

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 452

“The Double V”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“Our brothers are fighting for YOU. Why can’t we eat here?”

Picket sign in front of a whites-only restaurant in Washington, DC, 1944.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 452. The Double V.

On July 17, 1944, just after 10:00 PM, residents throughout the San Francisco Bay area were awoken by a sudden shuddering of the earth. Seismographs at the University of California, Berkeley picked up a shock wave measuring 3.4 on the Richter magnitude scale, which had been introduced in 1935.

But this was not an earthquake. It was a huge explosion, one with the force of five kilotons of TNT. Sailors at the naval base, closer to the site of the blast, scrambled out of their bunks and switched on the emergency lighting. They thought it was a Japanese attack, a second Pearl Harbor.

But this was not an enemy attack, either. It was a dreadful accident at the pier at Port Chicago, a small port town 40 miles upriver from San Francisco, where Liberty ships were loaded around the clock to carry fuel and ammunition to the front lines in the Pacific. Apparently, a crane had failed, triggering an explosion that in turn set off thousands of tons of munitions nearby. The ship being loaded, the *E.A. Bryan*, was literally blown to bits. Another Liberty ship nearby was broken into pieces which were flung across the water like toys and quickly sank.

Three hundred and twenty people died in the explosion. Two hundred and two of them were African-American sailors who had been loading the *Bryan* that night. Most of the bodies were never recovered.

African Americans were eligible to be drafted during the Second World War, but were assigned to segregated units, and with a few exceptions, most notably the Tuskegee Airmen whom I told you about in episode 427, African-American service members were not sent into combat. They worked behind the front lines. The Ledo Road, for example, built to enable trucks to carry aid from India to China, was built by African-American service members. So was the Alaska Highway, built through Canada to connect Alaska to the continental United States. From the tropical jungles of Burma to the frigid Yukon and in all sorts of climates between, Black American personnel built the roads and bridges and airfields and ports. African Americans loaded and unloaded the ships and drove the supply trucks that kept American soldiers fed and supplied as they fought on three continents and made global war possible.

If African Americans had not done this work, if they had not been made eligible for military service, then white service members would have had to do it, which would have reduced the numbers available for the front lines.

African-American service members received aptitude tests, like everyone else, and were assigned based on their scores. If you were Black and scored poorly, you were likely to get an assignment like the one at Port Chicago: unloading bombs and shells from railroad cars, piling them into a net, which a crane would then lift from the pier and place on the ship, and then unloading the net and stowing the munitions in the cargo hold.

These sailors handled powerful explosives day and night, yet the only training they'd gotten was two hours of classroom lectures. Sometimes they needed crowbars to free the tightly-packed munitions to unload them from the rail cars. Crane operators got no training; they learned by watching someone else do it. Their white officers organized competitions between different squads to see who could load the most bombs in one shift. Winning units got rewards like extra leave time.

Some of these sailors complained. They described themselves as "chain gangs" and "slaves" and questioned whether the work they were doing was safe. Some of their complaints reached the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, which represented civilian dock workers on the Pacific coast; the ILWU offered to send some of their members to teach safety lessons to the sailors free of charge. The US Navy declined the offer.

After the disaster, the Navy began an investigation. The investigators interviewed 125 witnesses who worked at Port Chicago: 120 of them were white officers, five of them were Black sailors. The investigators reported that the consensus view of the interviewees was that African-American sailors "are neither temperamentally nor intellectually capable of handling high explosives. It is an admitted fact, supported by the testimony of the witnesses, that there was rough and careless handling of the explosives being loaded aboard ships at Port Chicago."

Many of the approximately 250 Black sailors who survived the explosion were traumatized by the event itself and the deaths of so many of their comrades. The Navy gave the white officers a month's leave after the explosion; the Black sailors got no leave.

When it became clear to them that they were going to be reassigned to do the same work, and take the same risks, at a new port facility, the sailors decided to go on strike. Or that's the way they saw it. The Navy called it mutiny. About 200 of the sailors were court-martialed and convicted of refusal to obey orders, which cost them three months' pay and a bad conduct discharge that made them ineligible for veterans' benefits. Another 50 were charged with out-and-out mutiny. They were found guilty and sentenced to hard labor for periods of 8 to 15 years. This was the first and the largest prosecution for mutiny of this war for the US Navy, and it became a *cause célèbre* among African-American civilians. The NAACP took up the case and it played a prominent role in the Double-V campaign, conceived as a struggle against fascism abroad and racism at home.

