

Colorado State University

“That young girl should be in school, not out drilling wheat!” The Germans from Russia, Race,
and Americanization in Northeastern Colorado

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It is evident that the time has arrived when Colorado must act for self-protection and check the flood of foreign illiterates pouring into the state . . . such lousy people as the Russians are not wanted and if they are allowed to swarm in upon us as they have been doing it will be a matter of time only five or six years until they own the country . . . Every loyal citizen hopes we may save Colorado for the best people on earth and these are the native Americans. Down with the Russians, poles, hungs, crotians, slavs, serfs, jews and all the other rag-tag and bobtail of creation.¹

In 1913, the editors of *Denver Field and Farm*, a weekly agricultural newspaper, verbalized these strong nativist sentiments and fears surrounding the influx of a new immigrant group in Colorado, the Germans from Russia. German-Russian immigration to the United States peaked in 1913 with about 1,000 families arriving in Colorado.² What shaped the editors' fears of the Germans from Russia? How did the social hierarchy of northeastern Colorado define some people as a "swarm" and others as "native Americans?" Factors such as acculturation, child labor, Populism, and capitalism all provide angles for understanding the biting opinions expressed by these *Field and Farm* editors.

The story of the Germans from Russia in Colorado parallels the development of the sugar beet industry, in particular the growth of the Great Western Sugar Company and its immigrant labor practices. Anglo American laborers refused to do the arduous hand labor required for sugar beet farming, seeing it as beneath them, driving Great Western to recruit immigrant labor. German-Russian immigrants whose physical appearance mirrored that of Anglo Americans performed stoop labor alongside Japanese, Native American, Mexican, and Mexican-American workers, labor that racialized them as different from other whites. In *The Wages of Whiteness*, David Roediger uses the example of Irish immigrants to argue that unskilled, difficult, and

¹ *Denver Field and Farm* (Denver), 20 June 1903, 6. It is important to note that Germans from Russia often were misidentified as "Russian." The Germans from Russia resented this misnomer as they felt they were culturally superior to Russians.

² C. H. Becker, "A Historical Study of the Social Background of the German-Russians from the Volga District in Russia Living in Northern Colorado" (Masters Thesis, Colorado State University, 1938), 11.

monotonous labor racialized workers, regardless of their actual physical appearance. He states that Anglo American society equated menial labor with black slaves, that “‘white niggers’ were white workers in arduous unskilled jobs,” and that “it was difficult [for these whites] to get out from under the burden of doing unskilled work in a society that identified such work” with African Americans.³ For the German-Russians, acculturation into American society and upward mobility depended on overcoming the racial stigma attached to stoop labor.

Neil Foley illustrates in *The White Scourge* that “whiteness itself fissured along race and class lines” with economically successful whites setting themselves apart from poorer whites. He contends that “whiteness also came increasingly to mean a particular kind of white person,” specifically the male landowner. All whites were not equal, and Foley identifies farm ownership as “the master trope for agrarian whiteness.” Those without land working for others were seen as unable to control their own lives; they were dependent on others to make a living, and consequently were less manly and less white.⁴ In the sugar beet region of northeastern Colorado, this social construction of whiteness structured the social hierarchy with landowners at the top and hired laborers, the Volga Germans, at the bottom. Entire families of Germans from Russia worked in the beet fields, even children, as the patriarch eagerly worked toward upward mobility and citizenship defined by land ownership. Within twenty to thirty years of immigrating to Colorado as stoop laborers, many German-Russian families slowly broke free from the racial stigma attached to their labor as beet workers, and were able to purchase land and become American citizens. Their upward social mobility developed within a framework of a contested social hierarchy where labor defined a race, class, and citizenship status.

³ David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), 145, 150.

⁴ Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 5, 141.

The primary sources used in this study capture the multiple perspectives necessary to understand the position of the Volga Germans in the social hierarchy of Colorado. Included are those of German-Russian beet workers and farmers, the Great Western Sugar Company, and American-born residents of Colorado. Oral histories of German-Russians who worked in the beet fields occupy a central role in grasping the viewpoint of the laborers. The oral histories used in this paper came from the Germans from Russia in Colorado Study Project. Project staff interviewed German-Russians in Colorado between 1975 and 1978, and interviews followed a standard set of questions and subjects that included the immigration experience, work and social life in the United States, and interaction between the German-Russian communities and wider society in the United States. It is important to note that many interviewees were elderly and spoke English as a second language, and this is reflected in the transcripts of the interviews. Published memoirs also allow for understanding the German-Russian experience. *Through the Leaves*, an agricultural magazine published by the Great Western Sugar Company, provides a record of the company's public stance in relation to the sugar beet industry, including its laborers. Beginning in 1913, *Through the Leaves* functioned as a channel of communication between growers and the company, and was distributed to all beet farmers in northeastern Colorado. The earliest issues also include the beet growers' point of view, as farmers were urged to submit their own experiences.⁵ Newspapers, material culture, and a weekly agricultural newspaper, *Denver Field and Farm*, also present glimpses into the local community's perspective.

⁵ William John May, Jr., "The Great Western Sugarlands: History of the Great Western Sugar Company" (PhD. diss., University of Colorado Boulder, 1982), 166.

