



## RIO VISTA FARM GUIDEBOOK

901 NORTH RIO VISTA ROAD • SOCORRO, TX • 79927



**100+ years of history  
and community.**

**Local landmark with an  
international story.**

# Welcome

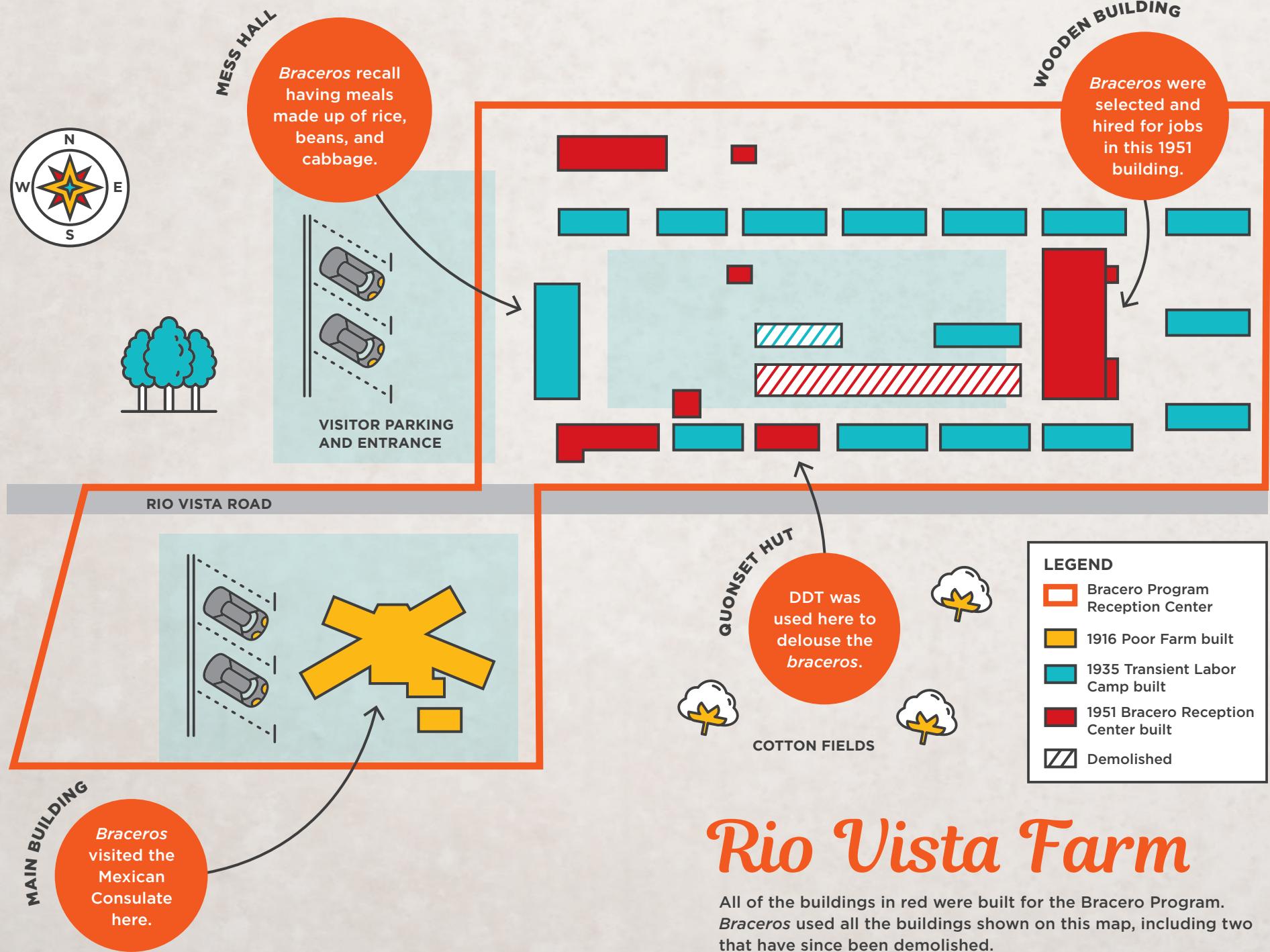
**YOU'VE STEPPED INSIDE HISTORY.**

This historic landmark set in the vast West Texas landscape has a rich history that started in the early 1900s. Rio Vista, which served first as an orphanage and later as the U. S. headquarters for the Bracero Program, tells the story of migration, oppression and triumph in the American experience.

It remains a testament to the contributions of the many skilled Mexican guest workers, known as *braceros*, brought into the U.S. to aid with farm labor shortages during and after World War II. The term *bracero* comes from *brazo* or arm, signifying that the men worked with their arms and hands.

This guide will help you discover the evolution and expansion of Rio Vista Farm. As you explore the site, take a moment to reflect on the civic and social services Rio Vista played in American history.

 **DID YOU KNOW?** Though the Bracero Program ended decades ago, millions of Mexican Americans can trace their roots to their fathers' or grandfathers' entry into the U.S. as *braceros*. To learn more about the Bracero Program, go to page 8.



