The antipathy with the liberal wing of the national Democratic Party was such that Shivers opposed Truman, and consequently Adlai Stevenson at the 1952 convention, ultimately helping Dwight Eisenhower to carry Texas that year. Conservatives also enjoyed the political advantages that their economic position secured. More effective and well-financed political campaigns and electoral

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<sup>1</sup> Neal Tannahill, *Texas Government: Policy and Politics*, Ninth Edition (New York, Pearson Longman, 2007) 138.

machines helped ensure a higher voter turnout among conservatives than among the generally less well-off liberal factions, although this tendency would not preclude some success by the liberals.<sup>2</sup>

Political participation in general was quite low in Texas, as it was in much the South. The de facto one-party system meant that there was little motivation to vote in general elections, and even Democratic primaries had participation levels that put Texas far below the national average.<sup>3</sup>

The Texas legislature had the power to control appropriations and create law, but was placed under a series of significant limitations by the Texas constitution. The legislature met only in odd-numbered years, and although there was no limitation on the length of sessions, members were only given per diem allowances for 120 days. Any additional special sessions were strictly limited to 30 days. The legislature was prohibited from borrowing money, and much of the functioning of the electoral system was defined by the Constitution. As such, the governorship was in many ways a more powerful position. Texas governors enjoyed line-item veto power, a powerful legally defined role in the budget process, and the visibility and prestige that came with holding statewide office. In addition, the governor was constantly in

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Caleb Perry Patterson, Sam B. McAlister, and George C. Hester, *State and Local Government in Texas* (Third Edition, 1961) 60.

power, giving him a distinct advantage over the legislature, which met relatively infrequently.<sup>4</sup> Despite this power imbalance, this dissertation will reveal that the state legislature was able to wield significant power at key moments.

It was during this moment of a conservative resurgence that the issue of migratory labor became important because of the demand created by the Second World War. Beginning in 1942, the United States began to import Mexican laborers to help harvest its booming agricultural output. Texans felt an acute need for these workers, particularly in those regions where cotton production predominated. Texas growers flocked to take advantage of the new bracero program. Mexican laborers were contracted by the tens of thousands under the terms of the agreement. They were brought to U.S. farms and ranches where they lived in primitive buildings or camps while working long days in the fields. Ideally, the workers would be able to save money, returning to Mexico when their contracts expired better able to provide for their families. The U.S. and Mexican governments codified the terms of bracero contracting more formally in 1943 in a form that would change little until the agreement expired in 1947.

Under the international agreements negotiated with the Mexican government, the contracting of workers and the administration of the program was to be conducted at the federal level, but in the summer of 1943 a crisis fell into the lap of the state government in Austin. On June 21, U.S. embassy officials in Mexico City reported that the Mexican government would not allow any agricultural workers to go to Texas

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

because Mexican workers faced excessive discrimination there.<sup>5</sup> This ban dealt an economic blow to the hundreds of large agribusinesses and smaller farms that depended on these laborers toiling for the wages the agreement allowed. More than that, singling out one state in this manner was an affront to Texans' sense of pride, belying their self-conception of having a special relationship with Mexico. Also, news of this labor embargo had potentially far-reaching economic effects by sully the image of Texas throughout Latin America.

Discrimination against Hispanics in Texas was indeed widespread. The most common form of discrimination was denial of service. Cafés, theaters, stores, transportation, and other public services or places of leisure often excluded Hispanics. Signs in storefronts reading "No Blacks or Mexicans Allowed" were commonplace. In addition to this type of segregation, Hispanics also faced employment discrimination. Desirable jobs with high skill requirements, good wages, or managerial duties were often off limits for Hispanic applicants. In addition, public schools were frequently segregated by race, with Hispanic children forced into less desirable schools while white children enjoyed more resources and better facilities. Not infrequently, Hispanics were also subject to racially motivated violence on the part of private citizens, federal border patrol agents, or the local police. These cases occasionally involved deadly force. Mexican migrants in particular were generally rigidly separated from the communities in which they labored. They were also

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<sup>5</sup>Memorandum, MacLean, June 30, 1943, *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1943*, Volume VI, *The American Republics*, 1965.

subject to deplorable living conditions, arbitrary fees, low wages, summary termination and deportation, and other on-the-job difficulties that made employment in the United States a difficult proposition. Although discrimination of this type certainly existed in California and other parts of the United States that contracted braceros, the Mexican officials' sense that the problem was worse in Texas was likely accurate. Texas maintained strict Jim Crow laws and the racial attitudes and restrictions faced by African Americans were often echoed in the plight of Mexicans or Hispanic citizens of the United States.

In Texas, economic realities drove changing conceptions of race over time. As Neil Foley describes in the often insightful *White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture*, racial boundaries hardened in Texas as the economic divisions between the haves and the have-nots became more rigid.<sup>6</sup> Through the early part of the twentieth century, the dream of Texas sharecroppers, tenants, and even farm laborers was to achieve social status and economic advancement by moving through the stages of the agricultural industry. Even the white son of a successful farmer might expect to start his career as a farm laborer, then move into a tenancy arrangement, and only after years of saving money and gaining experience to finally purchase and run his own farm. African American and Mexican or Mexican American farmers shared this dream, and found success, albeit with less regularity than their white counterparts. With this economic mobility came social mobility and acceptance. Racial lines, ever present to be sure, could be blurred

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<sup>6</sup> Neil Foley, *The White Scourge : Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997).

by a growing economic parity. A Mexican or Mexican American farmer who achieved ownership of his own farm could be considered “white.” One of the repeating tropes in the Texas lexicon of race relations is the phrase “dirty Mexican.” More than simply adding pejorative emphasis to the ethnic category, the use of the word “dirty” often implied class difference. Economic advancement allowed social movement. However, a number of interrelated economic factors, including the steady industrialization of agriculture, the rising price of land, and the increasing availability of farm labor, among others, combined to make this vision of an economic ladder less and less feasible. As economic mobility through advancing up the ladder of agricultural arrangements from farmhand to sharecropper to tenant to landowner became rare or impossible, economic categories hardened. A laborer was increasingly likely to remain a laborer, and a sharecropper was more likely to drift down the ladder to the position of a simple wage laborer than to advance to tenancy or farm ownership. As economic categories hardened, so too did racial categories. The accumulated baggage of this history of race relations made it difficult or impossible for Texas leaders to think of solutions to the 1940s labor embargo in terms of outlawing discrimination. For one, they shared the racial views of their fellow Texans, and for another they doubted the practicality of legislating away the kind of ingrained prejudice that the Texas system engendered.

The practical side of this issue involved the precedent that outlawing discrimination against Mexicans and Mexican Americans would set. The period under consideration here preceded the most dramatic advances of the Civil Rights



Movement, and consequently undoing the Jim Crow system that legally sanctioned the restrictions placed on African Americans was not a tenable political position in Texas. Texas leaders feared that legislation targeted toward the Mexican population would set a precedent that would also lead to the overthrow of Jim Crow. The possibility of such a result would be too risky to make a legislative solution to the embargo politically possible in 1940s Texas. Stevenson, for example, wrote “that the Texan distinguishes between the Mexican and the Negro and that it is entirely possible to go ahead with a program designed to eradicate discrimination against Mexicans but that it would have to be an extremely cautious program to be developed over the years.”<sup>7</sup> If such caution were not exercised, the entire racial system upon which Texas society was based might be endangered. In addition to the racial issues, Texas leaders were also staunchly conservative, and heavily supportive of states’ rights and individual liberty. The thought that the government could take an active role in this issue was far too invasive to fit into Texans’ political ideology.

Texas’ long border with Mexico also made it somewhat of a unique case in that there were continually high levels of illegal immigration. The Mexican government felt that illegal immigrants were even more likely to suffer discrimination than were legal immigrants, and it was also understandably reluctant to contract labor to a state that was already admitting thousands of its citizens as illegal workers.

In response to this new crisis, the government of Texas embarked on a series of programs designed to convince the Mexican government that braceros should be

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

allowed to contract in Texas again. These programs were quickly combined under the umbrella of the Good Neighbor Commission of Texas, created by Stevenson in 1943 in direct response to this labor embargo. This commission was tasked with gathering information, facilitating community action, and dealing directly with the Mexican consuls to take the necessary steps to bring the relationship between Texas and Mexico back to a positive footing.

This chapter traces the response of Texas officials to the labor embargo, including the creation of the GNC. It explores the programs of the commission, and evaluates their early success. It also seeks to situate the GNC within Texas politics by exploring how individuals and interest groups across the political spectrum reacted to the commission, and to establish its early relationship with the federal government.

This analysis reveals that although the GNC did accomplish some of its goals during its first several years, its members lacked the ability and the political will significantly to alter patterns of discrimination in Texas. Although the GNC engaged in a flurry of activities, its members and the Governor generally shared the social and political values of the rest of the state during the Jim Crow era. This outlook placed limits on the tools Texas officials were willing to employ to address the problem. Specifically, they were unwilling to contemplate any legislative action that might provide sanctions against overt discrimination. Mexican officials consistently advocated for such legislation. The lack of progress opened the GNC to political attacks by growers and social conservatives, who were convinced that the GNC represented an unwarranted concession to the Mexican government. The GNC was

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also attacked by advocates for Mexican and Mexican-American farm laborers who believed that the state government was not doing enough to solve the problems affecting this vulnerable group. These shortcomings in the GNC and its strategy became apparent as time passed, and would result in the labor embargo continuing for almost a decade.

### **First Reactions to the Labor Embargo**

When the initial news of the labor embargo hit Texas, it was not clear to officials in Texas or at the Department of State that it would become a long-term problem. The summer and early fall of 1943 saw a number of activities on the part of federal and state leaders to get the decision not to allow contracting in Texas reversed. On July 20, one month after the initial notification, the U.S. ambassador to Mexico, George Messersmith, was full of optimism that Texas would be promptly restored to its former status. He based this feeling on discussions that he had had with Foreign Minister Ezequiel Padilla. The ambassador left those meetings with the impression that Padilla believed the labor embargo might actually make discrimination in Texas worse, and that he intended to recommend to President Manuel Avila Camacho that the labor embargo be lifted.<sup>8</sup> According to Messersmith's report, Padilla went so far as to suggest that "he was very much inclined to remove the ban and to run the risk of the local difficulties they might have here [in Mexico]. He said he would talk to the President."<sup>9</sup> The Ambassador was sufficiently impressed with Padilla's assurances that he gushed to the State

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<sup>8</sup> Messersmith to McGurk, July 20, 1943, RG 59 811.504 Mexico/11.

<sup>9</sup> Messersmith to McGurk, July 20, 1943, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico/11.

Department in Washington that "I can only tell you that the remarks of Padilla, which I have given only briefly, have even increased my opinion of him as a statesman. He really is a statesman and a man of great understanding and, in addition to that, is sincere in his desire to solve these problems."<sup>10</sup> Messersmith's optimism would prove to be unfounded.

Officials in Texas also held out hope for a quick fix, and seemed genuinely perplexed that their state had been singled out in the first place. Shortly after the labor embargo was announced, the State Department sent two representatives to Austin to meet with Stevenson. These representatives were Robert G. McGregor, from the Embassy staff in Mexico City and William P. Blocker, who was the Consul General at Juarez.<sup>11</sup> These two men met with Stevenson for three days beginning on July 25. McGregor described the Governor as "a typical Texan," a man with cattle interests, "a man of few words, obviously sincere, cautious, realistic and friendly."<sup>12</sup>

While Stevenson was more than willing to expend significant effort in solving the problem of the labor embargo, and while he seems to have had a genuine concern regarding some incidents of discrimination, he nevertheless felt that Mexican leaders were being unduly sensitive. McGregor reported, speaking of Stevenson, that:

It is hard for a Texan to see why he should treat a Mexican peon any differently than he is treated in Mexico where he had observed that Mexican peons are not permitted to enter the homes of upper class Mexicans by the front door nor are they permitted to bathe in the swimming pools but that class distinctions are so clear that such Mexicans in the lower stratas would not presume to impose on their fellow citizens who have a higher standard of life.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Hull to U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, July 22, 1943, RG 59 811.404/Mexico/11.

<sup>12</sup> McGregor, Summary of Austin, TX Trip, August 4, 1943, RG 59 811.404/Mexico/43.

He said that perhaps 90% of cases that are termed “race” discrimination are no more than social discrimination.<sup>13</sup>

This last point was a meaningful distinction for many Texans who often attempted to explain charges of discrimination by asserting that clean and neat Mexicans were acceptable, just not the poorest classes. Leaders in Texas and Washington also attributed a significant number of discrimination complaints to overactive Mexican consuls and others who set out to use the issue for political purposes.

As mentioned, Texans’ views on race informed their treatment of the labor embargo by placing certain types of solutions beyond the borders of what was acceptable. These limits were both ideological and practical. Ideologically, the history of race relations in Texas made it difficult for these leaders to consider legal limits on discrimination.

Stevenson did take several symbolic actions in 1943, which he hoped would be sufficient to demonstrate the commitment of his government to battling discrimination. One symbolic act, which brought into clear relief the racial undertones brought to the surface by this embargo, occurred in early May when the state legislature issued, and the Governor approved, a declaration concerning race relations in Texas. This document declared that “all persons of the Caucasian Race within the jurisdiction of this State are entitled to the full and equal accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of all public places of business or amusement” and that anyone practicing discrimination in violation of this provision “shall be

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

considered as violating the good neighbor policy of our State.”<sup>14</sup> This statement managed to avoid a direct confrontation with Jim Crow laws by rhetorically categorizing all Hispanics as Caucasian. As Hispanic residents of 1940s Texas knew well, their classification as Caucasian was circumstantial and contested at best, and this rhetorical footwork illustrated the pains the government was taking to separate discrimination against Hispanics from that against African Americans. It is also worth noting that this sweeping proclamation carried with it no provisions for enforcement. It was not, either in intent or practice, an anti-discrimination law.

Following up this legislative declaration, in late June, Stevenson issued a proclamation making the Good Neighbor Policy, as conceived of by FDR, the official policy of the state of Texas. This document enumerated the many economic and cultural ties between the United States and Mexico and declared that state policy would now demand giving “full and equal treatment, advantages and privileges, in all public places whether of commerce or of pleasure to Mexicans and other Latin American residents in this state or who visit and provides that all the citizens of Texas shall observe the principle of the above mentioned policy of the good neighbor and fulfill it in its fullest extent both as to its spirit and as to its letter.”<sup>15</sup> This high-flown rhetoric gave the illusion of a binding policy, but in legal terms the proclamation amounted to little more than a public expression of the governor’s wishes. It was, however, an effective public relations tool in the short-term. The proclamation was

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<sup>14</sup> Declaration of the State Legislature of Texas. Texas Good Neighbor Commission. Archives and Information Services Division. Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>15</sup> Bursley to Hull, June 26, 1943, RG 59, 811.504/2378.

favorably reported in the press in Mexico City as well as in Spanish language papers in the United States. *Excelsior*, the Mexico City daily, reported the proclamation under the headline “Texas Ceases Discriminating Against Mexicans.”<sup>16</sup>

A second symbolic act by Stevenson involved exchanging letters with Mexican Foreign Minister Padilla. These letters laid out the positions of both governments and were published widely in both Mexican and U.S. papers. For his part, Padilla outlined some forms of discrimination that had become common in Texas. Stevenson acknowledged that some discrimination existed, but contended that it was isolated and that the spirit of the Good Neighbor Policy prevailed in Texas. This exchange was less advantageous for the governor than was the proclamation. Although his assurances were duly reported, the discrimination described by Padilla and the outrage associated with it took center stage in the Mexican press.<sup>17</sup>

At first, Mexican newspaper coverage provided a positive response to the efforts of the Texas government. In August, *El Nacional*, an official Mexican government daily, reported that “Our Braceros are Well-Treated in the United States: The Government of Texas has shown a Great Interest in Eliminating Prejudice.”<sup>18</sup> The article described Stevenson as a man of sincerity and decency who was working to eliminate discrimination, and reported the creation of the GNC as a positive

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ray to Hull, July 29, 1943, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico/29.

<sup>18</sup> “Our Braceros are Well-Treated in the United States: The Government of Texas has shown a Great Interest in Eliminating Prejudice,” *El Nacional*, August 12, 1943, p. 1.

development.<sup>19</sup> Later coverage explained that the GNC would investigate all cases of discrimination and eliminate it.<sup>20</sup> As late as December, Stevenson was quoted describing how the GNC would eliminate discrimination and result in “equal rights” for Mexicans in Texas.<sup>21</sup> The note of impending progress would fade, however, as a quick resolution to the labor embargo, much less to discrimination in Texas, began to seem out of reach.

The Mexican government also approached the labor embargo with mixed emotions. Correspondence during the summer of 1943 clearly revealed that the Mexican administration walked a tightrope between mollifying and offering support to the United States and taking a sufficiently hard-line against discrimination that it could maintain its credibility domestically as a defender of the Mexican people and legitimate heir to the Mexican revolution. Padilla’s initial assurance to Messersmith that he wished to end the labor embargo as soon as possible is one such example. It became clear within a short time that he was politically unable to make good on such desires.<sup>22</sup> During his visit to Austin, McGregor explained to Governor Stevenson that Padilla was already facing significant criticism in the press because of issues related to Mexicans being recruited into the U.S. armed forces.<sup>23</sup> Mexicans were suspicious that cooperation with the United States could become a new form of U.S. influence or dominance. Mexican presidents since the revolution had worked to maintain a

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> “Discrimination will be eliminated,” *El Naional*, August 29, 1943, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> “Environment of Confidence Surges in Texas,” *El Universal*, December 1, 1943, p. 1

<sup>22</sup> Messersmith to McGurk, July 20, 1943, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico/11.

<sup>23</sup> McGregor, Summary of Austin TX, Trip, August 4, 1943, RG 59 811.404/Mexico/43.



positive relationship with the United States, but they had also railed against various forms of U.S. domination. The new and relatively moderate Avila Camacho had tried during his first years in office to heal the rift that had developed in U.S.-Mexican relations during the administration of Lazaro Cardenas. However, getting too close to the United States opened the door to political criticism in his own capital.

### **Creating the Good Neighbor Commission**

When it became clear in June 1943 that Texas would be denied braceros, Stevenson consulted with officials within both the Department of State and the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, headed by the talented Nelson Rockefeller. All shared a desire to resolve this embarrassing crisis as quickly and quietly as possible. To that end, Stevenson announced in August the creation of the GNC. It was initially unclear exactly how this commission would function, but as a place to begin it was given an investigative role. The Mexican government had placed this labor embargo on Texas because of reports received either directly or through its consuls of acts of discrimination in Texas communities. Therefore, the GNC's first task was to gather information on these alleged abuses in order to gain a clear picture of the nature and extent of the discrimination. Since the idea of the commission had yet to be presented to the Texas legislature for funding, it operated in these first months on money from the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs.<sup>24</sup>

The GNC was composed originally of seven members, and would eventually be expanded to nine. One of these members would act as permanent chair. The GNC

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<sup>24</sup>Minutes of the Fifth Meeting of the GNC, August 1944, Coke R. Stevenson Records, Correspondence, 1944, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

also had an executive secretary who undertook much of the day-to-day business of the commission. Dorrance D. Roderick of El Paso was the first chair, but was quickly replaced by R.E. Smith, a businessman from Houston with oil and gas interests. Pauline Kibbe served as the first executive secretary. Commission members tended to be men of some significant standing in their communities. Members included an oilman, a politician, a cleric, a leader of a chamber of commerce, a rancher, a doctor, a World War II veteran, a newspaper editor, and a radio station manager. During the commission's first decade a handful of its members were Hispanic.

It was clear from the beginning that one of the key purposes of the GNC was to serve as a tool in the foreign relations of Texas and Mexico. A brief official history of the commission describes one of the GNC's central goals as "to create a favorable opinion of Texas in Mexico and the rest of Latin America" and suggested that:

It is not wrong to say then that the Commission fills a very important place in what may be called "shirt-sleeve diplomacy" between the governments of the United States and Mexico.

From time to time, matters arise which both governments would like to see settled, but cannot make an issue of them because of their local character. It is then that the Good Neighbor Commission can step in and by the power of 'moral suasion' bring about an amicable settlement.<sup>25</sup>

The GNC would allow the Texas government to take its case directly to the Mexican government.

In order to clarify the purpose of the GNC and to determine what precisely needed to be done to satisfy the Mexican government, Texas officials organized a conference in Austin with Mexican representatives. What became known as the

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<sup>25</sup> Internal History of the Good Neighbor Commission of Texas, Texas Good Neighbor Commission, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

University of Texas Conference on Inter-American Relations in Texas took place in December 1943, and was attended not only by the various consuls and consuls general who presided over Mexican affairs in Texas, but also by the Mexican ambassador to the United States, Raphael de la Colina. This meeting set the stage for future action, and the speeches given during its proceedings revealed in microcosm the basic outlines of the differences between the Mexican and Texan leaders on the bracero issue.

De la Colina's presence alone was evidence enough of the high value which the Mexican government placed on its relationship with Texas, a point highlighted further in the ambassador's remarks to the conference. "Any advantage or profit that might be had out of the relationships between Mexico and the United States comes directly through Texas," he said "For this reason, our relations with Texas are particularly important."<sup>26</sup> De la Colina stressed in his speech the need to stop discrimination against Mexicans in schools, restaurants, work, housing, and other venues. Still, the speech was conciliatory in tone, and de la Colina expressed great appreciation for the efforts of the government of Texas and Rockefeller's office, praising them for "doing the right thing to accomplish a welcome end."<sup>27</sup>

Although both sides had much to gain by finding a solution that would allow Texas-Mexican relations to return to a more normal footing, the conference also highlighted some of the basic differences in attitude and approach that existed, and

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<sup>26</sup>Minutes of University of Texas Conference on Inter-American Relations, December 1943, Coke R. Stevenson Records, Correspondence, 1944, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

thereby some of the reasons why it would take years to reach a solution. Smith, as chairman, described some of the GNC's plans for investigating and dealing with acts of discrimination in Texas. In addition to describing these activities that the Mexican officials would surely welcome, however, Smith said that "the Commission does not believe a law is the solution, nor that the problem can be handled by Federal agencies."<sup>28</sup>

For the Mexican officials, by contrast, a strongly worded law seemed the only reasonable solution. Ernesto Zorilla, the Mexican consul general in San Antonio, argued that "it would take decades to correct the situation by means of education, favorable publicity and persuasive methods alone, and advocated that the people of Texas demand that the true policy of Good Neighborliness be enforced, imposing penalties upon those who humiliate, terrorize, and deny the most elemental rights to the Mexican people."<sup>29</sup> The consul general of El Paso, Raúl Michel, echoed this appeal. After letting various consuls express the Mexican point of view during the discussion, de la Colina himself endorsed anti-discrimination legislation in his closing remarks, saying that "when a friendly alien goes into any country and is refused admittance to a public establishment, that man who was refused simply because of his nationality is entitled to redress. We must insist on this."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

However, this was not a path which U.S. leaders were prepared to follow. The GNC and the governor's office never seriously sought a solution along legislative lines. Thomas Sutherland, who at this time was a representative of Rockefeller and who would later become Executive Secretary of the GNC, summed up the position of most U.S. officials when he asked the Mexican consuls "if they believed the work of the Commission should be to change the mind of men who make up juries, or to recommend other laws which a jury can disregard."<sup>31</sup> Another U.S. attendee at the conference argued that such laws were inconsistent with the democratic tradition of the United States, or of Mexico, because people with such a tradition "do not react favorably to being told what to do."<sup>32</sup> This distrust of an imposed solution would dictate the lines along which the GNC would organize its efforts.

As the conference concluded, Mexican and U.S. officials agreed upon resolutions that focused primarily on ways to improve education. These methods included efforts to change textbooks to eliminate perceived biases, and efforts by the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs to create appropriate informational programs.<sup>33</sup> Most of the resolutions were comfortably vague, and the matter of legislation was dealt with by a resolution which simply stated that it should be known that Ambassador de la Colina had requested the GNC to study the possibility of legislation.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

Despite the shortage of specific policies emanating from the conference, it accomplished a significant purpose for Texas officials. The conference raised awareness among Mexican leaders that the government of Texas was committed to solving the problem of the sanctions imposed against it, even if disagreements over the appropriate method persisted, and put the Mexican government on record as approving of the general course of action the GNC had set for itself. It also resulted in positive coverage in the Mexican press, furthering Texas officials' efforts to present a good image of Texas.<sup>34</sup> This consultation with the Mexican government would be a key strategy of the Texas government. It consistently tried to gain approval of its actions from Mexican leaders, and to determine what precise thresholds needed to be crossed so that resumption of bracero contracts could take place.

### **Types of Activities Engaged in by the Commission**

If a legislative solution was not to be considered, the question for the GNC was to determine what other course of action might achieve the desired results. In January 1944, one month after the University of Texas conference, the Texas State legislature placed its stamp of approval on the Governor's program by constituting the GNC as an official state agency and providing funding.<sup>35</sup> With this new legitimacy, and with the insights gained at the December meetings with Mexican leaders, the GNC set out on an ambitious program in 1944, largely led by the energetic Executive

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<sup>34</sup> "Good Neighbor Program," *El Universal*, December 20, 1943, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> Minutes of the Fifth Meeting of the GNC, August 1944. Coke R. Stevenson Records. Correspondence, 1944. Archives and Information Services Division. Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

Secretary, Kibbe. For the next several years the GNC used its official status to influence Texas-Mexican relations on a number of fronts. These efforts included programs to encourage grass-roots activism, public health programs, investigations of incidents of discrimination, publication of literature associated with Texas-Mexican relations, direct contact with Mexican consuls and other officials, and visits of Texas officials to Mexico to lobby on behalf of the interests of the state.

Members of the GNC hoped that their program of community activism would pay dividends in the long-term by educating Texans about the need to stop discrimination. This effort, largely spear-headed by Kibbe, envisioned the creation of Good Neighbor Committees in individual communities throughout the state to further the goals of eradicating discrimination and building good relations between white and Hispanic communities at the local level. To organize this effort, Kibbe created a fascinating and revealing publication called *Community Organization for Inter-American Understanding*. The GNC distributed this official how-to guide to communities to facilitate the process of organizing local committees. This publication shed light on the motivations, intentions, and thought processes of those involved in the GNC's efforts in Texas, and most particularly Kibbe herself. At its most basic level, this program was strong evidence of the view held by leaders in Texas that legislation would not solve their discrimination problem. The community action program stressed persuading local elites to educate or pressure members of their communities to cease discriminatory practices.

*Community Organization* started out with several pages of introductory material that set up the problem and justified the creation of the program. This introduction, for a government document, is remarkable for its heavy reliance on Christian themes. This tendency may reflect the influence of the evangelical

Rockefeller, whose Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs was instrumental in the creation of the GNC. He is quoted on the first page explaining that

Everything we are trying to do to create a better life is in one way or another related to Christian morality. With the backing of the people of all countries that practice a Christian code of ethics, the program will continue and develop. To bind these two continents, these twenty-one republics, these 260,000,000 people, whether for defense or peaceful progress after the war, we are going to need Christian ethics.<sup>36</sup>

Kibbe expanded on Rockefeller's pronouncement at length, dedicating a page and a half to a section subtitled "The Principles of Christianity." In this section, Kibbe began by quoting the biblical admonition to "Love thy Neighbor as thyself," and ended by linking Christian scripture to Franklin D. Roosevelt's first inaugural address, in which the president declared "I would dedicate this nation to the policy of the good neighbor; the neighbor who respects himself and because he does respect[s] the rights of others."<sup>37</sup>

After this introduction, Kibbe then turned to more practical reasons that local elites should be interested in helping to organize their communities. The publication pointed out that Texas and Mexico shared a 1,000 mile border, that 1,000,000 citizens of Texas, or one sixth of the state population, were of Mexican descent, that this group had been handicapped by ill-

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<sup>36</sup> *Community Organization for Inter-American Understanding*, Coke R. Stevenson Records. Correspondence, 1944. Archives and Information Services Division. Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.



treatment and restricted opportunities, and that discrimination against this group as well as visiting citizens of Mexico had prompted protests by the Mexican government to the U.S. Department of State. The obvious immediate cause for this program, the recent labor embargo against Texas, was left unstated.<sup>38</sup>

In light of these reasons, both moral and practical, the GNC recommended to local communities that they form committees dedicated to the bettering of relations, both between white and Mexican-American citizens living in Texas, and between citizens of Texas and Mexico. In keeping with the Christian theme, these committees were to have as their first objective to “promote the principles of Christ in human relations throughout the State of Texas,” and to organize themselves primarily through local churches.<sup>39</sup> In communities where multiple churches existed, the GNC recommended setting up a “United Church Council” to coordinate efforts.<sup>40</sup> In addition to local church leaders, civic leaders including mayors, sheriffs, and others of significant influence were also to form part of the committee. In other words, these committees were to comprehend the largest possible number of local elites. Those with high profiles and positions of influence in the community would be in the best position to pressure local individuals or businesses practicing discriminatory policies toward Mexicans or Mexican-Americans.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

*Community Organization* ended with a detailed list of activities that these committees should engage in. The vast majority of these activities were educational in nature. Committees were encouraged to create speaker series on Inter-American affairs, to develop radio spots, encourage sermons in churches, form study groups, show films, and distribute any other educational material that would promote understanding between groups. Interestingly, the GNC envisioned a significant revamping of the curricula of local schools. Local elites were encouraged to have courses added in “The History of All the Americas,” to insist that children in their communities begin taking Spanish classes in the third grade, and to stock libraries with books and magazines that would educate students on Inter-American relations. Also, high schools were urged to form extracurricular “Pan-American Student Clubs” or “Inter-American Relations Clubs” for interested students to join. Although the publication was quick to aver that local committees should be completely autonomous, the level of detail in this list of possible activities suggests that the GNC leadership imagined a very specific role for local leaders.<sup>41</sup>

While educational measures represented the bulk of the suggestions, what would become the most visible function of these committees was found in a couple of short paragraphs on the last page of *Community Organization* under the heading “Human Relations.” Local committees were to investigate

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

cases of recalcitrant business owners in their communities, who practiced overt discrimination, and to “call upon the owners and managers of such establishments, explain the objectives and importance of this statewide program, and induce them to change their policy.”<sup>42</sup> They were also encouraged to have the committee serve as a local arbitration board where disputes between white and Hispanic members of the community could be brought for resolution. If these committees were constituted along the lines that the GNC foresaw, they would constitute a considerable force in their communities. One can imagine that a local business owner practicing discrimination would find it hard to resist the entreaties of a committee composed of his pastor, the mayor, the sheriff, and other local elites. Of course, this program assumed that all of the key players in the local communities would readily understand the rightness of the cause, and be willing to support it.