Another valuable source to explore the relationship between German-Russians and their American neighbors is *Second Hoeing*, published in 1935 by Hope Williams Sykes.⁶ Sykes' work as a public schoolteacher in Fort Collins in the 1920s and 1930s exposed her to German-Russian culture. She "spent a year keeping notes on all the work that was done in a beet field" near her home, and "for seven years . . . absorbed the feeling and undercurrent of the beet industry and these people." The book focuses on a large German-Russian family, the Schreissmillers. Daughter Hannah takes the leading role, guiding the reader through her life as a second generation German-Russian caught between the culture of her parents and Americanization. Although fictional, scholars agree that *Second Hoeing* provides a fairly accurate portrayal of German-Russian beet workers during the 1920s and 1930s: "it can be considered a classic account of those Volga Germans who settled in the sugar-producing areas of northern Colorado." A scholarly article exploring *Second Hoeing* in relation to lived experiences reveals this fictional account and real life "together create a picture of Russian German families in the sugar beet culture." This source supplements similar observations gleaned from primary sources.⁷

The Germans from Russia originated as a distinct social group with a 1763 manifesto issued by Catherine the Great that attempted to protect and populate Russia's southeastern frontier through settlement. Catherine's manifesto created an open-door immigration policy that "welcomed all foreigners, including peasants, artisans, merchants and even Jews regardless of

⁶ Hope Williams Sykes, *Second Hoeing*, with an introduction by Timothy Kloberdanz (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1935, reprint 1962).

⁷ Georgiena A. Cook, "Fact and Fiction: German Russian Sugar Beet Farmers in Colorado," in *Germans from Russia in Colorado*, ed. Sidney Heitman (Ann Arbor: The Western Social Science Association, 1978), 125; Timothy J. Kloberdanz, "The Novel *Second Hoeing*: A Reappraisal," *Journal of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia* Workpaper 20 (Spring 1976): 15; and Sykes, *Second Hoeing*, xii.

their social, economic, and physical condition.”⁸ This invitation made appealing promises to lure settlers: no taxes for thirty years, no military service, religious freedom, land grants, local self-government, and even passage to Russia. Groups of German colonists ravaged by years of warfare in the Holy Roman Empire responded to Catherine’s call. They created thriving agricultural communities in the harsh landscape of the Russian steppe along the Volga River through determination and hard work. German-Russians in Colorado still cite determination and hard work as defining characteristics and guiding principles in their culture. Amalie Klein, who immigrated to the United States in 1911 from Russia, remarks, “Work is the best medicine for anybody. Work has never killed anybody. But idleness has.”⁹

Isolated from their Russian neighbors, these German colonists looked down on Russian society and customs as inferior to their own culture. Amalie Klein touched on the distance between Russians and Germans and her own prejudices with the following statements: “Each to his own. They was in their villages and we was in ours” and “the Russian people were not a smart nation. They were crooked!”¹⁰ The colonists enjoyed a good amount of autonomy from the Russian government, governing themselves and educating their children in German-language schools. However, over a century later in the 1870s, things began to change. As the population of German-Russians grew, land became increasingly scarce due to Russian land laws, and severe droughts created further hardship. The Russian government, responding to modernization with various reforms, began to clamp down on these large, self-governing colonies of Germans by suspending colonial self-government, military exemption, and German instruction in schools.

⁸ James W. Long, “The Russian Imperial Manifestos of 22 July 1763 and 20 February 1804,” in *Germans from Russia in Colorado*, ed. Sidney Heitman (Ann Arbor: The Western Social Science Association, 1978), 6.

⁹ Amalie Klein, interviewed by Timothy Klobberdanz, 18 and 21 September 1975, transcript online at lib.colostate.edu/gfr/gfroralhistories.html, Germans from Russia in Colorado Study Project, Morgan Library, Fort Collins, CO, 101.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43, 81.

The promises of Catherine the Great were broken, and the German colonists deeply resented this attack on their autonomous way of life and the intrusion of Russian culture. Military conscription became the most hated reform, and many oral history interviewees comment on military service as a turning point in deciding to leave Russia. Fred Ostwald, born in Russia in 1899, remembered his father and five other men deciding to leave for America in response to a draft requiring military service in the Russo-Japanese War, “they detested serving in the war, or the army.” Mr. Ostwald commented further that his family left Russia “to find a place where they could live a free and independent life without interference . . . on the part of the military.”¹¹

Many Volga Germans looked to emigration, seeking a new place to farm and preserve their way of life, an idea similar to that experienced a century earlier when leaving Germany. They often chose to leave Russia and go to the Americas based on letters from family and friends already living in North or South America. Family members wrote of great opportunities in the United States in particular, at a time when opportunity was declining in Russia. Alice Miller, born in the Volga region in 1892, referred to letters from her uncle as the impetus for her family to leave Russia: “[my uncle and his family] were anxious for us to come, because they said you’ll have to work so hard here, and they more, make more money. And so we went there.” Fred Ostwald remembered, “this brother that had come to Denver had written back that there was opportunity here in Colorado.” Often, entire families and communities left Russia together; they created settlements not unlike those they left behind in Russia, isolated from those around them in “a spirit of clannishness . . . suspicious” of outsiders. German-Russian self-imposed cultural

¹¹ Fred Ostwald, interviewed by Timothy Kloberdanz, 13 January 1976 and 14 May 1976, transcript online at lib.colostate.edu/gfr/gfroralhistories.html, Germans from Russia in Colorado Study Project, Morgan Library, Fort Collins, CO., 14, 48.

isolation allowed one avenue for Anglo Americans in Colorado to see this new immigrant population as a distinct “other.”¹²

