

FIRST DRAFT

'White gold' long a staple for farmers

When the sugar beet harvest began in Mesa County in September, 1907, it was expected to be a good one.

The weather had been reasonable that summer, even though a late frost hurt the orchards. More and more farmers had planted beets. The sugar beet factory in Grand Junction had overcome initial obstacles and was working smoothly.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

By October, the Palisade Tribune could proclaim: "The great plant is running along in splendid shape. There has not been a serious hitch in its operation since the season opened."

The Tribune added, "The quality of beets is first class, and the fact that this is a superb beet raising country has been most emphatically proven."

The Daily Sentinel provided data to back up those statements. By Oct. 19, 1907, the sugar plant had produced 40,000 tons of sugar from beets, more than double the 16,000 tons produced through the same period the prior year. It was producing an estimated 700 tons of sugar "each and every day."

Growing sugar beets in 1907 required intensive labor. Workers had to bend and pull, shovel and lift, even crawl on their hands and knees. Children were an important part of the workforce.

Although less than a decade old in 1907, the sugar beet industry was already important locally. An estimated 6,000 acres of beets were planted that year in Mesa and nearby counties.

It didn't yet rival the fruit industry, with an estimated 20,000 acres of trees in 1907, but it was growing rapidly.

It wasn't just Grand Junction. Throughout much of the 20th century, sugar beet production and processing was "the most important agricultural activity in the state," according to the Colorado Encyclopedia. More than 20 sugar refining factories were built in Colorado between 1899 and 1920.

Grand Junction's was the first — a three-story brick building with an interior larger than a football field. A portion of the building still stands across from the Las Colonias amphitheater at the south end of 12th Street.

The plant began production in November 1899 as the Colorado Sugar Manufacturing Co.

In 1902, it was sold to a Wyoming firm, the Western Sugar and Land Co. In 1916 it was sold again to the Holly Sugar Co., which continued to operate it full-time until 1929, then intermittently until 1933.

But sugar beet production didn't end here when the Grand Junction plant closed. Holly Sugar continued to operate a beet plant in Delta until 1977. An estimated 10,000 acres of beets were cultivated in Mesa, Delta and Montrose counties in the 1970s.

Now, the only sugar beet production in Colorado is on the Front Range, and it's a fraction of what it once was.

But for nearly 80 years, sugar beets were among the most important cash crops in this region — one that farmers could count on for an annual paycheck.

Sugar beets were often referred to as "white gold," and many of the early investors in the industry were mining magnates or people who'd made money off the mining industry, men looking to diversify their



Photos from MUSEUMS OF WESTERN COLORADO/Special to the Sentinel

Harvested sugar beets are piled, awaiting processing at the Grand Junction plant.

financial interests.

Denver entrepreneur Charles Boettcher, founder of the Boettcher Foundation, who made his initial fortune selling mining hardware in Leadville, was on the board of directors of the group that opened the Grand Junction sugar factory.

So was John F. Campion, the owner of several Leadville mines, and the man credited with being "the father of the sugar beet industry in Colorado."

There was no local man on the board, although Colorado Springs businessman James Renwick McKinnie was an investor in the Grand Junction Town Co. And Charles N. Cox of Grand Junction is credited with traveling to Denver to get Campion, Boettcher and others interested in sugar beets in the Grand Valley.

However, the fledgling industry faced a critical problem. There was not a large enough labor force to handle all the necessary work.

In addition to the harvest, thinning and other procedures demanded large numbers of laborers. Women and children were perceived as most efficient in the thinning process.

Although some Native American children from Grand Junction's Teller Indian School were employed early on, there weren't enough. So, first the Colorado Sugar Manufacturing Co., and later Western Sugar, sought to attract immigrants from other countries.

Families of prospective beet growers were offered low-rent land and the possibility of buying it for \$50 an acre, free water for five years and free tents for their first dwellings.