This was one of the most publicized instances of racism in the US military during the war, but it was far from the only one. Just days before the Port Chicago explosion, there was an incident at Ft. Hood, Texas, involving a newly-commissioned 25-year-old African-American Army officer, Lt. Jack Robinson.

Robinson had been a star athlete at the University of California, Los Angeles, the first in the school's history to earn varsity letters in football, basketball, baseball, and track. After he was drafted, he applied for and was accepted at officer candidate school. Following his commission, he was assigned to the Army's 761st Tank Battalion, stationed at Fort Hood. The 761st was another "experiment," like the Tuskegee Airmen. It was the Army's first African-American tank unit, and would become better known by its nickname, the Black Panthers. I love that.

Lt. Robinson was riding on a bus on the post on July 6, 1944. You may recall from prior episodes stories about segregation on US military bases during the war. Well, in summer 1944, the Army issued regulations requiring the integration of some of the facilities on Army posts, including the post exchange, movie theaters, and transportation. On that day, Lt. Robinson was seated aboard an integrated bus on the post. He sat next to a Black woman of his acquaintance. She was fair skinned, and the bus driver took her for a white woman. Infuriated, he demanded that Lt. Robinson move to a seat farther back. Robinson refused. The driver summoned military police, who arrested Robinson.

The military police recommended Robinson be court-martialed, but the commander of the Black Panthers battalion, a white officer named Colonel Paul Bates, refused to approve the recommendation. So his superior officer ordered Robinson transferred to a different unit, where the commanding officer promptly approved the recommendation.

Robinson was court-martialed in August 1944 and acquitted by an all-white jury, but was not permitted to rejoin the 761st. He received an honorable discharge in November 1944.

Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama became fully integrated in 1944. During the war, an African-American woman civilian worked at the base. The experience of eating next to white workers and riding on integrated buses, in her words, “opened my eyes up” to the possibility of a world without segregation. The contrast was made all the more stark when her integrated bus reached the post gate, where she had to transfer onto a segregated Montgomery city bus. She began attending meetings of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP. Her name was Rosa Parks.

Rosa Parks was far from alone. During the Second World War, NAACP membership soared, from 50,000 to 450,000, a staggering increase.

The Double-V campaign was not only fought inside the military. In July 1940, Dr. Lonnie Smith, an African-American dentist living in Houston, Texas, was denied a ballot in the 1940 Texas Democratic Primary. Voting in the party primary was restricted to white citizens, which was allowed under Texas law on the argument that the Democratic Party was a “voluntary organization” and therefore free to choose for itself who could participate in its primaries. In April 1944, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that a primary election was an integral part of the elective process, and therefore to deny a citizen the right to vote in a primary violated the US Constitution and Federal law. The justices voted 8-1 in favor of the result. The lone dissenter was Owen Roberts.

Dr. Smith was represented before the Supreme Court by Thurgood Marshall, and this was one of the most consequential cases of Marshall’s career. In eleven of the thirteen states of the former Confederacy, Democratic Party primaries were closed to African-American voters. The NAACP’s magazine *The Crisis* called the decision “a giant milestone.” *Time* magazine called it a “time bomb.”

Prominent Southern Democratic Senators in Washington lined up to condemn the Court’s decision. Senator John Overton of Louisiana said, “The South, at all costs, will maintain the rule of white supremacy.”

Senator Claude Pepper of Florida said, “The South will allow nothing to impair white supremacy.”

Senator Ellison Smith of South Carolina asked that “all those who love South Carolina and the white man’s rule rally in this hour...to save her from a disastrous fate.”

I sense some kind of running theme through these statements, but I can’t quite put my finger on what it is...

When the subject of absentee ballots for US service personnel abroad came up in Congress, Southern Senators wanted the military to defer to the election laws of the individual states.

Senator James Eastland of Mississippi argued that white American soldiers were “fighting to maintain white supremacy...”

I spoke previously of the 1944 Presidential election and how increasing sympathy by the Roosevelt Administration and the national Democratic Party toward the plight of African Americans was alienating white Democrats in the South. Mike Connor, a former governor of Mississippi accused the Administration and the Party of conspiring with African Americans to “place the black heel of Negro domination on our necks.” Sam Jones, a former governor of Louisiana declared, “It is abundantly and increasingly clear that the New Deal high command hopes to use the war as an instrument for forcing the social ‘equality’ of the Negro upon the South.”

