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Dustin Kipp
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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“WE WERE BEET WORKERS, AND THAT WAS ALL”
BEET FIELD LABORERS IN THE NORTH PLATTE VALLEY, 1902–1930

DUSTIN KIPP

John and Alex Loos, two brothers who spent their childhood summers working in the beet fields of western Nebraska in the 1910s, suggested that a migrant beet field laborer could become, by the end of one season, “a trusted member of the community.”1 It took years of hard work and saving, but field workers could become farmers. Families could own land and work for their own benefit rather than for the subsistence wages of the migratory laborer. Although locals often viewed them with suspicion as outsiders, German Russian migrants were increasingly encouraged to stay to help build the burgeoning sugar beet industry during the 1910s. Later arrivals, increasingly those coming from Mexico, met with fewer such opportunities.2 “We were beet workers, and that was all,” said Elvira Hernandez, whose family came to western Nebraska in the early 1920s.3 This stark contrast reveals an important change that occurred around 1920 in the North Platte Valley. The sugar beet industry had expanded to the limits of available land and technology. The Great Western Sugar Company no longer sought to increase beet acreage by renting or selling land to immigrants on favorable terms. Instead, it recruited workers who would serve as a cheap, seasonal labor force and nothing more.

The experiences of the men, women, and children who labored in the beet fields of the North Platte Valley changed significantly as the sugar beet industry went through a period of rapid expansion prior to 1920 and then reached a relatively stable plateau. During the period of expansion, laborers were attracted by promises of reasonable wages, good living conditions, and opportunities to move up to the position of tenant or farmer if they worked hard and saved carefully. When the expansion...
reached its limits, however, those opportunities quickly disappeared. Beet field workers were always hired as part of a temporary labor supply, but during the 1920s they were increasingly treated by farmers, townspeople, and sugar company representatives as only that and not as potential new beet growers.

THE SUGAR BEET INDUSTRY AND THE LABOR PROBLEM

The structure of the sugar industry in the North Platte Valley, as in other sugar beet regions, was dictated by the physical and environmental limitations stemming from the nature of the crop and the value of the product. These factors created relationships between company, farmer, and laborer that differed significantly from the traditional family farm model. Especially in Nebraska and other beet districts in the West, land was still readily available when the sugar beet industry began to grow (See Fig. 1). Thanks to railroads and irrigation projects, it was also increasingly accessible and productive. Ultimately, this led to greater control of the production process by the sugar companies and toward the industrial agriculture that dominates much of the country today.

Growing sugar beets in the early twentieth century was an incredibly labor-intensive process, especially in terms of the hand or “stoop” labor that could not be mechanized. Even for people accustomed to the challenges of rural life, sugar beet work was considered difficult. “I don’t mind work,” said Estelle Mohrlang Colling, “but that, to me, was hard work.” The first beets planted in Nebraska were tended and harvested by the farmers, whether landowners or tenants, and their families. This family farm model, common to many types of agriculture in the United States at the time, severely limited the number of acres that could be planted and harvested as each individual could realistically work no more than ten acres per year. If farmers could only plant what their families could work, there would not be a high concentration of beets in one area and therefore the harvested crop would have to be transported to a distant factory.

Beets, being heavy and perishable, were expensive and risky to transport great distances. To make the industry profitable, therefore, the factories that would process the beets...
had to be located close to the source. For these reasons the sugar companies built factories in areas where sugar beets could be successfully grown on a large scale, based on results of both private and government test plots. Upon locating a factory, such as those in Scottsbluff, Gering, and Bayard in the Nebraska Panhandle, the company had an interest in getting farmers in the area to grow enough beets to keep the factory running at capacity.

Labor quickly became the limiting factor. The expansion of the sugar industry in Nebraska required some way other than the family farm model to meet the massive labor needs of the beet crop. The industry faced the same labor problem in other regions as well.

In the Saginaw Valley of Michigan, growers were encouraged by sugar companies to recruit women and children from nearby towns. One company even brought in 125 boys from a Detroit orphanage to work on their experimental farm. In the Red River Valley in Minnesota and North Dakota, labor gangs, including 700 high school students one year, were similarly tried but ultimately abandoned. A blend of industrial and agricultural practices appeared to be the best available answer for the sugar industry if it wished to increase production quickly. If the companies could solve the labor problem, they could effectively control how many acres were planted and how many beets would be processed in their factories without owning the land.

