

Smithsonian Institution: The Bracero History Project

The Bracero History Project collects, preserves, and shares the experience of a “greatest generation” of American workers. By recognizing the contributions of the elderly we do much to raise their self esteem and improve their mental health. Through intergenerational learning the general public gains an appreciation of elderly Americans.

Lead Agency:

Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, Division of Work and Industry

Agency Mission:

The National Museum of American History dedicates its collections and scholarship to inspiring a broader understanding of our nation and its many peoples. We create learning opportunities, stimulate imaginations, and present challenging ideas about our country's past.

Principal Investigator:

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Partner Agency:

Smithsonian Latino Center
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Brown University
George Mason University

General Description:

The Bracero History Project collects, preserves, and shares the experience of a “greatest generation” of American workers. In place between 1942 and 1964 the bracero program allowed millions of Mexican men to come to work in the US on short term labor contracts. Many of these workers eventually settled and brought families to the US or married locals. The Bracero History Project sends historians into communities across the country to interview these now elderly men and women and record their stories of hard work and hope for the future.

The Bracero History Project is important for both the nation and the individuals involved. By recognizing the contributions of the elderly we do much to raise their self esteem and improve their mental health. By then preserving and making the stories available to all through a website (braceroarchive.org) and a traveling exhibition (*Bittersweet Harvest*:

The Bracero History Program 1942-1964) the general public gains a growing appreciation of an often overlooked cohort of the American population. Intergenerational learning projects like this are one of the most important ways that we as a nation come to value the lives of the elderly.

Excellence: What makes this project exceptional?

This project is exceptional on many levels – in organization, in execution, and in accessibility.

Organizationally the Bracero History Project is unusual for being a consortium of museums, universities, and cultural institutions. While the Smithsonian has taken a leadership role the project is in fact truly collaborative and owned by all.

In execution the Bracero History Project is also exceptional. Members of the team go out into the field to conduct interviews, often in remote rural locations. With over 600 recorded oral histories (the majority in Spanish) this is the largest Latino oral history project to date.

Finally in execution the Project is quite unusual. All the materials are being made available through the web so interested parties can access them from home or school. The traveling exhibition has been carefully designed to be both inexpensive and low security meaning that this important show will be able to travel to communities that rarely see museum exhibitions.

Significance: How is this research relevant to older persons, populations and/or an aging society?

The project research is extremely relevant to older people because it values their experiences. Braceros and their families have been overlooked by historians for years. This project will help put their sacrifices back into the central story of American history where they belong.

Effectiveness: What is the impact and/or application of this research to older persons?

There are many ways in which the Bracero History Project is impacting those involved but perhaps the most interesting is the development of intergenerational learning. In the Town Hall Meetings and Collection Days held around the country we are struck by the number of older braceros and wives coming to tell their stories at the behest of a child or grandchild. The project helps send a strong message of family importance and worth.

Innovativeness: Why is this research exciting or newsworthy?

The project is helping document and preserve an important chapter of American history. Known by only a few historians the Bracero History Project is recording the details of an important piece of work and immigration history. Additionally the Project is groundbreaking in its open source use of the web to share collected materials with all.