Much of the rapid growth in NAACP membership can be attributed to African Americans in uniform. Entire Army units in Europe and Asia raised money for the NAACP. A segregated infantry regiment in Italy kept a running total of how much each company in the regiment had donated. A donation from an engineer unit in France was accompanied by a letter which said in part, “We are making a sacrifice for victory abroad, but that does not assure us of victory in our own country. We hope that the next coming generation will not have to endure the humiliation and suffering that we’ve gone through.”

The donations allowed the NAACP to take on more legal cases and the increased membership gave the organization greater political clout. And that’s the Double V campaign in a nutshell.

[music: Creamer and Layton, “Way Down Yonder in New Orleans.”]

Back in episode 344, I told you the story of how Franklin Roosevelt, under pressure from labor leader Philip Randolph, signed Executive Order 8802, which forbade discrimination on the basis of “race, creed, color, or national origin,” both in the Federal government and in private defense contractors. The same order created the Fair Employment Practice Committee, or FEPC, to enforce the rule. The FEPC was a small office, with a small budget, and unfortunately, the anti-discrimination order was more honored in the breach than the observance, as Hamlet once put it, although he didn’t mean it that way.

The 1930s had been something of a golden era for labor unions in America, with new unions forming and many workers unionizing. It was also a time of strikes and labor strife, often around compelling an employer to recognize a new union. Some large employers were vehemently anti-union and spent years fighting the unionization of their employees, two notable examples being the carmaker Ford Motor Company and Montgomery Ward and Company, a large mail-order retailer, sort of the Amazon of the pre-Internet era.

But after the US began its military buildup, and especially after it entered the war, strikes meant loss of war production. One tool at President Roosevelt’s disposal was military contracts. The

Administration told uncooperative companies like Ford or Republic Steel that if they wanted those contracts, they'd better allow their workers to organize.

Shortly after the United States entered the war, the President signed Executive Order 9017, which created the National War Labor Board, or NWLB. The Board had members appointed by business, labor, and the Administration, and its role was to mediate labor disputes that threatened war production, and during the Second World War just about any labor dispute threatened war production.

This was a pretty good deal for both sides. It protected businesses from strikes and kept a lid on wage increases; it granted labor unions security. Labor union membership in the United States peaked in 1945 at 35.4 percent of the workforce.

At least it was a good deal for both sides until 1943, when the NWLB ruled that employers had to offer women workers equal pay for equal work, a decision that was unpopular with industrial leaders, who were looking forward to the windfall profits that hiring large numbers of women would produce for them. A few months later, the NWLB issued a ruling that was even more unpopular: employers had to offer African Americans equal pay for equal work.

This second ruling didn't sit well either with employers or with unions. The unions could accept women workers because everyone simply assumed that after the war was over and the soldiers came home, the women would leave those jobs and the men would reclaim them. But they anticipated that once African American workers, especially men, got onto the factory floor, they'd never leave. Sad to say, but for most of the twentieth century, American labor union leaders took it as read that one of their duties was to prevent the jobs of the (white) workers they represented from being claimed by African-American workers.

These wartime jobs paid well, especially when compared to the jobs women or African Americans or especially African-American women were accustomed to working. An African-American woman in the South might reasonably expect to be paid 25 to 50 cents an hour to clean white people's houses. Now that same woman could take a bus to San Diego and get a job in a shipyard that paid three to five times the wages. That was the difference between just scraping by and being able to put away enough money to eventually buy a car or a home.

In spite of the NWLB, there were thousands of wildcat strikes during the war; a "wildcat" strike is one in which the workers at one particular factory or job site go on strike against the will of their own union. Wildcat strikes are generally prompted by local issues; it could be something as simple as a tyrannical foreman on the shop floor. Sometimes the local issue in question was...but hold that thought for a minute I'll come back to it.

In 1938, some labor unions within the AFL, the American Federation of Labor, broke from the parent organization and formed an alternative coalition called the Congress of Industrial Organizations, or CIO. The CIO's complaint with the AFL was that it focused on tradespeople

and skilled workers. The CIO wanted unions to be more aggressive in including unskilled laborers.