Immigration to the United States peaked in 1913, and by 1920, 116,535 first generation Germans from Russia lived in the United States. Most Volga Germans first settled in Kansas and Nebraska, with a small number arriving in Colorado in the 1880s and settling in Globeville, a suburb of north Denver. By 1920 there were 9,935 first generation German-Russians in Colorado, and first and second generation German-Russians together totaled 21,067. In this same year, Larimer and Weld counties attracted the most Germans from Russia, with 1,972 and 3,733 first generation immigrants in each county, respectfully. Many of these immigrants began life in Colorado as beet laborers. For example, in 1909, “of 10,724 beet workers in northern Colorado . . . 5,870 were German Russian, 2,160 were Japanese, and 1,002 were Spanish-American.” Working in the fields as cheap stoop labor alongside groups considered racially inferior by Anglo Americans racialized the Germans from Russia.¹³ As Foley points out, prosperous whites considered poor whites culturally and biologically inferior, an opinion based on the inability of poor whites to own land.¹⁴ Working the fields of another man signaled Volga German inferiority to landowning whites.

The sugar beet industry created the greatest momentum for German-Russian migration to Colorado, as “its own immediate economic interest justified a decision to rely promptly upon immigrant laborers.” In the early 1900s, the Great Western Sugar Company responded to the success of trial sugar beet cultivation and high tariffs on imported cane sugar by building

¹² Alice Herman Miller, interviewed by Kenneth Rock, 9 February 1977, transcript online at lib.colostate.edu/gfr/gfrorallhistories.html, Germans from Russia in Colorado Study Project, Morgan Library, Fort Collins, CO., 3; Ostwald interview, 50; May, “Great Western Sugarlands,” 172.

¹³ Richard Sallet, *Russian-German Settlements in the United States* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1974), 110, 122; and Kenneth W. Rock, “Colorado’s Germans from Russia,” in *Germans from Russia in Colorado*, ed. Sidney Heitman (Ann Arbor: The Western Social Science Association, 1978), 74.

¹⁴ Foley, *The White Scourge*, 7, 74.

factories that processed sugar beets grown by local farmers. Great Western built five sugar factories between 1901 and 1903, in Greeley, Eaton, Fort Collins, Loveland, and Windsor, and more would follow. Without the factories, the Colorado sugar beet industry never would have matured. The cultivation of sugar beets required strenuous stoop labor in thinning and harvesting the beets, labor that “so few of our American aristocrats care to tackle,” in the words of a contemporary observer. Representatives of the sugar company traveled to Kansas and Nebraska to recruit labor from the new immigrant population of Volga Germans. Alice Miller remembers Great Western coming to the area of Kansas she and her family first settled in to recruit labor. In 1906, a Wellington newspaper reported a growing local population of German-Russians brought by the “sugar company . . . free of charge to the farmers.” The paper detailed that Great Western even trained this new labor in “the right process of beet tending.” Mr. Ostwald recollected, “the sugar company field man came around to show us how the beets were to be blocked, how to space them, and leave one single plant.” Soliciting beet labor exemplified a well-researched marketing plan. Of the ten recruiters employed by Great Western in 1920, six “spoke German fluently.” Various methods, including “a well-illustrated German booklet of twenty pages . . . describing beet work,” “hand bills and posters,” and even “motion pictures of the industry . . . showing various steps in the growing of sugar beets and the manufacture of sugar” enticed German-Russian families to come work in northeastern Colorado’s beet fields.¹⁵

As new arrivals into Colorado, the German-Russian immigrants formed the lowest social and economic group in society. Local newspapers attempted to mitigate negative reactions to the arrival of the Volga Germans, and to ease acceptance of this new

¹⁵ Paul S. Taylor. “Hand Laborers in the Western Sugar Beet Industry,” in *Agricultural History* vol. XLI (January 1967): 21; *Denver Field and Farm* (Denver), 12 May 1906, 6; Miller interview, 4; *The Wellington: A Weekly Bulletin* (Wellington, CO), 28 April 1906, 9; Ostwald interview, 12; C. V. Maddux, “Soliciting Beet Labor, 1920,” *Through the Leaves* (January 1921): 28; and *Ibid.*, 27.

immigrant group into local communities as they welcomed the economic development the sugar factories would bring to the region. The *Greeley Sun* in 1902 reported that the German-Russians “are apparently an intelligent and good class of people.” In 1903, the *Fort Collins Weekly Courier* described them as a “bright, intelligent looking people [who] will no doubt make good citizens,” and a 1906 issue of *The Wellington Poll* commented that the newly arrived German-Russian laborers “will add quite materially to the population of the community.” Despite these favorable depictions by some members of the population, many American-born residents did not welcome this group to Colorado. Oral history interviewees repeatedly refer to humiliating experiences endured at school at the hands of American-born children. Clara Hilderman Ehrlich described wearing felt boots to school, a distinct German-Russian item of dress, only to be met “with howl[s] of laughter” as her Anglo American schoolmates “made such fun of us—our teacher could not control—that we never wore them a second time.” Mrs. Harold Henkel recalled during her schooldays “some of the children were very nasty about . . . the immigrant children . . . it was nothing to them to ruin our lunches for us, drop a handful of gravel or something in it. So we couldn’t eat it.”¹⁶

Turn-of-the-century Windsor High School yearbooks reflect the tension in social relations between German-Russians and American residents. An advertisement in the 1918 *Ocowasin* for the American Billiard Parlor, a Windsor business, reads, “A Pleasant Place to Spend an Evening,” “No Sun-Flower Seeds for Sale.” To the modern reader, this phrase means

