Child Labor in the Early Sugar Beet Industry In The Great Plains, 1890-1920

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Children working in agriculture have always been a part of the rural culture and work ethos of the United States, especially on the Great Plains. Many teenagers still detassel corn or walk the beans in the summer months to earn spending money or money for college. But what about the children who work as migrant laborers in commercialized agriculture? These children, even today, typically go untracked by governmental agencies. The children may lag behind in school because of their family's migrations and their frequent absences from school to work in the crops. Unlike the child who works during the summer to earn supplemental income, the migrant family's wage is often tied to the labor of the child worker. While the majority of commercially grown crops today are worked by migrants on the coasts, the use of child labor in commercialized agriculture in the Great Plains has a long and checkered history.

A history of child labor in the early sugar beet industry in the Great Plains traces two different trends that intersect in the period between 1890 and 1920. The first trend was the movement of sugar beet production away from small family farms to large commercial farms in the North Platte Valley of Nebraska and the South Platte Valley of Colorado in the 1890s. The Great Western Sugar Company and the American Sugar Company, among others, owned the land and recruited the labor to work the beets. The second trend was the arrival of German-Russian families in the 1890s, and later the arrival of Mexican workers in the Midwest, especially after the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Both groups with their large families played leading roles in the cultivation of this important American crop. Sugar companies hired heads of families knowing that children would also be employed in the fields in order for the families to earn a

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living wage. In 1905 the private New York-based National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) began looking at child labor in berry picking, and by 1911 had expanded their investigations questioning whether the work of child beet workers was simply family farm chores or actually a form of industrialized agricultural child labor. 1 The investigations of the NCLC, which often included photographs by Lewis Hine, became a part of a decades-long effort to include agricultural workers in child labor reforms. The legislative highlight of this reform effort was passage during the New Deal of a federal child labor law called the Jones-Costigan Act of 1934. Jones-Costigan and the subsequent Sugar Act of 1937 restricted subsidies to farmers who used children in cultivating sugar beets. 2 This legislation did more to protect children in the sugar beet industry than did efforts to unionize agricultural workers in the 1930s or the mechanization of sugar beet growing during World War II.

There was no labor organization among sugar beet workers in the period between 1890 and 1920. Labor organization among agricultural workers has an irregular history, with efforts to organize on the Great Plains even more sporadic than those on the coasts. Before World War I the radical labor union, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), attempted to organize bindlestiffs, mostly wheat harvesters, in the Midwest and Western states through their Agricultural Workers Organization. Bindlestiffs were adult male harvest hands who carried all their goods in a bundle, or bindle. On the East Coast, the IWW looked into conditions of migrant workers on the truck and tobacco farms through its Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union. 3 Because of the crackdown on radical organizations after the war, most of the IWW's successes involving migrant workers were short-lived at best, and none specifically involved sugar beet workers. 4

Further attempts to organize agricultural workers did not come until the Great Depression, and are beyond the scope of this article. Briefly, though, the AFL-CIO attempted in 1930 to organize Mexican beet workers in Colorado. The union criticized the sugar companies for paying such low wages to families, making it necessary for children as young as six years old to work in the fields. The CIO also attempted to organize beet workers in Nebraska in the 1930s, with some short-term successes. 5 Finally, in 1967, following the lead of Cesar Chavez, Baldemar Velasquez established the Farm Labor Organizing Committee to unionize agricultural workers in the Midwest, but efforts were focused mostly on truck farm pickers. 6 Legislation such as the Sugar Act of 1937 and its subsequent amendments, along with mechanization of the sugar beet industry during World War II, had already all but eliminated the use of child labor in the sugar beet industry, though this was not the situation in other areas of commercialized agriculture.

Muckrakers in the early 1900s had stirred many Americans to condemn the highly visible forms of dangerous labor, such as breaker boys in coal mines, child night workers in glass factories, and bobbin girls in textile mills. Until World War I, however, the average citizen read little about the exploitation of children involved in the street trades, domestic service, or industrialized agriculture. Journalists and reformers often extolled the "varied tasks of farm life with the endless opportunities for change and individual initiative." Although admitting that the child who worked on the farms may have worked harder than the child in the mill, reformers considered a child working in the "pure air of a farm" to be better off than a child laboring in the "dust-laden air of a factory" with the "strained attention and monotonous tasks of mill life." 7

Child field workers may have received little attention from the press, but the US Census Bureau did count them. As early as the 1870s the Census Bureau tabulated a separate category of gainfully employed children from ten to fifteen years of age. In 1870 one out of every eight children was employed. By 1900 the ratio had jumped to one out of six children, with
over 60 percent of these engaged in agricultural work of some kind. The census figures grossly undercounted the number of children actually working in agriculture because they did not normally count children who worked for their parents on family farms, nor did they count children who worked for their tenant-farmer parents. The census is taken in January, which is the time of year when children who work seasonally would be listed as non-working.