Apart from its importance as a key component in the strategy of the GNC, the community action program is also interesting as a window into the idealistic and utopian predisposition of Kibbe. The ambitious document reveals a significant gap between what she envisioned and what was possible for 1940s Texas. Her enthusiastic idealism would eventually lead to her termination as she tried to push the GNC and the state further than it was politically possible to go toward remedying the situation of Mexican migratory workers.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

The community action program that Kibbe created started out with some encouraging results. She sent more than 1,000 copies of the program to communities around Texas and received an overwhelmingly positive response. Kibbe basked in her initial success by reading portions of dozens of positive letters regarding the program at the fifth meeting of the GNC in August 1944. For example, Mrs. F. J. Crowell of Goose Creeke wrote “You have won my heart with the ‘Good Neighbor Plan.’ For over a year I have worked with just such an idea. I recognized the fact that such an organization was far beyond one lone person’s ability, but one person might light the spark.” Dr. D.M. Wiggins, President of the College of Mines and Metallurgy in El Paso wrote “I have read with a great deal of interest what you have to say about ‘Community Organization for Inter-American Understanding.’ It will be my pleasure to assist here in El Paso in any way possible with the program. Please feel free to pass on any ideas to me.” These letters reflect the hopeful tone of many such writers.<sup>43</sup>

Although the program started out on such a hopeful note, there is no evidence that the local committees emerged as a strong force, that Kibbe’s plans for community organization had any meaningful effect on the opinion of Mexican officials, or even that they bettered the lives of people living in Texas. The voluntary and idealistic nature of the program reflected the overall thrust of the GNC’s efforts. While they meant well, and often exerted tremendous effort in furthering the cause of interracial understanding in Texas, voluntary and educational programs could not by themselves change cultural patterns or behaviors in Texas.

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<sup>43</sup> Minutes of the Fifth Meeting of the GNC, August 1944. Coke R. Stevenson Records. Correspondence, 1944. Archives and Information Services Division. Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

The GNC also created and distributed literature to advance its goals in promoting public health among Mexican and Mexican-American communities. During 1945, the active and capable Kibbe was appointed to chair a subcommittee of the American Public Health Association called “Health Education among Spanish-speaking People of the Southwest.”<sup>44</sup> One of her primary goals in this capacity was to increase the quality of the literature available on diseases such as tuberculosis and diarrhea which caused death at a much higher rate among the Hispanic communities in Texas than in the population at large.

This literature was quickly created and the position expanded to become a significant area of cooperation between the government of Mexico and the GNC. The opportunity for this bilateral cooperation developed in late April and early May 1946. At this time Kibbe displayed the literature the GNC had assembled at the United States-Mexico Border Public Health Association in El Paso. At this meeting, Dr. Manuel Gonzales Rivera, Mexico’s Director of Public Health Education, noticed the efforts of the commission and offered his help in the process of revising the literature the GNC distributed. From this contact, Kibbe received an invitation from Dr. Gustavo Baz, Minister of Public Health and Welfare for Mexico, to attend the First National Congress on Public Health and Welfare in Mexico City in August 1946.<sup>45</sup> To establish a connection with the government of Mexico based on a goal the two governments clearly held in common was a significant success for Kibbe and the

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<sup>44</sup> Annual Report of Good Neighbor Commission of Texas, November 30, 1946. Beauford H. Jester Records. General Files. Archives and Information Services Division. Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

GNC, and formed part of a broad pattern of proactive contacts with Mexican officials, visits of Texas leaders to Mexico, and the solicitation of advice from Mexican officials.

Another key task of the GNC was to investigate cases of discrimination that came to the attention of the state government, and to coordinate efforts on the part of various state agencies to deal with such discrimination. The efforts toward education undertaken by the commission were designed to eliminate the causes of discrimination in the long term, but on a day-to-day basis, reports of specific acts of discrimination prevented Mexico and Texas from regularizing their relations. The GNC would make dealing with these specific reports one of its central missions.

These reports of discrimination were often reported by the Mexican consuls, who would learn of discrimination through their own research or by direct complaints made to them. For example, Mexican consuls present at the GNC meeting in August 1944 reported a series of problems at the Hi-Way Café in Victoria, Texas. The report indicated that Mr. Thomas Garcia was denied service “by reason of his being Mexican. Garcia having been hit in the face with a hammer. The authorities arrested this Mexican, accusing him of certain violations of the law, and fining him \$11.70.”<sup>46</sup> The consul also reported that at least two other individuals were refused service at the same location, one a decorated U.S. World War II veteran. Reports like these three, which revealed that the prejudice and casual violence faced by Hispanics in Texas were commonplace, were submitted to the GNC in large numbers.

Perhaps most commonly, these reports documented incidents in which Mexican citizens had been refused service at hotels, restaurants, swimming pools,

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<sup>46</sup> Minutes of the Fifth Meeting of the GNC, August 1944. Coke R. Stevenson Records. Correspondence, 1944. Archives and Information Services Division. Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

theaters, or other businesses. Other complaints involved discrimination in the workplace, mistreatment by federal or state officials, and even acts of violence. Since most businesses or individuals in Texas who practiced discriminatory acts against Hispanics did not distinguish between those who were citizens of the United States and those who were citizens of Mexico, the GNC sometimes investigated cases of discrimination which were purely domestic in nature, but which nevertheless had implications for Texas-Mexican relations.

The utility of having such a central clearinghouse for discrimination complaints was soon made clear by the sheer volume of cases referred to the GNC. During the last four months of 1943, the GNC received 117 complaints.<sup>47</sup> Although the commission often waded into the particulars of a specific case, it did not see individual arbitration as its primary goal. In her book *Latin Americans in Texas*, Kibbe quoted GNC policy for such cases as follows:

Due to economic and administrative limitations, the Commission cannot properly constitute itself into a judicial and executive body to investigate every incident and impose remedies. Rather, the complaints received will be regarded in the light that they represent symptoms of basic maladjustments which the Commission will seek to overcome by soliciting the co-operation of the various departments of the State Government, as well as of those agencies and institutions which can render services in an attack upon the basic causes of these fundamental maladjustments.<sup>48</sup>

In other words, the GNC sought to investigate those cases that it felt might be of assistance in dealing with the macro-causes of discrimination rather than particular circumstances. Kibbe goes on to describe some of their methods for analyzing the broader picture. They plotted incidents of discrimination on a map of Texas to

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<sup>47</sup> Pauline R. Kibbe, *Latin Americans in Texas* (The University of New Mexico Press: Albuquerque, 1946), 208.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

ascertain which communities or parts of the state had the most significant problems. This technique revealed that for this period of late 1943, all but six of the incidents occurred in South and West Texas. Further comparison by the GNC revealed that the areas in which Hispanics were refused service tended to be those areas where migratory labor was extensively used in the cotton industry. So, those communities that saw large populations of Mexican migratory labor move in and out during harvest time tended to create policies that prevented those migrants from patronizing businesses in those communities.<sup>49</sup> Analyzing the data in this way allowed the GNC to concentrate its efforts on particular regions and on the larger scale problem of how to deal with migratory labor, rather than dealing with individual cases.

One of the important ways that the Governor of Texas, members of the GNC, and other state officials tried to improve the relations between Texas and Mexico was to organize visits of high-profile Texas leaders to Mexico. As mentioned, Kibbe made one such visit to Mexico City in 1946 in relation to her efforts on public health initiatives. Other members of the GNC, and on several occasions the governor himself, traveled to Mexico to interact directly with Mexican government officials. Texas leadership solicited the help of the Roosevelt and later Truman administrations in dealing with Mexico throughout this period, but was never content to leave the matter solely in the hands of the national government.

To this end, Stevenson sent a delegation including Sutherland and Kibbe to Mexico City in March 1944. This committee was charged with discussing the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.



bracero issues with U.S. Ambassador Messersmith and delivering a letter from Stevenson to Foreign Minister Padilla. In this case, Messersmith was not inclined to support interference in his negotiations by Stevenson's representatives. He talked personally with Stevenson's envoys, but explained to them that "it would not be desirable nor necessary for them to see the Foreign Minister or the Mexican officials" about securing Mexican labor.<sup>50</sup> Messersmith further declined to forward Stevenson's letter, excusing himself to Stevenson that his conversation with Padilla had been of so casual a nature that to deliver a formal letter would have been inappropriate.<sup>51</sup> This strong reticence on the part of the ambassador was somewhat unusual. More typically, State Department officials extended significant cooperation to the Texas Government, including Messersmith's successors.

Governor Jester, who was elected to succeed Stevenson as governor in 1946, was also active in traveling to Mexico to advocate for his state's interests. Jester visited the newly elected president of Mexico, Miguel Alemán Valdez, in 1946 before his own inauguration as governor. He returned to Mexico City in 1947 during a trip to Guatemala. Later in his administration, he made a series of reciprocal visits with governors of the Mexican states bordering Texas.

The foregoing list of activities makes clear that removing the labor embargo was an important goal to which leaders in Texas dedicated significant resources. However, their own convictions, as well as their ideas of what was politically

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<sup>50</sup> Messersmith to Stevenson, March 23, 1944. Coke Stevenson Papers. Correspondence, 1944. Archives and Information Services Division. Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

possible, circumscribed the range of their activities. Because officials in Texas were unwilling to tackle discrimination as a legal problem to be addressed by legislation and law enforcement, their efforts would prove insufficient, and the labor embargo would continue for years.

### **The GNC in Texas Politics**

As can be readily imagined, a committee that dealt with a topic of such a controversial nature had its share of political battles. These battles took place inside the commission and between the commission and outside persons or groups. Some conservative Texans opposed the GNC on the grounds that it was too active, stirring up social problems they did not want to deal with or believed exceeded the proper scope of government. Other individuals and activist organizations also criticized the GNC for not doing enough to help the Hispanic population in Texas. Such groups included the League of United Latin American Citizens and the G.I. Forum. This frustration was allowed time to develop because the labor embargo lasted so long. The terms of the debate confirm that disagreements over race relations, and the appropriate role of government hamstrung the GNC's programs.

LULAC was founded in 1929 as a political organization for Texans of Latin-American descent. The group was founded by a predominantly middle-class strata of this community who saw Hispanics in Texas shut out of the political process either by apathy or outside pressure. To LULAC, one of the important problems to rectify was that the white population and the government of Texas often did not distinguish between Hispanic citizens of Texas and legal or undocumented workers from Latin

American countries. By the late 1940s, this political organization was an important voice in the state on issues relating to Mexico and migratory labor.<sup>52</sup>

LULAC consistently pressured the commission to see to the needs of Hispanic Texans, and sometimes sharply criticized it for failing to do so. The minutes of the GNC's quarterly meeting in March 1948 reveal the tenor of LULAC's arguments. At this meeting Raoul Cortez, the leader of LULAC in Texas during the late 1940s, argued before the commission that "the importation of Mexican Nationals discriminated against resident Latin American citizens who had to go North to find work, because of the 'immigration of underpaid Mexican Nationals.'"<sup>53</sup> When Sutherland responded that these workers were going north to seek better wages, rather than because they were driven there, LULAC counsel Gus Garcia quickly countered that another way to phrase that statement was that "they were being driven out by low wages in Texas."<sup>54</sup> To Hispanics in Texas, the entire scheme of importing labor from Mexico seemed like unneeded competition for those who made their living as agricultural laborers. Garcia then read to the GNC a letter from Cortez intended to clarify the attitude of LULAC toward the commission's work. The letter strongly stressed that discrimination in Texas was widespread, and certainly not confined to the community of foreign laborers. According to Cortez this discrimination took six

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<sup>52</sup> For a history of LULAC from its inception to 1945, see Robert A. Cuellar, *A Social and Political History of the Mexican-American Population in Texas, 1929-1963*, Thesis, (R and E Research Associates: San Francisco, 1974): 8-15.

<sup>53</sup> Good Neighbor Commission of Texas: Minutes of the Quarterly Meeting, 26 March, 1948. Beauford H. Jester Records. General Files. Archives and Information Services Division. Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

basic forms “1. Segregation of Mexican and other Latin American children in schools; 2. Discrimination in business and industry; 3. Restrictive covenants in real estate; 4. Refusal of service in public places; 5. Denial of the rights to serve on juries; 6. Violation of civil rights of Latin Americans on the part of Law Enforcement Officials.”<sup>55</sup> Cortez went on to write that this commonplace denial of service in public places had even led to the embarrassing situation of having the president of the Mexican Senate be denied service in a West Texas community.<sup>56</sup>

After introducing the letter, the minutes describe a heated exchange that began when Garcia claimed that:

He could present to the Good Neighbor Commission 20 cases for every one reported, and that in 24 hours he could present 20 cases. Mr. Sutherland asked him why he had not done so and Mr. Garcia stated that he didn’t do it ‘because the prestige of the Commission has been so low that I would have been the laughing stock of my own people.’ Mr. Sutherland said that this is the time to worry about doing the job rather than being the “laughing stock.”<sup>57</sup>

After the argument proceeded to the subject of the commission’s attitude toward segregation in schools, the GNC’s Lloyd Bentson offered a motion categorically denouncing school segregation as a means of calming the contentious meeting. LULAC’s Cortez did his part by presenting an official statement to the commission commending this action and pledging the support of LULAC to the GNC’s work. Although this meeting ended on a conciliatory note, the basic differences it laid bare

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

were not solved. LULAC, and other activists for the rights of Hispanic Texans, consistently argued that the GNC did not do nearly enough to meet the needs of their community.

Another organization that sometimes found itself at odds with the GNC was the G.I. Forum. In an interesting coincidence, this group was founded on the very day of the contentious quarterly meeting of the GNC described above. Thus, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of March while LULAC was remonstrating with the GNC, Hector Perez Martinez was organizing a veterans group committed to dealing with issues affecting the Hispanic community in Texas. The G.I. Forum was composed of veterans who were ill-disposed to have their sacrifice denigrated by a return to a discriminatory society, and convinced that LULAC was not going to solve their problems by itself.<sup>58</sup> Over the years this group would alternately cooperate with and criticize the GNC.

The GNC also faced internal debates over the appropriate extent of its activities on behalf of Mexicans or Mexican-Americans. Christopher Fox, one of the founding members of the commission and Executive Vice-President of the El Paso Chamber of Commerce, would resign his briefly-held place on the GNC in protest of what he saw as the GNC working too hard to placate trouble-making Mexican consuls who reported cases of discrimination. The very creation of the commission constituted an acknowledgement to the Mexican government that there was something wrong with Texas that needed fixing. Not all Texans were comfortable

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<sup>58</sup> For a history of the G.I. Forum, see Robert A. Cuellar, *A Social and Political History of the Mexican-American Population in Texas, 1929-1963*, Thesis, (R and E Research Associates: San Francisco, 1974): 16-34.

with this characterization, and some sharply fought against the idea that Texas was a discriminatory or inhospitable place. Only a few months into Fox's service, his discontent was beginning to show.

In April 1944, Fox wrote a personal letter to Stevenson explaining his doubts about the committee. The letter focused specifically on his frustration during a recent meeting of the GNC at the assumption of wrongdoing and guilt that seemed to pervade the proceedings. He wrote:

The first meeting of the Commission which I attended was in October 1943, and after listening to the various "experts" unfold sad and vicious tales of racial discrimination, I began to ask a few questions and soon found that most of these "atrocious acts" were brought to the attention of the Commission after they had been brought to the attention of the press, through the various Mexican Consuls located in the State of Texas.

Still being a "cop" at heart, I did a little nosing around and found that without exception every person with a racial discrimination complaint had either talked to a Mexican Consul immediately before or immediately after said discriminatory act was committed. Having a pretty good insight as to how these things happen, I listened to the afternoon meeting's remarks quite patiently, and finally asked for the floor and told them-which by that time consisted of college professors, American Consul General, social service workers, etc.- that if they wanted to stop about two-thirds of the racial discrimination, they should call a meeting of every Mexican Consul in the State of Texas and tell them just how the cow had eaten the cabbage, and that we expected them to help us.

At this meeting they could be shown that through stopping the practice of 'egging' their nationals on and directing them to places where they know some descendent of the Alamo might "blow his top" and thereby create an incident, they could help.<sup>59</sup>

The implication that the cases of discrimination under investigation of the commission were somehow manufactured was certainly counterproductive to the

commission's overall goal of convincing the Mexican government that Texas was serious about earning the right to contract Mexican laborers. Fox sensed that his opinions made it difficult for him to serve effectively on the Governor's commission. Later in the same letter he confided to Stevenson "I am afraid that I may kick over the bucket and spoil things, so it might be well for me, at the proper time, to quietly step out of the picture and let it go at that."<sup>60</sup> He further objected to the commission's "illusions of grandeur" and lamented that it had strayed "far away from the purpose I thought it was created to serve."<sup>61</sup>

Fox's views indeed caused some controversy. He received a scathing letter from Jack Danciger, who was active in fighting discrimination, pointing that Fox's views could not be reconciled with the previously stated policies of GNC with respect to discrimination. This letter Danciger copied to the Governor, the chairman of the GNC, and other Texas notables. Fox resigned from the commission on June 3, 1944, citing the fact that he lived far from places where the periodic meetings were held, and that he thus found it difficult to conduct his duties.<sup>62</sup> This manufactured excuse

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<sup>59</sup> Fox to Stevenson, April 27, 1944. Coke R. Stevenson Papers. Correspondence, 1944. Archives and Information Services Division. Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Fox to Stevenson, June 3, 1944. Coke R. Stevenson Records. Correspondence, 1944. Archives and Information Services Division. Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

helped him fulfill his desire to slip away quietly. Smith, chairman of the GNC, told the governor that “Mr. Fox has never fitted into our work for some reason even though, personally, I like him.”<sup>63</sup>

If a reluctance to take seriously the problems of discrimination against Hispanics in Texas made Fox a poor fit for the GNC, advocating too strongly on behalf of migratory workers was also out of bounds. Kibbe resigned as Executive Secretary of the GNC under a cloud of controversy in 1947. During the ensuing public discussion, she was repeatedly criticized for being too far left, too close to labor, and was even compared to a communist.

The key point of controversy was a tour undertaken in April 1947 by Kibbe to the Lower Rio Grande Valley, a significant cotton-producing zone, to gather information on conditions there. Kibbe spent ten days touring the region, meeting with immigration officials from both the United States and Mexico, gathering statistical information, and watching the process of certifying new workers to enter the state. Her report suggested that local growers engaged in a variety of unfair practices, including using Mexican workers as a way to hold down wages.<sup>64</sup> This criticism called forth a firestorm of indignation, from within the government and from the business community. Kibbe resigned as a result.

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<sup>63</sup> Smith to Stevenson, June 7, 1944. Coke R. Stevenson Papers. Archives and Information Services Division. Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>64</sup> Report to Members of the Good Neighbor Commission of Texas on Lower Rio Grande Valley Trip, April 17-27, 1947. Beauford H. Jester Records. General Files. Archives and Information Services Division. Texas State Library and Archives Commission.



Texas officials denied that she was fired for her report on the Rio Grande Valley, but the evidence to the contrary is convincing. Charles Hackett, a consultant to the GNC explained her parting to a Mexican Cabinet Minister as the result of a difference of opinion with the governor over the appointment of a General J.M. Wainwright to the GNC. Evidently Kibbe felt Wainwright lacked the proper credentials as an expert on Latin American affairs.<sup>65</sup> Further comments by both Kibbe and other interested parties reveal that she had incurred the disapproval of too many important people through her activism. Claud W. Garner, of Texas Fruit Growers, wrote Jester that he was sorry to see Kibbe go, because her parting might create more problems than it solved. However, he went on to say that he had read her book, *Latin Americans in Texas*, and “knew it would draw fire.”<sup>66</sup> He said further “to my mind Miss Kibbe[sic] has approached the subject from the wrong angle.”<sup>67</sup> The right angle, in Garner’s view, was to emphasize the exploitation that Mexican laborers endured at the hand of Mexican labor contractors, rather than from Texas growers. As he explained, “men of their own kit and kind exploit them and then all Texans get the blame for such abuses.”<sup>68</sup>

For Jester’s part, he insisted that Kibbe was not fired. In response to a writer’s inquiry from Mississippi regarding allegations that Jester had fired her for

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<sup>65</sup> Hackett to Bateta, Sep 5, 1947. Beauford H. Jester Records. General Files. Archives and Information Services Division. Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>66</sup> Garner to Jester, August 30, 1947. Beauford H. Jester Records. General Files. Archives and Information Services Division. Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

speaking out to forcefully on the conditions of Hispanic laborers in the Rio Grande Valley, Jester made out an indignant letter denying that Kibbe had been fired over the report.<sup>69</sup> In his letter he was careful not to express support for her, but rather explained the technical point that under the act creating the GNC that commission would be responsible for hiring and firing its own officers. Jester went on to charge Kibbe with making comments to the press that were “derogatory to the work of the Commission in the past and contained many mis-statements of fact.”<sup>70</sup> He further explained that although he knew of no specific demand from members of the legislature that she leave the GNC, he did know that many in the legislature did not approve her methods and “many members of the Legislature were of the opinion that Mrs. Kibbee [sic] had been too active with the C.I.O. Some went so far as charging her with being communistic.”<sup>71</sup> Jester further charged that he was still getting reports “to the effect that Mrs. Kibbee[sic] went to Mexico City after her resignation and has fermented dissatisfaction on the part of the Mexican government,” relating to conditions of Mexican workers in Texas.<sup>72</sup> This broadside against Kibbe in response to a letter from an unknown writer from out of state reveals the extent of Jester’s dissatisfaction. In a testament to the fact that old wounds had not yet healed, as late as 1949 when U.S. Consul Edward Benet reported a staffing change at the GNC to

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Jester to Henderson, Oct 31, 1947. Beauford H. Jester Records. General Files. Archives and Information Services Division. Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

the Department of State he took pains to note that the woman hired for the task was able and committed and not likely to cause the same trouble as "a former woman member of the Commission."<sup>73</sup> This was a clear reference to Kibbe.

More broadly, the cases of Kibbe and Fox reveal significant disagreement among officials in Texas over how to frame the GNC's work. As the fate of those on either extreme suggests, the GNC attempted, with only limited success, to forge a middle ground. They hoped to do enough to satisfy the Mexican government while not going too far in criticizing important Texas business interests.

### **The U.S. Government and Texas' Programs**

The relationship of the U.S. federal government to this crisis will be dealt with in more detail in later chapters, however at this point it is worth mentioning some of the basic attitudes. Officials at the State Department and within the administration in Washington broadly supported the aims of the GNC, although they too were at a loss as to how to bring the labor embargo to a more rapid conclusion. The State Department would make the crisis one of its bargaining points in its occasional negotiations with the Mexican government, but would ultimately not make it a deal breaker. The State Department largely supported the efforts of the GNC, unless those efforts infringed on its turf.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Benet to Department of State, November 1, 1949, RG 59, 7 11.12.

The State Department consular officials in the Mexican border states sometimes interacted with the GNC and reported favorably on it to their superiors in Washington. E.W. Eaton, the U.S. consul at Piedras Negras, reported after attending one of the GNC's meetings that "the Good Neighbor Commission of Texas seems to be well balanced and the members present at this meeting impressed the undersigned as being level-headed with a high regard for the responsibility placed upon them."<sup>74</sup> Eaton's view reflects that of most State Department officials who generally spoke of the GNC in positive terms. Roy Rubottom, for example, praised the GNC and would sometimes refer particular incidents of discrimination or other issues to it for resolution.<sup>75</sup>

Despite his positive opinion of those involved, the consul went on to echo unknowingly the same concerns shared by the Mexican government, particularly that the commission lacked real power. In reference to the fact that the Texas legislature was considering whether to establish the GNC as a permanent state agency, Eaton continued "if it could be granted certain powers and authority it undoubtedly could accomplish a great deal more toward eliminating discrimination which, despite the Good Neighbor policy of our country and the Good Neighbor Commission of Texas, is still too common in Texas."<sup>76</sup> Mexican officials similarly had warm relations with

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<sup>74</sup> Eaton to Marshall, March 26, 1947, RG 59, 711.12/ 3-2847.

<sup>75</sup> See for example, Rubottom to Penrose, October 20, 1950, Good Neighbor Commission of Texas, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

individual members of the GNC while at the same time doubting that they had sufficient power to effect real change.

These perceptions and the basic misunderstandings over how to proceed handicapped the GNC's efforts.

## **Conclusion**

Subsequent chapters trace some of the GNC's specific actions in more detail. For now it is important to note that the efforts of the GNC yielded mixed results. Four years into the program, members had achieved some modest success by getting the ban on workers temporarily lifted to allow several thousand Mexican workers to come to Texas legally in 1947. However, this was a very short-term program, and it was not until 1949 that the labor embargo against the state was lifted. Even then, the Mexican government imposed a new type of labor embargo that excluded individual communities and counties rather than the state as a whole. The efforts of the GNC were thus turned to dealing with discrimination on a community-by-community basis.

Ultimately, the GNC's efforts from 1943-1947 demonstrated the significant cleavages between Texas and Mexican officials on how to approach discrimination. The Mexicans consistently pushed for a law prohibiting discriminatory acts as the only adequate proof that the environment in Texas had truly changed. However, Texas officials in the Jim Crow era were almost universally unwilling to consider what they thought of as high-handed government interference in private decisions. These political realities within Texas would prevent Texas officials from

implementing the kind of policies or reforms that would have been necessary to convince Mexican officials that the bracero program could be extended to that state.

The efforts of Texas officials during these years also revealed a pronounced willingness to deal directly with the Mexican government. From 1943 forward, the governor, members of the GNC, and other concerned Texans would take their case to Mexican consuls, ministers, and presidents. Their efforts show a need to expand traditional ideas of how foreign policy is created, particularly among nations that share borders. The degree of economic interaction, movement of populations, and cultural mixing along the U.S.-Mexican border meant that local officials, and as the following chapters will show private citizens acted likewise, entered the foreign policy process by taking their case not only to their national leaders in Washington, but to Mexico City as well.

## CHAPTER 3

### SUCSESSES AND SETBACKS: TEXAS AND THE U.S.-MEXICAN LABOR

#### AGREEMENT OF 1947

Years of lobbying, negotiation, and persuasion on the part of the U.S. government and the state government in Texas began to yield some fruit in early 1947. In March, the Miguel Alemán Valdez administration agreed to a labor program that allowed Mexican workers to be employed legally in Texas. This partial thaw in the frosty relationship between Texas and Mexico was the most substantial victory that the Good Neighbor Commission achieved during its first four years of existence. The agreement, although disallowing new workers from Mexico, allowed for the legalization of undocumented Mexicans already in the United States. In the official exchange of notes that brought this agreement to life, Mexican officials specifically complimented the positive attitude of the new Texas Governor Beauford Jester, and the GNC was praised by the Mexican representatives at the Mexico City talks.<sup>1</sup> In theory, this new agreement would allow Texas to prove itself able to responsibly host Mexican workers contracted in that state and also to make steps

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<sup>1</sup> Thurston to Torres Bodet, March 10, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

toward resolving the problem of illegal immigration. Concurrently, Jester worked tirelessly in 1947 to advance the relationship between his state and Mexico. The year thus began in an atmosphere of considerable hopefulness that the problems that had plagued the relationship from 1943 could finally be put to rest.

Unfortunately, Texas leaders would not be able to build on this foundation. The legalization agreement would ultimately fail because of substantial non-compliance in the border region. In November 1947, the U.S. government successfully negotiated a new agreement to replace the wartime bracero program, which expired at the end of that year. This new agreement also continued to exclude Texas while making Mexican workers available to employers in other states. Texas farmers, thus, would enter 1948 without a legal method for hiring Mexican workers. This story reveals that the growers' associations in Texas, private employers, and, ultimately, federal agents along the border scuttled the federal agreement through actions that undermined the compromises worked out by the two national governments. Ultimately, local pressures trumped international politics.

Events during 1947 would also demonstrate the sometimes stark difference in the way Texas was perceived as opposed to the Truman administration. During his term, Truman's foreign policy attention was focused first on successfully prosecuting the Second World War, and then on how to position the United States in the world during the early Cold War. Latin America was thus not his primary focus, but he was interested in the region and took time to personally involve himself in a number of



issues related to U.S.-Mexican relations. This personal attention was exemplified most dramatically during the official state visits of Harry Truman to Mexico and Alemán to the United States in early 1947.

On March 3<sup>rd</sup>, Truman disembarked from his airplane in Mexico City amid much fanfare. Alemán greeted him at the airport, along with his entire cabinet, most of the state governors of Mexico, and a host of other dignitaries. Truman received a 21-gun salute at the airport, followed by a ride through a freshly cleaned and polished city along streets lined with thronging onlookers. The crowds were such that two persons were killed in the mob straining to catch a glimpse of the U.S. chief executive.<sup>2</sup> Later, the two presidents delivered glowing addresses regarding the state of relations between their two nations.

Truman was consistently presented positively in the Mexican press. The official paper *El Nacional* set the tone for coverage of his visit with a large front-page photo of Alemán and Truman shaking hands under the caption “A Perfectly Trusted Friend is a Welcome Guest.”<sup>3</sup> He represented a continuation of the Good Neighbor Policy most associated with his predecessor, and Truman took a number of actions during his trip to Mexico that would further enhance his claim to that legacy. Most significantly, he laid a wreath at the site where Mexican military cadets, known in Mexico as the Niños Heroes, lost their lives resisting the U.S. invasion during the

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<sup>2</sup>For descriptions of Truman’s arrival and visit see articles in the *New York Times*, March 2-4, 1947, also AGN/MAV, 577.1/9.

<sup>3</sup>“Bases of Collaboration and Friendship. International Politics of the United States,” *El Nacional*, March 4, 1947, p. 1.

Mexican-American War. His visit coincided closely with the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the event, and the press published widespread commentary on the conciliatory gesture.

Truman's personal relationship with Alemán was quite positive as well, which is unsurprising when one considers how sympathetic Truman was to his views on key issues such as the bracero program. When it came to issues of migratory labor, Truman's domestic political ideologies extended naturally into the realm of international politics. The same ideals of social justice that undergirded the Fair Deal drove his approach to Mexican migration. Truman could thus express concern, personally or through intermediaries, regarding discrimination, pay equity, and other issues with a sincerity that put him in good stead with the Mexican president.

On issues related to labor migration Truman's record did not always consistently reflect these values. His personal predilections would sometimes give way to practicality, as he dealt with powerful interest groups and a conservative Congress. However, despite these inconsistencies, his generally favorable image was a stark contrast to the image of Texas in Mexico, and highlighted the isolation of that state's position.