One method the Great Western Sugar Company used to increase beet production in the Scottsbluff area after building a factory there in 1910 was to purchase available land and then rent or lease it on good terms to growers who agreed to raise sugar beets and sell them to the company. Irrigation projects along the North Platte were expanding the available productive land just as the Great Western Sugar Company was pushing for an expansion of beet acres. In contrast, Michigan sugar companies relied almost completely on convincing existing farmers to grow beets on land that the farmers already owned. As Kathleen Mapes notes in her study of the sugar beet industry in Michigan, excess land simply was not available for the companies to drive expansion of beet acreage without farmers’ cooperation.

Contracts formalized the relationship between company and grower by stipulating how many acres the farmer would plant, the price that would be paid for the beets (including provisions for bonuses if the beets were exceptionally rich in sugar), and how the field labor necessary for raising the beets would be provided. In the first contract offered by Great Western when it was establishing the factory in Scottsbluff, the going rate was five dollars per ton of beets. Even assuming a modest yield of ten tons per acre, that rate was a significant incentive for farmers to plant beets rather than other, less labor-intensive crops. The contract also gave farmers a more sure future, as the price of their product was determined before planting rather than being subject to volatile commodity markets after the harvest.

As part of the contracts, sugar companies took the lead in finding, recruiting, transporting, and managing the field laborers needed to tend and harvest the beet crop after local labor supplies proved insufficient. These workers were almost entirely ethnic minorities and recent immigrants across the sugar beet industry. In the case of western Nebraska, they were primarily German Russians (many of whom had recently settled in eastern Nebraska), along with Japanese, Greeks, and Mexicans. The Great Western Sugar Company attempted to expand beet production by offering an opportunity for some migrant workers to move up. It would sell or rent land to people who had been field laborers in previous years, offering favorable terms or loans to make it possible for recently arrived immigrants to buy land. These families would often continue to do the field work themselves for at least a few years, but their goal was to become growers and to leave the field work to hired hands. While this was not exactly the family farm model, it did allow for upward mobility similar to the rural ideal espoused by the Country Life Commission during Theodore Roosevelt’s administration. That commission’s report suggested that
the laborer, if he has the ambition to be an efficient agent in the development of the country, will be anxious to advance from the lower to the higher forms of effort, and from being a laborer himself he becomes a director of labor. If he has nothing but his hands and brains, he aims to accumulate sufficient capital to become a tenant, and eventually to become the owner of a farm home.13

The vision of rural life in which every farm was a self-contained unit and the owner's family the source of labor was modified, though not completely destroyed, in the industrial agriculture model that took shape in the North Platte Valley of Nebraska as well as in other sugar beet centers in Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, and North Dakota.

The relatively high prices paid for sugar beets during the boom of the 1910s were attractive to growers and potential growers. High prices also had two important effects for laborers as some portion of those prices trickled down to the field workers. Higher wages, along with the ability of the whole family to work, provided greater incentive for potential laborers to choose beet field work over other options (railroad maintenance, factory work, or day labor in the cities, for instance).14 Also, those wages allowed laborers to accumulate savings, an essential element in the ability of field laborers to move up in the ranks to the status of grower as either tenants or landowners. The potential for economic betterment attracted laborers and settlers to western Nebraska.

Sugar companies were willing to take on the enormous task of providing labor for the sugar beet fields because their ability to make a profit depended on getting as much raw product to the factory as possible and doing so at just the right time. In 1915 the Great Western Sugar Company shipped a total of 500 laborers into its territories in Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska, and Montana. From 1916 to 1930, they averaged almost 7,400 laborers per year, with the high point coming in 1926 at over 14,500.15 Finding and keeping a labor force did present some challenges, however. With little economic activity in western Nebraska outside agriculture and railroads, there were few opportunities for migrants to find off-season work and little hope of finding a permanent job like those available in the industrial centers close to the beet districts of the Upper Midwest and Great Lakes region. This situation made it likely that families or work gangs would come to the area for the busy spring season or to help with the harvest in the fall, but not likely that they would settle down and be nearby year-round. The seasonal nature of beet work made the labor question especially difficult because two distinct high-demand periods were separated by a low-demand period in the summer and a no-demand period during the winter.16 The sugar company was faced with the possibility of needing to recruit workers twice a year, doubling their cost in this department.

The labor contract was the preferred tool of sugar companies in all beet districts to ensure that workers would be available when needed and to save themselves the cost of recruiting and transporting that labor force more than once per year.17 Stipulations in the contract arranged for payment to be made at specific times, always including a "hold-back clause," which made the largest payment the one after the harvest was complete in the fall. This policy forced workers to stay until the end of the season because, "on the contract, you didn't get paid till then."18 The contract was one effective method to meet the field labor demands, but it also indicated a move away from personal and community interaction as the basis of the farmer-laborer relationship that was typical under the family farming model. This trend accelerated in the 1920s.