One of the key unions instrumental in forming the CIO was the United Mine Workers, or UMW, under its colorful and volatile leader, John L. Lewis. Lewis supported Roosevelt in 1936 but opposed his re-election in 1940 and supported Willkie instead. When the rest of the CIO refused to go along with the UMW in switching parties, Lewis withdrew the UMW from the organization in 1942.

In 1943, Lewis led his union, the United Mine Workers to strike. Lewis objected to the wage caps the NWLB was imposing, which were usually smaller than the rate of inflation. Coal production was critical to the war effort, so Roosevelt issued an order for the Federal government to nationalize the nation's coal mines, though ultimately the NWLB ordered a substantial pay increase for the miners, which ended the dispute.

But a consequence of this dispute was the passage in the US Congress of the Smith-Connally War Labor Disputes Act, which authorized the Federal government to take control of industries under strikes if the strike was interfering with the war effort. It also fined unions that struck without 30 days' notice and barred labor unions from making campaign contributions in Federal elections. Roosevelt vetoed the bill, but Congress overrode his veto and the bill became law. Roosevelt would only use the powers granted him under this Act on two occasions, both times in situations amusingly different from what the drafters of the Act had in mind.

But a couple of other stories first. On November 4, 1942, copper miners working for the Anaconda Copper Company in Butte, Montana went on strike. These miners were not members of John L. Lewis' United Mine Workers. They were members of the smaller International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers, usually called Mine-Mill for short. This union had once been part of the Industrial Workers of the World, the IWW, or "Wobblies." I talked about them back in episode 203. They were a leftist union that faced bitter and often violent opposition during the Red Scare of 1919-20.

Mine-Mill was no longer part of the Wobblies, though it retained some of the leftist ideology of its roots. Like most unions, it agreed to the wartime no-strike pledge. So why were the miners striking? Well, Copper was a critical material for the war effort, and we've seen how the draft led to labor shortages. The US Army and government identified around 5,000 drafted soldiers with mining experience and judged they would do more to help the war effort by working the mines at home rather than fighting overseas. A couple dozen of these soldier-miners were sent to work in the Anaconda mine at Butte.

The trouble began because the workers were Black. The leftist leadership of Mine-Mill supported racial equality, but though workers in the mine at Butte included Irish, Italian, and Eastern European immigrants who worked together cooperatively, they were not willing to accept African-American co-workers, no matter what the union or Anaconda or the government

had to say about it. The president of the union and the Undersecretary of War both traveled to Butte to meet with the miners and urge them to set aside their prejudice for the sake of winning the war. The workers responded with heckling and boos.

The Roosevelt Administration gave in, but quietly, not wanting to set a precedent that deference to racism was a higher priority than war production. This incident was one of the first of what became known as “hate strikes,” labor walk-outs, usually wildcat strikes against the will of the workers’ own union, to protest efforts to employ African Americans.

Just a few weeks later began the first of a series of wildcat strikes at the Packard Motor Car Company in Detroit, which during the war manufactured Merlin engines licensed from Rolls-Royce for American fighter planes. I’ll have more to say about that next episode. Large numbers of African Americans migrated from the South to Detroit for these wartime jobs, and I should note large numbers of white Southerners did as well. Packard, like many companies of the time, welcomed Black workers and was willing to promote them, at least in part as a means of sowing division among the workers and decreasing the possibility of workers organizing against the company.

There were a number of these wildcat strikes over the first half of 1943, mostly by white workers but also some by Black workers in protest of their treatment on the job. On June 3, Packard promoted three African Americans. In response, 25,000 white Packard employees walked off the job.

These workers were members of the United Auto Workers, or UAW, a major American union also committed to racial equality in the workplace. The UAW ordered its workers to go back to work and the National War Labor Board threatened to replace any worker who refused. On June 6, 30 of the ringleaders were fired. That settled the matter inside the factory, but two weeks later, race riots broke out in Detroit, which lasted three days and led to 34 people killed and 433 wounded. Most of the victims were African Americans killed or wounded by the Detroit police. The city’s white mayor and police chief blamed the violence on African-American “hoodlums,” their word, while Thurgood Marshall, representing the NAACP, blamed the riot on the housing shortage in the city and police brutality.

Both the German and Japanese governments used the Detroit riot for propaganda purposes, suggesting the riot was evidence of American decline and calling on African Americans not to fight on behalf of the United States.