### **The March 1947 Agreement: Legitimizing Illegal Immigrants**

During the late 1940s, one of the nagging issues facing both the Mexican and U.S. governments was the steady flow of illegal immigrants from south to north. In January 1947, in a partial response to this problem, the Mexican government created an inter-departmental commission to deal with this problem and with Mexicans living abroad. This committee included officials from the Ministries of Labor and Social

Welfare, Foreign Relations, and the Interior.<sup>4</sup> One of its first actions was to engage in talks in Mexico City with U.S. officials. William G. MacLean of the Department of State and Commissioner Ugo Carusi, of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) led the U.S. delegation. Alfonso Guerra represented the Mexican government.<sup>5</sup>

These talks resulted in an ambitious proposal that would radically alter policy toward illegal immigration. The first step of the new program was to provide a framework whereby the entire population of illegal immigrants then in the United States, which the delegates to the talks estimated to be 119,000, could achieve legal status. This legalization would be accomplished by having the employers of illegal workers transport them to one of three border cities where the workers would cross over to the Mexican side, receive a contract through representatives of the Mexican inter-departmental committee, and then return to the United States as legal workers with their employers. The agreement was designed to act as a one-time solution to the problem of illegal immigration, rather than as a continuous process. The agreement called for both sides to defend the border against future illegal immigration, and specified that U.S. employers who hired illegal immigrants rather than participate in the program would be ineligible to contract workers in the future. Were the agreement to work as planned, it would have provided an immediate

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<sup>4</sup> Thurston to Byrnes, January 6, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>5</sup> Stafford to Marshall, February 7, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

solution by legitimizing virtually all Mexicans illegally in the United States. From this blank slate, the added enforcement measures provided for in the agreement would make illegal immigration less of a problem in the long run.<sup>6</sup>

Also, Mexicans who resided in towns along the border were told that they would not be allowed to participate in the bracero program, based on the longstanding assumption of the Mexican government that allowing recruiting along the border encouraged illegal migration. The Mexican government further agreed to stop large movements of workers toward the border by preventing them from buying bus or train tickets.<sup>7</sup> Despite public warnings that bracero contracting would only occur in the interior of the country and that the border stations would only be used for legalization, the announcement of the agreement resulted in an immediate movement of thousands of Mexicans to the border in the hope of being contracted. The Mexican government's pledge to stop large movements of workers notwithstanding, the demand for contracts was such that an estimated 300-400 workers moved to the border region every day in the weeks after the agreement was announced.<sup>8</sup>

Generally, the agreement was well received in Mexico. *El Nacional* exulted that the legalization program would place Mexican workers on an equal footing with U.S. workers, and protect them from the many abuses faced by undocumented workers who were constantly at the mercy of their employers and lived in fear of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., and Thurston to Torres Bodet, March 10, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>7</sup> Thurston to Torres Bodet, March 10, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>8</sup> "No Braceros will be Contracted at the Border," *El Nacional*, 19 April, 1947, p. 1.

deportation.<sup>9</sup> Foreign Minister Jaime Torres Bodet praised the agreement for giving undocumented workers the protection of a contract and the ability to seek help from U.S. officials when difficulties arose.<sup>10</sup>

This program could clearly not achieve its goals without including the many tens of thousands of illegal immigrants who resided in Texas. That state, however, remained under a labor embargo because of the Mexican government's concern regarding racial discrimination there. A compromise was worked out whereby Texas would be included in this legalization program, but the agreement would make clear that Texas' inclusion was a one-time exception. Texas would still remain embargoed from receiving workers under the 1943 bracero agreement. This concession was a sign of the significant improvement in relations between the Texas government and the Mexican government.

### **Beauford Jester: Creating a New Relationship with Mexico**

In addition, Jester engaged in a successful effort to create personal relationships with key Mexican officials boded well for improved relations in 1947. His attempts to establish a rapport with the Mexican president began with President Alemán's inauguration, which Jester attended personally. From this introduction, Jester kept up an ongoing correspondence with the Mexican leader. In a letter to Alemán in June, Jester spoke of a program in Texas, presumably the GNC, designed

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<sup>9</sup> "Equal Conditions for Mexicans," *El Nacional*, March 26, 1947, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> "More Benefits for Mexican Workers in the United States," *Excelsior*, March 22, 1947, p. 1.

to create better relations between the state of Texas and the nation of Mexico. He went on to highlight the importance of his state by pointing out to the newly elected president that of more than 200,000 travelers who crossed the U.S.-Mexican border each year, about 52 percent went through Texas.<sup>11</sup> Jester, stopping in Mexico City on his way to Central America a few months later, made a point of renewing contacts with Mexican officials. He and Alemán also exchanged gifts and personal notes. In an August letter, Jester described his goals for their relationship, saying that he was “happy that the president of Mexico and the Governor of Texas are friendly neighbors and can deal with each other as friends as well as the heads of their respective governments. I like to do business on a friendship basis and to deal with people in who[m] I have confidence, a feeling of friendship and sincerity of purpose.”<sup>12</sup>

Alemán reciprocated Jester’s initiative, as evidenced by the inclusion of Texas in the new legalization program. Mexican public opinion was still concerned about Texas, but newspaper reporting contained some reason for hope as well. *El Nacional* reported that although discrimination remained a problem in Texas it “seems to be headed for a favorable resolution, given the repeated proofs of friendship that Governor Beauford Jester has given our land and the beneficial activities of the Good Neighbor Commission.”<sup>13</sup> The Mexican president made a point of meeting with the governor personally, as he would also do for the governor of California or representatives of these leaders. Further, the Mexican archives reveal that Mexican

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<sup>11</sup> Jester to Alemán, 23 June, 1947, AGN, RP/MAV, 511.6/2.

<sup>12</sup> Jester to Alemán, 26 August, 1947, AGN, RP/MAV, 135.1/1.

officials worked to project a favorable image in important state capitals. When Jester was elected governor in 1946, for example, Mexican officials created multiple drafts of a letter of congratulations to ensure that just the right wording was used.<sup>14</sup>

Although Alemán did not personally attend Jester's inauguration, he sent his Minister of Finance, Ramón Bateta. Jester, evidently very pleased, wrote after the event that his inauguration was attended by more representatives of Mexico than any previous inauguration of a Texas governor.<sup>15</sup>

For all of his significant public relations efforts, Jester still found that individual acts of discrimination and unfavorable press coverage in Mexico could quickly undo his careful efforts at creating goodwill. Such incidents not only made people doubt the effectiveness of the GNC, but also its basic sincerity. The high-minded programs of the GNC could seem like so much window dressing when confronted with the realities of ongoing discrimination. For example, in October 1947, a U.S. expatriate in San Luis Potosi wrote to Jester lamenting the way Texas was portrayed in the local media. One local headline reported that "Racial Discrimination Increases in the United States."<sup>16</sup> Although the headline took in the entire United States, the article focused on the failures of Texas and, in particular, of the GNC. It alleged that the commission was internally divided and essentially nonfunctional. It charged that the GNC's failures represented a breach of Jester's

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<sup>13</sup> "Equal Conditions for Mexicans," *El Nacional*, March 26, 1947, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> See, AGN, RP/MAV, 544.2/34.

<sup>15</sup> Jester to Alemán, 4 February, 1947, AGN, RP/MAV, 544.2/34.

public pledge to fight discrimination in Texas. As evidence, the article described two possibly apocryphal incidents of discrimination. In one, a Mexican had been shot down with a machine gun for using a whites-only bathroom, and in the other, two fathers had been burned alive for trying to send their children to a white school. Although incidents of discrimination were common, violence and brutality on this scale was rare and these cases are difficult to corroborate. Nevertheless, the U.S. citizen who forwarded the article confessed to Jester that reports of discrimination were a source of indignation and made it difficult for him to defend his nation to foreign friends. He wrote that during the war he worked hard to convince his friends of the evil nature of the German regime and that such acts made his protestations seem hypocritical.<sup>17</sup> This letter was duly forwarded to the GNC, but there was little that could be done about it. Articles and stories once printed could not be pulled back, and credibility once lost for Texas had to be regained through slow and difficult work. This was particularly so since dramatic solutions such as outlawing discrimination were beyond the realm of serious consideration for Texas politicians.

Beyond Mexican public opinion, in 1947, Texas was still a worry to the Mexican government itself. Ambassador to Mexico Walter Thurston revealed to Secretary of State George C. Marshall the extent to which Mexican officials were concerned that events in Texas would undermine the Alemán administration politically. A leading official in the Mexican foreign ministry had reported that

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<sup>16</sup> Gouthier to Jester, September 20, 1947, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



“farmers in Texas were not disposed to cooperate in returning wetbacks in accordance with the agreement and that the Mexican Government could not expose itself to justifiable public criticism” by allowing Texas to import more Mexican workers, “which would only aggravate the border problem and result in further exploitation of Mexican labor, particularly in the State of Texas, where the greatest problem of racial discrimination exists.”<sup>18</sup>

Jester asked Barry Bishop, a newsman for the *Dallas Morning News* who lived in Mexico City, for some input on the treatment of Texas in the Mexican press. Bishop responded that incidents such as the denial of service in public places received regular treatment and that “Mexicans are a proud people and they also are highly nationalistic. They highly resent discrimination by foreigners and I would say that is especially true whenever Texans are concerned, for historical reasons.”<sup>19</sup> Bishop went on to argue that the impressive contribution of Mexican Americans and Mexicans to the recent war effort should inspire leaders in the United States to find solutions to the employment and social problems faced by these groups. In more bad news for Jester, Bishop wrote that a reporter friend of his had done a tour of bracero

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<sup>18</sup> Thurston to Marshall, August 25, 1947, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951* (United States Government Printing Office, 1972), 8: 828-829. It should be noted that the term “wetback” will appear in this dissertation only as it occurs in direct quotations from the principle actors of the time. Although the term is offensive to many, and has generally fallen out of use in official contexts today, the term was frequently used in the 1940s and 1950s in official documents, public speeches, and correspondence by persons on all sides of the migration issue on both sides of the border. It is reproduced it here in order accurately to reflect the nature of public discourse during this period.

<sup>19</sup> Bishop to Jester, October 28, 1947, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

camps and conditions in California, and he had been favorably impressed. His friend was then planning a similar exposé on Texas, and Bishop warned “now if he finds a lot of those ‘No Mexicans Allowed’ signs and other things---ugh!”<sup>20</sup>

Unable to apply global solutions, Jester used the existence of the GNC as a rhetorical tool. In a message designed to convince Marshall to plead Texas’ case with the Mexican government, Jester gushed that the GNC “has been constantly, and is now, at close grips with the highly complicated problem of harmonizing the living together of two dynamic cultures, each of which possesses a close nexus with their national sovereignty and thereby presents a problem in human relations that is unique in the United States, but which, these things considered, may be said to be in a high state of favorable adjustment.”<sup>21</sup>

Texas officials worked to improve their relationship with the Mexican government and improve the credibility of the GNC through their appointments to the commission. It was a necessarily delicate and secret process, but Jester and his associates would sometimes find ways to see that their appointments met with the approval of the Mexican government. In one case in 1947, Jester wanted to know whether it would make any difference that the candidate for a position on the GNC was a Catholic bishop. Jester asked his personal friend Paul King, who lived in Mexico City and was personally acquainted with Mexican officials, how Mexico would react to the appointment of a Catholic. King responded that the official line

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Jester to Marshall, June 7, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

was that the Mexican government had no preference, and trusted Jester himself to look out for the interests of their nationals. However, he added that in his opinion “this professed indifference is a preference (that they are reluctant to indicate, for fear of being misinterpreted) for non-catholic influence on all matters that may touch upon official relations in any way.”<sup>22</sup> This perceived anti-Catholic bias makes some sense in the context of the Mexican Revolution’s anti-clerical nature, but by the 1940s enthusiasm for anti-clerical thinking had dimmed considerably. Avila Camacho, while running for president in 1940 had famously told Mexican crowds, “soy creyente,” or I believe, marking a more moderate tack in the revolution and a return of Catholicism to public life to some extent. Other sources suggest that King’s impressions did not represent all of the Mexican government. Through Charles Hackett at the University of Texas, Jester was able to approach Bateta, Alemán’s Minister of Finance, about the appointment of Bishop C.E. Byrne to the GNC in October 1947. Bateta wrote back that he considered Byrne’s appointment to be a good choice, since he thought that as a Catholic presence on the GNC he might “have a special interest in preventing the continuance of discriminations.”<sup>23</sup>

Overall, Jester’s efforts did result in significant personal contacts and a favorable opinion of him among Mexican leaders. However, the Mexican government’s first tentative efforts to reward those seeming advances through the legalization program would not go smoothly.

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<sup>22</sup> King to Jester, September 11, 1947, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

## **Resistance to the March 1947 Agreement by Texas Growers**

In contrast to the progress achieved by Jester and the GNC, Texas growers would create significant problems for both the 1947 agreement and Texas' relationship with Mexico. Growers found significant fault with technical aspects of the agreement, delaying its enactment, and ultimately caused the agreement's failure by refusing to comply with its terms.

The state government in Austin and growers' associations throughout the state had been working for four years to be able to contract Mexican laborers. It is therefore somewhat ironic that in the months following the agreement of March 1947, which finally allowed Texas growers to obtain legal Mexican labor, the agreement nearly became derailed because powerful growers' associations in Texas objected to some of its specific terms. *El Nacional* reported these disagreements under the headline, "They Do Not Want to Contract Mexicans," explaining that growers balked at terms in the proposed contract that would guarantee Mexicans certain wages and food provisions even if the employer could not furnish work on a given day, as well as other provisions that seemed to U.S. growers to go far beyond what was offered to domestic workers.<sup>24</sup> The most vocal spokesmen for the growers were Austin Anson, general manager of the Texas Citrus & Fruit Growers & Shippers and A. L. Cramer,

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<sup>23</sup> Beteta to Hackett, October to 1947, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>24</sup> "They Do Not Want to Contract Mexicans," *El Nacional*, March 22, 1947, p. 1.

chairman of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Employers Committee. These two men would take the lead in a series of hasty negotiations with U.S. and Mexican officials to work out the kinks in the agreement.

To this end, Anson and Cramer visited or telephoned officials in the INS, the Department of State, and the Mexican Foreign Ministry for three weeks in April 1947. The first sign of discontent emerged on April 5 when Congressman Milton West marched the two growers' representatives into the division of Mexican affairs at the State Department to voice their complaints to MacLean and Carusi. They asserted that the three recruiting centers that had been established would only be able to process about 200 workers a day each (which later figures would actually reveal to be fairly optimistic). Contracting at this rate would make it very difficult for the growers to legalize as many workers as they needed. They went on to suggest, as interested Texans did with some regularity, that perhaps the best solution was simply to contract Mexican workers in the United States under U.S. law without bothering to negotiate with the Mexican government. MacLean gently suggested to his guests that although such unilateral action might get them workers in the near-term it would probably not be in their long-term best interests. He further promised to try to negotiate for a new recruiting center, if he were given a formal request to do so by the Attorney General.<sup>25</sup>

Not satisfied with this slow progress, Anson and Cramer called MacLean three days later to lobby for more changes. They had spoken with José Reyes Nava,

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<sup>25</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, by MacLean, April 5, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

the chief of the Mexican Labor Processing Office at Hidalgo, and U.S. Consul Henry G. Krausse in an attempt to resolve their difficulties, but left that meeting more disturbed than ever. Most significantly, they were told that employers would be required to post a \$30 bond in a Mexican financial institution for each contracted worker. The Mexican worker would theoretically pay the employer back over time through a 5 percent deduction from his paycheck, but at the prevailing wages for such labor it would take 200 days for the employer to recoup his or her \$30. They were also informed that the contracts would typically run for periods of time much shorter than 200 days, making it unlikely that employers would ever receive all of this money. In addition, they were concerned that the contract contained no provision for firing unsatisfactory workers. Finally, they had heard that Texas growers might also have to pay an additional \$500 refundable bond per worker to the INS, which was undoubtedly even more troubling than the smaller figure.<sup>26</sup>

On April 9, Anson met with yet another Mexican official, Mexican Consul at Brownsville Francisco Polin Tapia, together with U.S. Consul Cyril L. Thiel. Anson further outlined the complaints of growers and their intention not to comply with the agreement if some of their demands were not met. Anson threatened that "should Mexican authorities insist upon including the \$30.00 deposit in the contract in its present form, that Mexican labor contractors would sub rosa offer to supply Texas farmers with agricultural laborers at a far cheaper rate than the legal processing

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<sup>26</sup> Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, by MacLean, April 8, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

procedure."<sup>27</sup> Anson continued that the Lower Rio Grande Valley Employers Committee found the current understanding unacceptable and that he would immediately urge growers in the region through radio broadcasts not to make the trip to the processing centers until an acceptable agreement had been reached. Anson suggested as an alternative a temporary crossing-card, which would allow Mexican workers to enter the United States to seek work. Although Texas growers frequently proposed such a card, the Mexican government would never seriously consider an agreement that did not provide more explicit protections and contracts for its workers before they left Mexico. This potential breakdown in the international agreement was worrisome to both Mexican and U.S. government officials. Thiel concluded his report by warning that "tension is bound to increase within the next few days."<sup>28</sup> Anson followed through on his proposed broadcasts and on April 11 informed Thiel that no Texas growers had contracted workers.<sup>29</sup>

These disagreements escalated, prompting the Mexican government to bring in a higher-level official to resolve the impasse. On April 12 at the Hotel Madison in Harlingen, Texas, Anson and a dozen or so other important figures in the growers' community met with J. Jesus Castorena, *Oficial Mayor* of the Mexican Ministry of Labor, and several Mexican Consuls. Previous to this meeting, they had laid some of the groundwork by meeting in a smaller group to create a written interpretation of the

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<sup>27</sup> Thiel to Marshall, April 10, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, by MacLean, April 10, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico, and Thiel to Marshall, April 11, 1947, RG 59 811.504 Mexico.

various clauses of the contract.<sup>30</sup> At the meeting on the 12<sup>th</sup>, the two sides went over the proposed contract clause-by-clause, proposing interpretations and agreeing on those interpretations. Most importantly, it was agreed that the employers would not be required to pay \$30 per worker up front as a bond to guarantee transportation expenses. Rather, the \$30 would be accumulated over time through a 5 percent deduction from the worker's pay, meaning that if the worker did not remain in the employ of a particular grower long enough to accumulate \$30 that the grower would not be liable for the remaining amount. In addition, employers had successfully obtained a provision that allowed either side to end the contract, making it possible for them to fire unsatisfactory workers.<sup>31</sup> After the successful meeting, the representatives of the growers went to a mass meeting of Texas agricultural employers and presented their results. This breakthrough put the agreement back on track, and Texas employers were encouraged to proceed to the contracting centers to legalize workers.<sup>32</sup> Contracting began at both Reynosa and Juarez on April 21. The U.S. Consul at Juarez reported that some 100 workers per day were being processed.<sup>33</sup>

Even after these weeks of excruciating negotiations, one more issue delayed the contracting. Reyes Nava, the Mexican official in charge of contracting at

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<sup>30</sup> Cramer to MacLean, April 15, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>31</sup> Aguirre to Ray, April 16, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>32</sup> Thiel to Marshall, April 14, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>33</sup> Aguirre to Marshall, April 21, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico, and Krausse to Marshall, April 21, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico, and Aguirre to Marshall, April 24, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.



Reynosa, was unilaterally altering the contract at the border. In an effort to protect Mexican workers, he was adding clauses to contracts to meet their individual circumstances. These additional clauses included specifying wage rates and demanding bonds of varying amounts from the employers. Given that a general contract had recently been the cause of so much fighting, meeting, and painstaking clarification, this further arbitrary alteration of the terms led to an immediate and angry reaction by Cramer. On April 24, Cramer appeared at the consulate at Reynosa and demanded that Krausse immediately accompany him to confront Reyes Nava about these irregularities. Krausse demurred, offering instead to forward Cramer's views to the Department of State. After two more conferences between growers and Mexican officials on April 29 and 30, presided over by Consul General Gustavo Ortiz Hernan, Cramer was able to report that all of the issues had been finally settled.<sup>34</sup> The agreement survived through the summer of 1947, although it ultimately involved only a small fraction of the population of illegal Mexican workers in Texas.

### **The Failure of the Agreement in Practice**

Even after resolving all of these initial troubles, the legalization program never functioned as planned. By the beginning of the summer, it became clear that the agreement was failing to achieve its objectives. Reports appeared of rampant

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<sup>34</sup> Cramer to Krauss, May 2, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

violations of the terms of the carefully negotiated labor contract. Workers were given contracts even when they did not meet the criteria, and the wages proffered were not what the Mexican government expected.

Even as early as May, Mexican officials were inundated with reports of contract violations. U.S. employers, who had originally objected to many of the provisions of the contracts, seemed simply to ignore obligations they found distasteful. These obligations included offering proper housing, refusing to pay for days not worked, and, according to one report, withholding all pay.<sup>35</sup> Other employers fired workers they no longer needed despite the contract's prohibitions against doing so.<sup>36</sup> Without a certain level of compliance and commitment on the part of the employers, neither the Mexican nor U.S. government had the means necessary to enforce the contracts everywhere. The result was a system that was complaint-driven and ad hoc. Reports of contract violations in the Mexican press also overwhelmingly dealt with Texas. For Jester and the GNC, the all too familiar pattern of Texas being singled out for criticism in the Mexican press continued.

For the Mexicans, one of the primary purposes of the agreement was to regularize the status of their citizens who worked illegally in the United States. For this reason, they insisted on a provision that would ultimately prove counter-productive. They stipulated that all the workers contracted in Texas must have been illegally in the United States for at least three months. In this way they hoped to

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<sup>35</sup> There are Bracero Complaints," *El Nacional*, May 29, 1947, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> "Mexican's Contracts," *El Nacional*, July 20, 1947, p. 1.

confine the program to workers who were already in the United States when the agreement was signed. As could have been predicted, and was by some U.S. officials, this provision actually had the opposite of its intended effect by creating a strong incentive for Mexican citizens to migrate illegally to the United States so that they could establish eligibility for legal contracts under the agreement. In early June, Carusi described this state of affairs, asserting that:

While reports from the Mexican border districts reflect that Mexican farm workers are continuing to enter this country illegally in rather large numbers, and that they are finding employment without regard to the provisions of the agreement, it seems the situation is aggravated by the desire of these laborers to obtain employment in such a manner so they will become eligible for recruitment under the program, since it seems Mexican representatives at the recruiting points insist on this illegal employment status in the United States as the main factor in determining who may receive contracts.<sup>37</sup>

The provision requiring three months residence in the United States before participation in the program was ill conceived and impossible to enforce. Illegal immigrants had no stamps in their passports or documents from their employers by which their time of residence in the United States could be established. *El Nacional* reported cases of employers meeting braceros at Reynosa who they had never seen before, and trying to contract them under the terms of the legalization program.<sup>38</sup> Mexican officials grew frustrated that the agreement was failing because of these difficulties. Alberto Monroy, Chief of the Interdepartmental Office in Mexico, complained that “with deep

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<sup>37</sup> Carusi to Ray, June 13, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>38</sup> “There are Bracero Complaints,” *El Nacional*, May 29, 1947, p. 1.

regret this office has observed that neither the Associations nor the farmers who have individually requested the contract, are complying with the requisite that the workers who they bring here through the American Immigration Offices have been at least three months illegally on American soil.”<sup>39</sup>

Just as Mexican officials entertained hopes that the 1947 agreement would help eliminate the problem of illegal immigration, they also had high hopes that it would lead to better wages for their citizens. The idea was that if the Mexican workers enjoyed a legal contract, employers would be required to pay them the minimum prevailing wage in that location, which they hoped would be significantly better than the wages paid to illegal migrants. They further hoped that if the flow of illegal migrants were brought under control there would be less competition for jobs and a natural bounce in wages. In these hopes and assumptions they were disappointed. On May 23, about one month into the agreement, the Mexican Embassy sent a note to the Department of State expressing disgust about the way the program was working. They remonstrated that:

The Ministry for Foreign Affairs has received reports that unfortunately the situation foreseen by the Mexican delegates to the conferences under reference has arisen. Various Texas employers, far from responding to the spirit of friendly cooperation of the Mexican government, are endeavoring to contract even those who have legalized their immigration status on the basis of 25 cents an hour and, in some cases, at wages even lower.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Monroy to Wilmoth, May 29, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>40</sup> Memorandum 2600, Mexican Embassy to Department of State, May 23, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

Twenty-five cents an hour was not what the Mexicans had in mind for their workers. The specific figure that they put forward as an acceptable minimum wage was \$.37 an hour. U.S. officials feared that using this higher wage would lead to the collapse of the agreement, since this figure significantly exceeded the average contract wage in Texas. Most Texas contract wage rates ranged between \$.25 and \$.30 per hour.<sup>41</sup>

In June 1947, as frustration in Mexico mounted, Hector Perez Martinez, the Mexican Minister of the Interior, visited Texas on a fact-finding mission. He was disturbed to find an atmosphere of non-compliance in which Texas employers refused to go to the trouble and expense of transporting their workers to the border in order to legalize their status. Following his visit, Perez Martinez wrote a scathing letter to Jester describing the rampant discrimination and contract violations that he had found. Although he praised Jester and the GNC for their efforts, he stressed that other states had outlawed discrimination, giving victims a legal recourse. He went on to list 72 counties where discrimination was a particular problem. The condemnation received banner headlines in Mexico City.<sup>42</sup> *El Nacional's* editorial page strongly supported Perez Martinez and the government's subsequent decisions to end the legalization program and renew its commitment to the ban on sending braceros to Texas.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, by MacLean, June 9, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>42</sup> "More Humane treatment for Mexicans in Texas," 28 September, 1947, p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> "No Más Braceros a Texas," *El Nacional*, October 1, 1947, p. 5.

Another factor in the non-compliance of Texas growers was that many of the employers and workers feared that families would be separated during the process.<sup>44</sup> Illegal Mexican workers sometimes entered the United States together with their families. Workers feared that their families would be deported if they brought their position to the attention of government officials by having their status legalized. Grover C. Wilmoth, the district director at El Paso for the INS, suggested informally that U.S. officials could simply look the other way until their contracts expire.<sup>45</sup> Wilmoth's approach seems to have been largely accepted during the life of the agreement; nevertheless, the fear remained. Thus, for a variety of reasons, Perez Martínez found the enforcement of the agreement by local authorities lackluster at best.<sup>46</sup>

Several months into the process, the Mexican Foreign Ministry pointed out that out of approximately 130,000 illegal Mexican immigrants in the United States, a figure which had been revised upward from the 119,000 cited in March, only 3,000 had been legalized under the program. Despite this non-compliance with the legal agreement, the Mexican government remained willing to consider a request from Texas growers to recruit 10,000 more Mexican workers. After a few weeks of negotiations, the Mexican government agreed, provided that the recruiting did not take place at the border. Mexican officials felt that border recruiting would aggravate the problem of illegal immigration, and that "all recruiting should be done quietly and

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<sup>44</sup> Thiel to Marshall, June 30, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>45</sup> Aguirre to Ray, April 18, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

with a minimum of publicity.”<sup>47</sup> This stunning concession is strong evidence that the Alemán administration was often willing to accommodate the United States if it could avoid adverse reactions in public opinion at home. Ultimately, this extra agreement would not materialize because Texas growers did not wish to grant these workers the full guarantees associated with the 1943 bracero agreement, but rather proposed to contract them under the terms of the legalization program, even though the workers in question would be contracted within Mexico rather than the United States. This suggestion led Mexican officials to reply that “the Mexican Government could not expose itself to justifiable criticism by acceding to this request, which would only aggravate the border problem and result in further exploitation of Mexican labor, particularly in the state of Texas, where the greatest problem of racial discrimination exists.”<sup>48</sup> For the Mexican government, the balancing act between placating the United States and placating Mexican public opinion was a constant effort.

Ultimately, as a result of the agreement’s poor performance and because of continuing concerns over discrimination in Texas, the agreement would fail. In October 1947, through an exchange of notes, the Mexican government revoked that portion of the March agreement that allowed the contracting of undocumented workers residing in Texas.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, the original bracero agreement

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<sup>46</sup> Thiel to Marshall, June 30, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>47</sup> Geerken to Marshall, August 13, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>48</sup> Geerken to Marshall, August 25, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>49</sup> Thurston to Torres Bodet, November 10, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

authorized during World War II was set to expire at the end of the year. Negotiations were held in November to replace that agreement and to deal with the issue of allowing Mexican workers in Texas.

### **Renegotiating, November 1947**

On November 20, the U.S. and Mexican governments began negotiations at El Paso, Texas for an agreement to replace the expiring bracero program. The Mexican government chose this site along the border and expressed a desire to include key personnel from the border region such as Wilmoth of the INS.<sup>50</sup> These negotiations would prove difficult, but ultimately successful from the point of view of the State Department, as they produced an agreement that allowed the bracero program to continue with some modifications. However, the talks would prove to be a failure for Texas, as the Mexican delegation refused to remove the labor embargo and refused to extend the ill-functioning legalization program.

As the meeting approached, it was clear that the issue of discrimination remained among the most significant for Mexican officials. In a letter designed to establish the framework for the upcoming talks, the Mexican Foreign Minister first mentioned the continued determination of the Mexican government not to send its citizens to states where discrimination occurred.<sup>51</sup> The Mexican delegation also wanted a provision to protect workers from being transferred between states without

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<sup>50</sup> Thurston to Marshall, November 6, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>51</sup> Thurston to Marshall, November 13, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.



their consent or the approval of the Mexican government. Apart from these conditions, the Mexicans hoped that the new program could be largely based on the 1943 agreement.

In turn, U.S. officials shared the desire to build on the foundation of the 1943 agreement, but also wished to incorporate the provisions of the March 1947 agreement to allow illegal immigrants to achieve legal status in Texas.<sup>52</sup> Specifically, Robert Lovett ordered Thurston to reply to the Mexicans that the United States did not wish to accept any conditions that would prevent it from resolving the status of Texas. Whether and how to end the labor embargo against Texas would be one of the key issues discussed at this conference.<sup>53</sup> Texans had high hopes that the negotiations would resolve the embargo permanently. As the talks began, the *El Paso Times* confidently reported that the conference would likely result in the removal of the labor embargo by the Mexican government.<sup>54</sup> At the conference, however, the two sides remained deadlocked on this issue.

Since the status of Texas would be so important to the conference, Texas officials were keen to have their voices heard. Texas Congressman Ken Regan asked that Governor Jester be allowed to address the conference to speak on behalf of Texas employers. Although the relevant officials at the Department of State were anxious to solve the problem of the labor embargo against Texas, they were nonetheless hesitant

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Lovett to Thurston, November 19, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>54</sup> "Removal of Mexican Labor Ban for Texas Seen at Conference," clipping from *El Paso Times*, November 19, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

to involve the governor directly. MacLean, who would lead the U.S. delegation to the conference, responded that since discrimination in Texas was such a controversial issue it was essential that it be brought up in the proper context, and he feared that Jester's address might actually hinder his negotiations. He further argued that such an addition would have to be cleared with the Mexican government.<sup>55</sup>

In Jester's absence, the November 1947 meeting was attended by M.B. Morgan, the head of the Texas Employment Commission who would also lead Jester's Inter-Agency Committee to deal with migratory labor. Texas officials approached the November meeting with high hopes that the new bracero agreement would forever remove the restrictions placed on bringing migratory labor into Texas. What Morgan seems to have found instead, however, is that Texas was largely kept out of the process. The Mexican position was so intransigent by that time that U.S. officials may have avoided discussion of the labor embargo against Texas to keep the negotiations from being derailed. As Morgan reported, "I have been standing by, expecting to be called in when the Texas case is to be discussed. From time to time the Mexican officials have attempted to bring up certain charges or complaints against Texas, and each time Mr. MacLean, U.S. State Department, has switched the subject away from the Texas case so that further information might be available before getting into charges against us."<sup>56</sup> It was not clear what information he referred to, or how seriously MacLean pursued the issue of the Texas labor embargo.

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<sup>55</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, by MacLean, November 17, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>56</sup> Morgan to Jester, November 21, 1947, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

What is clear is that the international meeting ended as a success from the point of view of the State Department, and as a complete failure from the point of view of Texas.