Contracts were typically offered by agents of the sugar beet companies who acted as go-betweens for the growers. One such recruiter for the Great Western Sugar Company in the North Platte Valley was Tony Vera, a Mexican American who moved to the area in 1906. He arrived as a member of a work gang (composed of single men), settled, and then married. Vera later took advantage of an opportunity to move up from field laborer to labor recruiter
and manager. His responsibilities as a fieldman for the sugar company varied widely, but in general he served as an agent of the company in matters from recruiting during the winters, arbitrating disputes during the season, to final payment after the harvest and everything else in between.19

Although labor gangs consisting of single men were initially quite common, recruiting families quickly became a high priority for sugar company agents. Families were ready-made labor gangs with a cook and children, who were well suited to certain portions of the necessary labor.20 In a 1934 history of the sugar beet industry, a Mr. Allen of Ames, Nebraska, is quoted as saying,

The man with a large family of children to support is especially well suited in qualifications for the cultivation of the sugar beet. The woman and child labor is an important factor in this industry, and is placed higher in actual worth than the labor of the full-grown man.21

The labor recruiter often worked to specifically match the family size of his recruits to the acreage of a single farmer. Another reason families were sought was that they were less mobile than the single men who made up a traditional labor gang, meaning the company had less chance of losing their workers during the season or at the end of the year.22 This stability, along with the contract, helped reduce the company's recruiting and transportation costs.

Recruiting agents traveled during the winter to eastern Nebraska to recruit German Russian laborers or to Mexico, New Mexico, Texas, and various midwestern cities for Mexican workers. Transportation from these locations to western Nebraska was included in the contracts offered by the Great Western Sugar Company. For German Russians coming from Lincoln, this meant a ride on the “Beet Field Special,” a train run by the Burlington Railroad specifically to transport labor to the North Platte Valley and the Colorado beet fields. Similarly, Mexicans coming from various midwestern cities, the Southwest, and Mexico made the trip on trains packed with laborers heading for the beet fields. Transportation back home was provided sometimes as well, but this was not a constant. Many years, workers were on their own after the season. Laborers sometimes tried to find some way to settle down near the beet-growing corridor, but year-round work was scarce. German Russians usually went back to Lincoln for the winter and other laborers went to various cities or agricultural districts in the Southwest where they could find temporary work in construction, factories, or with the railroads to get them through until the next beet season. They were a part of the rural-urban seasonal migration of labor, one feature of the interdependent organization of both industrial and agricultural labor systems for the Midwest and Great Plains.23

From the time the Scottsbluff factory was built in 1910 until 1920, the Great Western Sugar Company worked hard to maximize beet acreage. This led it to institute policies and practices intended not only to attract workers for the seasonal labor but also to retain them as a permanent labor force and a pool of aspiring new farmers. Getting migrants to settle in the area was a challenge, however, as they had no permanent jobs and typically very little savings. Many of the workers continued to travel to and from the North Platte Valley with the seasons—Mexicans from the Southwest and from midwestern cities and German Russians largely from eastern Nebraska.

Others, however, took advantage of the company's efforts to settle their families in the area. In one such attempt, workers “were encouraged to build houses on lots owned by the sugar companies. They were furnished materials and offered the opportunity to pay for land and materials over a period of years.” Chris de Ollos said that the Great Western Sugar Company at one point even gave land to the field workers “if they'd build their own homes.” Many jumped at this chance. For migrants from Mexico, adobe was the most common building material because it was cheap and familiar.24 There was clearly a desire among beet field workers to attain some stability in their lives and improve
their circumstances. By 1923 “a goodly supply of both Russian-German and Mexican labor was available within the beet district itself.”

Individuals and families who worked in the beet fields migrated for a variety of reasons, often described as “push” and “pull” factors. They nearly always left poor economic and social situations in other countries (push) in search of better living in the United States (pull). Elvira Hernandez recounts how her father moved the family from Mexico to the United States in 1916 because of the revolution under way in their home country. He had no specific lead on a job but found work with the railroads and then in a packinghouse in Kansas City. The Hernandez family, like many other immigrant families, was searching for an opportunity to build a new life in the United States. In the late 1910s and early 1920s recruiters for the sugar companies came to the cities to find beet laborers, promising good wages and a good life. According to Hernandez, recruiters raved about the “wonderful opportunity . . . to be working together as a family” in the beet fields.” Her father was convinced and moved the family to western Nebraska.

THE WORK AND LIVES OF FIELD LABORERS

Work in the sugar beet fields involved long hours of strenuous, repetitive tasks. It was not the type of job that attracted a large pool of applicants (See Fig. 2). According to one account, “even children knew that Americans seldom worked in the beet field. ‘Naw, my papa don’t work beets. We’re Americans. Just ‘Roosians’ and ‘Mexes’ do beets,” said little Margaret when asked if her father worked beets.