When people did pause to think of child labor in rural America, they visualized bonny rosy-cheeked children helping their parents on family farms, not the overworked migrant children with their dirt-streaked faces, living in shacks and coops assigned to their parents. In the early 1900s the National Child Labor Committee began publishing reports on young children working in berry harvesting. By 1911 the NCLC’s Committee on Field Work was also looking into child labor in canneries and the sugar beet industry. The committee recognized that this labor was something different than the traditional assistance that children provided their parents on the family farm. It began by challenging the myth that any type of farm work was healthier than industrial child labor.

The most publicly visible case of child labor in commercialized agriculture in the Great Plains—and thus the major target of reformers for many years—was in raising and harvesting sugar beets. The major centers of sugar beets were in the Midwest to the Great Lakes area; the Rocky Mountain and Plains states, which included Nebraska, Colorado, and Wyoming; and the Pacific coast. Utah was one of the few states where sugar beets were grown that did not rely wholly on foreign labor. The high birthrate among the Mormons, and their attitude that no farm work was beneath them, kept beet production primarily a family affair.

The reason for the increase in sugar beet production was partly due to the increase in the consumption of sugar after the Civil War in such processed foods as jams and jellies, and as an additive to coffee, tea, cereal, and soft drinks. Farmers were willing to devote so many acres to sugar beets because of legislation such as the Dingley Tariff, enacted in 1897, which raised import duties on foreign sugar by as much as 79 percent. Growers discovered early in the 1870s that sugar beets could not be grown with most other crops except potatoes, and they required more maintenance than most root crops. The extensive growing cycle of sugar beets required labor to be on hand throughout the growing cycle, rather than only at harvest. The process involved hiring numerous workers on a seasonal basis over a period of months, with workers and their families living in separate barracks, away from the owner. Separate barracks could be anything from a tent to a small house or cabin.

In 1885 the government opened an experiment station in Grand Island, Nebraska, for sugar beet growing. Between 1891 and 1893 some 200 German-Russian families moved to Lincoln, and with their agricultural experience and their large families a ready source of labor, the German-Russians seemed a likely source of workers for the infant sugar beet industry. Because the German-Russians arrived after the best land had been distributed by the railroads and the Homestead Act of 1862, many families needed to work for wages and save their money in order to buy land.

Sugar beet companies like the Great Western were responsible in large measure for transforming agriculture in the North Platte Valley in Nebraska and the South Platte Valley in Colorado from small-scale family farms into large-scale industrialized farms with seasonal demands for labor. This practice did much to obliterate the nineteenth-century notion that the owner of the land and the worker of the land were one and same, since only a portion of the laborers ever managed to purchase the land on which they worked, and many owners never worked the land themselves. Between 1900 and 1910 Great Western and other companies recruited large-scale contract gang labor, mainly comprised of single males and a
small number of women and children. The owners also sought workers who would be responsible for finding other work in the off-season or who would migrate back to larger towns such as Denver or Lincoln. After 1910 commercial farm owners found that the way to cut costs and ensure a stable labor supply was to contract with the heads of migratory families and let them figure out which members of the family would need to work to fulfill the contract. This practice brought thousands more children into the category of migrant farm laborers.

German-Russian families provided the bulk of labor for the early sugar beet industry in western Nebraska and northern Colorado from the late 1880s through the early 1920s. From the 1890s through World War I, Slavic, Greek, Belgian, and Japanese workers in turn joined the German-Russians in sugar beet cultivation in Nebraska and Colorado. In Minnesota, the first sugar beet factory was built at St. Louis Park in 1897. Minnesota’s beet workers included German-Russians, Bohemians, Romanians, Poles, and Hungarians. A group of Hollanders also established colonies in southwestern Michigan and southeastern Minnesota to work in the sugar beets. A large number of Mexican workers joined the labor pool of migratory laborers in the Midwest and Great Lakes region around World War I, and by the 1920s were becoming the primary source of labor for the sugar beet industry as German-Russians moved up to becoming tenants and often landowners.