# Beginnings

During the early 20th century, a number of impoverished individuals came to El Paso County seeking services for orphaned children, the homeless, and elderly residents who lacked the means for self-support. In response to this growing need, the county opened a second County Poor Farm in 1916 at Rio Vista Farm in the rural town of Socorro. Poor farms were established as a part of the Texas Constitution of 1896 and provided public assistance for destitute residents in need of care and support.

The original site of the El Paso County Poor Farm is the 1916 Prairie-style building, historically known as the Main Building. The brick Main Building was designed in an

BELOW: Map of Texas highlighting Rio Vista Farm

X-shaped layout with four wards or wings that served as dormitories for boys, girls, men, and women. The central corridor functioned as a community room for play and afternoon leisure. Known as the local "communal colony," this system provided impoverished individuals and families room and board for nearly 50 years. To visit the Main Building, see the map on page 2 and find the building marked in yellow.

## FUN FACT

Did you know that the Rio Vista Farm is rumored to be haunted? Locals say that they have seen ghosts resembling women and children roaming the property.



## RIO VISTA FARM TIMELINE

1915-1964 → 1935-1936

El Paso County  
Poor Farm

New Deal programs and  
transient labor camp

1951-1964 ←

Bracero Reception Center

1994 → 1997

Rio Vista Community  
Recreation Center opens

1997

Listed in the National  
Register of Historic Places

2015 ←

Included on Texas Most  
Endangered Places list

2016 → 2017

Declared a National  
Treasure by National Trust  
for Historic Preservation

Bracero History Summit marks  
75th anniversary of first  
braceros admitted into the U.S.

# The Great Depression

After the stock market crash of 1929, millions of Americans lost their jobs and savings amid the Great Depression, and federal and state programs for indigent populations were created to provide relief to the most vulnerable citizens.

As the County Poor Farm, Rio Vista's population grew during the Great Depression when the farm was host to a variety of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal public relief programs. In the 1930s, County Commissioners started planning a transient labor camp and selected the Rio Vista County Poor Farm as their new location. Through various state and federal employment projects, like the Works Projects Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps, construction broke ground in 1935 to create the County Poor Farm Transient Camp. The transient camp's public work relief projects employed, fed, and sheltered over 100 workers.

Individuals worked six-hour days in exchange for room at Rio Vista and \$1 a week. Transient camp laborers farmed the surrounding fields, expanded the Main Building, made adobe bricks, paved Rio Vista Road, and made furniture in exchange for food, housing, clothes, and medical attention. They also built sixteen of the adobe Mission Revival style structures. Most of these buildings remain today and give the site its distinctive rectangular shape.

You can identify these buildings by their adobe brick, stucco coating, and curved parapets—all signature architectural features of the Mission Revival style, a prominent style in the

## FUN FACT

Rio Vista Farm was one of the filming locations for Steven Soderbergh's movie, *Traffic* (2000).

## MISSION REVIVAL STYLE ARCHITECTURE:

A late 19th and 20th-century style that interprets the Spanish Colonial missions. These missions were built by Catholic priests and Indigenous people throughout the southwestern United States.



**KEY FEATURES:** 1. Curved parapet or bell gable 2. Square complex and courtyard 3. White plaster (stucco) walls 4. Low pitched roof lines 5. Handmade adobe brick

southwest. These buildings are highlighted in blue on Rio Vista's site map located on page 2. Laborers also built a mess hall, infirmaries, a bathhouse, dormitories, and recreation rooms. These buildings served the labor camp, County Poor Farm, and later the braceros.

ABOVE: Mission Revival style building at Rio Vista was once a recreation hall for the County Poor Farm., by Kip Malone

# The Bracero Program

Rio Vista Farm echoes with the bittersweet stories of *braceros*, skilled Mexican laborers hired between 1942-1964 to fill railroad and agricultural labor shortages throughout the United States. The Bracero Program is the nation's most expansive guest worker program, created by the federal government in part because of America's extreme labor shortage during World War II. The United States and Mexican government negotiated a series of agreements that allowed for the recruitment of temporary Mexican laborers to enter the U.S. Over the 22 years of the Bracero Program, labor efforts sponsored an estimated 4.6 million contracts for guest workers from Mexico.

Seeking financial stability and prosperity, *braceros* waited for weeks at recruiting stations in Mexico, and came to the United States leaving behind wives, children, parents, their culture, and the only language they knew. Large farm associations,

growers, food processors, and individual farmers sought labor assistance from *braceros* throughout the U.S., with a concentration in Texas, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, California, and New Mexico. The *braceros* were selected by growers to harvest vegetables, fruits, and cotton.

Americans and politicians celebrated *braceros* for assisting with U.S. labor shortages and war efforts. In 1942, the first group of contracted *braceros* entered



**FUN FACT**  
The El Paso Region remains a large agricultural region known for its Pima cotton production and pecan orchards.



through El Paso, Texas, to work in the sugar beet harvest in Stockton, California. When they arrived at the California train station, welcome signs, musicians, and supporters greeted the men.

