The Price of Opportunity

by Paisley Dutcher (9/27/12)

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The air was hot in Houston, Texas. Every breath scorched lungs and seared throats. The trees looked like they were made for this place, dry but sturdy. Resolute. In that way I guess the humans were made for this place too, but add a thousand warm bodies and anyone would second guess their decisions.

*In 1942 America was in the throes of the Second World War. Young American men were going off to war and American farmers didn’t have enough workers to bring in the harvest. The Bracero Program was established by the Mexican and American governments on August 4, 1942 to alleviate labor shortages in the U.S. and help reduce poverty in Mexico. Thousands of Mexican workers left their rural homes and headed north for the promise of a dependable job and steady pay.*

Train cars crammed with hundreds of men, young and old, arrived at the border that morning. All of them were packed together waiting for the immigration process to begin. Wind could barely pass through the massive crowd. The hum of anticipation mixed together with exhaustion, anxiety, and just a little bit of hope. Young men leaving home for the first time felt the unease of a new place, a new people, and a whole new life. The copper sun shone down and made everything smell like sweat and summer heat. Then the immigration offices opened.

The processing centers were small, stuffy and brimming with misunderstanding. Spanish and English mingled in the cramped space. The men jostled together trying to form an orderly line. The men in charge pointed their fingers and raised their voices as if this extra emphasis would make their English easier to understand. Forms filled out in Mexico and others finalized here were checked and signed and re-checked. The contracts that would control the lives of these willing participants were written in a language they did not understand. It didn’t matter. They signed, and moved on to the next holding area.

Dark skinned men streamed in and out of the offices like muddy water, flowing towards northern fields, work and monthly paychecks.

The men were herded into groups of a hundred and led off to different areas to continue the process. Out in the open the teeming crowd was overwhelming. Thousands upon thousands of men, all ready to work for their families. Each and every one of them left something precious in Mexico: a mother, a wife, children, siblings-- all the people who relied on them. The thought of home was inescapable as they shuffled along in line after line of processing.

Bags were searched for vegetables, weapons, marijuana and other contraband ready to be confiscated. Then the bags themselves were sprayed inside and out until they were coated in DDT, the kind of pesticide more commonly used on cattle. It made everything it touched look dusty, pale, and toxic. It was a human assembly line.

Thousands of workers were ushered through inspection after inspection of luggage, paperwork and physical health. An endless line of stoic, reserved faces.

Finally, the group was led to one of the last stations. It was run by a man in a surgical mask holding a spray gun. Everyone was told to remove their clothes and hold them until they were through the line. Hats, pants, shirts, jackets, and shoes were removed and held modestly in each man’s arms. The added bulk of the clothes made the line disorganized and crowded. As each man reached the front of the line he shut his eyes and mouth tight and waited for the bitter spray of chemicals. The DDT flew from the spray gun, assaulting the skin and creating a thin cloud of poisonous dust, odorless and tasteless but menacing just the same. Not one inch of bare skin was spared. Men walked away looking like ghosts, pasty white and tense.

Blast after blast of poison sprayed onto faces, skin and lips, into ears and lungs and pores. Again and again, man after man. And the process still wasn’t over. Now the real work started. The kind of work that no one else would do, for wages no one else would accept. But that was the price of opportunity and it was a price the Braceros paid in full.