Historians have few primary sources documenting these immigrant groups who worked long hours for low wages, and who had little time or energy to keep journals and diaries. Both the German-Russian and Mexican beet
workers initially migrated frequently and thus were unable to keep many records of their early activities. Because of the scarcity of historical records for these groups, it may be helpful to also look at forms of historical literature, such as Hope Williams Sykes's *Second Hoing* for the German-Russians, and Thomas Benitez and Joe Minjares's play *The Minnecanos* for the Mexican workers. Sykes's book was published in 1935 and was used by reformers, including some in the NCLC, to dramatize the problems of using child labor in the sugar beet industry. When the Sugar Act of 1937 placed restrictions on the use of children in the sugar industry, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt sent Sykes a letter congratulating her on the impact of her novel. The play *The Minnecanos* uses the Mexican ballad tradition, or *corrido*, to tell the story of Mexicans who were brought north by train from recruitment centers in the Southwest to work in the sugar beet fields of Minnesota. Most of these beet workers (*los betabeleros*) came after the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and were actually recruited by growers in the Southwest and Midwest during World War I, when restrictions were placed on Europeans immigrating from the Central Powers countries. Recent historical scholarship on Mexicans in the Midwest shows that the American Sugar Company was recruiting small numbers of Mexicans to bring to Minnesota as early as 1907. One of the sad, recurring themes of Mexican settlement in the Midwest through the 1960s was that Mexican children almost never attended rural schools in the beet growing areas where they worked with their parents. This probably had less to do with the economic necessity of children helping their parents in the fields than with discrimination patterns against Mexicans in the Midwest, where signs could be seen on some local restaurants and businesses that read: "No Dogs, No Mexicans Allowed" or "White Trade Only."

From the accounts of reformers, we know that tending beets was exhausting work. Small children as young as five years old crawled for hours on their hands and knees to block and thin the beet seedlings. Both adults and children engaged in the backbreaking work of using short-handle hoes to weed around young plants. Older children had to pull up the beets at harvest and shake the dirt off them. Sugar beets weigh as much as ten pounds with the dirt still on them. The older children, ten to fourteen years of age, were the ones who undertook topping the beets. Topping is done by holding the beet against one's leg and then taking a long knife with a hook on the end of it and chopping the leaves from the top of the beet. Other children helped pile up the beets once they were pulled. In the 1920s reformers took a more scientific approach to documenting the dangers of constant heavy lifting for young children. Using doctors' physicals in Colorado, they found that nearly two-thirds
of the children who worked in sugar beets suffered an orthopedic defect known as winged scapula, which causes discomfort in the back and shoulders. Even children as young as four and five could help with babysitting their infant siblings at home, or they could take them to the edge of the fields and watch over them there as they and their parents worked in the fields.25

The biggest problem for the children who worked in the fields or stayed home to babysit was maintaining regular school attendance. In some districts, children only went to school six out of nine months in their hometowns. In the 1890s many thirteen- and fourteen-year-old beet workers were still only in the second and third grades in the First Ward school district in Hastings, Nebraska. The problem was partly the result of not speaking English but German at home, and partly because they missed the first and last months of the school term working in the beet fields. Sometimes they missed additional weeks of school because of other agricultural chores.26 Many older-stock Americans viewed the German-Russian beet workers as short-sighted in their attitude toward education. They respected them for their work ethic but wanted them to comply more fully with school attendance laws. The Greeley Farmers Union in 1916 supported the enforcement of Colorado's school attendance laws, saying that the German-Russians represented unfair competition since their wives and children worked for them. The Farmers Union stated: “Anything less than this will mean that the American laborers, including the farmers, must adopt foreign standards and work their families in order to compete with foreign labor.”27

In 1916 the Great Western Sugar Company began supporting school attendance for migrant children to prepare them for American citizenship. The company opened schools for migrant children in Greeley and Windsor, Colorado, in 1917 and geared their schedules to the beet-growing cycles.28 The German-Russians were targeted during World War I as “Teutonic” for speaking German, and after the Russian Revolution of 1918, as “Slavic” for their ties to Russia. Even reformers often blamed the German-Russians for making their children work and claimed that public schooling was the best corrective that would instill democratic ideals and end their social isolation.29