The conference itself dealt with issues of health care for workers, transportation costs, and other practical aspects of the contract, but predictably some of the most significant discussion took place on the issue of discrimination. Stephen Aguirre would call the meeting “one of the most difficult conferences held to date” regarding the migratory labor program.<sup>57</sup>

In the end, an agreement did emerge. Although the new agreement would largely build on the previous one, there were some key differences. Most significantly, the U.S. government would no longer serve as a guarantor of specific contracts as it had under the wartime agreement. Although the U.S. government would no longer sign workers’ contracts, it did help negotiate a standard blank contract to be signed by individual employers. The new agreement outlined a fairly straightforward procedure for contracting. U.S. employers could hire Mexican laborers by first having the United States Employment Service (USES) certify that a need for workers existed and that U.S. laborers were unavailable to fill the need at “prevailing wages in that area.”<sup>58</sup> Then, employers would get written permission from the INS to bring in a specific number of workers. After forwarding this certification to the Mexican Ministry of Labor, employers could meet workers at

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<sup>57</sup> Aguirre to Reveley, November 29, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>58</sup> Joint Overall Agreement, November 28, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

specified contracting centers in Mexico. There, they could sign a contract with representatives of the Mexican government overseeing the process. Before crossing the border, workers would be subject to a health inspection by Mexican officials. The provision requiring employers to post bond in advance for each worker sufficient to guarantee the worker's transportation back to the contracting center in Mexico was revived, and most contracts were limited to one year.

The agreement contained a number of protections for Mexican and U.S. workers, although many of them were more theoretical than real. One provision of the agreement demanded that workers not be subject to acts of discrimination. The agreement also contained the ineffectual promise that Mexican workers would not displace U.S. workers or be used to depress wages. Mexican workers under the contract were also guaranteed the same health and housing benefits given to domestic workers. This promise was almost meaningless, given the squalor in which domestic agricultural workers toiled, and their lack of access to health care. Employers who hired illegal immigrants were prohibited from hiring legal workers under the agreement. As in past agreements, Mexican workers who lived near the border were not allowed to participate. Both governments also pledged themselves to fight illegal immigration, although the agreement did not bind them to any specific policies of enforcement.<sup>59</sup>

After the arduous negotiating process, the Mexican government still objected to some of the provisions of the agreement when its delegation brought it back to

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

Mexico City for approval. They were reluctant to allow a separate agreement that would permit workers who were still in the United States at the end of 1947 to re-contract with their employers.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, the Mexican government expressed concerns over wage rates, the location of contracting centers, and transportation costs. A somewhat exasperated Paul Daniels, Director for American Republic Affairs at the Department of State, wrote the U.S. Ambassador in Mexico City arguing that most of the Mexican demands were already included in the agreement. Most of the disagreements were quickly resolved.<sup>61</sup>

After the agreement, there was still some confusion in Texas regarding whether or not the labor embargo had been removed. Senator Tom Connelly forwarded some of his constituents' concerns to the Department of State, and at first received only noncommittal replies.<sup>62</sup> Within a short time, however, it would become clear to all that the Mexican stance on sending workers to Texas had not changed. In early December, *El Universal* issued a front page story highlighting the anti-discrimination portions of the agreement, and pointing out that the terms would allow the Mexican government to continue its labor embargo against Texas as long as it deemed necessary.<sup>63</sup> Perez Martínez quickly followed by promising to maintain the ban on Mexican workers travelling to Texas for the foreseeable future, citing the continuing problem of racial discrimination.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Aguirre to Marshall, January 15, 1948, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>61</sup> Daniels to Thurston, Dec 18, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>62</sup> Connelly to Department of State, December 8, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

Morgan, as Jester's representative to the conference, tried to leave the door open for a later agreement in 1948 by stating publicly that incidents of discrimination were isolated, and that there might still be some chance to salvage an agreement with Mexico. However, he was immediately rebutted from two sources. First, Guerra, the leading Mexican delegate to the El Paso conference, issued a statement saying that no such accommodation would be possible, and that he had told Morgan as much at the conference itself.<sup>65</sup> The second rebuttal came from a domestic source. Raoul Cortez, the Texas leader of the League of United Latin American Citizens, wrote a lengthy and thoughtful letter to Morgan countering his claims that discrimination in Texas was minimal. Cortez acknowledged that while incidents of discrimination directly involving migratory laborers might be reported in small numbers, discrimination toward Hispanics in Texas was rampant. He then issued his list of six types of discrimination that were commonplace in Texas as quoted in the previous chapter.<sup>66</sup> Morgan's hopes for continued discussion were not realized.

Thus, the new agreement, ultimately signed in February 1948, kept the labor embargo against Texas intact, and there was no provision to renew even the legalization program. The result was that Texas farmers would enter 1948 without a legal method for hiring Mexican workers.

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<sup>63</sup>“Protection for Braceros against Discrimination,” *El Universal*, December 4, 1947, p. 1.

<sup>64</sup> Stafford to Marshall, December 18, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>65</sup> Stafford to Marshall, December 19, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

<sup>66</sup> Cortez to Morgan, December 18, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

## **The Stilley Plan**

Since the new agreement cancelled Texas' short-lived reprieve, new solutions to the labor embargo were necessary. As the labor embargo against Texas dragged on, not only did the Texas government become actively involved in negotiating with Mexican officials and lobbying Washington, but interest groups in Texas, both growers organizations and labor advocacy groups, also became heavily involved. A prominent example of these efforts can be found in the creation of the Stilley Plan in late 1947. This was a plan created by growers to combat discrimination in Texas. Growers hoped that such efforts would demonstrate to Mexican leaders that Texas could be hospitable to their citizens. It was hoped that the Mexicans would then lift the embargo and labor contracting could continue.

On the surface the Stilley Plan had much to recommend it to state leaders in Texas. It was a voluntary program conceived of and run by private citizens and organizations. As such, it would fit in nicely with the prevailing political view among Texas leaders that laws or programs to stop discrimination by force were inappropriate or impractical. If the coercion could come from the private sector, however, by way of pressure from one's peers, it might be more effective while at the same time keeping the government from direct involvement.

Jay C. Stilley, Executive Secretary and Treasurer of the Texas Cotton Ginners' Association, which represented thousands of cotton farmers, became interested in the problem of acquiring labor, and consequently in finding a way for cotton ginners legally to hire Mexican workers. Stilley believed that the concerted

efforts of his organization could achieve what the government had failed to achieve during the first several years of the labor embargo. His straightforward plan would rely on economic motives to move local communities to end discriminatory practices.

Stilley argued that while eliminating discrimination for the entire state of Texas was outside the ability of his organization, he could nevertheless create a program that would almost completely eliminate public discrimination in specific communities or areas. To that end, he proposed that members of his organization create committees in their several communities to investigate cases of discrimination, list institutions and businesses that practiced discrimination, and to create a plan for dealing with those problem areas. The plan envisioned a group of community leaders, including growers, holding a public meeting in which they would try to impress upon the community the economic distress that discrimination caused. Such a committee, upon successfully eliminating sources of discrimination in their community, would then report to the Ginners' Association the number of workers they needed for their area.

Stilley's Plan represented the most effective realization of the GNC's ideas about how to deal with the problems of discrimination. Pauline Kibbe's *Community Organization for Inter-American Understanding* envisioned a grass-roots effort very much like the one Stilley put forward in his plan. In fact, there is some evidence that Stilley was directly inspired by that program.<sup>67</sup> The most significant difference

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<sup>67</sup> Aguirre to Secretary of State, November 21, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.



between the two proposals is that Stilley's would be conducted largely without the participation of the government. His plan envisioned notifying the governments after the private sector had achieved its results.

Stilley was even able to make his voice heard at the November conference. Many in Texas had high hopes that this moment, when the terms of the program were changing and new directions were being discussed, might provide an opportunity to eliminate the labor embargo. Governor Jester would take advantage of this opportunity to lobby the federal government to make Texas an important part of the negotiations, and Stilley would see this as the ideal moment to bring his plan to the attention of the negotiators from both nations.

Stilley and his group were able to make sure that the plan would become a part of the discussion at the November negotiations by taking their idea directly to the Mexican consul at Austin. The consul forwarded the idea to Mexico City, and the interest generated led to a copy being distributed to each member of the negotiating team from both governments. The Mexican government was consistently positive about the idea of the Stilley Plan. There was, after all, little to object to in a proposal that offered unilaterally to eliminate discrimination, but they never went so far as to make specific promises based on the proposal.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, at the 1947 conference itself, the plan was rebuffed in its entirety as a basis for official action. The new labor

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<sup>68</sup> Aguirre to Secretary of State, November 21, 1947, RG 59, 811.504 Mexico.

agreement emerging out of the conference would contain no provisions for the legal employment of Mexicans in Texas. Stilley would not give up at this point, however, and 1948 would see a blizzard of activity by Stilley to see the plan enacted.

Stilley's proposals received a mixed reaction from Jester's government. The Stilley Plan, as presented to the international conference, came from the Mexican side of the table as a result of Stilley's personal contacts with the Mexican Consul at Austin. In fact, Jester's representative to the conference was completely blindsided by the document. His report to Jester on his activities at the conference complained that "no one of the State Department nor anyone else had ever heard of Mr. J.C. Stilley."<sup>69</sup> Ironically, the copy of the Stilley Plan that Morgan was eventually able to send back to Jester was a translation of the Spanish version.<sup>70</sup> Stilley's enthusiastic efforts, coupled with his naivete in political matters, led him to bring his plan to the Mexicans without clearing it with any U.S. officials at either the federal or state level. This failure may have gotten him off on the wrong foot in terms of state politics. Jester's government would refer to the Stilley plan when it was advantageous for them to do so, but would consistently keep Stilley at arm's length.

## **Conclusion**

The rise and fall of the legalization program in 1947 highlighted the often profound differences between the rhetoric and programs of the Texas government and

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<sup>69</sup> Morgan to Jester, November 21, 1947, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

the actions and intentions of its citizens. Jester's efforts at establishing a relationship with Alemán and improving the image of Texas in Mexico were undermined by apathy or outright hostility to making concessions to the Mexican government.

The legalization program also highlighted the intractable nature of the problem of illegal immigration. This program, along with its numerous predecessors and successors, committed the U.S. and Mexican governments to preventing illegal border crossings, dealing with the population of Mexicans already living illegally in the United States, and providing legal avenues to meet labor demands. However, a plan that seemed workable and comprehensive in theory proved unenforceable and even counterproductive in practice. The economic forces that prompted the migration of Mexican workers to the United States, and the political attitude along the border that tolerated their presence, were not easily influenced by international agreements.

Chastened Texas officials would enter 1948 having seen the optimism and success of 1947 undone, and the labor embargo reapplied. They would redouble their efforts in 1948, including a series of new programs created by the GNC, and the creation of a new government committee to coordinate programs related to migratory labor, but the familiar pattern of private behavior trumping or interrupting government efforts would continue.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE EL PASO INCIDENT AND THE FAILURE OF THE BRACERO PROGRAM IN 1948

Governor Beauford Jester's efforts in 1947 to create a new kind of relationship with Mexico predicated on his personal credibility and relationship with Mexican officials failed to have the desired effect by 1948. Jester accomplished much, including the establishment of a genuinely friendly personal relationship with a number of Mexican officials, most notably Minister of Finance Ramón Bateta and to some extent President Miguel Alemán Valdez. These growing ties at the official level, however, were not enough to counterbalance the continuing problems on the ground as the 1947 agreement failed. As the new year began, illegal immigration continued apace and Texas growers showed no hesitation to employ undocumented workers. Faced with that significant disconnect between what Texas officials were willing to promise and what their citizens were actually willing to do, the Mexican government did not agree to a new program for Texas during the coming season. This year would be spent in more concerted efforts, both inside and outside of government, to change both the image of Texas and the behavior of Texans. Rather

than yield significant success, however, these efforts would end in dramatic failure by the fall of 1948, not only blocking a new program for Texas but also destroying the entire international agreement.

This chapter traces the continued efforts of Jay Stilley, Executive Director of the Texas Cotton Ginners' Association, and his associates to see the labor embargo lifted through private action. It then examines the activities of the Good Neighbor Commission in 1948, as this agency worked to remain relevant and useful in what was now the fifth year of its struggle to regularize the process of acquiring Mexican labor. 1948 would also see the emergence of a new Texas government institution, the Inter-Agency Committee (IAC), to compliment the GNC in dealing with the issue of migratory labor. The IAC's efforts to treat the difficulties faced by migrant laborers will be examined. Finally, this chapter shows how the dramatic collapse of the bracero agreements in October 1948 demonstrated how events along the border had the ability to outpace the best efforts of government officials and private groups in Texas, Washington, and Mexico City. In one dramatic incident in October 1948, growers would find a way to bring mass numbers of workers across the border illegally, with the collusion of the local Border Patrol. This event would become known as the El Paso incident, and would lead the Mexican government to cancel all labor agreements with the United States. It would also lead the Truman administration to seek new solutions and methods for dealing with the problem of migratory labor. This chapter, coupled with the previous one, is thus a story of failure as two major international agreements collapsed as a direct result of events in Texas.

## **Pushing Forward with the Stilley Plan in 1948**

Although the Stilley Plan had not met with immediate success during the conference of November 1947, Stilley was undeterred. He continued to tout the program and promote it in 1948. In so doing, he met resistance from his own growers and a mixed response from the Texas government. Ultimately, both private initiatives such as Stilley's and the efforts of the GNC shared the common difficulty of not being able to provide meaningful, measurable results in reducing discrimination that could satisfy the Mexican government.

One of Stilley's key tasks in 1948 was to bring his own organization fully on board with his plans. In March, Stilley wrote a letter to "Directors and Key Ginners of Texas" urging their support.<sup>1</sup> After explaining the background of the failure of the 1947 agreement, he tried to forestall anger against the Mexican government by arguing that "we, as fair-minded citizens as well as ginnermen, certainly recognize the rights of the Mexican representatives to defend their countrymen through every legal means in their reach."<sup>2</sup> He also explained that the Mexican government was worried about educational, social, and economic discrimination against its citizens. Although the growers could most readily deal with the economic aspects of the issue, Stilley argued that in order to succeed growers would have to concern themselves with all three aspects of the issue. To this plea for cooperation, Stilley attached a blank registration form that asked growers to pledge their support and to offer comments

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<sup>1</sup> Stilley to Directors and Key Ginners of Texas, March 4, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

and suggestions.<sup>3</sup> Less than a week after sending out this request, Stilley was writing enthusiastically to Carlos Calderon that he had already received 23 replies to his message, all positive.<sup>4</sup>

However, if Stilley were to convince Mexican officials that his program was making real progress he would have to overcome the complacency some of his associates. One of the striking features of the comments that Stilley received was that very few of the growers acknowledged that any discrimination existed in the first place. Those that did admit that some discrimination occurred in their communities tended to minimize it as an aberration practiced by one local café or other institution. Growers wrote back with assurances such as: “we seem to have no discriminatory practices in this vicinity,” or “I don’t think I can be of much help, as we have no discrimination in this territory,” or “As far as I know, we have no discrimination against them here,” and “there is no discrimination practiced against Mexican labor here.”<sup>5</sup> These denials, when compared to the lengthy list of incidents of discrimination being investigated by the GNC, raised some questions about either the growers’ honesty or awareness.

Another interesting trend in the responses was that only a minority of ginners said they needed Mexican labor. For example, one grower wrote, “I am willing to

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Stilley to Calderon, March 9, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>5</sup> Stilley to Members Texas Cotton Ginner’s Association, April 21, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

cooperate fully, however, in this section there has been no need for outside labor.”<sup>6</sup> Another reported that “heretofore there has been only a slight need for Mexican labor, but should it be needed we will be glad and willing to cooperate.”<sup>7</sup> However, even if Mexican labor was not strictly necessary it was often preferred. One grower, in a comment that revealed the continuing racially charged atmosphere, responded that “the majority of the growers preferred Mexican labor instead of the ‘colored’ labor.”<sup>8</sup> Stilley was thus in the position of seeking cooperation of the many on behalf of the few, and at a time when most ginners believed the status quo was already acceptable. However, growers did readily commit themselves to helping in any way they could, and by the summer of 1948 Stilley had been able to assemble an impressive number of telegrams from Texas growers assuring him that they did need Mexican labor and that his efforts were welcome.<sup>9</sup>

Although Stilley’s efforts had the potential to be effective, the government in Austin was ambivalent toward his plan. Texas officials would use his efforts to their rhetorical advantage when it suited them, but they also kept Stilley at arm’s length. The most direct support of the Jester administration for the Stilley Plan came on June 12. Jester explained to the press that this plan had been brought to the attention of his government by the Mexican government and that they supported it “insofar as it had

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<sup>6</sup> Stilley to Members Texas Cotton Ginner’s Association, April 21, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Telegrams to Stilley, June 1, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.



to do with fostering good relations between Anglo- and Latin-Americans and with improving living conditions of migratory labor.”<sup>10</sup> What is most striking about Jester’s statement, however, were the qualifications he placed on his support. While the Stilley plan talked of improving wages scales for workers, Jester proclaimed that no government agency could have anything to do with adjusting wage scales. Texas officials feared that doing so would align them too closely politically with the growers. He stated “the negotiation of wage scales is a matter between employer and employee and neither this office nor the Good Neighbor Commission of Texas will participate in such discussion.”<sup>11</sup> So if the Stilley Plan ventured into such territory it would have to go alone.

The governor was hesitant to forge a personal relationship with Stilley. In July 1948, after months of concerted action, Stilley traveled to Austin in the hopes of meeting with Governor Jester. Jester’s Executive Secretary, William McGill, however, thought that such a meeting would get the governor caught up in the politics of migrant labor in a way that would not be helpful to him. He urged another staffer that “the story should be that the Governor and I are both out of the City on Wednesday afternoon,” and thus unable to meet with Stilley.<sup>12</sup> One reason Jester may have wanted to keep Stilley at arms’ length was that, ultimately, Stilley was

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<sup>10</sup> Jester Press Release, June 12, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> McGill to Brown, July 20, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

more willing to enact liberal measures on discrimination than the government was. To be sure, Stilley's interest in the issue was economic, but he nevertheless embraced the idea of a strong executive order banning discriminatory acts. In this policy, he was joined by the West Texas Latin American Commission. Jester declined on the grounds that legislating by decree was contrary to Texas government.<sup>13</sup>

Despite his mistrust of programs that he could not ultimately control, the governor could not condemn a plan designed to stamp out discrimination, nor could he treat the matter blithely. The GNC responded similarly. Thomas Sutherland, the Executive Secretary of the GNC, wrote to Stilley that he believed more than his program would be required, and that it was necessary to show actions and not just intentions to Mexican officials. At the same time, however, he praised the Stilley Plan as "The only effort that they [Mexican officials] have regarded with real interest since the establishment of the Good Neighbor Commission."<sup>14</sup> The Stilley Plan did have some use for Jester as a way to demonstrate Texans' willingness to change to Mexican and U.S. officials. In a letter to George Marshall, Jester discussed the Stilley Plan alongside the GNC and the IAC as evidence of Texas' efforts to eliminate the problems faced by migratory laborers. The Stilley Plan, in a revealing statement about Jester's view of legal solutions, was praised in this letter for its "worthy effort

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<sup>13</sup> Stilley to Membership of Texas Cotton Ginners' Association, July 20, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>14</sup> Stilley to Members Texas Cotton Ginner's Association, April 21, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

to bring about, through persuasion, an elimination of the obstacles of private cultural attitudes and private policy, not subject to action of the law in the State Government.”<sup>15</sup>

Another reason Jester was concerned about a close alliance with the Stilley plan was the potential political backlash inherent in a too-close alliance with growers’ groups. Such fears were not without foundation. Jester’s letter to Marshall was made public and led to an immediate backlash against Jester’s administration spearheaded by LULAC and involving other organizations as well. Jester’s letter to Marshall seemed to identify the State Government explicitly with the Stilley Plan, which these groups saw as just one more facet of an effort to drive down wages in Texas by bringing in foreign laborers to increase the overall labor supply. McGill sent a worried message on the subject to M.B. Morgan and Sutherland wondering how the government could avoid the stigma of working toward driving down wages, or even what they could do to change Stilley’s approach to the problem.<sup>16</sup>

The League of United Latin American Citizens was correct in thinking that the ginners were primarily motivated by a desire to drive down wages. In a June 7 letter to his organization, Stilley defended his efforts regarding discrimination and Mexican labor to skeptical members of his organization primarily in terms of wages. He bemoaned that “It comes to a pretty bad place in our industry when we must cater to cotton pickers. I am sure that none of you specifically desire a situation like this to

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<sup>15</sup> Jester to Marshall, June 7, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>16</sup> McGill to Morgan and Sutherland, June 10, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

occur any more than I do, but I can assure you that the chances are very slight at the present time of securing Mexican National labor; and if we don't secure this labor, the damndest fight for cotton pickers and the highest wages ever paid will take place in Texas in 1948.”<sup>17</sup>

This specific assertion by Stilley in the June 7 bulletin caused immediate consternation at the GNC. Sutherland was concerned that the GNC would be tainted by association and suspected of deflating wages. He reassured the committee members that the GNC was “on record as endorsing the Stilley Plan only insofar as it promotes better inter-American relations.”<sup>18</sup> Sutherland went on to suggest that Stilley was not so much interested in lowering wages as in ensuring a steady labor supply. He called Stilley and urged him to consider that “in his public relations this security of labor would have a far better effect for the respect of the Stilley Plan than would any emphasis upon wages.”<sup>19</sup> Sutherland reassured committee members that his “enthusiasm for the Stilley Plan has been based upon its use in securing civil rights for workers.”<sup>20</sup> The two very different ways in which Sutherland and Stilley spun the plan to their respective audiences highlight the fact that the Stilley Plan was used a rhetorical club much more than as a practical device.

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<sup>17</sup> Stilley to Texas Cotton Ginners' Association, June 7, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>18</sup> Sutherland to GNC, June 11, 1948, Good Neighbor Commission of Texas, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

For Stilley's part, he never seemed aware of any effort by the governor to gain distance from him. To the contrary, in July, just a week or two before the visit during which he tried to see Jester, Stilley wrote the Governor a personal note praising his GNC, and his personal efforts to resolve the labor difficulties. He further pledged his political support, flattering Jester that "I sincerely believe that you have made us as fine a Governor as Texas ever had and you can count on my support in the present campaign."<sup>21</sup> True to form, the internal correspondence regarding how to deal with this gushing letter recommended sending it over to Morgan at the Inter-Agency Committee rather than having Jester deal with Stilley directly.<sup>22</sup> This letter may have revealed some political ambition on Stilley's part, for it was not the only time he mentioned a possible role for him in the Jester campaign. In July, he had volunteered in a letter to the State government "I'd like to know what I could do in the coming election, for Gov. Jester."<sup>23</sup>

In terms of its ultimate success, the Mexican government positively regarded the Stilley Plan, but always refrained from making specific promises regarding its implementation. The Mexican consul urged Stilley and his organization to put the

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<sup>21</sup> Stilley to Jester, July 7, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>22</sup> Internal note from McGill to Jester, attached to Stilley to Jester, July 7, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>23</sup> Stilley to Jester, undated, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

plan into effect with the Mexican-American population already residing in Texas, and, if the results were positive, to consider the issue of new labor migration from Mexico.<sup>24</sup>

The Stilley Plan provided all sides of the migratory labor issue with rhetorical ammunition, and the Mexican government was no exception. In the summer of 1948, for example, Jester was pleading with the Mexican government to acknowledge the progress that had been made through the GNC and other government agencies to eliminate discrimination, and then to allow Mexican workers to contract in the United States. The Mexican Foreign Ministry responded that it appreciated all the governor's efforts, but ultimately refused Jester's request by suggesting to him that "if the appropriate authorities of the State of Texas lend all the support which their attributes permit for the application of the Stilley Plan...a solid basis shall have been laid to reconsider the attitude of our Government with relation to the 'Texas Case.'"<sup>25</sup> At various times, Stilley was able directly to engage high officials of the Mexican government in discussions of his plan. In May 1948, in response to Stilley's letter to him, Manuel Tello responded with great enthusiasm for his efforts, albeit without

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<sup>24</sup> Stilley to Members Texas Cotton Ginner's Association, April 21, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>25</sup> Lovett to Jester, September 24, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

committing his government to any specific actions.<sup>26</sup> Stilley would brag to Jester at one point that his work on the Stilley Plan had led to him being named Vice Consul by the Mexican government.<sup>27</sup>

Stilley was never able fully to test the sincerity of the Mexican government's interest because his plan ultimately yielded few results. There is only scattered evidence of real action having been taken as a result of the Stilley Plan. Clint Walker of the Tahoka Chamber of Commerce reported to Stilley that the few "no-Mexicans" signs in his community had been taken down and that the business owners had promised to serve people of all ethnicities, but such successes were few.<sup>28</sup> In late July, after several months of concerted effort, Stilley threw in the towel. On the 20<sup>th</sup> he sent an informational bulletin to the membership of his organization which began with the frank admission that "it is my opinion that under no circumstances will we receive contract labor from Mexico this year."<sup>29</sup> He described a series of meetings in which he had been involved in Mexico City over the course of the previous week and said that the official line had never varied from the complaint that Texas did not do enough to combat discrimination. Stilley said that he had also gathered the

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<sup>26</sup> Tello to Stilley, May 22, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>27</sup> Stilley to Jester, July 7, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>28</sup> Walker to Stilley, March 14, 1948, included in, Stilley to Members Texas Cotton Ginner's Association, April 21, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>29</sup> Stilley to Membership of Texas Cotton Ginner's Association, July 20, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

impression from his conversations that the Mexicans believed that Texas did not need Mexican labor for 1948, because of a news release put out by Henry LeBlanc, Chief of Farm Placement for the Texas Employment Service. Stilley bemoaned that such conflicting claims “made our job virtually impossible.”<sup>30</sup> Ever the diplomat, Stilley reassured his members that he was treated with respect and always met with high level officials including Manuel Aguilar and Walter Thurston.<sup>31</sup> Regardless of the amount of compliance, or lack thereof, it became clear that the Mexicans had no intention of sending workers to Texas in 1948.

Stilley’s efforts may have been part of the broad pattern of activities and circumstances that would ultimately lead the Mexican government to rescind its labor embargo against Texas in 1949, but in the short term it accomplished little and Stilley would end his efforts frustrated and disappointed.

### **The Inter-Agency Committee**

1948 also saw the establishment of a new government committee in Texas to compliment the work of the GNC by coordinating efforts between government departments. The IAC was staffed with representatives of the GNC, Health Department, Education Department, Vocational Education Department, Texas Employment Commission, Department of Public Welfare, and the Bureau of Labor

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



Statistics.<sup>32</sup> The IAC was created in part to fill a void left by the federal government. Some of the services that the national government had provided migratory laborers in the past had been discontinued under the terms of the new bracero program. The IAC would not enjoy significant state resources, but was rather designed most efficiently to use the resources already allocated to the various departments of the state government. In early 1948, Morgan estimated the number of migratory workers in Texas to be 160,000 and told members of his new commission that they would help “formulate a broad program covering all phases of the migratory worker in relation to health, education and general welfare.”<sup>33</sup> For Jester, the existence of the IAC gave him a tangible way to demonstrate his concern with, and actions on behalf of, migratory workers in Texas. As the IAC’s work got underway, Jester said through a press release that “we are determined to attend to all the needs of our migratory farm workers. The committee has made a good start.”<sup>34</sup> The release went on to highlight the committee’s efforts on behalf of migratory workers including the distribution of first aid kits and inspection of migratory workers’ facilities and health programs.

Much of the IAC’s focus revolved around public health and included the distribution to migrant camps of Spanish-language literature covering common health

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<sup>32</sup> Jester to Grogan, June 24, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>33</sup> Minutes of IAC Meeting April 2, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>34</sup> Press Release Draft, April 22, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

issues faced by workers and their families.<sup>35</sup> For example, the IAC distributed to both employers and workers literature on proper sanitation in migratory labor camps and, in cooperation with private organizations such as The National Foundation of Infantile Paralysis, literature on health. The sanitary guidelines for employers included specific regulations on the spacing and layout of camps, general cleanliness, toilet facilities, showers, safe drinking water, and waste disposal. The guidelines for workers included a number of specific suggestions for personal hygiene and health. Migrant workers were urged to avoid drinking out of streams or other non-purified water sources, to bathe daily, to wash their hands, and to maintain general cleanliness in the camp area.<sup>36</sup>

The IAC's programs also stressed employment. For example, after its beginning in early 1948, the IAC sent four teachers to the lower Rio Grande Valley to conduct home economics and family life courses with the wives of migrants to help prepare them for the problems they would face on the road. In addition, convincing migrant workers to advance their children's' education was a significant concern. For example, the IAC encouraged migrant laborers to send their children to local schools, even though they might only be in the community for a few weeks before moving on.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Morgan to Members of IAC, June 29, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>36</sup> Morgan to Members IAC, June 29, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>37</sup> Jester to Marshall, June 7, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

The IAC also joined the GNC in its interest in the international aspects of the labor problem. It was at least partially at Morgan's urging that Jester wrote Secretary of State Marshall in June of 1948 asking him once more to take Texas' case to the Mexican government.<sup>38</sup>

Like the GNC, the IAC was often prodded to action through the efforts of groups like LULAC, which reported unfavorable conditions and urged the government to respond. For example, in late 1948 the IAC received a letter from Raoul Cortez at LULAC pointing out the poor conditions faced by migratory workers during their transportation from place to place. "They have been herded into unsanitary trucks," he wrote, "and transported long distances without food, rest, or stops enroute."<sup>39</sup> The committee met in response to these allegations and determined that not only were they true but that there was no state agency or law designed to solve this problem. The IAC deliberated and approved a resolution to seek the creation of a law against overloading trucks of migrant workers. Although the IAC should perhaps be praised for doing as much as it did, it is perhaps indicative of the nature of Texas politics that it did not act until prodded and even then only treated part of the problem. Its resolution said nothing about maintenance of the trucks, food provisions, or rest stops. This case is a good representative of other similar cases where the IAC was led to act. When Hector Garcia reported that schools in labor

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Memorandum of IAC Meeting, November 13, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

camps in Mathis were suffering from serious ill repair the IAC followed up with an investigation of its own to confirm the problem.<sup>40</sup> Committee members traveled personally to Mathis the following month.<sup>41</sup>

Although the IAC aimed high in its first year, Texas officials felt that it had not achieved any particularly meaningful results. By November, Wendell Hart was trying to at least salvage some PR value from the IAC's work. In a note to William McGill about the committee, he asked, "do you suppose any of these people really did anything? Could we call for a report or something and maybe get a story out of it?"<sup>42</sup> The report was duly issued.