Recent immigrants, with few opportunities but a lot of desire to improve their standing, were willing to undertake the job because they often lacked other options. In the North Platte Valley, German Russians were by far the largest group in the early years. Japanese, Greeks, and Mexicans made up small minorities. During and after World War I, increasing restrictions on immigration from outside the western hemisphere led to a Mexican majority.

The 1907 Gentlemen’s Agreement, an informal understanding between the USA and Japan, cut off the flow of emigrants from Japan, and wartime restrictions limited those from the Central Powers countries. The Emergency Quota Act (1921) and the Johnson-Reed Act (Immigration Act of 1924) established numerical restrictions on the immigration of Europeans, and especially restricted the eastern Europeans, such as German Russians, who had been supplying the beet field labor. Due in large part to the lobbying efforts of the sugar beet industry and other agricultural enterprises that relied on cheap immigrant labor, Mexican immigrants were exempted from the quotas. Requirements such as literacy tests and the head tax were removed during the war to ensure crops could be harvested. Both sides in the debate over whether to allow immigration from Mexico believed in the racial inferiority of Mexicans. Restrictionists considered them a dangerous class of people and wanted to keep them out. Antirestrictionists, such as the sugar beet industry, wanted to allow them in as temporary labor but emphatically denied that there was any chance of Mexicans settling in the United States or becoming citizens.

Regardless of ethnicity, however, few of the migrants regarded field labor as an end in itself. It was intended to be a step along the way to economic improvement, and it would not be an easy one.

The first tasks of the hand laborers began soon after the sugar beets began to grow in June. This was the time for “blocking and thinning,” a two-step process used to properly space the plants for maximum growth and sugar production. Blocking involved the use of a hoe, either long-handled or short, to remove excess plants and leave properly spaced bunches in nice neat rows. This work was typically done by men, women, and older children. Thinning required the careful removal, by fingers, of all but the strongest plant in each bunch created by the workers with the hoes. This involved
crawling on hands and knees up and down the rows of beets and was usually done by women and children. It was typically hot and miserable when the workers were performing these tasks. “When you got to the end [of the beet row] so you could get a drink, you’d be real happy; you thought you’d never make it to that end, but somehow we did,” remembered Lee Karubos.32 These two tasks, blocking and thinning, had to be completed while the beet plants were young in order to give the selected seedling maximum time for growth and sugar production. Thus long days, ranging from 10 to 16 hours, were not uncommon. “You didn’t work from sun up to sundown; you worked from daylight to daylight, until you couldn’t see anymore.”33

After the blocking and thinning was done, usually in late June or early July, the pace of work in the sugar beet fields slowed for a time. Workers typically cultivated the land at least twice during the summer to keep weeds to a minimum, as required by their contracts. Beyond that, families had some time to devote to other endeavors. Summer days were often spent tending the garden, working extra jobs, or hunting and fishing in the countryside. The Loos brothers recall taking on extra work such as stacking hay and threshing grain. They recall more fondly, however, the days spent exploring along the North Platte or trying out promising new fishing holes. For families who had acquired a lot in town, the summer might
be devoted to building a new home for year­round residence.34

In the fall, work became intense again as the beets had to be extracted from the ground, “topped,” stacked, and loaded on wagons or trucks to go to the railroad siding or the factory (See Fig. 3). This time around, in contrast to the heat of the blocking and thinning, it was “real cold, and you froze.”35 First an implement known as a lifter was dragged through the field to loosen the soil around the beets. Then workers would pull the beets from the ground and stack them in rows. Others followed behind with long, hooked knives. They used the hook to pick up a beet and then, with a deft stroke, separated the sugar-bearing bottom portion of the beet that grew below the soil line from the mineral-rich section that had lived above. This step, which required a fair amount of strength and skill to do well, was crucial for two reasons. First, sugar companies did not want any excess mass transported to the factory; the tops did not contain a high percentage of sugar, so there was no reason to process them. Second, returning the nutrients in the beet tops either directly to the soil or using them to feed livestock were essential steps in the farmers’ overall land and livestock management scheme.36