To gain a better understanding of child labor within this ethnic group, it is instructive to look more in-depth at the German-Russian community between the 1880s and early 1920s. Even though outsiders referred to the German-Russians as “Rooshans,” anyone who listened to them knew that they spoke a dialect of German known as Rhenish, as had their ancestors going back to the early 1700s, when Empress Catherine the Great had granted her fellow Germans land and exemptions from military service in Russia. In 1871 those privileges were withdrawn. Rather than face programs of Russification and conscription into the Russian army, the German-Russians, particularly the Mennonites, began emigrating out of Russia in 1873—a migration that continued until World War I.30

In the early 1900s German-Russian men and boys often wore caps and coats, while the women and girls wore black dresses and shawls, some embroidered, along with head kerchiefs and felt boots. They would arrive by the train-load in the spring to work in the beet fields of towns in northern Colorado and western Nebraska. Besides their luggage, they would bring pots and pans and bundles of summer sausage and rye bread. The men slaughtered hogs in the spring before leaving and women packed in tins the sausages covered with hot lard. Refrigeration would not be available once the families reached their destination, and the canned meat kept well. Families would take along bedrolls, kerosene stoves, washboards, and often fruit crates for furniture. The German-Russian Mennonites rarely allowed themselves to be photographed, because according to their religious beliefs, photographs were considered “graven images.” Other denominations of German-Russians, such as the Evangelical Lutherans and Congregationalists, did
allow photographs. The German-Russians were described by outsiders as determined, hard-working, and family-centered. They preserved their ethnic separateness with their unique wedding customs, Old World dress, and meals of rye bread and cabbage. At the same time, they focused all their energy on saving their earnings to move beyond being agricultural workers to become renters and ultimately landowners.

German-Russian families, like many other poor families of the late nineteenth century, depended not on a sole breadwinner but on the “family economy.” Unfortunately, it was their pattern of working together as a family that made them susceptible to exploitation by large agricultural interests. As sugar beet production shifted away from family farms at the turn of the century toward commercialized farms owned and operated by the sugar beet companies in the north-central and western states, families began contracting with the growers on the basis of the number of people in the family willing to work and the number of acres available for tending.

The Great Western Sugar Company and the American Sugar Company paid for passage on the Union Pacific and Burlington railroads for whole families of German-Russians, and later Mexicans, to Brush, Colorado, or to Scottsbluff and Bayard, Nebraska. In the early 1900s many of the families lived only in tents. By the 1920s the sugar companies offered a limited number of two- and three-bedroom shacks. The less-fortunate arrivals had to make do with old railroad cars and empty chicken coops. German-Russian wives used lye to clean the chicken coops, but other than stripping the paint, the lye did little to remove the bad odor that often lingered for months.

Hope Williams Sykes in Second Hoeing (1935) sympathized with the German-Russian children who sacrificed schooling to work in the beet fields of northern Colorado in the 1890s through the 1920s. Her book was favorably received by child labor reformers, and even many German-Russians acknowledged that her description of child labor in the sugar beet industry was accurate. The main objection German-Russians had to her book was her uncritical incorporation of the “dirty Rooshan” stereotype for many of the characters in her book. Timothy Kloberdanz wrote in the introduction to the 1982 edition of Second Hoeing:

The allegation that German-Russians were dirty was viewed by more astute members of the group as a way for American landowners to justify the chicken coops, boxcars, and sordid tarpaper shacks that had been given larger Volga-German families as living quarters.

Not all of Sykes’s characters reflected the stereotype. The heroine, Hannah, even tried to wallpaper the family’s shack and learned from the grower’s wife how to keep a middle-class household. Some growers did offer tenants paint to fix up their shacks, but most workers had permanent winter homes in Hastings or Lincoln, Nebraska, and were not interested in improving shacks that they only lived in five months out of a year. The tenants who had permanent housing thought that their energy could be better used on working more acres to speed up the process of going from worker, tenant, and renter, to actually becoming an owner of a piece of land.

The rationale of many poor and immigrant families was that since the wages of an individual breadwinner were so low, then every member of the household should contribute to the “family economy.” The individual interests of German-Russian children who wanted to attend school, instead of working in the fields, were secondary to the collective goal of making money to buy land, which represented the family’s financial independence. In time, it was understood that the next generation would have the luxury of attending school and not having to work as hard. Most German-Russian sons worked for their fathers until they got married or were hired out for wages. German-Russian cotton farmers in Texas and Oklahoma used their whole families, including
four-year-old children, to help with the harvests. The strong work ethic and patriarchal structure of these large families pushed this immigrant group to succeed within the first few generations.