There would be enough remaining interest in 1949 to give the IAC at least one more year of life. M.B. Morgan, as chairman, wrote to committee members in May of 1949 as the migratory season was approaching asking for a meeting to map strategy for the coming year. Because all of the constituent agencies represented on the committee would certainly see some increased responsibility during the migratory season in the coming months, Morgan suggested there was "a valid reason for

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<sup>40</sup> Morgan letter on Mathis Case, June 15, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>41</sup> McGill to Brown, July 20, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>42</sup> Hart to McGill, November 15, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

keeping our committee alive and offering our services as far as we are able to do so in protecting these workers against the health hazards they are likely to encounter while they are away from their home.”<sup>43</sup>

### **Soldiering On: The GNC's Program for 1948**

Despite the setbacks involved with the legalization program of 1947, a hopeful atmosphere pervaded the GNC as 1948 began. After the public embarrassment surrounding the firing of Pauline Kibbe, Sutherland took the reins as executive secretary of the GNC. Sutherland was well known in Texas as a result of his work during World War II with the Office of Inter-American Affairs. He was also a graduate of the University of Texas and a former Spanish instructor at the University of Colorado. With these credentials and his diplomatic personality, he immediately made a positive impression on Mexican officials and State Department representatives in the area.<sup>44</sup> Stephen Aguirre, U.S. Consul in Ciudad Juárez, reported that “Sutherland has started off on the right foot and will certainly ingratiate himself with the Mexican consular representatives of Texas.”<sup>45</sup> Sutherland provided Aguirre with a copy of an ambitious program, which the GNC had created for the year 1948. This program included a public relations blitz complete with pamphlets, radio broadcasts, contacts with religious leaders, and articles placed in national

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<sup>43</sup> Morgan to Cox, May 27, 1949, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>44</sup> Aguirre to Reveley, February 9, 1948, RG 59, 711.12.

<sup>45</sup> Aguirre to Reveley, February 6, 1948, RG 59, 711.12.

magazines. The GNC would also strive to develop close cooperation with law enforcement in the state, through direct contacts with local officials and publications in *Sheriffs' Magazine*. Sutherland and the GNC also proposed to confront discrimination in the public school system by expanding English instruction for Spanish-speaking students and Spanish instruction for English-speaking students. In addition, the program would involve lobbying to undo the segregation of Hispanic students in the school system. Finally, Sutherland asked for and received help from the Department of State in encouraging visits of members of the GNC to Mexican border states. State Department consuls in these border-states encouraged Mexican governors to invite GNC officials to visit their capitals.<sup>46</sup>

Another way that the GNC worked to improve the public perception in 1948 was by trying to find Hispanic Texans to serve on the commission. The obvious choice, and one that was seriously considered, was George I. Sanchez from the University of Texas.<sup>47</sup> One of Sanchez' projects was called the Study of Spanish-Speaking People, and he was a well-known advocate of rights for Hispanics in Texas. As one of the foremost public advocates in Texas for issues related to migratory labor, Sanchez's appointment to the GNC would have lent significant credibility to that agency. Although plans to lure Sanchez to the commission were unsuccessful, Jester added other Hispanic members to it.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Smith to Jester, 19 November 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

Sutherland sought the federal government's aid in launching many of the GNC's programs. State Department officials were somewhat hesitant to involve themselves in the business of the GNC, but nevertheless provided aid at several points. For example, Sutherland asked the State Department for copies of Army Spanish-language training records and other teaching aids, to be used in conjunction with the GNC's Spanish instruction programs. In forwarding this request, Aguirre acknowledged that the Department might not be able to spend money on a domestic agency, but he nevertheless urged his superiors to find a way to meet this request. He argued that the "Commission, as the Department knows, has already been of great value in improving the status of Mexicans and persons of Mexican descent in Texas, and its members comprise an extremely influential, representative, and strategically located group."<sup>48</sup> In the end, the Department decided it could not spend money for materials to be used domestically, but sent a bibliography of helpful materials for Sutherland's use.<sup>49</sup>

Another of Sutherland's initiatives involving language instruction was a program to provide teacher exchanges between Mexico and Texas. In February, he wrote to Paul Reveley, at the Department of State, asking him for help in bringing qualified teachers from Mexico to work in Texas schools. Sutherland assured the State Department official that he would make sure local attitudes would not lead to any problems for those teachers.<sup>50</sup> Reveley was anxious to comply with this request,

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<sup>48</sup> Aguirre to Marshall, February 12, 1948, RG 59, 711.12.

<sup>49</sup> Acting Secretary of State to Stephen Aguirre, April 8, 1948, RG 59, 711.12.

asserting that “racial discrimination in Texas, both real and imagined, is a factor of great importance in our relations with Mexico. The GNC deserves the fullest possible cooperation of the Department and I hope that we can do something along the teachers of Spanish line.”<sup>51</sup>

Although these language programs advanced, and undoubtedly helped Texas’ image to some extent, discrimination remained the key issue for the Mexican government in 1948. Reveley suggested that the Mexicans might have actually become more sensitive on the issue of discrimination because of recent personnel changes in the Foreign Office.<sup>52</sup> Although the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Thurston, felt able to report in September that “the newspapers of Mexico City are in general friendly toward the United States at present,” anger over discrimination was a constant sub-theme in the Mexican press.<sup>53</sup> On September 10, 1948, for example, *La Prensa* printed an article under the banner headline “Braceros Burned Alive; Atrocious Iniquities and Vengeance in Texas.”<sup>54</sup> It was later revealed that the burning in question was not the result of some vicious persecution as the headline implied, but a tragic accident involving a bracero attempting to keep a stove lit

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<sup>50</sup> Sutherland to Reveley, February 14, 1948, RG 59, 711.12.

<sup>51</sup> Reveley to Deming, February 25, 1948, RG 59, 711.12.

<sup>52</sup> Reveley to Aguirre, February 25, 1948, RG 59, 711.12.

<sup>53</sup> Thurston to Marshall, September 10, 1948, RG 59, 711.12.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.



indoors by pouring gasoline on the flame.<sup>55</sup> Stories like this one revealed the simmering antagonism that some Mexicans felt over discrimination in Texas.

The GNC realized that incidents of discrimination were of serious concern, and tried to tailor its efforts accordingly. Sutherland was concerned with discrimination not only in terms of investigating specific cases, but also in tracking its root causes. He also hoped to analyze incidents of discrimination in order to understand their extent. For example, he proposed to plot episodes of discrimination on a map, with the aim of showing the Mexican government that only a relatively small portion of the state saw frequent acts of discrimination. He believed that discrimination was common primarily in the eastern portion of the state, along the Louisiana border.<sup>56</sup>

Texas leaders were also faced with widely divergent attitudes among their citizens about the problem of migratory labor. Some citizens recognized the discrimination occurring in Texas and urged the government to take action to stop it. One letter, for example, wrote understandingly of Mexico's refusal to allow workers to be contracted in Texas saying, "I would not let my child to go to play with the neighbor next door if you were a big bully that always mistreated her."<sup>57</sup> The author went on to urge the passage of state laws barring discriminatory acts. By contrast, another citizen, representative of an extreme but not uncommon view, wrote to the

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<sup>55</sup> Thurston to Marshall, September 17, 1948, RG 59, 711.12.

<sup>56</sup> Reveley to Aguirre, February 9, 1948, RG 59, 711.12.

governor condemning State Department officials as “betrayers of our national good,” and cautioning that “Mexican laborers are all too glad to work in Texas, and as for ‘discrimination,’ they who have lived with it all their lives do not even know what it means. It is a word coined by Labor Unions, and used by our own New Deal-and its present worse-form to make the trouble they have so well planned for the South.”<sup>58</sup> Such a diverse climate complicated GNC efforts, and made it difficult for it to project a united front for the state in its dealings with Mexico.

While the State Department was sympathetic to Texans’ desire to participate in the bracero program, it was unable to solve the labor embargo in 1948. Reveley felt that the GNC “can do a tremendous amount of good work of lasting value in our relations with Mexico,”<sup>59</sup> but U.S. government officials would have to content themselves with having successfully renegotiated a bracero program for the rest of the country, and the problem of Texas was deferred to the future.

### **El Paso Incident and the Breakdown of the 1948 Agreement**

Unfortunately, the tensions between Mexico and Texas would not be deferred. Events in Texas in October 1948 would ignite a powder keg of ill will, causing the complete collapse of the labor agreement negotiated the previous February. As October wore on, growers with land in the region around El Paso were becoming

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<sup>57</sup> Cantú to Jester, June 18, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>58</sup> Ring to Jester, June 15, 1948, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>59</sup> Reveley to Aguirre, February 25, 1948, RG 59, 711.12.

desperate for labor to aid in the cotton harvest. Meanwhile, on the Mexican side of the border, thousands of would-be braceros had gathered in the hope of finding work in the United States. On October 13, the Border Patrol agents at the crossing between Caudal Juárez and El Paso stood aside and allowed Mexican migrant laborers to come over the border unopposed, despite their lack of a legal contract. Some 8,000 crossed.<sup>60</sup> Once in the United States, they were apprehended by the Border Patrol and “paroled” to local farms that desired their labor. This incident provoked the Mexican government on October 18 to notify the Truman administration that they considered the United States to have unilaterally violated the labor agreement negotiated the previous February. On this pretext, the Mexican Government cancelled that agreement, effective immediately.

The actions of the Border Patrol seem to have been taken without the prior knowledge or permission of officials in the White House or the State Department. Days after the incident, Acting Secretary of State Robert A. Lovett seemed to be trying to understand what had taken place. In addition to a non-committal reply to Ambassador Raphael de la Colina, he sent a series of urgent requests to a number of government agencies asking for information on the incident.<sup>61</sup> In an interview fifteen years later, Truman’s advisor, David H. Stowe, who took the lead on issues related to Mexican labor, described the President’s surprise at the event in ways that seem

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<sup>60</sup> Sundquist to Jones, March 30, 1950, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, Folder 4 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>61</sup> Lovett to de la Colina, October 20, 1948, WHCF: CF, State Department Correspondence, 1948-49, Folder 2 of 6, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

consistent with the documentary record at the time. He explained that “some newspapers carried stories insinuating that this incident was according to an agreement which the President had made with certain Texas politicians so Texas could get cheap labor. This was not so; the President was shocked by the incident. At his direction the next morning a representative of the State Department went to the Mexican Embassy with an official apology.”<sup>62</sup> Although Stowe obviously had an interest in portraying this event in a positive light for the President, his account nevertheless squares with Truman’s attitude as revealed in the documents. Truman was consistently concerned with the treatment of agricultural workers and with the problem of illegal immigration. John R. Steelman, assistant to Truman, sent letters of explanation the week after the incident to LULAC as well as the Pan American Progressive Association, the Latin American Citizens Council, and the National Farm Labor Union, headed by H.L. Mitchell, who made issues relating to Mexican labor one of his key concerns. Steelman assured these various interest groups that “the matter has been investigated and the Commissioner of Immigration on October 22 directed the Immigration Service to return promptly all such persons.”<sup>63</sup> The idea that Truman himself would approve a plan with such easily predictable negative outcomes is doubtful.

Although the decision does not seem to have been made in the White House, it also seems clear that it was not merely the product of a few disobedient border

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<sup>62</sup> David H. Stowe, Oral History, July 27 and December 7, 1963, by C. T. Morrissey, Harry S. Truman Library.

guards either. The directors of the United States Employment Service and of the Immigration and Naturalization Service were both aware of the incident, and approved of the actions of the local border patrol.<sup>64</sup>

On October 26, Watson B. Miller, Commissioner of the INS, sent a response to inquiries from LULAC about the stories coming out of El Paso. He explained that as the harvest season unfolded, negotiations to bring in workers legally did not seem to be making headway. At this point, with impatient employers gathering on the U.S. side of the border and Mexican farm laborers gathering on the other side of the border hoping to get contracts, the INS decided to stop standing in the way. As Miller explained, "eventually that situation became so critical from the standpoint of both the need of the employers and the need of the workers, that it was decided, strictly as a temporary emergency measure, to parole the arrested aliens and defer their removal to Mexico until the crops in question have been harvested."<sup>65</sup> The more immediate supervisor in the area, Grover Wilmoth, confirmed this attitude. To his mind the practical realities of the situation made the action sensible and appropriate "the crops need harvesting, or they are going to waste."<sup>66</sup>

The INS chief seems to have thought that this explanation would somehow justify violation of the international agreement. In an incredulous letter, Raoul Cortez

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<sup>63</sup> Steelman to Mitchell, October 25, 1948, WHCF:OF, Mexican Agricultural Labor, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>64</sup> Mitchell to Carber, October 31, 1948, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, Folder 17 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>65</sup> Miller to Cortez, October 26, 1948, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, Folder 7 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

of LULAC responded that "While I am deeply grateful to Mr. Miller for his prompt reply, his courteous tone and his detailed response to our communication, I am unable to express anything less than amazement at the explanations that he offers in connection with the El Paso incident."<sup>67</sup> Cortez went on to explain that he was particularly amazed that even after the incident became public, the INS chief still intended to have the workers finish the harvest before being returned to Mexico. He remonstrated with the Attorney General that this approach was inconsistent with the statements of the President through his State Department, which promised that all of these workers would be returned immediately.<sup>68</sup> The INS, in short, seemed willing to disregard international agreements in response to pressure from interests along the border.

At any rate, the incident caused an immediate firestorm of protest in the Mexican press. Abuse of Mexicans in the United States was always a compelling story, and Mexican newspapers would have all the material they wanted after October 18. The day after the Mexican government's decision to cancel all bracero agreements with the United States, the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City revealed the extent of the ensuing public relations nightmare as it summarized the local news commentary. The story was front-page news with banner headline in virtually every

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<sup>66</sup> Unsigned Telegram, October 18, 1948, WHCF: CF, State Department Correspondence, 1948-9, Folder 2 of 6, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>67</sup> Cortez to Clark, November 4, 1948, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, Folder 7 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

Mexico City paper.<sup>69</sup> In addition to the news coverage, the incident was also the subject of almost universally harsh editorial comment. *El Nacional*, in an editorial entitled “An inexcusable offense,” explained the history of discrimination in Texas and the resulting labor embargo, arguing that the current “criminal outrage to which thousands of Mexican workers have just been subject at El Paso could not be more brazenly illegal or more offensively vexatious,” and called for immediate action. *Novedades* compared racial discrimination in Texas to Hitler’s Germany and praised the Mexican government for having abrogated the agreement. *El Universal* stated that Mexicans in Texas were treated worse than blacks and ended by lamenting the embarrassing economic realities that allowed the Mexican people to be placed in this degrading position. The editorial continued by arguing that Mexico needed to put an end to its colonial relationship with the United States, concluding, “our men leave because they need employment. We must put our house in order so all Mexicans may find work.”<sup>70</sup>

This editorial reveals a significant trend in the rhetoric inside of Mexico. The Mexican administrations of Manuel Avila Camacho and Alemán had been anxious to cooperate with the United States, recognizing their reliance on U.S. loans and investment. However, they faced an uphill political battle at home convincing Mexican elites that an economic system, which left Mexico dependent upon the

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<sup>69</sup> Thurston to Marshall, October 19, 1948, WHCF: CF, State Department Correspondence, 1948-49, Folder 2 of 6, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

United States, was consistent with the noble goals of the Mexican revolution. A provocation on the level of the El Paso incident left the Alemán administration little choice but to take a strong position against such abuses.

When President Alemán canceled all binational labor agreements in the aftermath of the El Paso incident, his office was inundated with supportive telegrams from labor unions, politicians, professors, and other significant Mexican interest groups praising him for breaking the agreement with the United States. A union, writing in support of Alemán's decision to cancel bracero contracts summed up the general tone of the telegrams as it praised him somewhat hyperbolically in this manner:

For the patriotic attitude that you adopted in defense of national honor and sovereignty in relation to the problem caused by the violation of agreements regulating the contracting of workers to work to serve in the fields of United States, this Confederation sends you its most enthusiastic congratulations and affirms to you its absolute support in your firm resolution to consider these agreements broken.<sup>71</sup>

A major journalist organization wrote to Alemán with its concern about the events at El Paso, and praising him for his decision to cancel the bracero agreement "in defense of the honor of Mexico."<sup>72</sup> A small farmers' organization also urged that the bracero agreements be canceled and that Alemán take quick action to prevent U.S. border patrol officials from ignoring their responsibilities again.<sup>73</sup> While these letters of

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<sup>71</sup> Confederacion Unica de Trabajadores to Miguel Alemán Valdez, October 21, 1948, AGN, RP/MAV, 546.6/1-32 C594.

<sup>72</sup> Asociacion Mexicana de Periodistas to MAV, 20 October 1948, AGN, RP/MAV, 546.6/1-32 C594.



support must have been welcomed by Alemán on some level, they are perhaps more significant for what they reveal about the way public opinion constricted Alemán's freedom to act. Alemán was consistently willing to cooperate with the Truman administration on issues related to migratory labor, but he had to temper that willingness against the countervailing pressure of public opinion in Mexico. Mexicans easily imagined that their powerful neighbor to the north was taking advantage of them, and when events like the El Paso incident occurred, public opinion became very quickly inflamed, as the worst suspicions of Mexicans seem to be confirmed. The strong support for canceling the contracts from across such a range of societal interest groups shows the near uniformity of opinion. Events along the border thus not only influenced the Truman administration, but significantly limited the range of options available to the Mexican government as well.

## **Conclusion**

Although it may have been the most striking example, the El Paso incident was not the only evidence that the Border Patrol curtailed its enforcement activities in response to local political pressures. These events prompted some far-reaching soul-searching within the U.S. federal government regarding the problem of migratory labor. Shortly after the events of October, Mitchell, an administration official who worked on migratory labor issues, set about creating a report on the general problem of immigration from Mexico. Mitchell wrote his report "in an effort to try to

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<sup>73</sup> Rodolfo F. Nieva, Confederacion Nacional Pequena Propeidad Agricola to MAV, 20 October 1948, AGN, RP/MAV, 546.6/1-32 C594.

understand why there was a breakdown of our immigration laws and an overt and admitted violation of a treaty with our neighbor Mexico."<sup>74</sup> But in Mitchell's view, and increasingly in the view of the administration generally, the problems related to migratory labor went beyond individual incidents. Mitchell maintained that "the El Paso incident was unique only in that it was dramatic. It was a goldfish bowl performance, exemplifying a general breakdown in our efforts to deal with the very serious problem of immigration from Mexico."<sup>75</sup> Pulling no punches, he concluded that "our immigration policy on the border is bankrupt and our immigration program is, as a result, an abject and pitiful failure."<sup>76</sup> He also described how the result of the current system was that U.S. laborers were pushed out of the border regions because they were unable to compete with the low wages that illegal immigrants would accept. In a series of stern recommendations, Mitchell argued that the INS, USES, and other agencies that dealt with these issues should be transferred to new authority. Significantly, Mitchell ended his report by recommending the creation of a Presidential Commission:

We have not been considering the basic issues but on the contrary only the mechanical superficialities of a highly complex social domestic problem and ignoring the adulthood of a more or less continuing imperialistic policy toward Mexico. If our foreign-policy conscience hurts us in the below-the-border area, the solution is not to piously exploit Mexicans in United States but probably lies in assisting Mexico in Mexico in such a way as to preserve her sovereign dignity.

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<sup>74</sup> Unsigned Telegram, October 18, 1948, WHCF: CF, State Department Correspondence, 1948-9, Folder 2 of 6, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

If this is reasonably correct, then we should be able to improve our internal social problem as it involves our Spanish-speaking citizens. To do this will require study by a Presidential Commission.<sup>77</sup>

This last recommendation would build steam and eventually be accepted. Eight months would transpire between the dramatic conclusion of the 1948 labor agreement and the negotiation of a new agreement in 1949. The El Paso incident was a crucial step in convincing the Truman administration that the intractable problems involving agricultural labor in the southwest could not be effectively solved through existing methods. The incident revealed that the federal government was unable, and in some cases unwilling, to control violations of law and international agreements along the border. Truman would form a presidential commission to study this problem and make recommendations.

While the Truman administration would use the incident as an incentive to seek new solutions to problems related to agricultural labor, perhaps its most striking lesson is that the millions of people inhabiting the region along the U.S.-Mexican border defied effective control by either government. Local realities drove local actions, and these actions in turn complicated, hampered, and influenced the Truman administration's efforts to conduct state-to-state relations with Mexico.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE 1949 BRACERO AGREEMENT: INSTITUTIONALIZING DISAGREEMENTS

The El Paso incident demonstrated the continuing difficulty that U.S. officials had making their public pronouncements square with the reality on the ground. The Mexican government's cancellation of the legalization program for Texas in 1947 and then of the entire international agreement in 1948 highlighted the growing sense of frustration of those on both sides who sought to control the border and to create a workable international labor program. The cancellation of the bracero agreements between the United States and Mexico in the aftermath of the El Paso incident started a period of ten months in which there was no framework for the large-scale legal contracting of Mexican labor. A new agreement, the latest in a long string of pacts, would be signed finally in August 1949.

This chapter discusses the negotiations leading to the new 1949 agreement, examines how the agreement functioned in practice, shows how the Good Neighbor Commission and other state government officers in Texas reacted to the changing international situation, and examines some of the more significant threats to the stability of the new agreement and to the efforts of Texas officials. These threats

included a bill in the U.S. Senate proposed by Clinton Anderson of New Mexico to admit Mexican workers without an agreement with Mexico, a much-publicized incident of discrimination involving the body of a World War II serviceman, and a political threat in the Texas legislature to abolish the GNC. This study of the 1949 agreement shows that the problems surrounding migratory labor were not solved, but rather came to be institutionalized. Leaders on both sides were figuring out how to live with the complexities of a labor market that did not lend itself to close control by either government.

This new agreement would bring both good and bad news for Texans. The good news was that the labor embargo that had been in effect nearly non-stop since 1943 was finally lifted. The 1949 agreement contained no blanket ban against labor contracting in Texas. However, this advance was not a complete victory for Texas leaders, as the new program did not mean a complete end to “blacklists.” Under the new system, the Mexican government still reserved the right to refuse contracts to specific localities, usually towns or counties, which it considered to be hostile environments for its workers. The labor embargo, therefore, did not so much cease to exist as it morphed into a new form that came with its own advantages and difficulties.

### **Forming the 1949 Agreement**

During early 1949, events demonstrated that significant demand for a worker agreement remained in both the United States and Mexico. In the absence of any formal agreement, or even the immediate prospect that one could be concluded,

Mexican workers began massing on the Mexican side of the border in the spring, straining the patience and the local economies of border communities.<sup>1</sup> The State Department, worried that such a movement of workers would derail bracero negotiations by leading to another El Paso incident, sent a subtle message to Immigration and Naturalization Service Commissioner Watson Miller to make sure he was aware of this movement and was committed to maintaining the integrity of the border. In a carefully worded note Paul Reveley urged that while “I know there is no intention on the part of any American Government agency to open the gates and admit these workers into the United States without documents” there was a possibility that “large numbers of them may elude our vigilance.”<sup>2</sup> This was a clear reference to the Border Patrol’s complicity in allowing Mexican workers to cross the border during the El Paso incident. Spurred on by the building pressure, the U.S. and Mexican governments began to negotiate in earnest in January 1949 in Mexico City.

These negotiations lasted for about a month, and were presided over for the United States by Leslie A. Wheeler of the Embassy in Mexico, and for the Mexicans by Alfonso Guerra, *Oficial Mayor* of the Ministry of Foreign Relations. After the initial talks, additional negotiations and correspondence would take more than six months before an agreement was finalized. Ultimately, the new agreement would replicate most of the terms of the previous one with a few notable exceptions.

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<sup>1</sup> Aguirre to Reveley, April 22, 1949, RG 59, 811.504.

<sup>2</sup> Reveley to Miller, April 29, 1949, RG 59, 811.504.

The U.S. officials refused to grant Mexican officials their long-time demand of having the United States act as official employer and guarantor of contracts, as it had during the Second World War. In the postwar era, the United States steadfastly declined to assume financial obligations to pay, provide healthcare for, or transport Mexican workers. Thus, under the 1949 agreement, laborers would be contracted directly by private employers, who would also be responsible for transporting workers back to Mexico after their contracts expired. The INS would collect a bond from employers for every worker to guarantee travel expenses. The contracts would generally last for four to six months, with contracts as short as three months for cotton workers and six weeks for beet workers allowed as exceptions. Contracts were renewable for up to one year. The terms of the contract were worked out precisely between the two governments and the employers and workers could choose only to sign or not to sign. Neither party was allowed to change any of the terms.

As with previous agreements, this one was ostensibly designed to protect U.S. laborers. Bracero contracts were theoretically only available to an employer after both the United States Employment Service and the INS had certified that there were not enough domestic laborers in a particular area to meet the demand. The agreement stipulated that braceros entering the United States under this agreement “shall not be employed to displace domestic workers or to reduce existing wage rates.”<sup>3</sup>

The agreement did not stipulate a precise wage for the Mexican laborers, preferring the vague language that braceros be paid the “prevailing wage” in the area

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<sup>3</sup> International Executive Agreement, 1949, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, Folder 4 of 19, Truman Library.

were they were contracted.<sup>4</sup> This wage was never to be below the amount necessary for “normal living needs,” but again, with this term left undefined the employers could largely determine what constituted a living wage. The Mexican government frequently pushed for or accepted provisions in these agreements that would guarantee their laborers the same benefits enjoyed by U.S. laborers. Either they were unaware of, or content to ignore, the fact that U.S. agricultural workers were among the least protected, lowest paid, and most generally overlooked sectors of U.S. labor. Consequently, this wage guarantee and others like it meant little. In practice, other protections provided by the agreement could actually result in Mexican workers being better paid than their U.S. counterparts.

One of the key concerns of the Mexican government in 1949, as in previous negotiations, was how to control the tide of illegal immigrants. The text of the 1949 agreement included the strongly worded provision that “both Governments shall, insofar as is possible, take all necessary measures to suppress radically the illegal traffic of Mexican workers.”<sup>5</sup> The agreement contained several provisions designed to achieve that end. Both governments pledged themselves to expanding their border enforcement.<sup>6</sup> Also, employers who hired contracted braceros were required to sign an affidavit that they were not employing illegal immigrants and would not do so in the future. Without the threat of enforcement through follow-up visits by government

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> “Joint Interpretation of the International Executive Agreement by the Governments of Mexico and the United States,” 1949, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor,



personnel, such assurances were often empty promises, but the agreement did contain a more meaningful provision that both sides hoped would help contain the problem. The 1949 agreement revived the legalization programs first experimented with in 1947 agreement. Illegal Mexican immigrants already in the United States were given preference for available work contracts. Provided they were already in the United States before August 1, 1949, their status could be legalized through the 1949 program.<sup>7</sup>

From the perspective of Texas government officials and employers, the most significant change contained in the 1949 agreement was that it ended the labor embargo against Texas that had existed continuously since the summer of 1943. No longer would the entire state be subject to exclusion based on its reportedly inhospitable atmosphere to Mexican nationals. Although this was certainly a victory, the new agreement included strong terms designed to protect Mexican nationals from discrimination, and compliance with these terms would still occupy considerable attention from those who had an interest in bringing Mexican workers into the state. As an indication of the seriousness and complexity of the issue of discrimination, the clause of the new program related to the subject occupied more space than did any other in the joint interpretation of the agreement.<sup>8</sup>

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Folder 4 of 19, Truman Library.

<sup>7</sup> "Information Relative to Temporary Admission of Nationals of Mexico to the United States to Engage in Agricultural Employment under the Agreement of August 1, 1949 Governing the Migration of Mexican Agricultural Workers, August 1949," Prepared by Commissioner of INS and Director of USES, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, Folder 4 of 19, Truman Library.

<sup>8</sup> "Joint Interpretation of the International Executive Agreement by the Governments of Mexico and the United States," 1949, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor,

It would be more accurate to say that the labor embargo changed forms, rather than disappeared entirely with the new agreement. Article 6 created a mechanism whereby the Mexican government and USES could jointly declare that acts of discrimination were occurring in a particular community. The first step in the procedure was for USES and the INS to certify that there was a need for workers in a set of towns or counties. Next, the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs would examine that list and report to the U.S. embassy in Mexico City whether any of those locations were unacceptable because of existing discrimination. USES would then have an opportunity to agree or disagree with these findings. The threshold was left completely undefined by the agreement. There is some further explanation provided in the joint interpretation of the agreement, but significant latitude was granted to Mexican consuls and USES officials to determine what constituted discrimination. The joint interpretation added that “while it is understood that single isolated instances of discrimination by individuals cannot be completely controlled, this Agreement contemplates that Mexican nationals should not be denied access to community facilities, private or public, because of their race, color, or nationality.”<sup>9</sup> It was not immediately clear whether one sign in a storefront, a segregated school, or an offensive remark would be enough to ban a community from contracting Mexican labor. In the likely event that USES disagreed with the findings of the Mexican Foreign Ministry, the agreement stipulated the rather unusual course of action that

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Folder 4 of 19, Truman Library.

<sup>9</sup> “Joint Interpretation of the International Executive Agreement by the Governments of Mexico and the United States,” 1949, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, Folder 4 of 19, Truman Library.

would be available to the Mexican government. Mexican officials could demand a signed pledge from local leaders of the community in question. This pledge would say in substance that:

- a. No discriminatory acts shall be perpetrated against Mexicans employed in that locality and
- b. That in the event the Mexican Consulate reports the existence of acts of discrimination against any Mexican because of race, color or nationality, the local governmental head will have such complaints promptly investigated and promote such community and individual action as may be necessary to fulfill the community pledge.<sup>10</sup>

Although such a pledge placed a daunting responsibility on local officials, the joint interpretation contained the provision that “it is understood that the failure of a community to stamp out isolated cases of discrimination, where it has attempted to do so by taking appropriate measures in accordance with their pledge, will not be considered grounds for terminating the Individual Work Contracts of the workers employed in that area.”<sup>11</sup> In the event that Mexican consuls reported discrimination after the assurances of this pledge, USES was required to appoint a representative to investigate within ten days. If they failed to investigate, or if the investigation returned evidence of discrimination, the work contracts for that area would be cancelled. If USES and Mexican officials disagreed about the outcome of the

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<sup>10</sup> International Executive Agreement, 1949, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, Folder 4 of 19, Truman Library.

<sup>11</sup> “Joint Interpretation of the International Executive Agreement by the Governments of Mexico and the United States,” 1949, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, Folder 4 of 19, Truman Library.

investigation, the case would be taken up through diplomatic channels. The agreement also included a clause allowing the exclusion of individual employers “who discriminate in employment against Mexican nationals.”<sup>12</sup>

These arrangements showed the increasing seriousness with which the Mexican government approached the issue of discrimination, and it also showed a certain amount of diplomatic clumsiness, as these terms were ill-defined and in some cases mutually contradictory. For example, requiring local officials to pledge to investigate cases of discrimination made little sense if a concurrent USES investigation could result in the termination of the contracts. The local investigation could not be of any value to the community under those terms. Also, the fact that the threshold of discrimination that could result in a community’s exclusion was not defined was certain to lead to disagreements between USES and the Mexican consuls. Further, which officials were included under the heading “principal authorities” of the community in question was not defined.<sup>13</sup>

The provisions in the agreement designed to keep local wages high and avoid displacing domestic workers also failed. Not surprisingly, macroeconomic forces did not obediently subject themselves to these proscriptions. U.S. workers were displaced, pushed north by the low wages prevailing in the border regions, as would be amply demonstrated by the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

What was clear was that Texans would now fight the battle of gaining access to labor on a community by community basis. The way the Texas government worked to adapt its efforts to meet these new contingencies will be discussed below.

### **GNC efforts under the 1949 Agreement**

Efforts to create a workable arrangement at the national level were paralleled by efforts within Texas. The GNC and the governor's office strove to adapt to the new arrangements contained in the 1949 agreement. Specifically, it would be their task to figure out how the new community-by-community restrictions would work in practice. Efforts to do this were complicated by spectacular incidents of discrimination, significant shakeups in leadership, and varying levels of commitment to the issue among Texas officials.

