



AMERICAN LIVES Ernesto Galarza

Scholar, Educator, Activist

Section 2

“When [Mexican-Americans] came to California, Anglo-Americans preached to us about our apathy and scolded us. . . . [But] what is mistaken for apathy is simply a system of self-defense. . . . ‘La mula no nació arisca’—the mule isn’t born stubborn, he’s made stubborn.”—Ernesto Galarza, “La mula no nació arisca” in Center Diary (September/October, 1966)

Ernesto Galarza, born in a small village in Mexico in 1905, came to the United States when he was six, one of hundreds of thousands of Mexicans who fled the turmoil of the Mexican Revolution. He became a scholar, an educator, and an activist.

Galarza was first involved in activism when he was in high school, while working picking crops. A teacher encouraged Galarza to pursue his education, and he went to college. Afterwards, he attended Stanford University for his master’s degree and Columbia for his doctorate. While studying for his degree, he and his wife also launched their own school.

Galarza became a researcher for the Pan American Union. In ten years there, he studied a number of issues. Most prominent was the bracero program of the 1940s. During World War II, the United States suffered a shortage of farm workers. The government signed an agreement with Mexico to permit the entrance of temporary workers called *braceros*. At first the United States agreed to provisions required by Mexico that aimed to ensure that these workers were not discriminated against. In 1943, Congress allowed those limitations to be ignored if doing so was required for the war effort. With the limits lifted, the number of *braceros* jumped. The large growers used their economic power to take advantage of the workers. When other farm workers tried to organize and strike, the growers replaced those workers with *braceros*.

Galarza protested the bracero program. He believed that workers should be admitted to the United States as immigrants—so they could have the full rights of immigrants. Because he thought that the Pan American Union did not do enough to support the workers, he left that organization.

Meanwhile, Galarza was working for the National Farm Labor Union trying to organize farm workers. He led several strikes from the late

1940s through the mid-1950s. Each time, the union was defeated. He grew angry over the lack of support from organized labor, which was more interested in helping industrial workers. He also realized that the bracero program—still in force even though the war had ended—hampered moves to unionize farm workers.

In fighting the bracero program, Galarza was largely alone. One study describes his lonely effort: “He had neither large numbers of supporters, nor finances, nor friends in high places. His weapons were highly personal: the shield of research and analytical thought, the sword of the written and spoken word.” One of those swords was his 1955 report, *Strangers in Our Fields*, a book based on a tour of 150 migrant-worker camps in California and Arizona. In 1964, he financed publication of another critical look at the growers, *Merchants of Labor*. That year, the bracero program was finally ended.

Over the next two decades, before his death in 1984, Galarza remained active in many ways. He taught at universities from Notre Dame to the University of California. He taught elementary school and—in San Diego—pioneered bilingual education. He wrote children’s books in Spanish and in both Spanish and English. He helped organize community groups and advised foundations on Mexican-American issues. He had come far from the small village where he was born.

Questions

1. What does Galarza mean by using the Spanish saying about the mule?
2. What obstacles prevented the farm workers from organizing?
3. Why would a scholar and activist like Galarza become involved in elementary education?