

February 18, 2007

Ken Burns
Florentine Films
P.O. Box 613
Walpole, New Hampshire 03608

Dear Mr. Burns,

It has come to my attention that you intend to release your film about World War II—"The War"—without documenting the role of Latinos in the war effort. I have personal reasons why I think this is wrong—beginning with my grandfather's contribution as a member of the U.S. Navy serving in the Pacific during the conflict—but I want to appeal to you as a professional historian to correct this oversight. My area of research concerns people of Mexican heritage in the United States and I have documented the myriad ways this community influenced, and was influenced by, "the War" you aim to document. It was a major turning point in the formation of Mexican American civil rights consciousness and catalyzed a movement for those rights. Additionally, the war introduced service men into Mexican neighborhoods in Los Angeles, resulting in conflicts among sailors and Mexican youths. Known as the "Pachuco" or "Zoot suit riots," Mexican American youths were beat and stripped of their flamboyant attire on the streets of L.A., highlighting the degree to which Mexican Americans still had not been accepted within the United States. Mexican American service in the military and the Zoot suit riots demonstrate how Mexican Americans were pulled between two poles by the War: a desire to prove their worth at the same time that they experienced discrimination and racism in large part because of the war.

The history you are missing that is of enormous importance to the War is the bracero program. In 1942 Mexico and the United States signed an agreement that brought thousands of temporary Mexican contract workers ("braceros") to harvest crops and maintain rail lines throughout the West and Midwest. This agreement had at least two precedents: a 1909 executive agreement between Presidents Howard Taft and Porfirio Díaz that brought Mexican sugar beet workers to Colorado and Nebraska temporarily; and U.S. Congress's suspension of a U.S. prohibition against contract labor for approximately seventy-three thousand Mexican workers during World War I. The semi-permanency and formality of the 1942 bracero program, however, distinguished it from previous incarnations of such arrangements. Although the government planned to terminate the program once potential workers returned from the warfront, U.S. agribusiness lobbied to maintain the program after the War ended. The importation of

railroad workers declined towards the end of the 1940s; however, through the passage of a series of public laws, agribusiness lobbyists extended the contract system through 1964. The agreement had a significant impact on agricultural labor in California helping to feed the nation in a time of war. The program also sowed the seeds of conflict around farm labor in this country by replacing many resident Mexican American men with temporary, male contract workers from Mexico. Although totals of contract workers varied according to the season and crop, California growers consistently attracted the highest number of braceros of all the states participating in the program. On California citrus farms, for example, industry spokespeople reported that Mexican nationals performed 60 percent of all picking in 1945. By 1946, braceros constituted around 13,000 of the workforce in California citrus groves, or 80 percent of all pickers. Over the life of the program, there were approximately 4.6 million contracts. Several braceros stayed in the country or returned later, forming what is now a very diverse Mexican American community in the United States.

Over the last few years, major projects have been undertaken by the Smithsonian Institution and partnering universities to document this history. This project is now entitled “Bittersweet Harvest: The Bracero Program, 1942-1964” led by Peter Liebhold, the chair and curator of the Division of Labor and Industry within the National Museum of American History. Last May, Kristin Navarro of the Institute of Oral History at the University of Texas, El Paso (UTEP), members of the Smithsonian Institution, and a team of 11 researchers from Brown University traveled to the California/Mexican border region and collected over 200 interviews with former braceros and their families. There have been several conferences dedicated to the subject dating back to an initial conference at Brown University in 2005 and UTEP has collected hundreds of oral histories separately. There is now an NEH proposal led by George Mason University's History and the Media program known as “The Bracero Digital Archive” to make these interviews accessible to the public.

My point in sharing this information is to demonstrate not only the centrality of Mexican American history to a history of World War II (and vice-versa), but also that the source material is there for you to document this history. I am including a copy of my book that is just one example of this history (you should go to page 234, in which I share the story of Candelario Mendoza and how his service in General George Patton’s regiment transformed his life). There are numerous people who can help you if you were to seek their assistance. Given the access and influence you have with the public, it is crucial that you begin to incorporate this history into your productions and that you strive to become a relevant filmmaker to all members of our society, including U.S. Latinos.

Sincerely,

Matt Garcia
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