SEPTEMBER 2018

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A SWEET LIFE

A look at Windsor's sugar beet heritage

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SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER EVENTS

HARVEST FESTIVAL

Community event draws regional attention

OIL & VINEGAR

BOTTLED OLIVE OFFERS UNIQUE FLAVORS FOR HEALTHY MEALS

Perry Weideman and Mike Otto in Weideman's sugar beet field north of Greeley.

EMILY KEMME

A Sweet Life

Local farmer Paul Fritzler with a truck loaded with beets.

A look at Windsor's sugar beet heritage

by Emily Keaine

A forlorn and rusted tractor seat.

A dilapidated shanty.

Remnants left by German-Russian farm laborers who helped usher in the sugar beet's 20th century heyday in Northern Colorado are still visible, scattered in fields and displayed in museums across Weld County. Other indelible remnants are etched into Windsor's history.

Riding out market fluctuations over the years, handfuls of those early immigrants' descendants continue to cultivate sugar beets today. Although the number of Germans from Russia has dwindled in Windsor, while others with diverse cultural roots have flowed into the community of over 25,000 people, the Volga Germans' impact can still be observed in how Windsor defines itself.

At its base, it is a family town with people proud of their heritage.

WINDSOR FARMLAND WAS IDEAL FOR CULTIVATING SUGAR BEETS

Windsor is equidistant from Northern Colorado's two principal cities, Greeley and Fort Collins. Its beginnings stem from the need for a stagecoach stop where travelers could swap horse teams. Farmland surrounding Windsor was ideal for growing oats, barley, alfalfa and wheat as well as supporting a burgeoning livestock-feeding industry. With the success of irrigation methods, cultivation of arid land created a booming agricultural sector and demand for a railroad infrastructure, essential for transporting crops to market. In 1881, the Greeley, Salt Lake and Pacific railway was built and Windsor was incorporated in 1890.

According to Caitlin Heusser, museum curator for Windsor, large-scale beet sugar had been produced in Europe — including Germany and Russia — since 1800, but the United States' only sugar source at that time was cane sugar grown in tropical climates. Attempts to cultivate sugar beets across the U.S. had failed, only becoming feasible after 1888 when scientific researchers at the Colorado Agricultural College in Fort Collins (today Colorado State University) studied European growing methods to learn how to improve the amount of usable sugar in beets. It turned out that Colorado's sunny climate

WINDSOR-SEVERANCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, COURTESY OF PAUL FRITZLER FAMILY

Work during sugar beet harvest meant that everyone in the family was involved in the process. Pictured: Paul Felte, Lauren Felte, Ron Felte, Jerry Felte, Pauletta Felte and her dog.

Women wore canvas pieces on the front of their pants so the pants wouldn't wear out while crawling down the beet rows. Left to right: Emmaline Rutz, Mollie Hettinger, Esther Kisselman, Emma Stroman, Leona Hettinger.

and sandy soil was an ideal mix for sugar beet production.

By 1900, Windsor-area farmers began experimenting with sugar beets, which were shipped by rail to Colorado's first sugar mill operated by the Loveland Sugar Company. Factories followed in Greeley and Eaton. In 1901, Dr. E.I. Raymond and H.C. Branch spearheaded a commitment from area farmers and investors to plant over 5,000 acres of sugar beets in the Windsor-Severance area so a factory could be built in Windsor. In 1903, the Windsor Sugar Factory opened at 430 Main St.

Sugar beets are a labor-intensive crop. After the Great Western Sugar Company purchased the Windsor factory in 1905, it advertised in Europe for field workers.

WINDSOR EXPERIENCED RAPID GROWTH WITH AN INFLUX OF WORKERS IN THE SUGAR BEET INDUSTRY

The timing was ideal for Germans living in settlements in Russia's Volga River region. Beginning in 1763, they had emigrated from Germany after German-born Czarina Catherine the Great invited European farmers to set up communities on the steppes of Russia, offering freedom of religion and exemption from military service in exchange. According to "The Struggle for Identity: Windsor's Historic Downtown" by Adam Thomas, the harsh realities of survival on the barren steppes instilled a strict work ethic, idealizing work with guiding principals such as *Arbeit macht das Leben süss*, — "Work renders Life sweet." This ethic applied equally to women and young children. But with a turbulent political climate in Russia under Nicholas II, the government reneged on these promises now over a century old. When men found themselves conscripted into the Russian army off the streets, the timing could not have been better and entire families immigrated to America in response to the call for workers in the surging sugar beet industry.

This willingness to live a life dedicated to work dovetailed with the rigors of sugar beet farming. Prone to seclusion, thanks to generations of isolation in Russia, the Volga Germans had successfully preserved their cultural heritage, often living in their own communities after arriving in the United

"By 1909, Colorado grew more than 60 percent of the national total of sugar beets produced, 70 percent of which grew along the South Platte River."

Caitlin Heusser, museum curator

WINDSOR-SEVERANCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY COURTESY OF JOLIETA FELTE

States. Bracewell, northwest of Greeley, was one such community, supporting a store and school.