The labor of children in the sugar beet fields was crucial to the families who relied on the extra earnings to make enough to survive and, hopefully, move up. According to a 1923 study, children (defined as under the age of sixteen) made up 52 percent of the labor force and
accounted for 47 percent of the acreage tended. “Undoubtedly, the labor of children in the sugar beet fields means larger money returns to the parent, the grower, and the company.” Child labor reformers were critical of the practice and pressed for legislation to protect children in agriculture as they had been in mines and factories. The sugar industry and its boosters in the academy were quick to point out that, while children may toil in the sugar beet fields, the sugar company itself does not employ them. This was true after various efforts to directly employ children failed. The practice of contracting migrant families took hold, in part because it relieved the company of the responsibility of determining exactly how many workers to hire. The head of each family signed the contract, and it was up to the whole family to complete the work by whatever means were necessary. Children simply work alongside their parents “as they do elsewhere in other farmwork,” industry supporters claimed. They rejected the comparison to industrial or sweatshop child labor made by reformers and touted beet work as “helpful rather than detrimental” to the child’s development. As Mary Lyons-Barrett has argued, however, the experiences of children laboring in industrial agriculture were different from those who worked on family farms. The children of migrant laborers moved frequently and missed more school days than the children of settled farmers.

Women who worked in the beet fields alongside their husbands and children were faced with double duty. After working the majority of the day in field, they would head home a little earlier than the rest of the family to prepare dinner and do other sorts of housework. “Usually Saturday was set aside for mother to stay home and do the laundry and baking, and we usually went out to the field,” recalled Esteleen Mohrlang Colling. Although they may have worked fewer hours in the field, these women’s concerns extended beyond the sugar beets they raised—their responsibilities included raising children.

The quality of the homes in which these women endeavored to feed, clothe, and care for their families varied to some extent depending on the farm on which they worked, contract specifications, and the fieldman in charge of the area. Laborers employed on farms near the city would often live in ethnically segregated settlements in the city and travel daily to the fields. If the farm was too far away, however, they would live out near the fields in temporary housing which was often shoddily built or run down. According to the contracts, growers were required to provide housing, access to clean water, and in some cases “a plowed, disced, and harrowed” garden plot for the workers. As representative for the Great Western Sugar Company, it was Tony Vera’s first task when laborers arrived in the spring to ensure that their housing was adequate. He checked the structure for leaks and made sure that there was access to clean water and a functional cookstove.

While some workers were fortunate enough to find housing that was acceptable, if a bit spartan, others found poor conditions and little recourse. One laborer reported that “farmers build houses for beet-tenders just like for chickens.” Elvira Hernandez, whose family arrived in the valley around the end of the boom period, suggested that the provided housing was “a big disappointment; we ended up in shacks on the farm—rats, mice, bugs, ants—very, very bad.” Her father, like many others, took the first opportunity he could to move the family out of the provided housing and into their own home.

New arrivals to the North Platte Valley, though not necessarily accepted as neighbors because of ethnic differences, did interact with the community in some ways. Acquiring necessities like food, clothing, and supplies was typically handled on credit because new workers arrived with almost nothing. Fieldmen or farmers would introduce their workers to the grocer and service station operator in town so they could open a line of credit. Payment for goods and services was usually expected when the field workers got their wages, often after thinning or at the end of the harvest season. When workers had settled in the community,
 Cooperation and neighborly assistance were common within the various ethnic groups that migrated to the area as well. Interactions across ethnic groups were occasionally helpful, but less common. Noi Sato, for instance, recalled that upon her arrival in 1914 they “put on a party for me, so that I could meet the neighbors,” and that a German Russian neighbor helped her with the birth of her first son. This mutual support was especially common for those who lived in towns and therefore were close enough to see their neighbors often. Chris de Ollos remembered how “the people used to unite together and help each other,” whether it was for food, shelter, or socializing. For the migratory laborers who lived on the farms where they worked, however, there was little opportunity for socializing and community support during the beet season.

While this economic and cultural interchange was going on, the field workers tried, in various ways, to maintain some part of the culture and heritage from which they had come. There was a Japanese-language newspaper, *Neshyu Jibo (Nebraska News)*, published in Scottsbluff for a couple of years in the 1920s, and at other times ethnic papers were brought in from Denver or other cities. Church and religious ceremonies such as weddings and baptisms were another important way for laborers to maintain ties to their culture and traditions. “The baptisms were family get-togethers. They had a little celebration for that day,” said Elvira Hernandez. Holidays such as Christmas were occasions for festivities and socializing. Life, then, was not all about difficult work or the struggles of adapting to a new home. In their memoir, Alex and John Loos fondly remember much of the time they spent in western Nebraska, at least the time they were not working, as an opportunity to be close to nature and enjoy life.

Education, on the other hand, was a challenge for the migrant or immigrant laborers and their children, partly because it required interacting across cultural boundaries. Language barriers and field work often got in the way of effective education, even though the beet laborers knew it was important for their children to be educated. Rose Kubo Yamamoto remembered, “My mother and father thought we ought to get a good education . . . so they sacrificed to send us to school.” Working hard to provide better opportunities for the next generation was a common theme among the migrant labor population, and school was recognized as part of that process.