1949 saw considerable changes in Texas leadership that would prove to have an effect on efforts to fight discrimination. On July 11, 1949 Governor Beauford Jester died suddenly and Lieutenant Governor Allan Shivers succeeded him. Shivers was a young, wealthy politician from East Texas with strong connections to the business community and a suspicion of racial politics.<sup>14</sup> While Jester was an enthusiastic champion of the GNC, and took great personal pride in his own relationships with Mexican officials, Shivers approached the issue of Mexican labor with more reticence. Shivers would take the GNC in a more moderate direction, most directly through the appointment of a new chairman. Shivers employed Mexican and

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<sup>14</sup> Kinch, Sam and Stuart Long, *Allen Shivers: The Pied Piper of Texas Politics* (Austin: Shoal Creek Publishers, 1973), vii.

Mexican-American labor on his own ranch, and approached this issue from the perspective of business owner and employer rather than laborer. He, for example, was among those offended by Pauline Kibbe's scathing report on labor practices in the Lower Rio Grande Valley that had led to her forced resignation.<sup>15</sup>

In 1949, Neville Penrose replaced R.E. Smith as chairman of the GNC under significant political pressure for reasons that will be described later. Smith, whose work on the GNC stemmed from a strong personal commitment to the issues, was rewarded by the Mexican government for his efforts with the Order of the Aztec Eagle. He did not disappear from sight on issues of Texas-Mexican relations, as he was appointed later by Allan Shivers to chair the Council on Human Relations.<sup>16</sup> Smith's leadership would be missed. Lloyd Bentsen at first refused to continue to serve on the GNC if Smith was replaced, only changing his mind after the personal intervention of Shivers.<sup>17</sup>

Penrose himself was less dedicated to the mission of the GNC than was Smith, and it probably was no coincidence that during his tenure the GNC lost many of its functions to other agencies, chiefly the Human Relations Council. Just over a year after his appointment, Penrose wrote Shivers asking for permission to resign. He lamented that "I am completely fed up with it. I get no more fun out of it, and I

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<sup>15</sup> Green, George Norris, *The Establishment in Texas Politics: The Primitive Years, 1938-1957* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979), 139-140.

<sup>16</sup> Biography of R.E. Smith, Texas Good Neighbor Commission, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>17</sup> Kinch, Sam and Stuart Long, *Allen Shivers: The Pied Piper of Texas Politics* (Austin: Shoal Creek Publishers, 1973), 63.

would like to resign at any time the resignation will be agreeable to you.”<sup>18</sup> Shivers refused Penrose’s resignation, telling him in no uncertain terms that he wished him to continue, but the exchange highlights Penrose’s attitude toward the GNC’s work.<sup>19</sup>

On December 11, 1949, Penrose gave a speech before a gathering of the American Legion in Fort Worth. This speech, given to an organization to which Penrose belonged, provides a revealing look at the way in which Penrose saw U.S.-Mexican relations in terms of the Cold War. Penrose told his audience from the start that "I'm going to take off the gloves and be very frank and candid and blunt with you." He went on that "it is high time that Texans took an interest in Texas, and discussed the dangers our family and our friends are facing." For Penrose these dangers included threats to national security, and, in an interesting juxtaposition, he suggested that discrimination became a security issue. Penrose declared "I am sure we have military plans for our joint defense, and I know our highway systems tie in, as do our railroads, and we both have lots of airports and harbors. But the most important thing of all we do not have. That is the love and confidence and affection and trust of the average Mexican." The fault, for Penrose, lay with the behavior of Texans. He went as far back as World War I, asserting that Germany was able to woo Mexico to its side because of poor behavior by Americans. "We have been thoughtless, smug, inconsiderate." He suggested that although Mexico supported the

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<sup>18</sup> Penrose to Shivers, Nov 21, 1950, Texas Good Neighbor Commission, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>19</sup> Shivers to Penrose, Dec 9, 1950, Texas Good Neighbor Commission, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

United States during World War II, the average citizen Mexican was probably not committed to the Allied cause. Without citing sources, he suggested that the Japanese had invasion plans that included a landing on the West Coast of Mexico, and he further made the rather astonishing claim that "Texas was right in the path of the Japanese contemplated invasion." This security concern was seen as extending into the Cold War era. Penrose warned that "Communists are working like trojans across the Mexican border, making plans to take us over, and we, like a bunch of saps, appear to be doing all we can to help them." Penrose went on to directly address the topic of discrimination arguing that reports of incidents of discrimination that happen in United States, including an abusive police, denial of service at public facilities, and other humiliations, make their way back to Mexico souring the image of the United States and that nation. These reports, Penrose argued, provide the Communists with propaganda tools and make Mexico an unreliable ally.<sup>20</sup> Couching efforts to fight discrimination in terms of security and a broader Cold War struggle was one useful way to motivate Texans who were unconcerned about discrimination for its own sake.

Texas officials' efforts to link discrimination and security provide confirming evidence for a well-established literature arguing that international security concerns helped provide motivation for the civil rights movement at home. U.S. officials feared that the United States would have trouble winning cold war allies in the third

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<sup>20</sup> Addressed by Neville D. Penrose to Texas Post Commanders and Adjutants of the American Legion in the Longhorn Room, Texas Hotel, Fort Worth, Texas, December 11, 1949, RG 59, 711.12.



world when it did not provide political equality to its own racial or ethnic minorities. Penrose's speech demonstrates that some state-level politicians shared those concerns.<sup>21</sup>

In 1949, the GNC launched a new initiative to improve its relationship with Mexico through direct contacts with the governors of Mexican border states. The Governor of Tamaulipas attended the October 11 meeting of the GNC and was welcomed in elaborate fashion by Shivers. These efforts seemed to yield some fruit in the good will of Mexican officials. GNC member Ramon Guerra excitedly reported after this visit that Governor Raúl Garate was considering establishing a good neighbor commission of his own in Tamaulipas.<sup>22</sup> The enthusiasm from this visit grew and Penrose, as the new chairman of the GNC, invited the governors of Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, and Tamaulipas to Texas to discuss discrimination.<sup>23</sup> On December 4, the governors were treated to formal receptions and dinners as well as meetings with prominent Texans inside and outside of government.<sup>24</sup> In late 1949 the GNC also added another staff member to help run their bilingual program in which Guerra was heavily involved.

In addition to the continuing efforts of the GNC, in 1950 the government of Texas took a new initiative in its dealings with Mexico. They began a program of

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<sup>21</sup>For a discussion of the links between the civil rights movement and international politics, see, for example, the work of Thomas Borstlemann, Mary L. Dudziak, or Azza Salama Layton.

<sup>22</sup> Benet to Department of State, October 18, 1949, RG 59, 711.12.

<sup>23</sup> Aguirre to Department of State, October 20, 1949, RG 59, 711.12.

<sup>24</sup> Benet to Department of State, December 1, 1949, RG 59, 711.12.

forming local Human Relations Councils in Texas communities to deal with issues of discrimination and other divisive issues. These new councils would allow Texas to deal with the individual community restrictions more effectively than the GNC could do itself. To some extent, this new movement represented a fulfillment of Kibbe's original vision in "Community Organization for Inter-American Understanding." These councils were tasked with seeing to the problems of Hispanics in Texas while the GNC would continue to focus more directly on relations with Mexico.<sup>25</sup>

Governor Shivers requested that such councils be formed throughout the state, and the GNC tried to keep a record of the members of each local council at its office.<sup>26</sup> In addition, there was a statewide board headed, as mentioned, by Smith. By the end of 1950, there were about 30 local Human Relations Councils. During the first 90 days of 1951 the statewide Human Relations Council made a special push to increase this number, enlisting at first on a temporary basis the services of GNC executive secretary Sutherland. He was to be tasked, among other things, with setting up and organizing offices for the council at the University of Texas. This change in assignment would lead to Myrtle Tanner taking over as the next executive secretary at the GNC.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Kinch, Sam and Stuart Long, *Allen Shivers: The Pied Piper of Texas Politics* (Austin: Shoal Creek Publishers, 1973), 96.

<sup>26</sup> Penrose to Dansby, June 22, 1950, Texas Good Neighbor Commission, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>27</sup> Penrose to Members of the GNC, Dec 19, 1950, Texas Good Neighbor Commission, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

It took some time for the new councils to understand their functions and perform them. In September 1950, Penrose still felt that the new organizations “have a hazy idea as to how to attack the problems for which they were organized,” and directed Sutherland to prepare a printed guide for the reference of council members.<sup>28</sup>

The Human Relations Council would not enjoy the same kind of government support as the GNC. Instead of being supported by state funds, it was privately financed by Smith himself. The HRC was unstable from the start, and there is some evidence that Shivers supported it as little more than a way to get some positive pre-election public relations and to find a suitable place to drop former GNC officials Smith and Sutherland.<sup>29</sup> With the removal of two officials, who had been with the GNC since its inception, Penrose would have a free hand to make sure the commission took the more moderate road that Shivers envisioned.

The discussions and actions surrounding problems with bracero workers in Harlingen, Texas in late 1950 highlighted the way the new councils functioned. In the late summer, an activist named Fred Ferree began to draw the attention of U.S. and Mexican officials in his efforts to secure good treatment, adequate food, and other necessities for braceros. Through a number of letters, public pronouncements, and statements to the media, Ferree came onto the radar screen of both Texas and U.S. federal government officials as a potential problem. In June, Ferree wrote a letter to Guerra, Mexican Minister of Foreign Relations, informing him of low wage

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<sup>28</sup> Woodward to Sutherland, Sept 16, 1950, Texas Good Neighbor Commission, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>29</sup> Green, George Norris, *The Establishment in Texas Politics: The Primitive Years, 1938-1957* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979), 140.

rates in the Rio Grande Valley and urging that he insist on higher wages and close the border to the illegal migrants who drove down wages.<sup>30</sup> In August, Ferree reported to the President's Commission of the significant hardship to workers' families caused by the deportation of illegal immigrants who had settled with their families in the United States. He told the commission "their home-life was ab[r]uptly broken, they were compelled to sell homes, possessions at a great sacrifice, their incomes ended and they picked up by the Border Patrol often at night and 'dumped' on the other side of the river in numbers so great Mexico's railways and bus lines could not move them into the interior fast enough and thousands of these families were stranded along the border destitute without food or funds or employment."<sup>31</sup> He urged that these families of long residence in the United States, often with American-born children, be granted legal residence. Continuing his flair for the dramatic, he also described the depredations inflicted on illegal immigrants by criminals on the U.S. or Mexican side of the border in the starkest possible language, reporting "3 or 4 of these bandits will hold a man underwater until drowned then rob him and allow his body to float down the river."<sup>32</sup>

In September 1950, Ferree became the subject of a piece published in the Mexican newspaper *Ultimas Noticias* regarding the conditions of bracero workers

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<sup>30</sup> Ferree to Guerra, June 27, 1950, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, Folder 10 of 19, Truman Library.

<sup>31</sup> Ferree to President's Commission on Migratory Labor, August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1950, Brownsville, TX, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, Folder 10 of 19, Truman Library.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

around Harlingen. The article described the humanitarian efforts of Ferree on behalf of the thousands of braceros who flocked to the region around Harlingen in the hopes of securing work contracts. The sudden influx of people stretched local resources to the breaking point, with the result that braceros suffered numerous difficulties while waiting for work. Ferree had been working to arrange food donations to support these workers, and in the process had described their condition to the Mexican press in bleak terms. He reported having seen braceros fight over a scrap of bread, including one man fighting off with a stick three hungry workers who were searching for scraps of food in his makeshift hut.<sup>33</sup> Ferree was not wrong in his description of the difficulties faced by workers. It was this public airing of the issue that pushed Texas officials to act. What was surely a serious humanitarian crisis was also becoming a political problem for Texans hoping to keep their communities off the prohibited list for work contracts.

Roy Rubottom wrote to Penrose, concerned that Ferree's comments, however well intentioned, would lead to misunderstanding in Mexico and urging him to have someone from the GNC meet with Ferree.<sup>34</sup> Sutherland was given this task, and he sent Ferree a letter on October 30 urging him to consider how his comments made the United States appear in Mexico. He acknowledged that the problems faced by laborers were severe, and pointed out the President had shown his concern by the

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<sup>33</sup> Clipping attached to Rubottom to Penrose, Oct 20, 1949, Texas Good Neighbor Commission, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>34</sup> Rubottom to Penrose, Oct 20, 1950, Texas Good Neighbor Commission, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

establishment of the President's Commission, but he warned Ferree that such circumstances "are misunderstood in Mexico and distorted into anti-United States propaganda by the mischief-makers who find voice in the Mexican press."<sup>35</sup>

To help alleviate the public relations damage, Penrose in turn looked to Assistant to the Governor John Van Cronkhite for help in approaching local leaders in Harlingen to form a Human Relations Council.<sup>36</sup> The fact that the council in this case was formed ad hoc in response not to a crisis, but to bad publicity gives a good sense of their purpose. These councils were designed to smooth relations and cover over differences more than to solve problems. They were a tangible symbol of action that Texans could present to the Mexican government as evidence of their compliance with the discrimination clauses of the 1949 agreement.

The Human Relations Councils would spearhead efforts to get local communities removed from the prohibited list. In July 1952, for example, after the program had been in operation for several years, Charles Houlihan, the chairman of the Human Relations Council in Beeville, Texas wrote the GNC asking to know why his community had been prohibited from employing Mexican contract labor.<sup>37</sup> In turn, Carter Wheelock, Assistant Director of the GNC, asked the Mexican consul at

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<sup>35</sup> Sutherland to Ferree, Oct 30, 1950, Texas Good Neighbor Commission, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>36</sup> Penrose to Van Cronkhite, Oct 24, 1950, Texas Good Neighbor Commission, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>37</sup> Wheelock to Houlihan, July 16, 1952, Texas Good Neighbor Commission, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

Corpus Christi Augusto Moheno to explain why Beeville had been added to the list.

His letter to Moheno reveals some of the rationale for the program. In asking for the specifics he tells Moheno that:

It would be helpful to know what the condition is, in order that the indignation of the citizens themselves can be brought to bear on it. In this way the people of Bee County can show their willingness to eliminate discrimination, to the mutual benefit of Texas and Mexico.<sup>38</sup>

Moheno responded that the problem with Beeville centered on school discrimination, denial of service to Mexicans in two barbershops, and that “some of the Bee County officials are especially and extremely severe toward Mexicans, either for nationality or origin.”<sup>39</sup> Wheelock forwarded this information to Houlihan, also explaining that to remove his community from the list would require the community leaders to sign the pledges described in the agreement.

Exchanges like this one were commonplace under the new agreement. The issue of discrimination thus largely became an administrative problem rather than a social problem for Texas officials. To be removed from the list of blocked locales required paperwork more than specific action. Local officials needed to put their names onto the appropriate forms. The degree to which these problems became an institutionalized part of life for Texans is witnessed by the fact that the GNC eventually created a form letter for local leaders to fill in to make their pledge. In response to a request from the Lockhart Chamber of Commerce regarding the

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<sup>38</sup> Wheelock to Moheno, June 30, 1952, Texas Good Neighbor Commission, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>39</sup> Moheno to Wheelock, July 14, 1952, Texas Good Neighbor Commission, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

procedures for getting their community removed from the list, Wheelock forwarded a copy of the form together with a hand-written list of local officials who should sign it. The extensive list included the sheriff, superintendent of schools, president of the Chamber of Commerce, mayor of the county seat and one or two other communities, county attorney, county judge, one district judge, one or two bankers, chief of police of the main city, and one or two service clubs.

Although the Human Relations Council did help some communities gain access to labor, it never quite got on its feet as an institution, and when Smith eventually withdrew his financial support, the HRC disappeared.<sup>40</sup> In the absence of the council the GNC still worked with the local communities to get the appropriate forms filled out, but there was no requirement that the local leaders organize themselves into a Human Relations Councils.

### **Anderson Bill**

Waiting for the new agreement to take shape strained the patience of some U.S. leaders, particularly growers along the border and the politicians who supported them. During early 1949, Senator Clinton Anderson shocked the Department of State by introducing a bill to bring Mexican workers into the United States without the cooperation or even permission of the Mexican government. Providing legal status to workers crossing the Mexican border in violation of Mexican law would have been

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<sup>40</sup> Green, George Norris, *The Establishment in Texas Politics: The Primitive Years, 1938-1957* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979), 141.



devastating to the bilateral relationship. The bill's presence caused a flurry of activity in the administration, and especially the State Department, to see the bill defeated. S. 272 would fail, but only after it came up for consideration or discussion in each of the next two years as well. Anderson, who as Harry Truman's Secretary of Agriculture from 1945 to 1948 certainly had ample background in issues related to migratory labor, was a brand new Senator in 1949, and decided to make his presence felt early in defense of the growers in his state. His status as a former cabinet secretary must have made his troublemaking particularly galling to Truman officials.

Although there was some discussion at the State Department that such a bill might put pressure on the Mexicans to be more pliable in negotiations if they considered the State Department proposals to be the lesser of two evils, most Truman officials saw this bill as a significant threat.<sup>41</sup> The administration quickly tried to convince Anderson that his idea was not in the best interests of the country. On April 13, two luckless State Department representatives visited with the Senator in his office. Daniel Goott and Robert Wilson explained that, leaving aside the fact that the bill "provides for the elimination of documentary requirements for agricultural workers desirous of entering the United States" the idea of allowing Mexican workers admission to the United States without the approval of their government would "have

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<sup>41</sup> Mann to Miller, May 25, 1950, RG 59, 811.06.

serious repercussions and will work to the detriment of friendly relations between the United States and Mexico and between the United States and other American Republics as well.”<sup>42</sup>

In what must have been a depressing moment for the two representatives, Senator Anderson first responded by acknowledging these concerns, but asserting that the need for workers made some form of action an absolute necessity. He then suggested that the problem lay in the overzealous enforcement of the INS. The record of the conversation records that “the Senator said that if Inspector Grover Wilmoth at El Paso did not take so seriously his duty of enforcing the immigration laws, it would not be necessary to seek such legislation as this. He said the inspector in the San Antonio area is much more reasonable, and closes his eyes to illegal entry.”<sup>43</sup> After suggesting that the director of the INS disregard immigration law, the Senator went on to admit that he personally had illegal immigrants “regularly on his farm in New Mexico and that every one of them has always gone back to Mexico happy, laden down with shoes and other articles purchased in the United States.”<sup>44</sup> Such an admission might be shocking if it were not so commonplace for the time period. When further pressed about the danger of such unilateral action, the Senator responded that the Mexicans’ recent request for oil was a “unilateral” request, and he did not see the difference between that and his proposal for unilateral action on farm

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<sup>42</sup> Memcon, Clinton Anderson, Daniel H. Goott, and Robert E. Wilson, April 13, 1949, RG 59, 811.504.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

labor. The reference to the oil loan makes little sense as a comparison, but perhaps Anderson was trying to point out subtly that the United States had sufficient leverage to force the Mexicans to swallow his plan.

Senator Pat McCarran, Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, sent an official request for State Department views on S. 272 and received much the same response as that given to Anderson himself. In this response, the State Department added that in becoming a willing accomplice in helping Mexican citizens break Mexican law, the United States opened itself up to “severe criticism and censure. It would also greatly increase tensions, possibly leading to acts of violence along the border and in general would be likely to lead to the deterioration of official United States-Mexican relations.”<sup>45</sup> He also mentioned in passing the security concern caused by admitting foreign nationals without identifying documents issued by their home government.

The hearings for the bill in the Senate brought out some of these points still further, but they also revealed some cleavages within the administration. While the Department of State and the Federal Security Agency were concerned about the excesses of the S. 272, the INS and the Department of Justice offered only minor criticisms.<sup>46</sup> Wilson complained to Reveley that the Department of Justice “gave what amounted to its support of S. 272, criticizing it only in unessential details readily subject to amendment.”<sup>47</sup> Wilson expressed his great frustration that the INS

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<sup>45</sup> Gross to McCarran, May 4, 1949, RG 59, 811.504.

<sup>46</sup> Wilson to Reveley, July 25, 1949, RG 59, 811.504.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

Commissioner, when asked about the international implications of the legislation, “consistently avoided answering or answered in a false or evasive manner.”<sup>48</sup> The hearing itself was a moment for self-congratulation more than investigation. The objections of the Department of State were inserted into the record, but not orally presented to the Committee. Meanwhile, two supportive U.S. Representatives from border states, including Representative Harold Patten of Arizona, who sponsored the House version of the legislation, H.R. 5672, were allowed to testify along with three growers’ representatives.

The bill was not enacted in 1949, but remained a live issue through most of 1950 as well, a constant thorn in the side of State Department officials whose job it was to reassure the Mexican government of their intentions. As late as August 17, 1950, Dean Acheson worried that the administration’s opposition to the Anderson Bill might prove insufficient, leading to another damaging incident along the lines of what had occurred at El Paso in 1948.<sup>49</sup> Although the bill caused no small amount of consternation among administration officials, by the end of August it had been tabled quietly without being voted on by the full Senate.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Acheson to U.S. Embassy, Mexico City, August 17, 1950, RG 59, 811.06.

<sup>50</sup> Ohmans to Rubottom, August 9, 1950, RG 59, 811.06.

## **The Longoria Incident and its Aftermath**

The single most significant incident of discrimination during 1949 surrounded the burial of Felix Longoria. This episode would lead to trouble for GNC and other state officials, and would provide an opening for enemies of the GNC to take aim at the agency.

Longoria was a U.S. citizen who had served in the Pacific theater during World War II and had been killed while fighting on Luzon. He was a manual laborer before the war, a fence builder like his father. His body was transported back to Three Rivers, Texas, to be buried near where his family lived. The problems began when the local director of the funeral home refused to participate in preparing the body for burial, apparently out of fear that catering to a Hispanic family would hurt his business in the white community. Denial of service was common in Texas at this time but Longoria's status as a war hero who had given his life for his country quickly made this into a national and international scandal.

Administration officials in Washington were also deeply concerned by the potential rift this incident could cause in U.S.-Mexican relations generally. Byron Mitchell opined with alarm that "the further we go into this question of United States – Mexican relations the more we are convinced that the problem is of such magnitude as to constitute a force, and that unless it is carefully studied we are in for a continuing series of incidents which will lead to worse and worse relations."<sup>51</sup> When arrangements were made for the funeral at Arlington, Truman officials considered

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having the president fly the family to Washington on an Air Force plane, perhaps having them visit the president while in the capital, or at least having the president make a statement.<sup>52</sup>

The issue was resolved to the federal government's satisfaction through the intervention of then newly-elected Senator Lyndon Johnson. Johnson spoke with the family and arranged for Longoria to be buried in Arlington National Cemetery, where he could be given the full honors that he deserved. While the solution was acceptable to the family and seemed to diffuse the crisis, it seemed like a significant setback for leaders in Texas who felt like moving the funeral to Arlington took away any opportunity that they had to erase the public-relations damage the incident had cost.

In Texas, advocacy groups rallied around the issue and the family. The League of United Latin American Citizens raised money to help the family afford the trip to Washington.<sup>53</sup> The new G.I. Forum also raised funds to help finance the family's trip.<sup>54</sup> G.I. Forum director Hector Garcia would be one of the major forces in bringing the issue into the press as an opportunity to press the Texas government to do more to protect its Hispanic citizens. The G.I. Forum, as a veterans group, was particularly concerned about the treatment of this former serviceman.

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<sup>51</sup> Mitchell to Garber, January 17, 1949, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, Folder 18 of 19, Truman Library.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> "Texas Would Bury Longoria in Native Soil," *The Austin Statesman*, January 18, 1949, Texas Good Neighbor Commission, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

This incident brought down upon Texas a wave of invective from periodicals, newspapers, and other media across the United States and Mexico. For example, Walter Winchell, a well known political and entertainment commentator, prominently featured the incident in his popular radio program.<sup>55</sup> *The Dallas Morning News*, in an article lamenting the poor publicity that this incident brought upon Texas, quoted the major Mexico City daily *Excelsior* in what was perhaps the deepest cut of all. The article cautioned readers to understand that “acts of discrimination against Mexicans in Texas should not be interpreted as a general sentiment of the North American people” and went on to say “against the incomprehensible attitude of the Texans, there is increasing understanding of other important sectors of the neighboring country and the sympathy of the Mexican should be focused toward them.”<sup>56</sup> This singling out of Texas as the problem area was all too familiar to those in the state who had spent the years since 1943 trying to erase precisely such sentiment. The Longoria case brought to light all of these familiar accusations and undoubtedly undid much of the work accomplished by the GNC.

Texans in the Three Rivers community and in the state government worked to resolve the problem by appealing directly to the family to bury Longoria in Texas, and by securing the belated cooperation of the funeral home. Early in the process, Beatrice Longoria, Felix’s widow, wrote a gracious but deflating letter to the funeral home in question. While acknowledging the belated offer to prepare her husband for

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<sup>55</sup> Mitchell to Garber, January 17, 1949, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, Folder 18 of 19, Truman Library.

<sup>56</sup>“Latin Lawmakers Say All U.S. Not at Fault in Discrimination,” *Dallas Morning News*. Jan 19, 1949, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, Folder 18 of 19, Truman Library.

burial she said, “I feel that it is still too late. My husband will be buried in Arlington National Cemetery Washington D.C.. My thanks and gratitude to the people of Three Rivers for their sentiment on the matter. I want to let you know that I bear no grudge and still think greatly of all the people from Three Rivers. I am sorry about the whole matter.”<sup>57</sup> Unfortunately in their zest to save the image of Texas, some Three Rivers officials ended up harassing the family even further during a difficult time. For example, locals inaccurately published notes in the paper over the father’s name stating that the family wanted Felix buried in Texas. Carolina Longoria also hastened to correct rumors that the family opposed efforts to raise money for their trip to Washington, D.C., explaining instead that her father had worked with Dr. Garcia, of the G.I. Forum regarding fund-raising. Carolina lamented that “Daddy got sick and on Dr. Garcia’s instructions I made the men go away whenever they came to the house. It all got so bad finally, though, that Alberto had to take Daddy away to [L]aredo to get some rest.”<sup>58</sup>

The GNC itself would have no more luck resolving this issue than did the local officials in Three Rivers. The GNC response was essentially limited to an investigation of the case. Their eventual report of the outcome of the investigation, which was distributed to the press, amounted to a frustrated diatribe against interest groups in Texas that elevated problems out of proportion, citizens whose discriminatory practices besmirched the image of the state, and finally to the state

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<sup>57</sup> Beatrice Longoria to T.W. Kennedy Jr., January 14, 1949, Texas Good Neighbor Commission, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.



government whose limited financial support for the GNC made it impotent to resolve issues like this one.<sup>59</sup> The GNC specifically condemned Garcia for having gone immediately to the press rather than attempting to solve the problem through the GNC. The report asserted that sensationalizing the incident damaged “United States prestige and goodwill” in the international community.<sup>60</sup> Specifically, the report alleged that diplomatic negotiations over a new labor contract were stopped in the aftermath of the incident. There were some reports that Sutherland’s focus on this incident as a case of discrimination led to Shivers moving him from the GNC over to the Council on Human Relations.<sup>61</sup> With the HRC’s focus on discrimination, this hardly seemed like a good place to hide a troublemaker, but even the rumors were evidence of the political fallout the Longoria case would leave in Texas politics.

One of the most significant passages of this report included one of the first signs of softening by GNC officials on the key issue of legislation outlawing discrimination. It is interesting that this language is couched in the context of an argument regarding states rights. The report said:

Texas must choose either to provide the means of settling its own problems or to have the Federal Government provide that means in the national defense. Specifically, the Texas Legislature must pass legislation to allow effective work in this field or surrender any claim to state’s rights in the field. The sum of legislative action has been an \$8000 annual budget for a Good Neighbor Commission of Texas. With such a small budget the Commission cannot

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<sup>58</sup> Statement by Carolina Longoria, March 7, 1949, Texas Good Neighbor Commission, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>60</sup> Memorandum for the Press, Good Neighbor Commission, February 11, 1949, Texas Good Neighbor Commission, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>61</sup> Green, George Norris, *The Establishment in Texas Politics: The Primitive Years, 1938-1957* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979), 140.

spread itself effectively in 254 counties among 7 million people, nor can it give everywhere the needed guidance that it has been giving within its limits toward adjustment of Mexican relations in Texas.<sup>62</sup>

This comment nicely sums up the collective frustrations of six years of effort that had produced only limited results.

As the Anderson bill represented a threat from the national level to the mission and programs of the GNC, there were also growing threats from within the state of Texas. One such threat that resulted directly from the Longoria case was the bill introduced by State Representative Gray to abolish the GNC. Austin radio show host Stuart Long spoke with Gray and explained his reasoning on the air. Long reported that “Gray told me that he first began to realize that the commission was a waste of the taxpayers['] money when the case of Felix Longoria came up in Three Rivers.”<sup>63</sup> Gray became convinced during this episode that the GNC created an outlet for those who wanted to aggravate the issue of race in Texas.

The disagreements over the handling of the Longoria case led Gray and Smith publicly to exchange words on the subject. Gray felt that the Longoria case did not represent an incident of discrimination, and worried that the GNC, and particularly Sutherland, would agitate public opinion by saying that it was one.<sup>64</sup> Privately, Smith

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Transcript, Radio Broadcast, Stuart Long, KVET Austin, Feb 3, 1949, Texas Good Neighbor Commission, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>64</sup> Bentsen to Gray, May 11, 1949, Texas Good Neighbor Commission, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

seethed in a telephone conversation with William McGill that “You feel free, and tell Beauford [Jester] that I said that I am ready and willing in front of this monkey’s friend, by himself or under the house or where ever he wants to, I’ll meet him and I’ll make him run in his own hold[hole] with his position.”<sup>65</sup> Smith, in defending his own honor and the integrity of the GNC, pledged to apologize and resign if information in the GNC’s reports was proven inaccurate. Gray jumped at the chance to catch Smith in a mistake, and wrote to Jester in April citing the GNC report by Sutherland stating that the bracero negotiations were called off because of the Longoria incident. Gray refuted that statement by producing a copy of a letter from the Department of State to Senator Tom Connally stating that no such interruption had taken place.<sup>66</sup> He then demanded Smith’s resignation.

This threat was eventually mitigated through a negotiated agreement with Gray in May 1949. Gray agreed to withdraw his bill to destroy the GNC on the condition that Smith retire after serving out the remaining month of his term. Gray also demanded that Sutherland be replaced, and, as a carrot to accompany this stick, he agreed to support an increase in compensation for the new executive director.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Telephone conversation, Smith and McGill, February 3, 1949, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester Papers, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>66</sup> Gray to Jester, April 21, 1949, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester Papers, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

<sup>67</sup> Letter to Smith, May 5, Texas Governor Beauford H. Jester Papers, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

## **Outcomes of the 1949 Agreement**

In January 1950, the Mexican government gave the U.S. Embassy in Mexico a laundry list of complaints regarding the effectiveness of the 1949 agreement in Texas. They charged that Mexican workers were not given the pay promised under the agreement, that their contracts were terminated early on some occasions when U.S. employers found domestic workers who were able to fill the spots, that Mexican workers were repatriated to Mexico without prior warning, and that the enforcement of the contract by USES was spotty at best allowing a number of irregularities to persist.<sup>68</sup>

By the middle of 1950, it had become clear that, although the 1949 agreement was more stable than its predecessors had been, it was not accomplishing its purpose in Texas. Edward Benet provided his superiors in Washington with an assessment of the program after one year. He reported that "Implementation of the so-called 'Bracero' Agreement as affecting the Lower Rio Grande Valley since its inception on August 1, 1949 has for all practical purposes been, in the opinion of the writer, a complete failure."<sup>69</sup> Benet's concerns stemmed largely from the fact that the new agreement had done nothing to stem the flow of illegal immigrants into the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Benet estimated that 100,000 illegal migrants had entered the Valley to harvest the 1950 crop. To Benet's mind, the problem lay with the Border Patrol. He pointed out that Border Patrol agents had been able nearly to stop the flow

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<sup>68</sup> Blanchard to Department of State, January 23, 1950, RG 59, 811.06 M.