The sugar beet industry immediately impacted Windsor's population. As of 1910, the U.S. Census reported 1,780 residents in the town, a 484 percent increase from 10 years earlier.

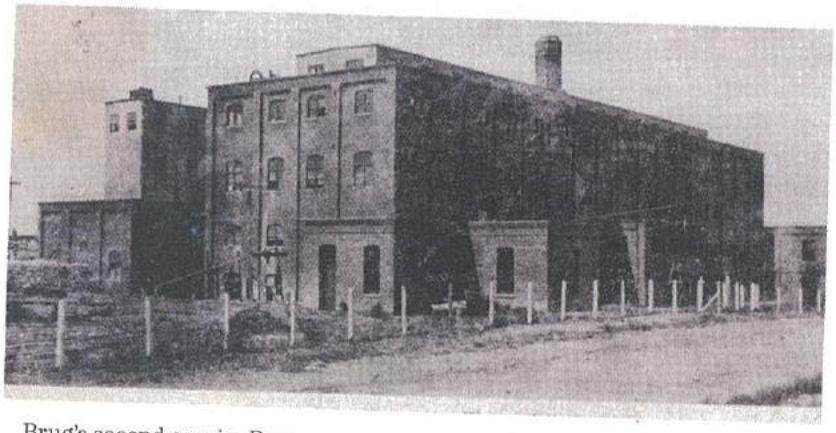
"By 1909, Colorado grew more than 60 percent of the national total of sugar beets produced, 70 percent of which grew along the South Platte River," Heusser said.

Protected by U.S. government tariff programs and passage of the 1937 Sugar Act, sugar beets transformed the region.

BACKBREAKING WORK, DISCRIMINATION AND EVENTUAL ASSIMILATION

Sandy Brug, president of the Windsor-Severance Historical Society, recalls her mother's stories about life as a field worker: "The whole family worked out in the fields, even the tiny kids. Right after planting, first thing in the morning the beets had to be thinned by hand with 1-foot-long hoes to space the beets one foot apart. And then later in the season they would crawl through the rows again to hoe out the weeds."

Brug keeps one of these hoes with her, a reminder of what her ancestors' life was like in those early Colorado days.



Brug's second cousin, Perry Weideman, echoes tales of hardship from stories his granddad, R.J. Blehm, told him: fork-loading beets onto a wagon all day, hauling several loads to Windsor where Blehm hand-forked them off the wagon onto a pile and then home to the little village of Bracewell for chores and maybe six hours of sleep. At midnight, Blehm arose to fork the noodles — the pulp that comes off the beets after running them through the slicer — to feed his livestock.

"Day in and day out, the excessive amount of labor made Granddad's hands so large, my size 11 and a half high school class ring couldn't fit on his little finger," Weideman reminisced.

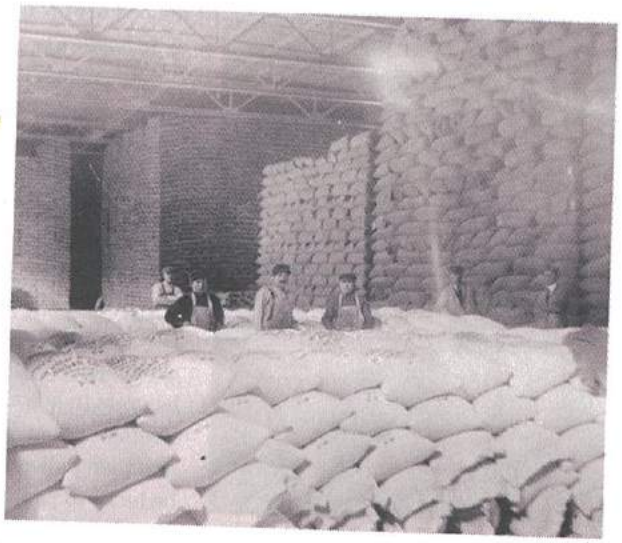
Poverty was widespread. Weideman remembers his grandma, Elizabeth Blehm, cooking butterballs for chicken soup. "She would crack the eggs and wipe out every little drop from inside the eggshell. We had 13 of us at the table and only two or three eggs to feed the family. Every little bit was important."

Although the Great Western Sugar Company built 14 houses to respond to housing needs, it wasn't enough and Windsor was unprepared for the influx of people immigrating to the area. Living conditions were crude and scarce, with workers standing in line to rent a house measuring no more than 10 by 12 feet with two rooms. Often several families lived together in these tarpaper-roofed shanties that dotted the eastern part of Windsor, Brug said.

Weideman asked his granddad once what he believed was the greatest invention of all time. "He thought it was tarpaper," Weideman said. "They put it on the roofs of their houses and didn't have to wake up with snow and dirt inside in the morning. We're spoiled today with our cellphones and whatnot."

The flood of immigrants was first met with discrimination, tied in part to an inability to speak English. Brug said children were taunted at school and a lot of the older population — her grandparents included — could only speak broken English during their lifetimes. Weideman recalls a family rule: German could only be spoken at home. When out in public, kids were instructed to speak English to avoid being harassed.