The children of many beet workers missed two or three months of school each year because in the spring and the fall they were in the fields. A 1923 survey suggests that the average child beet worker missed 40 to 45 school days. In the early years, some students were simply allowed to fail. “You just had to make up, or they wouldn’t pass you.” Students would often return to school after the harvest for a new school year and start over in the same grade they had failed to complete the year before. This influx of students in November presented challenges for the school district and teachers as well. The Scottsbluff district saw enrollment grow by nearly 600 students after the beet harvest in 1923, forcing them to increase class sizes and attempt to help the children make up for lost time. In 1922 a six-week summer school was instituted in Scottsbluff during the slack time between weeding and harvest to try to keep children who worked in the beet fields from falling behind (See Fig. 4).

Cultural and language differences often made school a particular challenge for the recently arrived immigrants. “If we would speak Spanish, we would get punished,” recalled Elvira Hernandez. The language barrier, while always challenging, was also one of the reasons that education was so important. The inability to communicate was a roadblock to community interactions in many cases. Children, who quickly learned English in
school, were often used to ease communication difficulties. “Our folks, being first generation, didn’t know how to speak English very well. . . . So we had to do a lot of translating,” remembered Rose Kubo Yamamoto.\(^5^4\)

Education in the public schools was an integrative force in other ways as well. It allowed some immigrants to move into occupations other than field work, a crucial step to becoming integrated members of the community. Chris de Ollos reported that his mother, after graduating from Scottsbluff High School, was able to find employment in various office jobs.\(^5^5\)

Such year-round employment provided crucial stability and predictable income for formerly migrant or seasonally employed families.

**INDUSTRY STABILIZATION AND LABORER OPPORTUNITIES**

Prior to 1920, some workers were able, through employment and commerce, to sink roots, as the sugar industry and the communities in the North Platte Valley, especially Scottsbluff, were rapidly expanding. The Great Western Sugar Company and other members of the community encouraged and benefited from the arrival and settlement of immigrant farmers because the immigrants contributed to the growth of the local economy and the sugar industry. Between 1900 and 1920, the number of farms in Scotts Bluff County increased from 421 to 1,391 as irrigation and profitable crops
made agricultural expansion attractive. By the late 1910s, however, land was no longer readily available and the sugar beet boom began to level off. In 1920 beets reached their peak price per ton of $11.96, the result of a worldwide spike in sugar prices associated with World War I. A steep decline to just $6.59 per ton came the following year. The rest of the decade saw an average price of $7.28.

In the absence of space and economic incentive for expansion, the field laborers became simply a necessary part of the beet farming industry—with no chance to move up the ranks.

Nativism was a common reaction as different ethnic groups moved into western Nebraska. German Russians were especially disdained for their willingness to work their children in the fields and their differences of language and dress. During World War I they were especially maligned for their German roots and language, and after the Russian Revolution of 1917, for their connections to that country. Nativist feeling became more overtly racist during the 1920s as Mexicans and Mexican Americans became the predominant group of laborers. In the case of Mexicans, race and nationality were seen as inseparable: a Mexican could not change his or her identity by obtaining citizenship or adopting an “American” lifestyle.

Two factors tended to differentiate the migrant beet fielder from the typical hired hand of the family farm system: the nature of the work performed and ethnic or cultural difference. While hired hands typically lived and socialized with the family for which they labored, this was a rarity for sugar beet laborers. Some German Russians were able, through their hard work at an unenviable task, to become the social equals (or near equals) of other white Americans when they succeeded in renting or buying their own farms. For Mexican and Japanese workers, this was more difficult in the early years and nearly impossible in the 1920s.

Ethnic “colonies” were not uncommon in many beet-growing districts, similar to the concentrations found in larger industrial centers around the country. Scottsbluff, Gering, Bayard, and Minatare all had such settlements of German Russians and Mexicans by the early 1920s. An investigation by Sara A. Brown and Robie O. Sargent in 1924 reported that “invariably Mexicans live in the most undesirable section of the town or village.” Full-size lots were often subdivided by both Mexicans and German Russians and crowded with shacks similar to those found in the beet fields. Businesses often excluded Mexican customers. Segregation even reached into houses of worship: “The Catholic church [had] one side for the Mexicans and the other side for the other people.”