While the program promised good pay, housing, food, insurance, and other necessary accommodations, many describe this period as "legalized slavery." Men were bused across the country to contribute to America's agricultural economies in harsh and oftentimes inhumane working conditions. Some employers charged men inflated prices for room and board, leaving them to earn just pennies a week after their difficult work.

OPPOSITE: Temporary clerks were proficient in both English and Spanish at the Reception Center; courtesy USCIS History Library

ABOVE: Bracero loading for transportation to farm, courtesy USCIS History Library

To support the expanding Bracero Program, in 1951 the federal government transformed Rio Vista Farm's quadrangle into the Bracero Program's U.S. headquarters and the first permanent reception and contracting center located along the US-Mexico border. At Rio Vista, the U.S. Department of Labor contracted up to 1,500 men a day, and it is estimated that in 1956 alone over 86,000 contracts were processed at this site.

# Rio Vista Farm



## BRACERO RECEPTION & CONTRACTING CENTER

From 1951 to 1964, Rio Vista Farm served as the Bracero Program's U.S. headquarters by making use of the existing Main Building and County Poor Farm Transient Camp adobe structures. As a Bracero Reception and Contracting Center, these buildings were reused as *bracero* dormitories, federal administration offices, a mess hall, recreation room, and medical examination rooms. *Braceros* began arriving at Rio Vista in September 1951, with most men coming from the migratory station in Chihuahua, Mexico.

To further fulfill the needs of a contracting site, the U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Public Health Service, and U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service built two large structures for dormitories and an interview selection building. The 1951 *bracero*-era interview selection building still exists today and is the only wooden structure located in the quadrangle. Also added were concrete block restrooms, as well as concrete drinking water fountains and shaded structures to protect men from the harsh West Texas sun and shelter them as they awaited their day-long hiring process.

Visitors can still see remnants of signs in Spanish by visiting the *escusado* (bathroom) on the north side of the quadrangle.

Those that passed through Rio Vista—more than 880,000 *braceros*—endured terrible food and humiliating and arduous medical and psychological examinations. The *braceros* were stripped of their clothing, organized into lines, underwent day-long examinations, and fumigated with toxic chemicals like DDT before being hired by the contractors. Former *braceros* vividly recall that

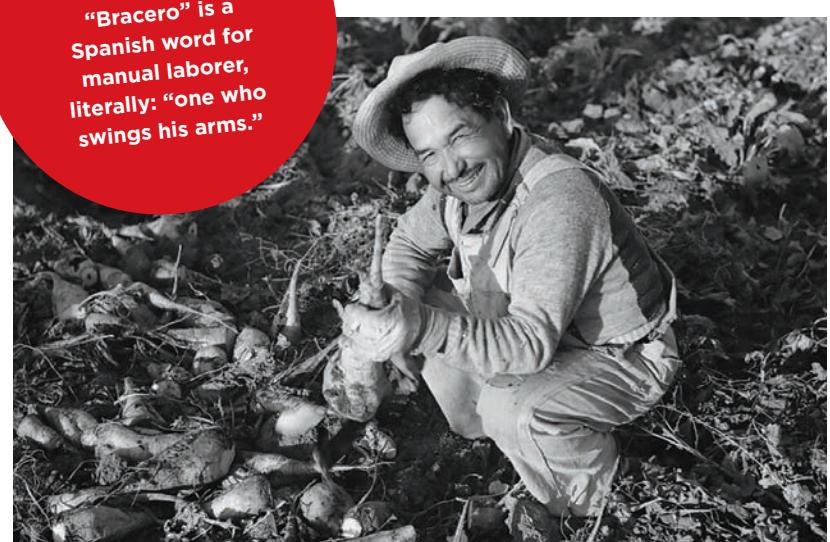
OPPOSITE: Fields worked by the *braceros*, by Kip Malone

BELOW: Stockton (vicinity), California: Mexican agricultural laborers topping sugar beets.; courtesy Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection

interviewers thoroughly inspected the men's hands for callouses to see if they were used to physical labor. Men also remember the bologna sandwich they were provided. For some, it was the first time they had eaten meat in a long time. To see where the *braceros* were sprayed with DDT, look for the Quonset hut—the long metal building near the front of the quadrangle.

### FUN FACT

“Bracero” is a Spanish word for manual laborer, literally: “one who swings his arms.”



## WORKING TOGETHER



As the owner of Rio Vista, the City of Socorro is dedicated to the rehabilitation and maintenance of this important historical landmark. The once poor farm, Depression-era transient camp, and bracero reception and contracting center is now a community center and beloved historic site. For its role in Texas and American history, it is listed on

ABOVE: Rio Vista Farm Historic Preservation Month celebration, by Steven St. John

the National Register of Historic Places and is historically designated as a Texas State Antiquities Landmark by the state of Texas, and as a National Treasure by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

 **DID YOU KNOW?** In 2014, the City committed over \$1 million to help restore Rio Vista Farm.

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The National Trust for Historic Preservation,  
a privately funded nonprofit organization, works  
to save America's historic places.



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