A few minutes ago, I referenced the Smith-Connally Act. Here’s the first instance of the Roosevelt Administration using it to end a strike. This one was against Montgomery Ward, a retailer that did most of its business via catalogs and mail order.

The company’s chairman was Sewell Avery, a right-wing business leader hostile to Roosevelt and to labor unions. The workers at Montgomery Ward voted 3-1 for union representation in

1942, but Avery refused to negotiate. The union and the NWLB put together a contract proposal which ultimately Avery signed, but only after the personal intervention of President Roosevelt.

That contract expired in 1944 and Avery refused to agree to an extension, “come Hell or high water,” as he put it, and the union called a strike on April 12. Avery again refused to cooperate with the NWLB, arguing that Montgomery Ward was not engaged in defense work and therefore the NWLB had no jurisdiction, but this argument was specious. In an age of total war, most everyone in the economy is doing work that is war-related somehow; in the case of Montgomery Ward, rural farmers were heavily dependent on catalog retailers like Montgomery Ward and Sears, Roebuck & Company for equipment and supplies, as their local brick-and-mortar retail options were few. And farmers are essential to the war effort as long as soldiers need to eat.

Two weeks later, on April 27, 1944, Attorney General Francis Biddle personally appeared at the main offices of Montgomery Ward in Chicago, along with some soldiers. Biddle asked Avery to be reasonable and pointed out his intransigence was hurting the war effort. Avery replied, “To Hell with the government.” So Biddle ordered the soldiers to physically remove Avery from the building. As they were carrying him away, he threw at Biddle the nastiest insult he could think of: “You New Dealer!” The US government took control of the company and signed a contract with the union, ending the strike.

As I said earlier, the anti-union authors of the Smith-Connally Act certainly never imagined their law would be used in this way.

The government returned control of the company to Avery in less than two weeks. Avery still refused to comply with the terms of the contract and just after Christmas 1944, the US government again seized control of the company. This time it would continue to run Montgomery Ward until the end of the war. The company was returned to private control in October 1945.

On June 5, 1944, workers at the Curtiss-Wright aircraft engine factory in Cincinnati, Ohio went on a hate strike after the company promoted a few African American machinists. The plant made engines for American fighter planes, so this was unquestionably war production, and the timing of the strike couldn't have been worse from a public relations point of view. The following day, June 6, 1944, newspapers across America presented two major news stories on their front pages. The first was the Normandy invasion; the second was that a hate strike in Cincinnati was shutting down airplane production.

The newspaper editorials practically wrote themselves. These workers were also represented by the UAW, which responded to the strike with a statement that read in part:

[This] strike ... provoked by a handful of individuals is a blow at our boys invading Europe ... The UAW is absolutely opposed to all forms of discrimination because of race ... Negro workers

have fought with white workers to establish our union ... Negro Army, Navy and Marine Corps fighters are on every battlefield.

The US War Department announced it would cancel its contract with the plant if the workers did not return to work. Curtiss-Wright then announced that anyone who was not back at work at the plant by June 9 would be fired. Most of the workers went back to work by the deadline; those who did not were fired, with the blessing of their union.

Two months later, on August 1, 1944, in Philadelphia, white workers went on a sickout to protest the hiring of African American trolley drivers by the Philadelphia Transportation Company, or PTC. Some background here: First, a sickout is a labor action in which workers all call in sick at the same time; it's a strike that doesn't want to acknowledge that it's a strike. Second, you can't run a modern city without public transportation, and Philadelphia was at the time the third-largest city in America by population and the second-largest measured by war production. Third, Philadelphia, like most US cities in the North, had experienced a significant influx of African-Americans seeking war-related work.

A transit strike meant workers involved in war production, say building ships at the Philadelphia Naval Yard, couldn't go to work, so the implications are obvious. The PTC carried a million people to and from work every weekday. The company employed some 11,000 workers, of whom 500 were Black, all working unskilled, low-pay jobs such as janitors.

African Americans had been applying for the good jobs, such as motorman or conductor, but the company maintained a whites-only policy for those positions. The workers complained to the NAACP, the NAACP complained to the FEPC. Meanwhile, in January 1943, because of wartime shortages, the PTC went to the Federal government to request 100 white candidates for motormen. The War Manpower Commission suggested the company hire some of its African-American applicants. PTC claimed it was barred from doing so by its union contract, even though the contract said nothing about hiring by race. The leader of the union supported the whites-only policy and refused to discuss changing it, on the grounds that the workers he represented had not authorized him to begin such a negotiation.