¹⁶ *The Greeley Sun* (Greeley, CO), 24 April 1902; *Fort Collins Weekly Courier* (Fort Collins, CO) 22 April 1903; *The Wellington Poll* (Wellington, CO), 28 April 1906; Clara Hilderman Ehrlich, *My Prairie Childhood* (Fort Collins: Germans from Russia Study Project, 1977), 47; and Katherine Rudy Henkel, interviewed by Kenneth Rock, 21 March 1977, transcript online at lib.colostate.edu/gfr/gfroralhistories.html, *Germans from Russia in Colorado Study Project*, Morgan Library, Fort Collins, CO., 42.

little; however, in 1918 northeastern Colorado sunflower seeds were associated with Germans from Russia. Anna (Braun) Burkard remembered that in Russia people “were very fond” of sunflower seeds, eating “them by the bushel.” Alice Miller reminisced “there were those people in Windsor, couldn’t walk down the street and they would be eating sunflowers and spitting out the seeds, hit you in the eye.” The *American Billiard Parlor* (my emphasis) did not sell sunflower seeds because sunflower seeds were associated with German-Russian immigrants. World War I likely influenced the sentiments expressed in this yearbook advertisement as American perceptions of the Germans from Russia during the war exploded in xenophobic attacks and even violence. Mrs. John P. Geringer aptly observed the strangeness of such attacks based on Germanic roots, “because in the early years our people being called “Rooshuns” and then during the war they were suddenly being called Germans.” The War illustrates another way that the Anglo American community constructed this immigrant population as a distinct and separate group from themselves.¹⁷

The *Ocowasin* ad not only shows the influence of World War I, but also remnants of Populist anti-immigration rhetoric. The Populist movement, with its anti-big business and anti-immigrant labor message, captivated Colorado voters in the decade preceding the development of the sugar beet industry. Fifty-seven percent of Colorado’s popular vote in 1892 supported the People’s Party candidate. American-born farmers represented a majority of the founders of the Colorado branch of the party. Populists believed “the fruits of toil of millions [were] boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few.” They criticized the government’s inability to protect American labor, “open[ing] our ports to the pauper and criminal classes of the world and

¹⁷ Anna K. Burkard, interviewed by Kenneth Rock, 17 March 1977, transcript online at lib.colostate.edu/gfr/gfroralhistories.html, Germans from Russia in Colorado Study Project, Morgan Library, Fort Collins, CO., 3; Miller interview, 35; Mrs. John P. Geringer, interviewed by Timothy Kloberdanz, 5 May 1976, transcript online at lib.colostate.edu/gfr/gfroralhistories.html, Germans from Russia in Colorado Study Project, Morgan Library, Fort Collins, CO., 67.

crowd[ing] out our wage-earners” with “ ineffective laws against contract labor.” These types of sentiments colored many Colorado farmers’ perceptions of their new contract sugar beet laborers, as shown by the opening quote of this paper.¹⁸

Under siege by capitalism, the Populist farmer reacted by attacking industrialized farming, including its cheap immigrant labor, viewing it as the apparatus of impending rural demise. An article in *Through the Leaves* further expounds on the Populist fear that immigrant labor would put the small farmer out of business and enrich the capitalist:

The capitalist would enlarge his holdings, would organize his farming business just as business is organized in large manufacturing concerns, and the small farmer would be forced to quit. More than that, there would be deterioration in society that would make the country anything else than a good place to rear a family. There would be slums all over the country, as there are in the cities.

Such language reflected Populist rhetoric that farmers needed to fight big business and monopolies. In northeastern Colorado, big business in the form of the Great Western Sugar Company solicited immigrant laborers to make beet raising profitable enough for the company to build factories. Great Western’s role in bringing this labor into Colorado “helped to support and preserve a pattern of large-scale, industrialized farming contrasting with a long-cherished view that the tiller and owner of the soil should be one in the same.” Beets were a difficult crop to profit from due to the high demands of hand labor, and prices fluctuated year to year with Great Western ultimately dictating the price paid for beets. Beet farmers argued that the Sugar Company paid too little for sugar beets, denying the farmer fair returns for his efforts. Wrangling over the price the Sugar Company would pay for beets filled the newspapers of the time. *The Wellington Sun* reported “that the beet growers of northern Colorado are unanimous in

¹⁸ Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Movement: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); and Edwin C. Rozwenc and John C. Matlon, *Myth and Reality in the Populist Revolt* (Boston: D.C.: Heath and Company, 1967), 9, 14.

contending that they should receive \$10 a ton for beets next year.” Ironically, Colorado sugar beet farmers overlooked their role in the capitalist system by earning money selling sugar beets to Great Western, profits that existed only because Great Western existed. Populists advanced the agrarian myth, an outlook that glamorized rural life and claimed the success of the country depended on a Jeffersonian yeoman farmer, ignoring the relationship between farmers and big business.¹⁹