<sup>69</sup> Benet to Secretary of State, August 9, 1950, RG 59, 811.06 (M).

of illegal migrants during a big push in January and February 1950, but that since that time their efforts had trailed off. Benet also praised the findings of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor whose hearings in Brownsville suggested that there was domestic labor available, and that Mexican labor and U.S. labor alike suffered from lack of education and other social ills. Benet ended his report by urging a program of education and legislation and linking the daily actions of inhabitants along the border to the U. S. position in the world saying "with the world in its present critical condition, it seems to me urgent that the Border Americans be made to realize that, in addition to the benefits which would ultimately be enjoyed locally from a generally higher economic and public health level, this migratory labor issue is but another phase of our responsibility as a leader among nations. We cannot hope to expect others to believe in our sincerity of purpose as the spearhead of Democracy by words alone."<sup>70</sup>

On June 15, 1951, the Mexican Government officially renounced the 1949 agreement. In their note the Mexican government cited continual non-compliance with the terms of the individual work contract negotiated for the 1949 agreement. They reiterated their desire that any future agreement would contract Mexican workers directly with a U.S. government agency that could serve as guarantor for the contract's terms.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Strom to U.S. Ambassador, June 15, 1951, RG 59, 811.06 M.

## **Conclusion**

An examination of the 1949 bracero agreement reveals that rather than solving the problem of discrimination in any permanent way, fighting discrimination had simply become an institutionalized part of life. This lack of progress is evident in the international agreements negotiated at the federal level, which replicated much of the same language contained in early agreements. The 1949 agreement also set up the framework whereby removing Texas counties from the labor embargo became essentially an exercise in pro forma pledges and record keeping rather than a significant effort to abolish discrimination. In 1951, as it had in the past, the Mexican government would renounce the agreement in the hopes of negotiating a new one with better terms. Although the agreement failed, it did set the tone for the passage of Public Law 78 in August of 1951, which would define the parameters of the bracero program till its conclusion in 1964.

1949 would also bring to power a new group of politicians in Texas who would be less interested in radical solutions and expansive programs, and more interested in allowing the current system to run unmolested. Shivers would only tolerate a GNC that confined itself to a narrow, moderate mission, and Penrose for his part was comfortable with that role.

Illegal immigration remained a key source of frustration and disagreement on both sides of the border. Neither nation was able to develop the political will or the appropriate program to curb this problem. As long as the numbers of illegal

immigrants continued to dwarf those allowed legally under the bracero program, the complicated negotiations and bargaining surrounding labor contracting had an air of unreality. Documented or not, the workers came by the tens of thousands.

High profile events in 1949, most particularly the Longoria incident, demonstrated that the good faith and good acts of governments could still be undone with astonishing speed by the insensitive acts of private citizens. This quick interplay makes the U.S.-Mexican border unique in the realm of U.S. foreign policy. Rarely could an individual citizen of either nation significantly impact government policy in most areas of the globe. There was not much that the average American could do to influence U.S.-British policy for example, but the long shared border between the United States and Mexico meant that even local incidents could have international ramifications. For the Truman administration and the Jester and Shivers governments in Texas, this meant the frustration of not only dealing with the Mexican government, but also concurrently trying to secure the cooperation of millions of inhabitants of the borderland.

As these problems continued without any permanent resolution, the need for the President's Commission on Migratory Labor in American Agriculture seemed more urgent than ever. These intractable problems affected the lives of hundreds or thousands of U.S. employers, and millions of U.S. and Mexican laborers. The Truman administration hoped that the commission could bring new understanding, new solutions, and a better future.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE PRESIDENT'S COMMISSION ON MIGRATORY LABOR, PUBLIC LAW 78, AND THE FUTURE OF THE BRACERO PROGRAM, 1950-1952

The difficulties in carrying out the 1949 Farm Labor Agreement brought into sharp relief the many problems with the existing system of agricultural labor in the United States. As the state government in Texas worked to deal with these issues on a local level, as described in the last chapter, the Harry Truman administration attempted to craft a federal farm labor policy and to negotiate with the Mexican government to solve difficulties in the latest agreement. The first step in this process was to gather information. The conflicts and recriminations between interest groups made it difficult to discern the true state of affairs in agricultural communities along the border. Growers in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and elsewhere insisted that they could not effectively harvest crops without massive amounts of foreign labor. Meanwhile, labor organizations, advocacy groups such as the League of United Latin American Citizens, and some private citizens insisted that the importation of Mexican labor took jobs from U.S. citizens, driving them away from the borders in search of



work and a living wage. The Truman administration was faced with the tasks of dealing with pressure from all of these groups and attempting to make sense of their differing versions of reality.

In 1949 officials within the Truman administration began to discuss the idea of creating a special presidential commission to study the issue of migratory labor. Such a commission was created by executive order on June 3, 1950. It was tasked with investigating the “social, economic, health, and educational conditions among migratory workers, both alien and domestic, in the United States.”<sup>1</sup> Members were also enjoined to examine the prickly issue of illegal immigration, both to assess its impact and to recommend policies to prevent it. To accomplish this task, they were given until December 15, 1950 to hold public hearings, investigate, and draft a report.

This chapter traces the origins of the President’s Commission, describes its functions and key findings, examines the internal debates over the meaning of its final report, and discuss the political battles over implementing the report’s recommendations. Public hearings of the President’s Commission revealed the political environment within Texas and around the country surrounding the issue of migratory labor. Ultimately, the President’s Commission demonstrated that no major societal interest group apart from the growers’ lobby supported importing a significant amount of foreign labor, or thought that either foreign labor or domestic labor was treated well. Truman’s support of his commission’s findings would make the isolation of the growers complete. The plight faced by Mexican immigrants

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<sup>1</sup> *Migratory Labor in American Agriculture: Report of the President Commission on Migratory Labor* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1951), 187.

created foreign policy difficulties for the President, and his concern for the difficult circumstances under which domestic agricultural migrant laborers toiled moved him to want to limit the number of Mexican workers entering the United States.

However, the difficulty that Truman would encounter in enacting specific proposals based on those findings demonstrated that the growers' lobby wielded enormous political power. Rather than provide a victory for labor advocates and others who questioned the wisdom of relying so heavily on Mexican labor, the President's Commission marked more of a last gasp for this group. The system that emerged in the early 1950s with the passage of Public Law 78 favored growers and would enjoy a large measure of stability lasting till the end of the bracero program in 1964.

### **Creating the President's Commission**

The idea of creating a formal presidential commission to study the problem of migratory labor began to gain steam in late 1949. In the short term, the mere possibility of forming a commission provided some political cover for the administration by allowing it to appear active while not answering difficult questions. Thus, queries from concerned groups such as the NAACP regarding the effect of Mexican strikebreakers on African American cotton pickers were answered with the assurance that the issue was under investigation. Truman assured Roy Wilkins of the NAACP that the Department of Labor was looking into establishing a commission and "if such a Commission is established the questions you raise would be among

those to which it would give close study.”<sup>2</sup> By the beginning of 1950, in the context of the struggling 1949 agreement, Secretary of Labor Maurice Tobin was ready to recommend to Truman that such a body actually be established.<sup>3</sup> Of all Truman’s key advisors, only the Attorney General argued against the creation of a presidential commission, urging that the 1949 agreement with Mexico had been in operation for too short a time to know whether or not it would be effective.<sup>4</sup> Outside pressure and bureaucratic momentum continued to build, however, and the fact that the possibility of a presidential commission had been talked about so publicly would have made it difficult not to create one.<sup>5</sup>

Several months before the President’s Commission was officially created, there were already clear indications of the direction the administration was headed on the issue of migratory labor. In March 1950, James L. Sundquist surveyed internal administration opinion on creating a commission and found that the major administration departments were much closer to the position of labor organizations than to the growers. Representatives from the Department of State pointed out that Mexico was not anxious to send workers to the United States and that the current program created frequent embarrassments for the Mexican administration. Further, the inevitable problems and incidents of discrimination were detrimental to the U.S.

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<sup>2</sup> Truman to Wilkins, November 8, 1949, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor folder 2 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>3</sup> Tobin to Goodwin, January 9, 1950, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 5 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>4</sup> McGrath to Lawton, May 4, 1950, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 6 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

image in Mexico. The Department of Labor suggested that a commission would lend moral authority to administration efforts to punish employers in the United States for hiring illegal workers, and the representatives of the Department of Agriculture suggested that this might be the time to end the importation program altogether.<sup>6</sup>

Truman was also moving toward a more aggressive stance on the issue of illegal immigration. Early 1950 saw an unusually strong push to deport illegal workers in the border region. As Sundquist described:

Field reports now indicate that the vigor and effectiveness of enforcement by INS may be at an all-time high. Deportations in the San Antonio district are running at 50,000 a month. Roadblocks have operated successfully to keep wetbacks in the Valley until they are apprehended. What is called 'operation harassment' has disrupted the labor supply on non-cooperating farms. Perhaps the best evidence of effective enforcement is editorial comment such as that of March 3 in the Valley Express, which asserts that 'the Federal Government... has used our tax money to eliminate our former supply of alien labor' and 'the Federal Government proceeds with the systematic elimination of the only established and dependable supply of labor in the Valley.'<sup>7</sup>

The inability of the government to control the traffic in illegal immigrants was widely considered inside and outside of government to be one of the key flaws of the existing system. Any study by the President's Commission would have to confront this difficult issue.

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<sup>5</sup> Sundquist to Jones, March 30, 1950, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 4 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Sundquist to Jones, March 30, 1950, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 4 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

It was in this context that the President's Commission came into being in the summer of 1950. The group consisted of five members--Maurice T. Van Hecke (Chairman), Noble Clark, William M. Leiserson, Robert E. Lucey, and Peter H. Odegard-- with Varden Fuller serving as Executive Secretary. Chairman Van Hecke was a law professor whose only previous government experience was chairmanship of the 4<sup>th</sup> Regional War Labor Board during the Second World War. Clark had done agricultural research at universities in Michigan and Wisconsin before serving at the United Nations as Deputy Director General for Food and Agriculture. Leiserson, who held a Ph.D. in economics, had been a key player in a staggering number of government boards and commissions associated with mediating labor disputes. His record included two stints as a member of the National Labor Relations Board and one as Chairman of the National Mediation Board. Lucey was Archbishop of San Antonio, with experience in issues surrounding the Spanish-speaking population of the United States and organized labor. Fuller held a Ph.D. in agricultural economics and boasted a distinguished career in government service and the private sector related to farm labor and other agricultural issues.<sup>8</sup>

The bulk of the President's Commission's work took place through a series of public hearings in Brownsville and El Paso, Texas; Phoenix, Arizona; Los Angeles, California; Portland, Oregon; Fort Collins, Colorado; Memphis, Tennessee; Saginaw, Michigan; Trenton, New Jersey; West Palm Beach, Florida; and Washington, D.C. During these sessions, members elicited testimony from local and state government

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<sup>8</sup> Biographies of Commission Members, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 5 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

officials, leaders of advocacy and religious groups, labor unions, growers, Mexican Foreign Ministry officials, and a host of private citizens. The President's Commission also received written statements from groups and private citizens expressing their views on the problem.

The creation of the President's Commission was a positive step in U.S.-Mexican relations. Its creation was received in Mexico City as a step sure to bring new protections to Mexican laborers. It also allowed the Mexican administration a public relations moment that helped it justify its agreements with the United States to its constituents. As Mexican leaders often did, the Acting Foreign Minister expressed his belief that if legal penalties were exacted on employers of illegal migrants the problem would all but cease to exist.<sup>9</sup> Mexican officials hoped that the Truman administration's study would lead it to the same conclusion.

### **The President's Commission Gets to Work**

As the President's Commission conducted this wide-ranging series of public hearings, it was able accurately to capture the contested nature of the problem of migratory labor. On the one hand, growers' representatives consistently lobbied the President's Commission for more and easier access to Mexican labor. Growers painted a picture of economic necessity for their businesses as well as opportunity and uplift for the laborers themselves. This divide, however, was not as even as it seemed at first glance, for while employers generally had only themselves to lobby

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<sup>9</sup>Thurston to Secretary of State, June 6, 1950, RG 59, 811.06-M.

for their position, a broad coalition of unions, concerned citizens, advocacy groups, public figures, academics, and others consistently urged the President's Commission to come to some sensible arrangement to protect domestic workers, and also to end the abuse to which illegal migrant workers were subject. An analysis of some of the representative testimony from concerned groups reveals that most were horrified at the conditions endured by both U.S. and Mexican farm laborers and felt that eliminating much of the foreign labor would be a salutary first step toward improvement of those conditions.

Leaders of growers' organizations presented their view of the farm labor question. This view was strikingly difficult to reconcile with that of most of the witnesses. For example, C.H. DeVaney, the director of the Four-State Farm Labor Users Association, touted the increased wages his member-farmers paid to migrants and spoke highly of the quality of living arrangements they provided for the workers. DeVaney assured the President's Commission that incidents of discrimination against migrants were rare and that in the dubious justification often cited by Texans, those incidents that did occur were "not based on color, creed, or nationality, but on personal appearance, uncleanness or other undesirable conditions."<sup>10</sup> He ended with a lament about the shrinking size of the domestic labor pool and a plea for the government to make it easier to import Mexican labor, suggesting a simple crossing

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<sup>10</sup> DeVaney testimony before President's Commission on Migratory Labor, July 31, 1950, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 10 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

card for workers would be easier and better than a complicated international agreement. DeVaney's testimony is an accurate representation of the vast majority of growers' views.

In contrast, the collective weight of the testimony before the commission revealed a starkly different reality. For example, Union leaders welcomed the establishing of a presidential commission, reasoning that public exposure of the plight of U.S. farm workers could only help their cause. William Green, president of the American Federation of Labor, submitted a lengthy statement to the President's Commission stressing the society-wide nature of the problem and noting that migratory labor played a part in industry as well as agriculture. He also praised the President's Commission for looking into the problem at this particular time because mobilizing the economy for the Korean War would undoubtedly spur labor migration in the same way that previous wars had. Green also stressed the oft-remarked and very real problem that agricultural laborers were excluded from taking advantage of many of the key social programs developed since the 1930s. Farm workers were ineligible for unemployment compensation, their efforts at unionization did not enjoy the same protection as did those of industrial workers, and they could not get workmen's compensation when injured on the job. Green went on to note the low wages, frequent child labor, and damaging competition from foreign labor faced by U.S. workers. To avoid antagonizing the American Federation of Labor's foreign affiliates, he stressed that his organization heavily supported U.S. aid programs such as Point Four, which sought to improve the conditions of workers within their own countries in order to alleviate the need to migrate. Green was also one of the few



contemporaries to point out the absurdity of the language in international agreements with Mexico that guaranteed a “prevailing wage” for Mexican workers, noting that there was no widely accepted prevailing wage in agriculture, and that the rates were invariably set low enough to depress overall wages in a given area.<sup>11</sup> The National Farm Labor Union; the Congress of Industrial Workers; Food, Tobacco, and Agricultural Workers Union; the Allied Workers of America; and others gave representations in this same vein.

One of the issues that continually rankled labor advocates was that Mexican nationals were often the beneficiaries of better working conditions, wages, and protections than was domestic labor. For example, the 1949 international agreement stipulated that Mexican nationals should be provided with free health insurance from the employer. This was a luxury that most U.S. migratory farm laborers did without. That 1949 agreement also made specific guarantees of adequate housing for Mexican workers. It demanded that free potable water be available at a reasonable distance. It provided for a period of paid training for those workers typically paid in piecework fashion, it guaranteed transportation to and from the place of employment, and it provided detailed rules for the comfort of this transportation. Mexican workers were to travel no more than 12 hours a day and to be afforded ten-minute breaks every two hours. Braceros were required to be transported in vehicles with flares and fire extinguishers and to be given three meals a day free of charge during transportation. These guarantees, although they may have often been more theory than fact, were

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<sup>11</sup> Green statement to President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, October 26, 1950, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 14 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman

nevertheless far and away better than the conditions granted to domestic workers. Perhaps most significantly, Mexican workers had available to them a considerable bureaucratic apparatus in both the Mexican government and the United States Employment Agency that they could go to with complaints. Domestic workers were not protected in the same fashion. They had no advocates comparable to the Mexican consul.<sup>12</sup>

A number of religious groups, charitable organizations, and advocacy groups geared toward Hispanic citizens also took an interest in the condition of migratory workers. The Home Mission's Council of North America testified of its efforts to provide for the physical, educational, and spiritual needs of migrants throughout their months on the road and bemoaned the low wages that pushed migrants to travel in the first place.<sup>13</sup> The Home Mission Council's was emblematic of a large body of testimony from concerned groups advocating for the better treatment of migratory laborers and their families. A number of groups, including the Department of Rural Education of the National Education Association and the Alliance for Guidance of Rural Youth focused specifically on the needs of the children migrants, who often

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Library.

<sup>12</sup> "Joint Interpretation of the Individual Work Contract Conditions of Employment for Mexican Agricultural Labor," August 1949, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, Folder 4 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>13</sup> Cross to Van Hecke, August 1, 1950, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 10 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

worked in the fields with their parents because of financial necessity or the unavailability of local schools.<sup>14</sup> Individual concerned citizens, such as the energetic Fred Ferree also testified to the difficulties encountered by farm laborers.<sup>15</sup>

Hector Garcia of the G.I. Forum testified extensively to the President's Commission during hearings at Brownsville. After introducing the G.I. Forum, which by this time had grown to include 82 units and 12,000 members in Texas, Garcia told the President's Commission that he hoped to give it the "humanitarian side of this very old and very serious problem."<sup>16</sup> Garcia proceeded to paint a picture of the segregation, low wages, disease, lack of education, and other hardships faced by Mexican-American workers in the Rio Grande Valley who had to compete with illegal laborers who worked for pennies on the dollar and depressed wages by their sheer numbers. He described how tens of thousands of American workers were pushed out of the valley every year by low wages, making a migratory cycle that would take them north to Colorado and other states in search of a living wage. Migration exacerbated problems of access to education for migrant children and of health care, and it made political organization or unionization even more difficult. Garcia urged the President's Commission to take seriously the needs of these workers by providing aid stations along the route of migration. He urged that the federal

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<sup>14</sup> Dawson testimony before President's Commission on Migratory Labor, July 31-August 1, 1950, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 10 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>15</sup> Ferree to President's Commission on Migratory Labor, August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1950, Brownsville, TX, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, Folder 10 of 19, Truman Library.

government take the lead, as he did not think that the state would take action. He further suggested strong fines for employers who hired illegal labor and he urged a minimum agricultural wage. Fundamental to any success, he argued, would be the enforcement of the border to prevent the flow of illegal immigrants. He concluded by pronouncing that “our Government, especially our Texas Government, has failed dismally in doing this and we can even say that they have not been even interested.”<sup>17</sup> For Garcia, any progress would have to be made at the federal level since the state was so controlled by agricultural interests.

Although the G.I. Forum and LULAC were the most significant Hispanic advocacy groups in Texas, other smaller organizations and private citizens echoed their concerns before the President’s Commission. For example, the Mexican-American National Association wrote to Van Hecke while the President’s Commission was at Brownsville along largely the same lines that Garcia had laid out. This organization urged the administration not to allow short contracts of migratory workers from Mexico on the grounds that local labor would be displaced. If there was to be immigration it preferred to have whole families who could stay indefinitely.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Garcia testimony before President’s Commission on Migratory Labor, July 31-August 1, 1950, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 10 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Cueller to Van Hecke, August 1, 1950, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 10 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

Various federal agencies were also given the opportunity to comment on the issue of migratory labor for the benefit of the President's Commission. The opinions of administration leaders mirrored those of labor organizations and others concerned for the plight of migratory laborers to a large extent. The Federal Security Agency, for example, echoed the comments of Green and other labor leaders by urging the extension of a number of federal programs, including Social Security, to farm laborers.<sup>19</sup> Many administration officials were also sympathetic to the idea of extending the guarantees given to Mexican workers under the internationally negotiated contract to American workers, and to decreasing the total number of Mexican workers by relying more on domestic sources, including, by implication, Puerto Rico.<sup>20</sup> Administration officials further supported increased health-care and other social services, better housing, and even minimum-wage legislation.<sup>21</sup> It seems clear that if the administration did not have to contend with a Congress where growers' interests exercised enormous influence that it would have created a migratory labor program that incorporated nearly all of the major points pushed for by labor unions and Hispanic advocacy groups.

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<sup>19</sup>Federal Security Agency to Van Hecke, November 2, 1950, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 15 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>20</sup> Conference between Government Agencies and Departments and President's Commission on Migratory Labor, November 6, 1950, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 15 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>21</sup> Agenda for Conference between Government Agencies and Departments and President's Commission on Migratory Labor, November 6, 1950, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 15 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

At the invitation of the President's Commission, the Mexican government sent Manuel Aguilar to discuss the Mexican perspective. The Foreign Office instructed Aguilar to discuss discrimination generally, to lobby for a law penalizing employers of illegal immigrants, and to express Mexican concerns about the creation of detention camps by the INS for Mexicans awaiting deportation. This last point concerned the Mexicans because of the potential public relations disaster and because of the potential that Mexicans who had violated no laws might end up in these centers as well.<sup>22</sup> This testimony to the President's Commission added to a long list of complaints that had stacked up before, during, and after the 1950 hearings detailing specific abuses of Mexican nationals, often by government officials.

Documents in the Mexican National Archives and the Archives of the Mexican Foreign Ministry reveal a sustained concern for the treatment of Mexican nationals in the United States. Incidents of mistreatment created political problems for the Mexican government, in addition to its general concern over the treatment of its citizens. President Miguel Alemán Valdez received numerous letters objecting to the treatment of Mexican workers north of the border and urging the president to stop allowing the migration. Alemán could not ignore these internal political pressures, but neither could he easily abandon a policy that was important to large interest groups in the United States, for fear of creating tensions with the United States. Mexican officials thus had few options at their disposal to assure the proper treatment of their workers. They tried to solve this problem in several ways. First, they insisted

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<sup>22</sup>Thurston to Secretary of State, July 25, 1950, RG 59, 811.06 (M).

that braceros be contracted under official inter-governmental agreements rather than merely entering through the normal channels available to migrant workers. Second, the most forceful action taking by Mexican leaders was to deny certain U.S. states bracero contracts in response to incidents of discrimination in those states. Third, Mexican officials wrote letters of protest to the State Department urging appropriate treatment on a case-by-case basis. These letters to the Department of State provide a clear record not only of Mexican frustration but also a catalog of the types of abuses that Mexican citizens were made to endure.

These letters dealt with ill treatment relating both to legally contracted braceros and to illegal migrants. Some of these complaints dealt with inadequate working or transportation conditions. For example, throughout February 1948 the Mexican embassy sent a series of notes to the State Department regarding a plane crash near Fresno in which 28 Mexican workers were killed. The Mexican consul in Los Angeles followed the early stages of the investigation and reported that the plane had only 25 seatbelts for 28 passengers and that the aircraft was 18 flying hours past its inspection time. Mexican officials complained to their U.S. counterparts that the incident reached the level of “punishable negligence.”<sup>23</sup>

Officials also protested that employers failed to provide adequate living conditions, as required by the agreement. Employers were obligated to provide living conditions that were healthy and of the same standard that was common to the region.<sup>24</sup> This requirement that the housing be comparable to other local housing did

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<sup>23</sup> Mexican Embassy to Department of State, February 24, 1948, SRE, III-1015-2 (segunda parte).

not mean much in practice, given that domestic migrant workers also lived in very poor conditions. A study carried out by a Mexican consul who toured a number of the bracero camps in the summer of 1947 reported on the highly undesirable conditions he found there. His report provides a sense of the way these workers lived on a day-to-day basis:

In my visit to camp number 7 in Rosemont Minnesota, belonging to the "Faribault Canning Company," 24 braceros were lodged in two small wood house measuring five by four meters, which lacked ventilation and were in a state of absolute disrepair. The old hovel that served as kitchen and dining room was found completely lacking in hygiene. The workers did not have bathrooms, using a room in ruins in which were two round tubs of lámine to wash themselves and their clothes. Regarding the utensils and plates that they use to eat, they are metal and filthy for lack of cleaning. Worst of all, one of the braceros is charged with collecting the garbage and leftover food and digging holes daily in which to bury all of the garbage, but they do not give him the disinfectants or cleaning tools necessary to complete his task.<sup>25</sup>

Apart from the physical conditions, the consul's report also pointed out that Mexican workers were not getting the support of government agencies that they had a right to expect. In Camp 11, a separate facility, the consul said, the braceros complained that the foreman, employees of the company, and sometimes the representatives of the Department of Agriculture...treat them with hurtful words, they threaten them, and tell them that their contracts do not provide any protections."<sup>26</sup> Further evidence of unfulfilled contract obligations came from a description of the Morgan Company of Pine Bluff, Arkansas. It came to the attention of Mexican officials that the 1,000

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<sup>24</sup> *Síntesis de los Puntos Básicos que Contendra el Acuerdo Internacional para la Contratación de Trabajadores Agrícolas Mexicanos que vayan a Prestar Servicios a los Estados Unidos de Norteamérica.* 3 Feb 1949, AGN, RP/MAV, 546.6/1-32.

<sup>25</sup> Memorandum, Mexican Consul in St. Paul, 10 September 1947, SRE, III-993-1 (segunda parte).



Mexican workers employed there were forced to pay for the sacks they used to gather cotton and were not paid for their subsistence, in violation of their bracero agreements.<sup>27</sup>

Illegal migrants faced many of these same issues, but had the added burden of dealing with the U.S. immigration service and with employers who had no incentive to look out for their interests. In one case, Mexican officials complained that their citizens were forced to spend months in jail in San Diego before being deported because there was no federal judge assigned to the area. They explained that a judge traveled down from Los Angeles one day a month and that he could not effectively deal with the volume of cases by himself.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to delayed deportations, mass deportations also caused considerable consternation. On October 7, 1949, in a meeting with Robert Wilson of the Division of Mexican Affairs at the Department of State, Mexican officials asked the Department to halt the practice of mass deportations, particularly when they resulted in the separation of families. They urged that such practices had a detrimental effect on Mexican public opinion.<sup>29</sup> Some of these mass deportations were also carried out in an irregular manner, creating even further tension between government officials in the United States and Mexico. On October 22, 1948 for example, the gate between Fort Hancock and El Porvenir, Mexico was opened and

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Correspondence of the Mexican Embassy, 13 February 1952, SRE, III-1252-7.

<sup>28</sup> Mexican Embassy to Department of State, August 6, 1948, SRE, III-1015-2 (segunda parte).

<sup>29</sup> Mexican Embassy Memorandum, October 10, 1949, SRE, III-1114-3.

138 Mexican illegal migrants were deported. What provoked a complaint from Mexican officials was the fact that the U.S. border patrol did not bother to inform them until the next day that they had sent this large number of people into their territory.<sup>30</sup>

Some complaints dealt with actual physical abuses of Mexican workers. A typical such case was that of Ruben Chávez Gutierrez, a Mexican citizen detained by border patrol agents in Laredo, Texas. A memorandum composed in the Mexican Embassy in Washington related that Chávez was beaten in the vehicle in which he was transported and that he was subject to verbal abuse, first at the Immigration Office and then at the Hotel Hamilton where he was moved. The local border patrol chief, Elmer B. de Brail, visited the Mexican consul, confirming that Chávez had been apprehended, but denying any mistreatment. However, a doctor who had visited Chávez found scraping and evidence of blows to the face. When confronted with this information, the border patrol chief offered the unlikely explanation that Chávez had incurred the injuries by falling off of a chair.<sup>31</sup> This incident was far from isolated. A memorandum in December of the same year reveals that the Embassy had become aware of “a series of abuses committed against Mexican nationals by officials of the Immigration Service” in California.<sup>32</sup> These abuses included reports by two Mexican citizens that they had been beaten when they refused to confess to certain acts.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Correspondence of Mexican Embassy, 10 December 1948, SRE, III-1114-3.

<sup>31</sup> Mexican Embassy Memorandum of October 15, 1948, SRE, III-1015-2 (segunda parte).

<sup>32</sup> Mexican Embassy Memorandum of December 7, 1948, SRE, III-1114-3.

One dramatic example of these abuses was the case of Adrian Gallardo Herrera. The Mexican consul at San Bernadino relates the abuse Gallardo suffered at the hands of “immigration inspector George R. Teabau or Tibou.”<sup>34</sup> On June 12, 1949 Gallardo was travelling on the roof of a cargo train together with a number of other Mexicans between the towns of Coachella and Indio, California. They were approached by the above-named immigration inspector, who ordered them to disembark. Gallardo, naturally, informed the inspector that he could not possibly comply with this demand until the train had stopped or at least slowed down. The angry inspector kicked Gallardo twice, causing him to fall from the moving train and onto the tracks below. Several train cars ran over Gallardo’s left arm, severing it entirely. One of the most shocking parts of this story is that the consul had no expectation that action would be taken against this inspector, citing a lack of witnesses.<sup>35</sup> That the report made specific mention of a number of other Mexicans who were riding on the same rooftop gives some indication of local attitudes toward Mexican witnesses. The immigration official could act with impunity despite numerous Mexican onlookers.

Another case of abuse by border patrol officials highlights how the humiliation suffered during these episodes could serve to undermine the general relationship between the United States and Mexico. The Mexican consul at Fresno reported to his superiors in the Foreign Ministry that on October 22, 1952, inspector

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Mexican Embassy Memorandum, 7 September 1949, SRE, III-1114-3.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

Allen C. Owen confronted Mexican citizen Antonio Romeo Arriola Pivaral. Owen handcuffed Arriola's hands to his feet, and forced him to walk "like a cat" through the streets in plain view of onlookers, and in the heat of the day. Owens followed Arriola in his patrol car, nudging him with the bumper when he slowed down. Finally, "Arriola fainted and fell to the ground because of, no doubt, the high temperature of midday, the extreme physical exertion, and the moral torture to which Owens submitted him."<sup>36</sup> Although Owen's supervisor seemed sympathetic to the Mexican position, Mexican government officials were still understandably outraged.