Efforts to extend legislative protection to children working in sugar beets or other forms of commercialized agriculture have been sporadic, beginning in the Progressive Era and continuing into the present. In 1907 Nebraska pioneered an eight-hour day, or forty-eight-hour week, for children under the age of sixteen who worked in certain industries, and specifically included the sugar beet industry. The success of this measure was due largely to the efforts of the NCLC and to lobbying by the Women’s Clubs in Omaha and Lincoln.

In 1917, in large measure as a response to the NCLC’s report by Edward N. Clopper and Lewis W. Hine, the Colorado legislature took up a bill to restrict children under fourteen years of age from working in the beet fields. The legislature ended up adopting a work certification system that required parents to get the approval of local school superintendents for their children younger than fourteen to work in fields or on farms. During World War I most states generally relaxed what child labor laws they had and encouraged schools to grant “crop vacations” so that schoolchildren could work in agriculture outside school hours. Even as late as 1931, only a few states, notably Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Ohio, California, and Nebraska, had specific laws restricting the age and hours children could work in agriculture outside school hours. During the depression, wages paid to migrants were so low that every member of the family was expected to work in order to subsist. In 1933 five workers were available for every two farm jobs available. Consequently, reformers made little headway in getting legislation passed to protect migrant workers. Even under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938, children working in agriculture were initially exempted from its provisions. Governmental agencies made efforts during World War II to improve housing for agricultural workers, and some of this interest carried over to the presidential commissions set up in the early 1950s to look at the problems of migrant workers.

But the only real restrictions on child labor in agriculture came in 1974, when the provisions of the FLSA were extended to children working in commercialized agriculture outside school hours. Children who are twelve and thirteen years old may still work with written parental consent on a farm where the minor’s parents are employed, and there are even exceptions applicable to ten- and eleven-year-olds who hand-harvest short-season crops outside school hours. Because of these exceptions and the limited funds allocated for enforcement, the extent of children working alongside their parents in certain commercially grown crops is probably more widespread and less documented than it is for many industries. The US Department of Labor’s Operation Salad Bowl in 1998 was a well-publicized attempt to crack down on growers using child labor and turned up numerous violations that spring. But because some migrant children are illegal aliens, or are the children of illegal aliens, the public has come to see the issue as an immigration or welfare problem rather than a clear violation of child labor laws. The situation of migrant child workers today is unfortunately strikingly similar to that of children in the sugar beet industry in the 1890s. Hopefully, by recalling this little-discussed chapter of our rural history, we can recognize the long-term detriment to migrant children of their working instead of receiving an education, and by increasing our awareness of a problem, we can promulgate more effective measures to protect the health and welfare of all children.

NOTES

1. National Child Labor Committee Papers, Minutes, Board of Trustees Meetings, April 27, October 12, and December 8-10, 1905, October 4, 1911.
2. Statement on Conditions Relating to Sugar Beet Workers in Colorado Submitted by Charles E. Gibbons Representing the National Child Labor
Committee at the Hearings on the Sugar Stabilization Agreement, August 11, 1933, 2, 3, 5, 11, Edward Costigan Papers, Box 50-8, Archives, University of Colorado at Boulder Libraries; US Senate, Sugar Beets and Sugar Cane as Basic Agricultural Commodities, 73rd Cong., 2nd sess., April 17, 1934, report no. 733, Report to Accompany HR8861, 4.


10. National Child Labor Committee Papers, Minutes, Board of Trustees Meetings; April 27, October 12, and December 8-10, 1905, October 4, 1911.


27. May, Great Western Sugarlands, 371-72, n. 34.

28. Ibid.


30. For general information see Paul Kuhlman, “A Brief History of the Mennonites in Nebraska” (MA thesis, Municipal University of Omaha, 1953).


34. Sykes, Second Hoeing, xlv.

35. Richard Sallet, German-Russian Settlements in the United States (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1974), 81.
36. NCLC Papers, Minutes, Board of Trustees Meeting, April 22, 1907; Russell Lowell Beebe, “History of Labor Organization and Legislation in Nebraska to 1918” (MA thesis, University of Nebraska, 1938), 100-101.


38. Compiled Laws of Colorado, 1921, Chapter 75, Child Labor Law, Section 4208.


