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Puzzle: what's right and what's wrong when 'wetbacks' cross over?

Two governments study border-jumping Mexican labor

Legal exit. *'Wetbacks' start a return trip to Mexico on the deportation airlift tried last month by the U.S. Immigration Service.*

For a few weeks last month a resident of the border town of Matamoros, Mexico, could visit relatives in southern Mexico at the expense of the United States Government.

All he had to do was wade across the Rio Grande to Brownsville, Tex., get picked up by the U.S. Border Patrol as an illegal alien (or "wetback") and in a matter of hours be on an airplane to Guadalajara chartered by Uncle Sam.

This peculiar state of affairs ended abruptly July 4 when Congress refused to appropriate funds for the U.S. Immigration Service to operate this airlift for illegal aliens. It was only a symptom, however, of an international headache that shows no signs of getting better.

The problem: What to do with the thousands of Mexican farm laborers who illegally enter the U.S. each year to harvest south Texas crops.

The wetbacks wade or swim across the Rio Grande, which forms the sparsely patrolled Mexican border, and go to work for as little as $12 a week, living in dirt-floor shacks on the farms that hire them. Even farmers who object to using foreign labor are tempted to hire the Mexican peons. Local labor supplies can't begin to take care of the heavy demand for workers during peak harvest seasons.

The ill-fated airlift—first tried last summer—was an attempt to move the wetbacks into the interior of Mexico, 600 miles from the U.S. border. That is too far for a quick return on their meager financial resources.

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By keeping wetback labor off south Texas farms, officials hoped to force farmers in the area to use Mexican contract laborers, or *braceros*, under a U.S.-Mexican treaty that prohibits wage-cutting and requires decent housing. Such agreements, which pay good workers as much as $5 or $10 a day, are being used by many Rio Grande Valley farmers. However, less than a third of the estimated 50,000 *braceros* needed for this summer's cotton crop have been requested.

Money Talks. Why? Wetback labor is cheaper, and there is no law against farmers using it. Also, many farmers resent Government interference in what they consider a local labor problem, and refuse to go through Washington to get Mexican field workers when thousands are waiting across the Rio Grande.

Center of the wetback dispute is Brownsville. One rabid opponent of Government regulation there is S. D. Ray, who farms 900 acres of cotton and garden produce in the southernmost tip of Texas.

"I've been using Mexican labor for years on that farm," Ray said. "There's a whole town of Mexicans across the river from it who depend on farming for their living. It's ridiculous to go through Government channels to get *bracero* labor when those people need jobs."

Ray refuses to build the minimum housing required by the U.S.-Mexican treaty for *braceros*, says he will switch to livestock raising that doesn't need migrant workers if Government interference continues.

The issue is an explosive one in Brownsville. American workers resent the wetback labor because it keeps them from asking for better wages. Even under the *bracero* treaty, Mexican labor can be brought in any time local workers will not work for the "prevailing wage." Under those conditions, asking for a pay raise—or striking for one—is impossible.

Way Out. One possible solution was offered by Representative Lloyd M. Bentsen Jr. (D.-Tex.) whose Congressional district includes most of the counties along the Rio Grande.

"The way to handle the situation is to issue 'border crossing cards' to Mexican workers, authorizing them to work in U.S. harvest areas when outside labor is needed," he explained. "That way farmers won't be tempted to exploit wetback labor."

Bentsen, whose relatives operate farms in the Rio Grande Valley, believes using such a system would cut out the red tape needed to get legal Mexican labor now.

One hitch in getting such a plan approved: Large landowners in Mexico hire farm labor at much lower wages than

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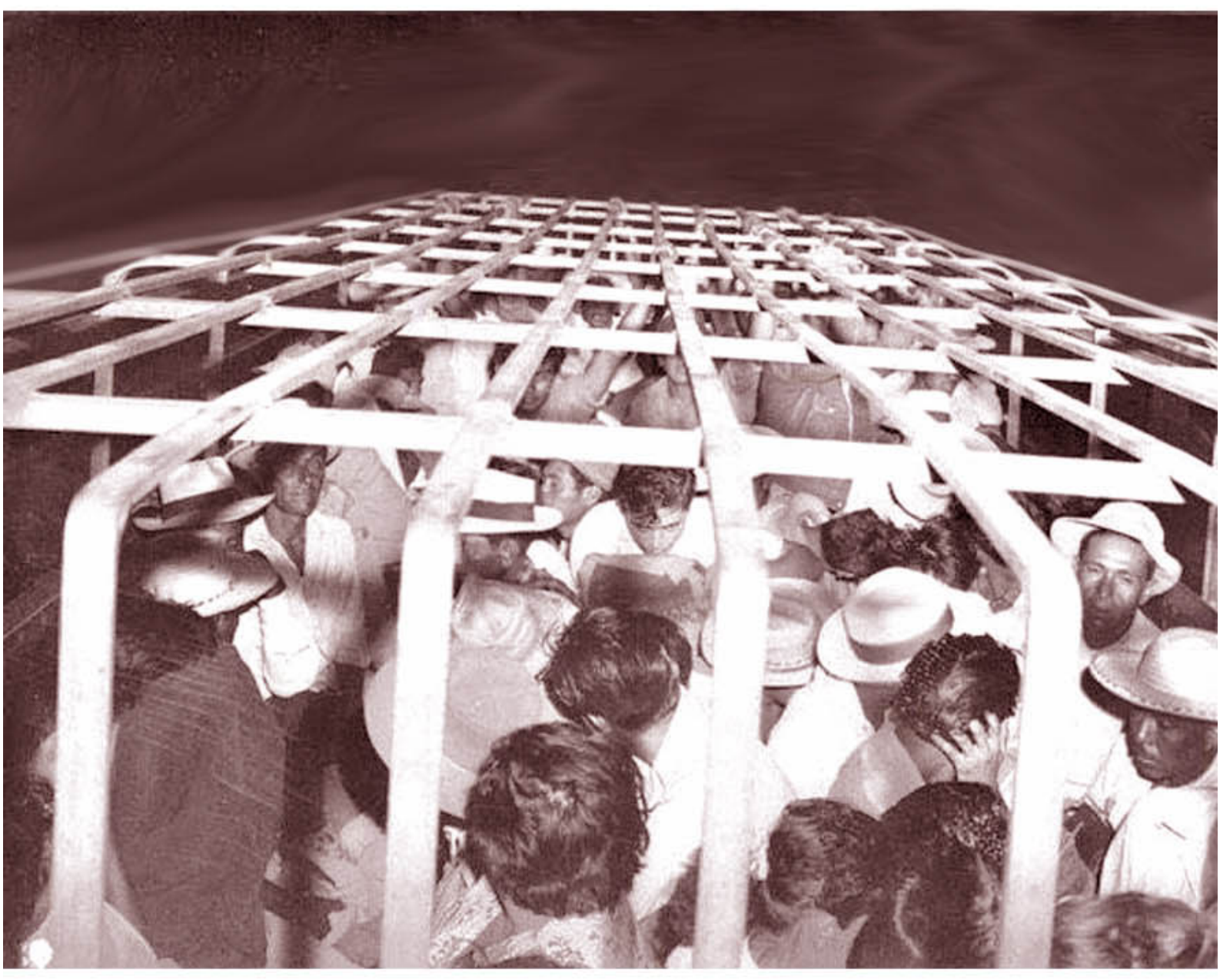
U.S. farmers (as little as 70¢ a day). Mexican officials will hesitate to let down the bars for peons who may desert Mexican farms to work for better pay on the U.S. side of the river.



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