

Agricultural Personnel Management Program



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Bracero savings transfer proved WWII-era papers from Wells Fargo show money deducted from paychecks was sent to a Mexico bank.

by Yvette Cabrera

World War II-era documents obtained recently from a California bank offer the first hard evidence that savings funds deducted from the pay of Mexican farm workers were deposited into Mexican banks.

Most of the farm workers, known as braceros, never received the savings that were automatically deducted from their paychecks. For years the braceros have petitioned the Mexican government and, more recently, the Mexican bank, Banrural, to acknowledge the existence of these funds. Farm-worker activists estimate the sum to be between \$150 million and \$3 billion, including interest.

The documents prove that a California bank, Wells Fargo, received the savings and held them for transfer to Banco Nacional de Mexico, Mexico's government bank. Evidence tracking the money's flow from the United States to Mexico had been scant.

"Those documents are really a big piece of information. The Mexican authorities can no longer ignore the facts, and this confirms what has been known all along," said Juan Jose Gutierrez, who in the early 1980s petitioned the Mexican government to return the savings to the braceros. He is executive director of One Stop Immigration, an immigration resource center.

Antonio Macias Rivera, 78, of Santa Ana, was one of about 5 million farm and railroad workers sent as part of a wartime deal to the United States from Mexico to fill a labor shortage during and after World War II.

The documents move the braceros one step closer to receiving the lost funds, Macias said. In recent months, the braceros have renewed their efforts to recoup these funds.

"It gives me great pleasure to see that this history of mistreating the farm worker is coming to an end," Macias, who worked in California and other states between 1944 and 1963, said in Spanish. "I am one of those that agrees that something needs to be done about (these funds)."

No records show where the funds went after Wells Fargo transferred the money to Banco Nacional de Mexico.

But farm-worker activists say the salary deductions, 10 percent of a worker's paycheck, were deposited into the Banco Nacional de Credito Agricola, which merged in 1976 to become Banrural.

The money was withheld as an incentive for the workers to return to Mexico once their U.S. contracts expired, said Ventura Gutierrez Mendez, head of Coachella-based Union Sin Fronteras, a farm workers' rights group. He had heard reports that Wells Fargo possibly was involved in the program.

Until now, old paychecks showing the deductions and workers' recollections were the only proof he had of the program.

Banrural has stated repeatedly that bank officials have not found records that prove the deposits were made.

"At the time that (Banrural) was created, the funds didn't exist, but Banrural is ready and willing to accept individual claims," said Hermes Castro Ojeda, a Banrural spokesman.

Officials from Banrural's legal department declined to comment on the specific documents, obtained from Wells Fargo Bank's corporate archives in San Francisco on a request from The Orange County Register.

Castro, however, noted that Mexican banking laws are strict and that, had the savings account existed, the funds should have been transferred to Banrural.

"I don't know what happened with the funds. They could have been cashed out or could have had another destiny," Castro said.

On Nov. 1, Banrural began accepting claims from braceros who think they qualify for the savings funds. The bank has placed the onus on the workers to provide original contracts or documents, such as pay stubs, that prove the deductions were made.

Ten claims have been filed so far in the 13 locations throughout Mexico, Castro said, stressing that these are preliminary figures.

The Wells Fargo documents are dated from 1944 and 1945 and are part of a report filed by Emil Leunberger, then-vice president for the bank's foreign department, after he returned from two trips to Mexico to visit with officials from the Banco Nacional de Mexico, a bank that holds federal reserves.

In a 1944 report, Leunberger wrote: "Mr. (Rodrigo) Gomez, (Banco Nacional de Mexico manager) expressed satisfaction with the banking relations they have with us, and seemed particularly pleased with the arrangement whereby we act as depository for the salary deductions of Mexican railway and farm workers in this country, which have passed through their account with us."

In an April 1945 report, Leunberger wrote: "Mr. (Carlos H.) Palmer, (foreign department chief) is in charge of the arrangements whereby the salary deductions of Mexican farm and railroad laborers are deposited with us for credit of the Banco de Mexico, Mexico City."

Wells Fargo's Los Angeles spokeswoman, Kathleen Shilkret, said researchers have not located documents that detail how much, how often or how the money was transferred to Banco Nacional de Mexico. It is unknown whether Wells Fargo received a fee for the transactions and from whom the bank received the savings funds, she said.

"We'd certainly be pleased if our research would be able to turn up what was necessary for the braceros to receive the money that's due to them," Shilkret said.

Wells Fargo legal-affairs officials say the bank is not liable for the lost money, "because we were just a funnel from one party to another," Shilkret said.

It is believed that only those braceros who worked between 1942 and 1949 qualify for the savings reimbursements because in 1949 the two governments signed an agreement ending the program.

Ventura Gutierrez of Union Sin Fronteras thinks the U.S. Farm Security Administration withheld the money from the braceros, but records from the now-defunct agency have not been found, according to Department of Labor spokesman Al Belsky.

Juan Jose Gutierrez, of the Los Angeles-based One Stop Immigration, believes both Banrural and the Mexican government should be held responsible for compensating the braceros.

"If (Banrural) lost the records, then they're responsible for that," said Juan Jose Gutierrez. "Records like that don't get easily misplaced or lost,

and I'm sure they're somewhere in their archives because it was a significant fund.

"The Mexican government has got to assume responsibility for that and go back and do some soul searching and estimate a formula to compensate the Mexican farm workers," he continued. "There's no ifs, ands or buts."

Source: <http://www.ere.berkeley.edu/APMP/pubs/agworkvisa/transferproved111799.html>