A 1903 editorial in *Field and Farm* illustrates this view of immigrant labor hastening the demise of the rural way of life. The editors’ chastised the sugar beet industry for demanding more acres of beets than a farmer could reasonably handle on his own, forcing him to rely on “the use of illiterate, cheap foreign labor.” Such business practices did not benefit the American farmer, as the editors pointed out, “factories have been built too rapidly and the business boomed too much . . . for the good of the farmers.” Another editorial in the same newspaper in 1906 reported on hundreds of Japanese and German-Russian beet workers arriving, describing the beet industry as “the never yielding juggernaut of toil whose appetite is never satiated.” The labor of these immigrant populations conjures up images of an industrial machine in pursuit of profits destroying the rural way of life and the independent American-born farmer. Again, Populist rhetoric seeps from such opinions. Another editorial from the same paper that year cursed Great Western for “importing the scurvy labor of southern Europe to compete with home talent . . . this is the kind of cattle the sugar trust is shunting on us . . . it may be a great money making scheme for the sugar trust but it is not good Americanism.” Such sentiments echo the Populist Party Platform, which “condemn[ed] the fallacy of protecting American labor” with continued immigration. The use of the word “cattle” to describe the immigrants evokes the perceived

¹⁹ “A Labor Problem,” *Through the Leaves* (August 1917): 296; and Taylor, “Hand Laborers,” 24; *The Wellington Sun* (Wellington, CO), 27 September 1917.

inferiority of this immigrant population. The editors' condemnation of Great Western's lack of "good Americanism" clearly reflects Populist rhetoric that corporate capitalism and its followers did not care about the good of the majority of Americans.²⁰

Occupying the lowest place in the social hierarchy translated into materialist concerns for the Germans from Russia. Local farmers did not always treat their German-Russian labor well, another signal that Anglo American farmers considered them an inferior "other," a group that did not need or warrant the same living conditions of other whites. Great Western continually reminded beet farmers to treat their labor suitably, citing that this labor enabled profits. A Great Western employee declared, "The introduction of this labor made possible the production of beets of that value which would not have been produced if labor had not been furnished." Great Western singled out housing for German-Russian workers as key to securing quality labor, labor that produced high yields of beets and hence increased profits for the company. Some farmers headed the housing message, declaring that "the farmer who provides good living accommodations for his beet help . . . is a progressive fellow and at all times gets the best help." However, oral history interviewees only mentioned substandard living conditions in the beet fields: "most of them . . . just put you in a shack, you know, you had to live wherever they put you," and "the beet shacks would be infested with lice and bed-bugs and what-not . . . the conditions were terrible." Paulina Hahn, a second-generation German-Russian born in Globeville, "had an aunt who would always leave one corner [of the beet shack] dirty to show you how dirty it was when she got it." A pervasive attitude among American farmers was that "the really simple needs of these families" involved little in the way of accommodations. Such opinions parallel similar arguments that non-white immigrants did not require the higher living

²⁰ *Denver Field and Farm* (Denver), 16 May 1903; *Denver Field and Farm* (Denver), 5 May 1906; *Denver Field and Farm* (Denver), 7 April 1906; and Rozwenc and Matlon, *Myth and Reality*, 14.

conditions expected by Anglo Americans. A report by the U.S. Immigration Commission in 1909 found “American laborers will not generally submit to the standard of living acceptable” to immigrant labor. Nonetheless, Great Western continued to advocate for better housing for this labor, a wise endeavor since company profits depended on an ample supply of labor to get the beets out of the field and into the factory.²¹

Aside from the housing issue, the actual cultivation of sugar beets presented no easy task. A Great Western bulletin in 1916 declared “ten acres will require not less than 300 hours of labor and very likely 600 hours to do the blocking and thinning properly, and still more if the fields are very weedy.” Blocking entailed using a hoe to clear weeds and excess beet spouts from a bunch of beet seedlings, leaving 12 to 16 inches between bunches. Thinning required pulling all of the beet plants except the strongest one, and this occurred a few weeks after blocking. A field that had been properly blocked and thinned would be weed-free and have one beet plant every foot. This labor required hours of stooping and bending, with thinning conducted on hands and knees. Harold Henkel remembers life in the beet fields as “hard work all the time, no recreation,” and Philip Legler, who started working beets at age six, “found the work very hard, and backbreaking, because it consisted primarily of stoop labor” and working twelve hour days during peak times. Despite the demanding labor required for beet cultivation, the German-Russians looked to the higher returns per acre possible by using family labor that would enable buying and paying land off faster. Large families with several children provided the perfect laborers for the beet fields. Fred Ostwald remarked, “When we went to the field, we all went to

²¹ Maddux, “Soliciting Beet Labor,” 33; H. H. Knoop, “Beet Help Responds to Good Treatment,” *Through the Leaves* (August 1918): 351; Miller interview, 6; Mr. and Mrs. Delbert Blehm, interviewed by Kenneth Rock, no date, transcript online at lib.colostate.edu/gfr/gfroralhistories.html, Germans from Russia in Colorado Study Project, Morgan Library, Fort Collins, CO., 25; Paulina Hahn, interviewed by Kenneth Rock, 5 July 1977, transcript online at lib.colostate.edu/gfr/gfroralhistories.html, Germans from Russia in Colorado Study Project, Morgan Library, Fort Collins, CO., 18; H. Mendelson, “Next Year’s Labor Supply,” *Through the Leaves* (September 1916): 294; Taylor, “Hand Laborers,” 21.

the field . . . the children were down at the end of the field.” In *Second Hoeing*, Hannah Schreissmiller remembers that “she’d been just four years old when she was left at the end of a beet field to look after [her siblings,] two-year-old Tabia, and two-months-old Alec.” The Great Western Sugar Company encouraged German-Russian labor because “they usually have large families and can’t, on the first provocation, pull out and leave the farmer when he need them the most, as some other class of labor can.”²² Family labor carried greater stability than the single male laborer who could more easily roam from farm to farm seeking better wages and living conditions.