Racial stereotypes affected more than community interactions, however. They came to play an important role in the treatment of Mexican workers by farmers and by the Great Western Sugar Company during the 1920s. Wage rates for Mexican laborers were often lower than for their German Russian counterparts. Some growers suggested that Mexican worker’s wages must be kept low because their inherent laziness would lead them to quit as soon as they had accumulated a little bit of money. The wage differential was also tied to the company’s efforts to use different ethnic groups in competition to keep overall wages low. The “laziness” believed to be inherent in Mexicans’ nature, however, was apparently not taken into account when determining how much land they could work per year. Contracts sometimes required Mexican and Japanese laborers to work twelve to fifteen acres per person whereas the German Russians were only expected to cover ten.

The goal for most beet field laborers who tried to settle in the North Platte Valley prior to 1920, regardless of their ethnic background, was to become a farmer, an owner of the land. This would give them a better chance at economic stability and more freedom to work and live as they pleased. Others simply relied on beet work as a fallback option until they could find a more permanent job. Moving up required a great deal of hard work and, in many cases, a bit of luck or help. For the laborers, the requirements appeared straightforward: “They started hoeing beets with that little short hoe. Then
they saved their money to buy machinery and farm. Wages were never high, though some years were better than others. Saving enough to buy a farm and necessary equipment was never an easy task, but it could be done when the industry encouraged expansion.

For those who arrived after 1920, after the land was occupied and the beet industry well established, the opportunities to become a farmer were severely limited. German Russian field workers’ ability to rent or buy their own farms during the boom period of the late 1910s is one reason noted for the shift toward Mexican labor. A 1923 study of sugar beet labor noted that “Russian Germans furnish the majority in both contract labor and grower groups. Mexicans were found only in contract labor.” Wages for field labor, which peaked in 1920 at thirty dollars per acre, averaged only twenty-three dollars per acre for the decade following that high point. Lower wages for Mexicans made the challenge of moving up even more difficult. Elvira Hernandez recounts that we [Mexicans] came as laborers, not as settlers, settlers like the German people. They worked hard, but they knew where they were going, and they knew that the harder they worked, the better their chances were going to be. . . . We were beet workers, and that was all.

Supporters of Mexican immigration frequently lobbied for their position in Washington. The head labor recruiter for the Great Western Sugar Company made the industry’s position abundantly clear in his testimony before the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization: “We are in, or perhaps have come to, a new period, for we no longer want settlers to occupy vacant land. . . . What we want is workers to work for the settler who came before.” This policy shift roughly coincided with the transition from German Russian labor to predominantly Mexican labor. The farmers and the sugar company accepted the new beet field workers as a good source of cheap labor but rejected them as potential neighbors and countrymen. Many migrants came to see their position as beet field laborers and their residence in the North Platte Valley as a temporary situation as well. It was a stepping-stone or, in bad times, a fallback option. These workers increasingly looked for opportunities at more permanent labor in the factories or meat-packing plants of Great Plains or midwestern cities.

In the 1920s, contracts began to reflect the company’s shift toward treatment of beet field laborers as a transient labor force rather than the next year’s grower. As Juan Garcia has noted, contracts became more specific and harder on the Mexican field workers; risk and responsibility were transferred from the company to the laborer. “Their goal was to maintain a seasonal work force sufficient to meet their needs. This was good business, they reasoned, and it complemented the desire of many communities to dissuade Mexicans from becoming permanent residents.”

The very nature of the relationship between farmers, laborers, and the sugar company continued to change as well. The contract labor system offered certain benefits of predictability and clear expectations for everyone involved in the process. Increasingly, however, this system also disconnected the farmer who owned the fields and supplied the housing from the workers who labored in the fields and lived in the homes. Because the farmer did not deal directly with the laborer, he failed to assume responsibility for the work, housing, and other conditions of the laborers’ lives. The contract came to replace the more personal relationships that had characterized relations between farmers and hired hands in the family farming model.

The sugar beet industry came to western Nebraska at a time when land was still available and determined settlers could build a life on hard work and the fruits of the soil. In the earliest years of sugar beet farming in the North Platte Valley, this fact was reflected in land and labor policies of the Great Western Sugar Company. Workers fleeing social or political upheaval at home or simply seeking
better economic opportunities migrated to the valley to earn a living, and for some, in hopes of establishing a new life in the region. Many were able to meet their goal of becoming farmers by virtue of their labor, their frugality, and support from the community. Finding available, affordable land became increasingly difficult in the 1920s, however, as most land was occupied and wages dropped. The sugar company, the farmers, and established members of the communities reflected this change in their expectations and treatment of beet field laborers. They no longer extended offers of cheap land or the opportunity to move up. Newcomers continued to arrive, but were in most cases limited to field labor.

