

GERMAN-SPEAKING IMMIGRANTS AND THE HISTORY OF THE SUGAR BEET INDUSTRY IN WELD COUNTY

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PROJECT INTRODUCTION

The sugar beet played a crucial role in the development of northern Colorado. German-Russian immigrants were one of the first ethnic groups to perform the stoop labor required for sugar beet cultivation, but little has been done to explore the role of Hispanic and Japanese laborers in the years following World War II. This project intended to bridge that gap of information by identifying archival resources linked to these groups.

Similarly, the Great Western Railway that ran from Loveland to Johnstown has not been fully interpreted. The construction of a bike trail along the now-removed track provides an opportunity to educate the rapidly-growing communities of Severance and Windsor on the region's agricultural history.

INTERNSHIP GOALS

- Identify archival resources for additional research on German-Russian immigrant farmers and migrant laborers in Weld County.
- Identify historic sites in Weld County and along the Great Western Trail related to beet farming.
- Present findings to public in the form of a community-facing event.

HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO YOUR EDUCATION?

- I furthered my skills in applying the historical method to primary and secondary source research.
- I expanded my knowledge on navigating a physical archive, including learning how to read a finding aid and identify relevant archival resources.
- I learned how to read primary sources against the grain, meaning I learned not to take an author's words at face value and instead read between the lines of what is *not* being said or *why* something is being said.
- I learned how to integrate conversations about race and ethnicity in rural spaces with largely homogenous populations.
- I gained experience in crafting and delivering public-facing presentations and dialoging with community members about the histories of their homes.

WHAT YOU DID

RESEARCH

- Navigated through the archive of the Great Western Sugar Company, located in Morgan Library.
- Read secondary sources on western agriculture and irrigation, agricultural short-line railways, and the Great Western Railway.
- Read through the oral histories of German-Russian immigrants in the Sidney Heitman Germans from Russia Collection in Morgan Library.
- Visited local museums to familiarize self with how to write museum labels in preparation for writing historical markers for Great Western Trail.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- Reached out to Julie Rothe and Bob Winter, the current and former presidents of the John Law Ditch, which runs alongside the Great Western Trail in Severance, to catalog the history of the ditch and its importance to sugar beet farming
- Presented mock-up historical markers at Severance Days, a town fair celebrating Severance's history and local businesses



WHAT YOU LEARNED

- The transition from row crop irrigation to center pivots and sprinkler irrigation and the boom in subdivision development in Windsor and Severance has decreased the number of acre-feet of water the John Law Ditch has available for agriculture.
- In 1968, the Colorado Department of Health issued new guidelines on housing requirements for agricultural laborers throughout the state. Though the report primarily addressed poor conditions at sugar beet farms in Southeastern Colorado, Great Western Sugar ran several articles in its internal magazine, *Upbeet*, counter that the company took good care of Hispanic laborers in Weld and Larimer counties. In subsequent years, a number of rags-to-riches stories and stories about White farmers treating their laborers well ran in *Upbeet*, likely to assuage public concern.
- I learned how to write historical markers, specifically how to capture and retain the attention of passersby using images and captivating stories.



Image courtesy of Morgan Library, Great Western Sugar Company Records

NEXT STEPS

Applying for a grant to establish interpretive markers along the Great Western Trail.