Children working in the beet fields missed “from twenty to thirty percent of the school year.” The problem of school attendance appears frequently in both oral histories and in *Through the Leaves*. German-Russian parents subscribed to a very different perspective on education than school officials, believing that a rudimentary education adequate enough for reading the scriptures sufficed. Mrs. Harold Henkel recalled that working in the beet fields interfered with her schooling, with “the truant officers send[ing] letters out quite often” to her father, even coming “into the field a number of times.” Many school districts in northeastern Colorado, beginning with Windsor’s “plan of adapting the school work to the needs of the community interests,” created a summer school for beet children in July, a time of little fieldwork. This summer school covered the first seven weeks of the normal school year, the time missed by beet children. When returning to school in October after the harvest, these students

²² H. Mendelson, *Essentials of Beet Farming* (Denver: Great Western Sugar Company, 1916), 4; Henkel interview, 37; Philip B. Legler, interviewed by Kenneth Rock, 23 February 1977, transcript online at lib.colostate.edu/gfr/gfroralhistories.html, Germans from Russia in Colorado Study Project, Morgan Library, Fort Collins, CO., 8; Ostwald interview, 12; Sykes, *Second Hoeing*, 36; and *Through the Leaves* (August 1918), 353.

would then not be behind the other children. This system helped to progressively improve attendance rates of German-Russian children.²³

Great Western Sugar Company publicly supported the use of child labor until the Child Labor Commission investigated children working in the beet fields in 1925. Prior to that, Great Western's stance on the issue of German-Russian child labor ignored their role in retarding the education and acculturation of these children. The company lacked any great interest in the education or future of the beet children, overlooking any culpability in the fact that the company's low sugar beet prices forced the Volga Germans to use their children's labor in order to make any money. A Great Western official found nothing wrong with these children missing school to work in the field, declaring, "while beet children may be absent for several weeks each year from their classes in geography and spelling, they are learning other valuable lessons of industry and thrift and the practices of agriculture." When Hannah in *Second Hoeing* laments that her brother cannot attend school due to working in the fields, she mentions that if her brother "had been the son of an American father, high school would have been a matter of course." The Great Western Sugar Company and German-Russian patriarchs like Hannah's father did not see the need for these children to receive the same education as American children. On the other hand, in Brush, the "superintendent of the Brush schools and the Great Western Sugar Company's fieldman" worked together to inform German-Russian beet laborers about a special summer school to get more beet kids into school. Regardless, the Sugar Company benefited from using German-Russian family labor. Great Western would continue this pattern with

²³ Dena Markoff, "Beet Hand Laborers of Sugar City, Colorado, 1900-1920," in *Germans from Russia in Colorado*, ed. Sidney Heitman (Ann Arbor: The Western Social Science Association, 1978), 92; *Ibid.*, 92; Henkel interview, 23; and A. C. Cohagen, "Fitting School Work to Community Interests," *Through the Leaves* (September 1921), 411.

Mexican labor in the 1920s and 1930s as well, “require[ing] that ninety per cent of each shipment [of labor] should consist of family labor.”²⁴

The issue of child labor in the beet fields opens a window into understanding the motives behind nativist and xenophobic reactions to the German-Russians. An American farmer “endeavoring to raise and educate his family to a better citizenship . . . is sending his children to school and must hire labor to carry on the farm work.” Hired labor increased overhead and cut into profits per acre of beets. According to Dena Markoff’s study of beet workers in Sugar City, Colorado, “small growers competing with German Russian farmers objected that [using their children’s labor] gave the immigrants unfair advantage, while those growers depending upon contract workers felt the use of child labor was justified.” Those using contract labor likely would acquire it from German-Russian families recruited by Great Western. Volga German tenants or farmers using their children for labor produced beets at a cheaper cost per acre, threatening the grower who hired wage labor or worked his fields by himself. A contemporary observer noted, “upon investigation you will find [the German-Russian] has voluntarily lowered his price with the expectation of working his children.” Utilizing every member of the family enabled the immigrant beet worker to make the most money possible tending beets.²⁵

Many independent Anglo American farmers disliked the competition of this new foreign element, and resented Great Western’s role in encouraging it. In a 1903 editorial, the writer quipped that the “beet growers’ association endeavor[ed] to import American laborers . . . [because] the people . . . have tired of the wandering Russian and his proverbially large family.” As mentioned previously, the capitalist influence on the sugar beet industry was not “for the

²⁴ “The Field-Labor Problem,” *Through the Leaves* (August 1925), 353; Sykes, *Second Hoeing*, 231; E. Ward, Jr. “Summer School at Brush,” *Through the Leaves* (December 1920), 681; and Maddux, “Soliciting Labor,” 30.