Campion sent a letter to leaders of the sugar beet industry in Germany, seeking help in getting immigrants.

However, the first sugar-beet immigrants were German-Russians from Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska and Utah.

German-Russians were people of German ancestry who had emigrated to Russia at the invitation of Catherine the Great in the 18th century. When political and economic conditions changed in the mid-19th century, many emigrated to the United States and Canada, especially to the Great Plains states.

Within a few years, however, many of the ethnic Germans had purchased their own plots of land or had gone into other businesses. Again, more laborers were needed.

World War I worsened the labor shortage, while political and economic unrest in Mexico led to many people from that country moving north. Along with Hispanics from New Mexico and Colorado's San Luis Valley, a significant number made it to Mesa and nearby counties to work with sugar beets.

Although some worked as migrant labor, moving to other locales when work here was done, quite a few chose to remain in the Grand Valley, and Holly Sugar wanted to encour-



Children work with adults harvesting sugar beets near Grand Junction early in the 20th century.



Workers remove weeds and thin the young sugar beet plants.



BOB SILBERNAGEL/Special to the Sentinel

A portion of the old Grand Junction sugar plant still stands across from the Las Colonias amphitheater near the south end of 12th Street.

age them to stay.

So, in the 1920s, the company built two "longhouses" west of the beet factory near the Colorado River to house laborers.

Over the years, individual houses were built and a neighborhood of primarily Hispanic families developed what became known as La Colonia. Today's Las Colonias Park is named in honor of the neighborhood.

Even as mechanized farm equipment began to assume much of the work in the sugar beet plantings, individual workers were still necessary for many of the tasks. Hispanic laborers remained an important part of the sugar beet industry until its demise.

That came without warning in early 1977 — after many farmers had already acquired seed and prepared land for the coming season — when Holly announced it was closing its Delta sugar plant. A variety

of economic factors resulted in that decision, including increased competition from foreign sugar producers and a need to upgrade the Delta plant.

As a result, 70 years after the booming growth of 1907, the sugar beet industry ended in western Colorado.

Sources: *Colorado Historic Newspaper Collection*; "The Colorado Sugar Manufacturing Company: Grand Junction Plant," by William J. May Jr., *Colorado Magazine*, Winter 1978; "The Sugar Beet Industry," *Colorado Encyclopedia online*; 1907 *Colorado Agriculture Report*; "The History of Las Colonias Park," by Jonathan Car and Claire Kempa, *Colorado Mesa University and the City of Grand Junction Parks and Recreation Department*.

Bob Silbernagel's email is bohsilbernagel@gmail.com

Woman gets life for role in murder

DENVER — A Colorado woman was sentenced to life in prison for her role in the robbery and death of a man who was picking up barbecue for dinner.

The Jefferson County District Attorney's Office says 21-year-old Alicia Elena Valdez was sentenced Friday in District Court for the April 2018 death of 27-year-old Andrew Jenicke in Edgewater.

Valdez was convicted under the felony murder law, which holds people responsible for deaths that occur during the commission of other felonies, including aggravated robbery.

Court records say co-defendant Caleb Joseph Vigil tried to rob Jenicke and shot him and that Devon Howard drove Valdez's car over Jenicke as they left the scene. Both men are serving life sentences. Prosecutors said Vigil, Howard and Valdez obtained a gun days before the murder.

— The Associated Press

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Reckless driving alleged

Andre Geurin, 39, was arrested and accused of vehicular eluding and reckless driving Aug. 21 in Grand Junction.

He reportedly had several small children

in his vehicle and was also charged with child abuse, according to an arrest affidavit.

A police officer spotted Geurin passing Nisley Elementary School that day about 4 p.m. and knew there was an active warrant for his arrest.

Another patrol vehicle was set up to stop

Geurin, but he allegedly started to yield before driving onto the sidewalk to get around traffic and flee to the east, the affidavit said.

Other children were in the area because the school had recently ended for the day, officers noted.

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