Questionable shootings were also a source of periodic concern for Mexican leaders. In one such case, the Mexican embassy carried on a lengthy correspondence with the Department of State regarding the case of Ramón Palma Galván, who was shot to death by immigration official Gordon Jeffrey McDonald. The official caught Palma and six companions attempting to make an illegal border crossing, and as he pursued them, he shot and killed Palma. McDonald claimed that he tripped and, as he struggled to stay on his feet, he accidentally fired his pistol. However, witnesses at the scene reported that McDonald was on his feet shining a flashlight directly at Palma at the time that he shot him. These witnesses also reported that Palma was attempting to flee back across the Mexican border at the time of his shooting. The

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<sup>36</sup> Memorandum, Mexican Consul at Fresno, 17 November 1952, SRE, III-1252-7.

embassy argued that legal precedent in such cases should preclude the use of lethal force and asked the Department of State to see that Palma's family was compensated.<sup>37</sup>

In light of these and other incidents, the Mexican Government responded favorably to the establishment of the President's Commission, expecting that when the situation faced by many of its nationals became better known some positive reforms might result.

The President's Commission also dealt extensively with the issue of illegal immigration, and made clear its extent and results in a very public and official way. There were obvious difficulties involved in counting the number of illegal immigrants, but one of the methods available was to total the number of voluntary and forced deportations that could be counted by border patrol officials. This number had skyrocketed from about 10,000 a year in 1944 to more than 550,000 in 1950, as the President's Commission did its work.<sup>38</sup>

Some testimony also revealed the problems with enforcement that plagued efforts to deal with the problem of illegal immigration. The El Paso incident was the most famous example of lapses in enforcement but although it may be the most striking example, the El Paso incident is not the only evidence that the Border Patrol curtailed its enforcement activities in response to local political pressures. In testimony before the President's Commission on Migratory Labor, the district director

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<sup>37</sup> Correspondence of Mexican Embassy, 7 May 1942, SRE, III-1252-7.

<sup>38</sup> *Migratory Labor in American Agriculture: Report of the President Commission on Migratory Labor* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1951), 70.

of the INS at El Paso stated that during his tenure it was very common that the Border Patrol would receive orders to lighten up on its enforcement. As he explained, "either I get word from some higher official to go easy until cotton-chopping or cotton-picking time was over; or the men who were doing the work would be so upset by the investigation that they would go easy on their own."<sup>39</sup> Other officers of the INS gave similar testimony. In addition to this testimony that the INS sometimes bowed to political pressure, the President's Commission also found evidence that explicit deals were made between government agencies to avoid enforcement during harvest time. One officer related during the hearings at Portland that "I might state that in 1949 representatives of the Federal Employment Service asked us not to send our inspectors into the field to apprehend 'wet' Mexicans, for the purpose of the deporting them, until after the emergency of harvesting the crops have been met. In that particular instance, we did not send the officers into the field as early as we would have otherwise."<sup>40</sup> James L. Sundquist sums up the lax policies of the past in this way:

American Policy, moreover, has not always been rigid. Pressures by employers on local immigration authorities, particularly during periods of acute labor shortage, have unquestionably been very great; and local law enforcement officials have not always cooperated with the border patrolmen of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The Immigration and Naturalization Service has been traditionally 'reasonable' when crops had to be harvested; and deportation figures always show a rise at the end of the harvest season.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Migratory Labor in American Agriculture: Report of the President Commission on Migratory Labor* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1951), 69-76.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Commissioner Watson Miller's letter further reveals that when he found out about the El Paso incident he found it justifiable. The more immediate supervisor in the area, Grover C. Wilmoth, district immigration officer, confirms this attitude. To his mind the practical realities of the situation made the action sensible and appropriate "the crops meet harvesting, or they are going to waste."<sup>42</sup>

The report also described the exploitation endured by illegal immigrants from smugglers who charged exorbitant fees on the Mexican side of the border to unscrupulous employers who gave low wages, kept workers on the job with threats of calling the INS, and withheld pay to keep workers on the job.<sup>43</sup>

The President's Commission's findings confirmed the claims of labor leaders and others that illegal traffic drove down wages and limited opportunities for domestic workers. The final report included a series of strong recommendations for dealing with the issue. The report recommended laws allowing broader latitude for INS searches of places of employment and creating significant punishments for employers of illegal immigrants. It also recommended working with the Mexican government to control the border and ceasing the legalization programs that granted legal status to undocumented workers already in the United States.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Sundquist to Jones, March 30, 1950, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 4 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>42</sup> Unsigned telegram, October 18, 1948, WHCF: CF, State Department Correspondence, 1948-9 2 of 6, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>43</sup> *Migratory Labor in American Agriculture: Report of the President Commission on Migratory Labor* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1951), 77-78.

### **Acting on the President's Commission's Report**

In March 1, 1950, the President's Commission forwarded an impressively exhaustive document to the President. The report consisted of 188 pages of material divided among 12 chapters. These chapters introduced the problem, examined the effect of foreign labor programs, described the scope and consequences of illegal immigration, and dealt with a number of specific aspects of the issue such as housing, child labor, education, and wages.

Lest its basic conclusions become lost in the lengthy text, the President's Commission sent its opus to Truman with a cover letter that was, in any number of significant ways, a resounding defeat for the growers and their allies. The report recommended that "no special measures should be adopted to increase the number of alien contract laborers."<sup>45</sup> Rather, commissioners enjoined the government to utilize available domestic labor to a greater degree. They further recommended that any foreign labor agreement should be conducted strictly as a government-to-government agreement, striking directly against growers' hopes for a simple crossing card system to allow workers across the border. The report went on to urge penalties for

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>45</sup> President's Commission on Migratory Labor to Truman, March 1, 1951, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 6 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.



employers who hired illegal workers, improved housing, a minimum wage for agricultural labor, improved labor-management relations, and a Federal Committee on Migratory Labor to oversee the industry.<sup>46</sup>

After the President's Commission submitted the report on March 15, the administration sought to publish it quickly and widely in order to make it a part of the debate in Congress over a migrant labor program for the coming year. 25,000 copies of the report, officially titled *Migratory Labor in American Agriculture: Report of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor*, were produced by the Government Printing Office. Of these, 868 went to the Congress, 1,360 to the White House, and thousands of copies to other interested government agencies. In addition, copies were sent to Presidents of Land Grant Colleges, to libraries of agricultural colleges, academics in relevant fields, and state officials. 5,000 copies were reserved for sale.<sup>47</sup> Distribution was heavy in the border region. Texas received 378 copies and California, 550.<sup>48</sup> Key interests groups, such as the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the National Farm Labor Unions, and various social advocacy groups were also given copies of the report.<sup>49</sup> After submitting the body of the report, the President's Commission spent several weeks compiling and publishing a second part that included detailed studies of particular aspects of the issue. For example, special

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Randall to members of President's Commission on Migratory Labor and Executive Secretary, May 27, 1951, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 8 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>48</sup> Randall to Members of President's Commission on Migratory Labor and Executive Secretary, May 31, 1951, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 8 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

studies regarding housing, mechanization, Puerto Rican labor, and a number of other issues were prepared.<sup>50</sup> Ultimately, the Department of Agriculture agreed to finance the printing of 5,000 copies of this addition.<sup>51</sup>

Members of the President's Commission and Presidential Administrative Assistant David H. Stowe hoped that this wide distribution of the report, and Truman's endorsement, would make an immediate splash, influencing the course of government policy toward migratory labor in 1951. In reality, however, it would not inspire the kind of far-reaching reforms that the administration envisioned. Ultimately, Truman would find himself unable to act seriously on the President's Commission report because of political considerations.

In the summer of 1951, shortly after the report was published, the Ellender-Poage bill (S984) was introduced into Congress. This bill, known as Public Law 78 once passed, called for the legal importation of Mexican labor without any measures to address the problem of illegal immigration or the more efficient distribution of U.S. workers called for in the President's Commission's report. As such, Truman was faced with the decision of vetoing the bill, or signing it while making clear to Congress that he expected this program to be a stopgap measure while Congress seriously considered the issues raised by the report. Truman decided to sign the bill, but failed to motivate Congress to act seriously on his administration's concerns

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Fuller to Van Hecke, April 11, 1951, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 8 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

regarding migratory farm labor. He hoped that when the measure expired in six months, he would be able to incorporate more of his vision. However, the February 1952 negotiations did not lead to any significant changes. Again, the pressure of growers, the politics of the border region, and the strong pull of market forces prevented the president from enacting what he considered to be a rational and effective public policy regarding migratory labor. Public Law 78 formed the basis of the bracero program until its demise in 1964.

Stowe explained the dilemma to Truman in a memorandum written just after S. 984 was introduced. Stowe lamented that this bill was essentially a sop to the growers' lobby, arguing that "the legislation is in the interest of about 125,000 farm employers who are dependent on migratory labor."<sup>52</sup> The bill, in its essentials, would allow the contracting of Mexican illegal immigrants who had been in the United States for at least five years. It would also authorize the importation of Mexican nationals under contracts guaranteed by the U.S. government. Employers would be required to pay a \$15.00 transportation charge for each worker. The bill also contained many of the familiar protections for U.S. workers that had proved so useless in the past. It required the Secretary of Labor to certify that U.S. workers were not available and that the importation of Mexican laborers would not have the effect of depressing wages, as if the Secretary of Labor had the ability to control the impact of adding thousands of new laborers to the market. In addition, there was a

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<sup>51</sup> Randall to Fuller, May 15, 1951, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 8 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>52</sup> Stowe to Truman, July 8, 1951, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 16 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

provision that made employers who had illegal laborers on their property ineligible for the program. Since contracting was done at the border, and no government employee was required to visit the places of employment, and no investigatory requirements were envisioned, this protection also was more imagined than real. The bill amounted essentially to a codification of the basic terms of the 1949 agreement.

Stowe identified the basic dilemma the bill presented. “The basic flaw in the Ellender-Poage Bill,” he said, “is that it fails to meet the basic problem-which is the corroding effect of a plentiful supply of cheap Mexican labor on the standard of living of American workers.”<sup>53</sup> He explained that the employers’ desire to maximize their labor pool at key points in the crop cycle pulled against the needs of migrant laborers to get enough work, angered U.S. unions, and tended to reduce the status and economic opportunities for Hispanic citizens of the United States, reducing them to “third class citizenship.”<sup>54</sup> He continued that “their current status is below that of the negro.”<sup>55</sup> This program was obviously not in harmony with the recommendations of the President’s Commission, and Stowe recommended considering at least those provisions of the report that could be easily and immediately acted upon as the administration considered S. 984. For example, the report recommended sanctions for employers and traffickers of illegal migrants, the ability to inspect the premises of employers in the process of investigation, stopping the contracting of illegal immigrants, and limiting Mexican workers to the agriculture industry. Stowe also

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

sensibly suggested that the Department of Labor not certify the need for workers unless the employers offered the domestic pool the same terms given to Mexican contract workers and he urged increased funding for the Border Patrol.<sup>56</sup>

Truman decided that his best approach was to accept the Ellender-Poage bill, but to couple his signing with a strong message to Congress that he did not consider S.984 to be a complete solution. A handwritten note on the first page of Stowe's memorandum reads "Done-Let's push this legislation, HST."<sup>57</sup> Truman's message to Congress of July 13 outlined his vision for the future of migratory labor legislation. The message reported that he had received assurances from Senate leaders that legislation dealing with other aspects of the migratory labor problem would be considered while Congress was still in session. The President favored new penalties for harboring and transporting undocumented workers, the ability to inspect farms and ranches to ensure compliance, new appropriations for the INS, and new appropriations for the Farm Placement Service in order to facilitate the better use of domestic workers. Truman also commended the report of the President's Commission and notified the Congress that he expected many more recommendations for legislation to be forthcoming as the report was studied and assimilated.

Later in the summer of 1951, the administration made an effort to see that some of its concerns were acted upon. One manifestation of this effort was S.1851, which would provide clear authority for government agents to inspect any place of

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

employment where they suspected the presence of undocumented workers, except for the actual home of the rancher or farmer. The bill also provided penalties for harboring and helping to conceal an undocumented worker of up to \$2,000 in fines and five years in prison.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to these immediate efforts, the administration also gave serious consideration to how the broader proposals outlined in the report could be made effective in law. One of the proposals involved the creation of a permanent committee that would deal with issues relating to migratory labor.<sup>59</sup> A group of this kind would have the institutional memory and focus to keep pushing for advances.

Despite these efforts, the President's recommendations were not enacted in their entirety. In August, administration staffers were trying to find ways to get their stalled agenda moving again. Stowe wrote to Truman that of the major initiatives congressional leaders agreed to consider during this term, only the funding for the Farm Placement Service seemed likely to pass.<sup>60</sup> He reminded Truman that on July 12 he had personally met with congressional leaders, and they had agreed to consider these proposals in exchange for Truman agreeing to pass S. 984. Stowe suggested it might be time to call on the leadership and ask for an accounting of their progress.<sup>61</sup>

One other option which was considered was to have the president send another notice

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<sup>58</sup> Ford to McCarran, August 6, 1951, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 16 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>59</sup> Dungan to Stowe, August 20, 1951, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 16 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>60</sup> Stowe to Truman, August 11, 1951, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 17 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

to Congress as he signed a Department of Labor appropriation, reminding the Congress of his priorities and of the fact that the current agreement with Mexico had only six months to run. The draft message went on to suggest that if the Congress had not taken some substantive action by that time, then renegotiating with the Mexican government would be difficult. Stowe approved the idea and the statement was issued in Truman's name.<sup>62</sup>

The passage of S.984 did not create a migratory labor agreement, but rather gave Truman the legal authority to negotiate such an agreement with the Mexican government. There was concern within the Truman administration over how this new program would be viewed, and there was also an attempt, emanating from Truman himself, to use the Mexican government as an ally to help him maneuver a non-compliant Congress.

Just one day after Truman's strong message to Congress, in which he demanded action on the recommendations of the President's Commission's report, he sent a letter to President Alemán of Mexico. In this letter, Truman tried to pave the way for an agreement based on S.984 by assuring Alemán that the bill gave him the authority to overcome the Mexican objections which had led to the collapse of the last agreement. However, Truman also took the opportunity to express his disappointment that the Senate Bill failed to deal with the problem of illegal immigration and the related social problems for both U.S. and Mexican citizens. Truman then suggested

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Neustadt to Murphy, August 15, 1951, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 16 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

that the best way to keep Congress moving on this issue would be for he and Alemán to agree only to a six-month pact, making clear that unless Congress had acted in the interim that there would not be a renewal.<sup>63</sup>

This unusual approach of explicitly enlisting the cooperation of a foreign government to help manage a domestic political fight underscores Truman's commitment to the issue of migratory labor, a commitment which is further evidenced by the fact that Truman sent Stowe, his lead advisor on the issue, to deliver the letter to Alemán personally.<sup>64</sup> For Alemán's part, he too went to great lengths to communicate to Truman his personal engagement with this issue. On one occasion when Stowe arrived in Mexico to meet Alemán, Ambassador William O'Dwyer informed him that Alemán had left town. The next morning, one of Alemán's staffers called Stowe to tell him that he had just flown back from Acapulco in Alemán's personal plane to pick Stowe up and take him to see the President. Within hours, Stowe found himself on Alemán's personal yacht in a private conference with the president.<sup>65</sup>

When the first six months of Public Law 78 expired, Truman sought to negotiate changes to the bill based on the recommendation of the President's Commission. By January 1952, the various agencies and departments within the executive branch continued to discuss actively the problem of migratory labor, but by

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<sup>63</sup> Truman to Alemán, July 14, 1951, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 17 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Oral History, David H. Stowe, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.



this time the Congress adjourned without acting on the recommendations contained in Truman's message. Particularly, the president and his advisers felt that the Congress had promised to strengthen immigration law and provide more resources for enforcement, but once the legal avenue for acquiring workers have been achieved the impetus to act on these suggestions seemingly disappeared. The administration still hoped that a high-level interagency committee be established to make the problem of migratory labor its special concern.<sup>66</sup>

In late January, the Mexican government was willing to proceed with negotiations to extend the agreement despite the lack of progress, but Truman himself still maintained that unless Congress acted, particularly by creating penalties for employers of illegal immigrants, he did not intend to negotiate a new program.<sup>67</sup> By February 11, Truman felt that he had the assurance he needed. The Kilgore bill (S. 1851) had passed the Senate, containing provisions that penalized those harboring illegal immigrants and that gave new powers to the INS inspectors to investigate such situations. Although the bill still had not passed in the House, Truman was assured that the bill would be promptly considered by Chairman Emmanuel Celler's Judiciary Committee and on that basis he agreed to a 90-day extension running through May 11.<sup>68</sup> The Kilgore bill would ultimately become law, but, although it may have

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<sup>66</sup> Memorandum by Lawton for the President, January 4, 1952, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 18 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>67</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Culbertson, Blocker, Neal, Rubottom, January 22, 1952, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 18 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

seemed on the surface to be a victory for the president, the details show the continued power of the growers' interests. In response to pressure from growers, Kilgore took pains on the floor of the Senate to say that employment did not constitute harboring under the terms of his bill. He explained "so long as an employer lets the employee carry on only the normal work of his employment and does not make any special effort of any kind to conceal him, that of itself shall not constitute harboring."<sup>69</sup> It was in part on the basis of this toothless bill that Truman would agree to extend the 1951 agreement well into the future.

As the May 11 deadline approached, U.S. and Mexican officials met in Miami to negotiate the extension of the 1951 agreement. Rather than seek another brief extension Truman was now ready to agree to a program for at least 18 months through the end of 1953.<sup>70</sup> The power of the growers' lobby had prevailed over his attempts at bringing significant reform to the migratory labor system.

The power of the growers' lobby to shape legislation and limit Truman's scope of action was profound. Their influence was evident in the ease with which they gained access to public officials, such as was the case in the negotiations for the 1948 agreement where a Texas Congressman personally introduced growers' representatives to State Department officials. Their ability to affect the legislation

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<sup>68</sup> Memorandum for the Files, February 11, 1952, Student Research File, Problem of Migratory Labor, folder 18 of 19, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

<sup>69</sup> "Wetbacks: Can the States Act to Curb Illegal Entry?" *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2. (March, 1954), pp. 287-322.

<sup>70</sup> U.S. Embassy in Mexico to Department of State, Jun 18, 1952, RG 59, 811.06 M.

was in part due to the lack of other interest groups to give them serious competition for influence.<sup>71</sup> The laborers were sometimes organized, but unionization was slow to arrive in the agricultural sector. Advocacy groups such as LULAC and the G.I. Forum were significant, but could not wield the political or economic clout that growers' organizations did.

During World War II, growers had also successfully couched their requests to the government for labor in patriotic terms. They argued that the success of the war effort would hinge, in part, on their ability to gain access to Mexican labor. This appeal to duty and country was enhanced by the fact that the appeals often came not only from growers but also from governors, congressmen, and other politicians from the growers' states. The governor of California, for example, wrote to administration officials, "without a substantial number of Mexicans, the situation is certain to be disastrous to the entire victory program."<sup>72</sup> This patriotic appeal could also be made during the post-war reconstruction period, but the ongoing Korean War made it particularly effective during the 1952 discussions.

The Korean War, in its second year by the time of this latest round of talks, stimulated the demand for farm labor in the United States, making the claims of growers seem more reasonable.<sup>73</sup> Much like World War II had brought to life the

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<sup>71</sup> Robert D. Tomasek, "The Migrant Problem and Pressure Group Politics," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (May, 1961), pp. 295-319. The power of growers organizations as a political force is also well-documented in Richard B. Craig's fine study, *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971).

<sup>72</sup> Richard B. Craig, *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy* (Austin: University of Texas Press), 39.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

bracero program, this second conflict would help make it a durable fixture of life in the United States. The Mexican government was anxious to show its commitment to the conflict in Korea even if it was not willing to send troops or shoulder significant burdens.<sup>74</sup> It could use the opportunity to pitch the new farm labor agreement as their part in the effort. What critics hoped would be a temporary advantage for growers that might subside with the end of the Korean War actually provided a moment for Public Law 78 to become settled policy.<sup>75</sup>

As the previous chapter describes, this institutionalization and stabilization of the bracero program at the federal level was coupled with a transformation of the Good Neighbor Commission of Texas and other aspects of the Texas program to deal with agricultural labor. These programs lost much of their reform impulse and settled into a steady routine of filling out paperwork, responding to immediate claims, and helping to provide a good public image for the state. Gone were the active days of the early GNC where Pauline Kibbe, Robert Smith, and Thomas Sutherland envisioned broad reforms, programs, and dramatic results that would have reshaped the state of Texas-Mexican relations and the everyday lives of immigrants and Hispanic Texans.

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<sup>74</sup> Mexican Government to Secretary of State, July 10, 1950, SRE, III/110 (73-0) "50"/1 III-1209-2.

## Conclusion

The President's Commission achieved some remarkable results over its short tenure. Its members traveled throughout the country gathering a staggering amount of information and successfully making contact with a wide variety of people and organizations, each providing a special vision or set of knowledge that helped form a remarkably complete picture of the problems facing migratory laborers in U.S. agriculture. Truman's personal concern with this group roots him firmly in the Democratic tradition of social welfare and conforms to his record as the architect of the Fair Deal.

The creation of the President's Commission was also a cleverly conceived political ploy. The public hearings and the final report made the administration appear to be actively engaged with these complicated issues, and the data gathered would serve as a tool to pressure the Congress to move toward the solutions that the Truman administration supported.

Ultimately however, one of the more remarkable facets of this story is how the powerful growers' lobby managed to blunt the impact of the report to a few public pronouncements and narrowly written laws. Public Law 78, which Truman saw as a temporary measure to be replaced by his program, became the stable foundation upon which the bracero program would rest until 1964.

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<sup>75</sup> Richard B. Craig, *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy* (Austin: University of Texas Press), 144.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

In a striking and urgent manner, the government of Texas was thrust into an effort to influence Mexican government policy following the introduction of a labor embargo against that state in 1943. Texas officials worked to convince Mexican leaders to rescind the embargo through a wide variety of policies including investigating cases of discrimination, reforming aspects of the state education system, negotiating directly with Mexican officials, enlisting the cooperation of the U.S. federal government, and working to improve the image of Texas among the Mexican public. Texas created new government bureaucracies to coordinate these efforts, including the Inter-Agency Committee, the Council on Human Relations, and most importantly, the Good Neighbor Commission. Collectively, these efforts represent a striking effort by Texas leaders and private citizens to influence the foreign policy between their state, and sometimes their individual community, and the Mexican government.

These efforts yielded some fruit, but progress was distressingly slow for Texas officials. The labor embargo was in effect for four years before the Mexican government agreed to a temporary legalization program that would include Texas, and after that brief interlude the embargo would remain in effect for two more years

before finally being lifted in 1949. After 1949, some Texas communities still faced local embargoes. This slow progress was due less to the intransigence of the Mexican government than to the inability of Texas leaders to effect the kinds of changes within Texas society, such as passing legislation to punish acts of discrimination, which would have convinced the Mexican government that their embargo was no longer necessary.

First, the existence of the Jim Crow system in Texas was a constant brake on the nature of programs that could be considered by Texas officials for Hispanics in their state. Jim Crow presupposed a certain degree of comfort with racially motivated policies, making it harder for Texas leaders to experience real outrage over the existence of “No Mexicans” signs or over incidents of discrimination. White Texans’ commitment to maintaining the legally approved discrimination that African Americans suffered made them hesitant to improve the lot of Hispanics. Texas leaders feared precedents that could ultimately be used by advocates for black Civil Rights to pressure the government for change. Texans’ tortuous efforts to define Hispanics as Caucasian, while at the same time they faced rampant racial discrimination, testifies to that ambivalence. They might be able to urge equal treatment for fellow whites but not for a different ethnic group.

Texans were also quite conservative. The state was solidly Democratic during the whole period covered here, but it was a conservative southern Democratic party that had a strong feeling of reverence for personal liberty and a limited role for government. For many Texans, the idea that discrimination could be subject to

legislation and punishment was simply anathema. Their view of government's appropriate role in society left them with the feeling that educating, investigating, and persuading marked the extent of their reach.

Beyond explaining the immediate crisis, this study also leads to some interesting conclusions about the border in the study of foreign relations, and about the nature of the Truman administration's foreign policy in the early Cold War. Examining the complicated interactions along the U.S.-Mexican border leads one naturally to an examination of the concept of the border itself. To define a border as a political boundary is perhaps necessary, but insufficient. Imagining a border region, rather than a bright line, offers more room for nuance and understanding. Borders are zones where ethnic groups, polities, economies, and other group identifiers change. However, the change is rarely a stark transformation, but rather a blurring and mixing that creates in the border region new identities and new realities that are not entirely one or the other. The degree to which this mixing occurs is predicated upon the interaction of multiple complex factors. The size of the population in the border region, the degree of economic interaction, similarities or differences in political or economic realities, geography, and a host of other factors shape the nature of the resulting mixture.

The blended nature of border regions is readily evident along the U.S.-Mexican border. That region has long had a significant population, from the first influx of U.S. settlers in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century where the Rio Grande gave life to cities, towns, and agricultural sites on both sides of the border. This border has also been the site of significant and constant economic



interaction. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century, hundreds of thousands of people crossed the border every year in both directions, the economies on both sides of the Rio Grande were tightly interconnected, and the region could not be completely controlled by either government. Indeed, both governments working in concert would often fail to exert even joint sovereignty over the border region. This complexity formed the backdrop for the negotiations and actions surrounding the movement of Mexican labor to Texas in the 1940s and early 1950s. The resulting study leads to a number of conclusions about the nature of Texas, Mexico, the United States government, and the relationship between them.

One of the key lessons to be drawn from this study regards the intractable nature of illegal immigration across the U.S.-Mexican border. The economic push and pull factors that drove Mexican migrants north in search of work led to a demand for U.S. jobs that always vastly exceeded the number of jobs legally available under the bracero program. The demand for workers on the U.S. side was continually high as well, and the possibility of moving outside of the immediate border area meant that this demand was virtually limitless. Leaders on both sides recognized the economic forces at work and swung periodically between tolerance and feverish efforts at enforcement. Even when the desire to enforce the border was at its strongest, however, the ability of the Mexican or U.S. government actually to control the movement of workers was limited. Illegal immigration would become the most durable of the problems faced by policy makers. The labor embargo against Texas would eventually be lifted, and the bracero program itself would ultimately come to

an end, but the pattern of illegal immigration that began in World War II and the early postwar period would endure as a policy challenge and an ever-present reality for decades to come.

The nature of the national political environment in the late 1940s meant that there could not be any serious consensus for advancement. Truman faced a conservative Congress and a serious political divide within his own party of the issue of Mexican labor. Entrenched, southern, conservative Democrats who depended on cheap agricultural labor faced unions, New Dealers, and others who advocated for better treatment of the downtrodden. Thus, even when Truman put his whole credibility behind seeking some change to the pattern of migratory labor in the United States, such as was the case when he established his presidential commission and urged the Congress to enact its suggestions, recalcitrant politicians such as Clinton Anderson or Allen Ellender were able to stall or dilute President Harry Truman's proposals.

Another theme in this work is the continual political tension within Mexico created by the treatment of Mexican nationals in the United States. Mexico was unique among nations in this period for requiring formal, negotiated government-to-government agreements with the United States before it would allow its workers to cross the border. Other nations simply allowed agricultural workers to enter the United States under existing immigration laws. Mexico's insistence on these negotiated agreements was in large part an effort to ensure just conditions for its citizens, who frequently experienced discriminatory treatment in the United States. Mexican officials insisted on minimum wages, adequate health care and housing, and

freedom from harsh or disrespectful treatment by either U.S. employers or government officials. Violations of these agreements were numerous, and Mexico's efforts to defend its citizens' rights while maintaining its ever-important relationship with its northern neighbor constituted a continual tightrope act for Mexican officials.

Beyond their desire to protect Mexican nationals, Mexican leaders were also worried about their domestic public image. Intellectuals and opinion makers within Mexico, particularly in the capital, frequently and vocally criticized the bracero program for allowing the degradation of Mexican people in the United States. The Mexican government, as the heir to the Mexican Revolution, had to maintain its credibility at home as it dealt with these problems abroad. It could not be seen as ignoring the needs of the masses of its citizens whose economic well being depended on the success of this program.

Next, the story of the GNC and the supporting efforts by Texas governors and other state agencies also allows for a deeper understanding of the way in which officials along the border conducted their own foreign relations. The crisis of the labor embargo against Texas was felt at the national level, and the State Department did work to see it lifted. However, the national government was consistently willing to put the issue on the back burner if that helped them keep the rest of the bracero program running smoothly. Not content to allow key local issues to be slowly resolved by federal officials distracted by other goals, Texans did a remarkable amount to take their case directly to the Mexican government. The GNC was, in a sense, a State Department for Texas as it interacted directly with Mexican officials, worked to solve problems that affected the bilateral relationship between

Texas and Mexico, and tried to negotiate a solution to the labor embargo. It also served as a public relations office for Texas by creating speeches, articles, and other material designed to show the concern of state officials for the problems facing Hispanic Americans and Mexican nationals in their state. The existence of the GNC itself was designed in large part to be a living symbol of Texas' commitment to eliminating discrimination. But eliminating discrimination was never the ultimate goal for Texas officials, but rather a means to an end as they sought to acquire legal access to Mexican labor. That resolving the labor embargo was the single overriding goal for the GNC was clearly demonstrated, as the agency became increasingly irrelevant in Texas after the labor situation had been normalized. It continued for several decades as a largely ceremonial position and a frequent place to appoint prominent Hispanic citizens, but in the 1980s it was finally eliminated as an anachronism that had long outlived its usefulness.

This study also reveals something about how the Truman administration approached foreign relations with those nations on the periphery of the Cold War struggle. Although U.S. officials were always aware of the potential for Communist encroachment anywhere in the Western Hemisphere, for the most part they considered Mexico to be safe. Even so, Cold War concerns affected this bilateral relationship as U.S. leaders sought Mexico's approval and vocal support for its Cold War efforts. To help ensure that support, and to eliminate what threats of communist incursion there might be in Mexico, U.S. leaders supported loans to the Mexican oil industry, military aid, and other programs to help with Mexican security and development. The Cold War was relevant to the issue of migratory labor in particular

as the border emerged as a possible source of threats. Primarily, however, the issue of migratory labor provides an interesting case study for having been considered largely outside of the confines of the Cold War. As such, it gives a glimpse to perhaps what would have been Truman's greater priorities in the realm of foreign policy if the Cold War had not emerged. For Truman, his approach to the issue of migratory labor seems to have grown naturally from his convictions regarding domestic policy. Truman hoped to protect vulnerable groups of laborers, both U.S. and Mexican. His approach to the issue revealed the part of himself that supported the Fair Deal, rather than the part that enunciated the Truman Doctrine.

During the 1950s, the bracero program continued and Texas was able to get access to laborers using that program. Efforts at eliminating illegal discrimination also continued sporadically, perhaps most dramatically in the so-called "Operation Wetback." However, never during this period, or after the program was finally discontinued in 1964, did leaders succeed in finding global solutions to the issue of migratory labor.

The border region, since the immediate post-World War II period, only increased in importance as the population skyrocketed. The succeeding decades saw ever-greater economic interdependence as the border became site not only to large-scale agricultural concerns but also, increasingly, a place for U.S. industries to set up their base of operations. The 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement would blur the border still further by allowing those U.S. industries to set up shop south of the border, taking advantage of inexpensive Mexican labor and relatively lax labor and environmental regulations. However, the interactions that have sprung up since

1994 are not a new phenomenon, but rather a continuation of a long process whereby the border region has increasingly taken on an identity of its own, neither wholly of one nation or the other.

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