²⁵ Harvey Riddell, “Juvenile Beet Labor and the Public School,” *Through the Leaves* (May 1916): 185; Markoff, “Beet Hand Laborers,” 92; Riddell, “Juvenile Beet Labor,” 185.

good of the farmers” in the opinion of many Colorado beet farmers. Great Western encouraged and defended child labor, which aided in undermining American farmers with cheap immigrant labor. Beet growers’ associations formed to collectively bargain for higher payouts and to protest cheap labor and child labor, but many German-Russians who had risen to the status of tenants or farm owners often would not participate in such collectives, taking what Great Western offered. Hannah’s father, Adam Schreissmiller, felt “the farmers what don’t join that association is the smart ones” because the growers’ associations demanded that members refuse to plant beets until the farmers could secure a fair price from Great Western. Furthermore, even as farm owners, Volga German families often still used their children’s labor and opposed growers’ associations that condemned such practices.²⁶

The perceived German-Russian economic advantage over American farmers, whose children were less likely to work in the beet fields, spawned another argument attempting to level the economic playing field: child labor acted as a detriment to Americanization. Acculturation would not happen until German-Russian children attended school regularly, often not common until the third and fourth generations. In a narrative about a childhood experience, Mela Meisner Lindsay remembers working in the field with her father when “a farmer who had been driving past our field” yelled out, “You dumb Roosian . . . that young girl should be in school, not out drilling wheat!” At the time, Lindsay felt “there was no other way . . . I had to miss school to help in the field, the same as my sister had to help at home” in order for her family to survive. Hannah in *Second Hoeing* gives up her dreams of finishing high school when her mother’s death leaves her in charge of the household and younger siblings. Being kept out of school isolated German-Russian children from American culture, “denying them the means to become part of the mainstream.” Writing in 1916, Henry Riddell, a Larimer county school administrator and

²⁶ *Denver Field and Farm* (Denver), 7 March 1903; Sykes, *Second Hoeing*, 275.

Great Western fieldman declared, “the foreign-born child will absorb more in a nine-months’ school term than if he is only sent periodically and spasmodically during the year . . . start the foreign child in school at 6 years of age and it will, in a very short time, learn the language.”

Philip Legler commented “the children would speak the German dialect in the home until they entered the public schools.” Paulina Hahn remembered a teacher changing the spelling of her name, telling her “You don’t want to be a little German girl, you want to be an American girl so we changed your name.” Anglo American farmers and townspeople felt German-Russian children must attend school in order to advance in American society. Germans from Russia of the second and third generations “tied their own future hopes to education.” For example, Hannah sees education as her only means out of the beet fields into acceptance by mainstream American society.²⁷

Child labor also caught the attention of progressive reformers who found beet work in Colorado fatiguing and strenuous, “a very objectionable form of work for children” in which the “welfare of the child” did not occupy “the center of vision” of their parents. These reformers argued that such parents only valued their children in economic terms. An article in a 1916 issue of *The Child Labor Bulletin* presented the story of a German-Russian father who “declared to a school principal that his boy was worth \$1,000 for work during the beet season but if he went to school he was nothing but an expense.” Local citizens and national reformers felt such examples demonstrated over-zealousness for the capitalist system, placing money ahead of schooling, education being “the only hope for a permanent race improvement.” Reformers felt that German-Russians needed to be taught how to raise their children because they “sacrifice[d] their

²⁷ Mela Meisner Lindsay, “Papa Taught Us Citizenship,” *Journal of American Historical Society of Germans from Russia* Workpaper No. 14 (April 1974): 41; Cook, “Fact and Fiction,” 119; Riddell, “Juvenile Beet Labor,” 186; Legler interview, 19; Hahn interview, 1; and Randall C. Teeuwen, “Public Rural Education and the Americanization of the Germans from Russia in Colorado: 1900-1930” (Masters Thesis, Colorado State University, 1993), 66.

children's proper education and normal childhood" for money. Reformers espoused that German-Russian parents did not understand their children's needs; they needed to be forced to reform through enforcement of compulsory education laws because they lacked the advanced culture of the Americans who sent their children to school, the proper place for them. This type of Anglo-American middle-class discourse implied superiority on the part of the reformers and inferiority on the part of the Volga Germans.²⁸

The use of children in the beet fields even spurred comparisons to American imperialism, aiding in the social construction of the Volga Germans as non-white. In 1906, *Field and Farm* declared the Germans from Russia were no better than other groups considered inferior to white Americans, that without the labor of "every member of the family in caring for the beets the pay would be but little better than that received by the natives of Cuba and the Philippine islands." Placing the German-Russians into a context of areas under American influence with inhabitants considered inferior by many Anglo and middle-class Americans implies the lowliness of German-Russians to American-born white citizens. For Americans to perform the stoop labor of the beet fields would degrade and racialize them as if they were similar to native Cubans or Philipinos. Labor performed by non-white groups was stigmatized, both because Americans refused to it and that the people performing the labor were usually not white. In *White Scourge*, Neil Foley views whiteness "not simply as the pinnacle of ethnoracial status but as the complex social and economic matrix wherein racial power and privilege were shared, not always equally, by those who were able to construct identities as . . . whites." Fear of the "wandering Russian" speaks to the contention that white farm owners "blamed white tenants for their own inability to achieve ownership, strongly implying that they were inferior whites." The labor Germans from

²⁸ Edward Clopper and Lewis W. Hine, "Child Labor in the Sugar-Beet Fields of Colorado" *The Child Labor Bulletin* 4 (February 1916), 183; *Ibid.*, 188, 187; Riddell, "Juvenile Beet Labor," 187; and Clopper, "Child Labor," 186.

Russia performed in the field degraded their whiteness in the eyes of local Anglo-American residents, in effect constructing them as a racialized group.²⁹

The diatribes of Colorado farmers against immigrant labor centered on economic competition between immigrants and American farmers, a key point of the Populist movement. Many American farmers felt that the Germans from Russia developed an unfair economic advantage in using their children for labor. Reformers, townspeople, and second, third, and fourth generation German-Russians perceived laboring in the beet fields as detrimental to acculturation into the American mainstream. Stoop labor worked to construct German-Russians as a separate economic class and a racialized group that clearly was not American. When asked about relations between growers and laborers, Fred Ostwald felt that “in many ways you . . . were made to feel that you was only the beet worker and somewhat lower than the farmers on the economic and social rung of the ladder.” During World War I, Germans from Russia were made to feel even lower on the ladder with outspoken hatred and violence. Mr. Ostwald recalled Ku Klux Klan cross burnings as “an indirect threat against us.”³⁰ Isolated attacks on German-Russians speaking German on the streets also runs through many of the oral histories. Labor, and fear of labor competition, worked to classify the Germans from Russia as different from other whites and even a potential threat to Americanism.