In March 1944, PTC workers voted in a union election in which an outside union, the Transport Workers Union, competed for the workers support. The Transport Workers Union was affiliated with the CIO and campaigned explicitly on a platform of ending the whites-only policy. The Transport Workers won the election, but the company continued to resist hiring Black workers, as did many of the white workers.

Effective July 1, 1944, a new policy from the government's War Manpower Commission required all employers to hire new male workers through the US government's own employment agency, which assigned workers without regard to race. At this point, the company gave in and accepted eight African-American applicants and began training them as streetcar drivers.

On August 1, the new drivers took their cars onto the streets of Philadelphia for the first time, and the sickout began. It was not authorized by the union, which called on the workers to return to their jobs.

This was the second occasion in which President Roosevelt invoked Smith-Connally. He ordered the Army into Philadelphia to take over the PTC's system and operate it with soldiers. Workers were told to return to work by Monday, August 7; those who refused would be fired. Those fired would be excluded from wartime employment for the duration, and those workers under 38 years old would be drafted.

On Monday, all but 24 workers turned up for work, a much lower absentee rate than an average day for the PTC. The 24 holdouts were indeed fired; the six of them eligible for military service were drafted. Soldiers remained in the city and rode aboard PTC transit vehicles as armed guards, but there was no further trouble, and they were withdrawn on August 17.

The hate strikes I've described here are merely the most prominent cases of a common phenomenon. It is estimated that the US lost hundreds of thousands of worker-days every year because of hate strikes. The editor of the NAACP's magazine, *The Crisis*, wrote that "White folks would rather lose the war than give up the luxury of race prejudice." Eustace Gay, a columnist for the *Philadelphia Tribune* wrote of a race riot in Texas: "The blame must rest squarely on the shoulders of those Americans who love their country less than they hate thirteen million fellow citizens."

If these words sound harsh to you, allow me to quote one of the striking white workers at the Packard plant in Detroit in 1943: "I'd rather see Hitler and Hirohito win the war than work beside [an African American] on the assembly line." (Only he did not say "African American.")

African-American newspaper reporter Harry McAlpin wrote that "the Axis has now found anew America's 'Achilles heel'...its unbridled race prejudice..."

I'll give the last word to Langston Hughes who wrote these words in verse after the Detroit race riot:

*I ask you this question
Cause I want to know
How long I got to fight
BOTH HITLER—AND JIM CROW.*

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank Simon and Michael for their kind donations, and thank you to William for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Simon, Michael, and William help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a

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Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we consider developments in the air war over Germany. Have the Allies at last found the panacea target? That's in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. We talked about labor shortages in the United States during the Second World War and how that opened opportunities for American women and African Americans, and it must be said, African American women in particular, but there's also a story to tell about Mexicans.

Hundreds of thousands of Mexicans crossed into the United States during the turmoil of the Mexican Civil War, and most of them could find no better work than agricultural labor. Field work is some of the worst work there is. Few are willing to do backbreaking labor for very low wages, or even no wages at all. (There's a reason most enslaved people are put to work in agriculture.)

This influx of Mexican farmhands worked out fine for farmers in the states that border Mexico until the Great Depression struck. With so many white people out of work and destitute, like the Okies who fled to California, attitudes changed, and the public became hostile to the idea of foreigners working in America while Americans couldn't find a job. A combination of social pressure and outright threats forced most Mexican farmhands back to Mexico during the 1930s.

Then came the war, and suddenly there was no one left to work the fields. On August 4, 1942, the United States and Mexico entered into an agreement that would allow Mexican workers to contract to work on American farms for a limited time. When the contract ended, the worker would have to return to Mexico. They called it the Bracero Program, *bracero* being a Spanish word for manual laborer, literally "someone who works with their arms."

On paper, the program promised these workers adequate living conditions and a minimum wage. In practice, these guarantees were unenforceable. Most were underpaid, subjected to terrible living conditions and had no recourse, as their employers could at any time cancel their contracts and force them to return to Mexico. Conditions were particularly bad in Texas; so much so that for a time the Mexican government refused to allow its workers to sign contracts for work in that state.

The Bracero Program was originally intended to end after the war, but it was such a good deal for the farmers that they pressed to continue the program. It went on for almost twenty more years, until it finally ended in 1964.

[music: Closing War Theme]