The work in the sugar beet fields changed little from 1902 to 1930 in all of the beet districts. It remained dirty, difficult, and despised by most. The earliest beet workers struggled with the same environmental and social challenges faced by those that followed. The difference lay largely in the expected outcomes. Beet field workers before 1920 could become farmers in the North Platte Valley by investing time and the labor of their families. Those who came later could not. Most, therefore, worked in the beet fields only as long as they had to, looking to growing industries, railroads, or other opportunities for a chance to build a more prosperous and stable life.

Abraham Lincoln, addressing the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society in 1859, described the typical path for young men to become farmers thus: “The prudent, penniless beginner in the world, labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land, for himself; then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him.”73 According to this ideal of the family farm model, the path to ownership and independence was, though difficult, available to those who were willing to work. This path was closed to agricultural laborers in the early twentieth century who worked in an increasingly industrial agricultural system, however, including the sugar beet laborers in the North Platte Valley.

NOTES

1. Alex Loos and John Loos, The Migrant Beet Fielder (Germans from Russia) (Lincoln, NE: self-published, 1975), 41.
2. “German Russian” refers to people of German origin who settled in Russia at the invitation of Catherine the Great. Many left Russia after 1871 when the privileges they had been granted (such as freedom to practice their religion and exemption from military service) were rescinded. They are also commonly referred to as Russian Germans, Germans from Russia, and Volga Germans. “Mexican” is used to refer to people who share the common culture and language typical of Mexico, even though many had lived in the U.S. Southwest since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and were U.S. citizens, because this is how they were identified in the early twentieth century in sugar beet districts around the country.


14. The opportunity to use the labor of all family members made sugar beets more profitable than urban industrial work where only one or two were likely to be employed. The German Russians’ typically large families made this arrangement attractive. They were often criticized, however, for ignoring compulsory school attendance laws and denigrated for employing their children in such hard work.


17. Schwartz, Seasonal Farm Labor, 105; Norris, North for the Harvest, 31; Mapes, Sweet Tyranny, 78–79.

18. Chris De Ollos, “Chris De Ollos,” in Patterson-Black, Ethnic Life, 28; Sara A. Brown and Robie O. Sargent, Children Working in the Sugar Beet Fields of the North Platte Valley of Nebraska (New York: National Child Labor Committee, 1924), 40–43. Some reports indicate that the workers often never received their final pay at all. Garcia, Mexicans in the Midwest, 17.


30. Mapes, Sweet Tyranny, 144.

31. The seeds planted in the first few decades of sugar beet agriculture in Nebraska were actually seed balls, containing up to 30 individual seeds. This caused far more plants to sprout than could effectively grow in one spot. Later, methods of reducing the seed ball were developed and implemented to reduce the amount of hand labor needed for thinning the plants.


34. Loos and Loos, Migrant Beet Fielder, 42; Brown and Sargent, Children Working, 67.


36. See Anderson, Sugar Beet Industry (1935), 83–84, for details about the importance of the beet tops to livestock feeding operations and soil preservation.


41. Loos and Loos, Migrant Beet Fielder, 39–40; Brown and Sargent, Children Working, 40–43.

42. Moomaw, Pioneering in the Shadow, 174.


44. Loos and Loos, Migrant Beet Fielder, 41; Moomaw, Pioneering in the Shadow, 174.


46. Noi Sato, “Noi Sato,” 18–19, and De Ollos, 26, both in Patterson-Black, Ethnic Life.


50. Loos and Loos, Migrant Beet Fielder, 73; Brown and Sargent, Children Working, 75–81.


54. Yamamoto in Patterson-Black, Ethnic Life, 32.


56. Population growth in Scotts Bluff County was 147.9 percent from 1910 to 1920, compared to an 8.7 percent growth rate for the entire state of Nebraska. See table 25, “Population Changes in Typical Beet Producing Counties in Nebraska Compared to Changes in the State as a Whole, 1910–1930,” in Anderson, Sugar Beet Industry (1935), 109; Esther S. Anderson, “The Beet Sugar Industry of Nebraska as a Response to Geographic Environment,” Economic Geography (October 1925): 373–86.


64. Kinbacher, “Immigration, the American West, and the Twentieth Century,” 156.


69. U.S. Congress, House, Immigration from Countries of the Western Hemisphere, hearings before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, 70th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, 1928): 246, quoted in Schwartz, Seasonal Farm Labor, 115. Schwartz demonstrates that the sugar beet industry, and their large-scale agriculture allies, fought mightily during the 1920s to maintain access to cheap Mexican labor in the face of proposed restrictions on immigration such as literacy testing and a head tax. Mapes offers specific coverage of Michigan lobbyists and farmers in her study, Sweet Tyranny.