Despite the low social status Volga Germans derived from stoop labor, within a generation of working in the Colorado beet fields many families owned land. Neil Foley’s concept of the agricultural ladder, a system of moving from laborer to tenant and finally owner, “guaranteed opportunities for all farmers, in theory at least, to move across social and economic boundaries toward farm ownership, which was both the symbol of and the

²⁹ *Denver Field and Farm* (Denver), 12 May 1906; and Foley, *The White Scourge*, 7, 74.

³⁰ Ostwald interview, 13, 29.

passport to full citizenship in the democracy of rural America.” By 1922, the German-Russians in Colorado had climbed the agricultural ladder, comprising 53.5% of beet workers, 73.9% of beet farm renters, and 72.7% of beet farm owners. Not only had Great Western seen opportunity in the sugar beet, the Germans from Russia took advantage of it to secure upward social mobility by cultivating sugar beets and purchasing land with the returns. With land ownership often came citizenship and integration into American culture. Oral history interviewees discuss the Americanization of their families, often in reference to land ownership, the pinnacle of Foley’s agricultural ladder. Fred Ostwald reminisced, “we wanted to become Americans, we wanted to become integrated . . . feeling that with the acquisition of property, we would be . . . accepted within the integrated society.” Paulina Hahn recalled that for her family, “the great desire of everyone was to be an American.” The agricultural ladder rang true for German-Russians, eventually allowing them to transcend social and economic boundaries to achieve land ownership.³¹

A short article in a 1929 installment of *Through the Leaves*, “Henry Schwindt Made a Real Farm Home,” captures the upward mobility and Americanization of the Volga Germans. Mr. Schwindt, a sugar beet farmer, “first settled four miles north of Brush and worked beets for nine years after which he rented a farm several years between Fort Morgan and Brush . . . in 1922 he purchased the 160-acre farm on which he has built a fine Colonial style home.” Home and land ownership, the pinnacle of American social mobility, transformed the Germans from Russia. By 1924, German-Russians accounted for only 31% of the beet labor with Mexican and Mexican-Americans accounting for 59% of beet workers. As increasing numbers of Volga Germans rented or bought land, Mexican

³¹ Foley, *White Scourge*, 10; Teeuwen, “Public Rural Education,” 7; Ostwald interview 27; and Hahn interview, 32.

and Mexican-American laborers filled their contract and wage labor positions in the beet fields.³²

The Germans from Russia increasingly found themselves on the other side of the labor equation, as landowners hiring laborers to work their beet fields. Alice Miller, talking about her children, commented, “When it came to beet work, they didn’t want to be in that, we always had Spanish people to work the beets.” The Great Western Sugar Company continued to address housing for labor, suggesting that German-Russian farmers treated their Mexican labor as they had once been treated, taking advantage of their new social status to construct themselves as a superior people in relation to their laborers. Amalie Klein noted the relationship between German-Russians and Mexican laborers “was alright, but you couldn’t trust them . . . I missed a chicken here, I missed a chicken there . . . they got sticky fingers.” Anglo Americans often described the Germans from Russia as having “sticky fingers.” In *Second Hoeing*, Hannah laments that her people are known as thieves as her own father steals irrigation water from the landlord. An angry farmer writing in *Through the Leaves* in 1918 commented about his German-Russian laborers that “you simply can’t treat them as you would like to treat people you have around the place, for if you tried that it wouldn’t be thirty days until you would be living in the shack and the Russian would be joy-riding in your ‘flivver.’”³³ Ironically, Volga Germans trying to set themselves apart from the growing number of Mexican and Mexican-American beet workers used the same language of Anglo Americans that constructed Germans from Russia as a non-white group.

³² W. S. Henderson, “Henry Schwindt Made a Real Farm Home,” *Through the Leaves* (March 1929), 111; and May, “Great Western Sugarlands,” 381.

³³ Miller interview, 37; Klein interview, 95; and Chas Snow, “Does Beet Labor Respond to Good Treatment?,” *Through the Leaves* (September 1918), 421.

The experience of Germans from Russia in northeastern Colorado epitomizes David Roediger's assertion that white workers experienced great difficulty in transcending the racial stigma associated with menial labor. Child labor and the anti-capitalist rhetoric of Populism served as the tools used by American-born whites to keep Volga Germans at the bottom of the social hierarchy, racialized by stoop labor. Nevertheless, with determination, many of these immigrants broke free of the stigma attached to their labor to realize Foley's pinnacle of agrarian whiteness, land ownership. Increasing numbers of non-white field workers forced a new configuration of the social hierarchy. German-Russians became white in the face of an increasing non-white population. Now at the top of the agricultural ladder, the Americanized Volga Germans maintained the social hierarchy defined by types of labor that once oppressed them, supporting a system that defined whiteness and Americanism around land ownership. Mexican and Mexican-American beet workers without land acted as the new racial "other," freeing Volga Germans from the lowest social and economic group in society.

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