The population was very religious, bringing with them liturgical



Great Western Sugar Factory, Windsor, filled cloth sugar sacks in warehouse.

ABOVE: "Sugar Factory, New Windsor, Colo." 1909 postcard.

WINDSOR PARKS, RECREATION AND CULTURE DEPARTMENT, ARTS & HERITAGE DIVISION

traditions from Lutheran, German Congregational and a few Mennonite sects. Brug recalls some KKK activity, including cross-burning in Windsor in protest, but after time there were so many Volga-area Germans in Windsor it was no longer an oddity. Living conditions improved after the period of fast growth stabilized, allowing people the chance to buy homes and farms.

Even with the backbreaking work, "The whole sugar beet thing was the best way of life," Brug said. "I learned to drive in an old pickup going down the beet rows picking up stray beets and then driving to the beet dump. Everyone got out of school for three days for the October harvest, and teachers held conferences then."

Brug's memories of those days are fond ones, with recollections of a simple way of life that built family connections on the back of hard work. "There were so many of us, we all had the same background, ate the same food, and we keep in touch with those old friends."

She waxes rhapsodic at the foods: Krautburgers, Gummersalat — a cucumber salad prepared with buttermilk, green onion tops, salt and pepper — along with noodle soup, butterballs and beet syrup, which took hours of cooking. She recalls peeling mounds of beets and cooking them down in a kettle into dark syrup to use in coffee cake, on pancakes and to mix with snow. "It was like ice cream."

SUGAR BEET FARMING IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The Sugar Act expired in 1974, after which the industry could no longer compete globally. Great Western Sugar was sold in 1975 to Hunt International Resources of Dallas, and combined with the decline of sugar usage and increase of sugar substitutes, the Windsor factory closed and the company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 1985.

Weideman keeps up the legacy and has grown sugar beets for 40 years, farming 150 acres near Eaton with his son. The business is a cooperative these days, owned by approximately 900 farmers spread throughout Colorado, Montana, Wyoming and Nebraska. There used to be 11 processing plants in Colorado alone. Today, there is one plant for the cooperative region — Colorado's plant is in Fort Morgan. The Western Sugar Cooperative processes 130,000 shares annually, translating to 130,000 acres planted.

Mike Otto, senior agriculturalist for the Western Sugar Cooperative in Colorado, finds that growing beets is more difficult for several reasons. Population growth along the Front Range has municipalities buying more water leaving less for agricultural use. Additionally, farmers must compete with world markets. As the world-traded sugar, cane sugar grown in tropical climates is still a large competitor. The U.S. Sugar Program is a no cost program to the taxpayer keeping consumer prices stabilized, and demand is fairly stable, with slight increases coming from population growth.

A positive factor is "the demand today is for natural sugar, or sucrose, which is what beet sugar is," Otto said. Beet sugar competes primarily with other cooperatives within the United States.

Even so, input price has increased. As with other commodities, farmers

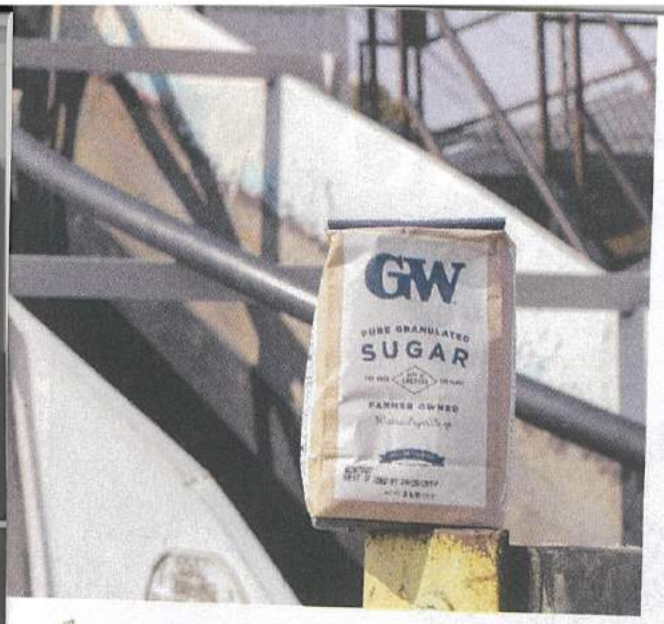
must invest in factory technology — larger, more efficient tractors, harvesters, processing equipment, and increased seed costs — all of which makes beet farming expensive.

Sugar beet crops are still profitable, thanks to GMO crops from enhanced seeds that require fewer chemicals today than when they farmed beets conventionally, Otto said. Researchers worked together with the seed company to hybridize a seed with increased pest and disease tolerance within the seed itself. Roundup Ready — a genetically modified plant seed brand — is tolerant to glyphosate, the active ingredient in RoundUp chemical weed control. A crop need only be sprayed once after planting. Combined with genetic engineering, the beets grow better and don't have to be hoed.

But farm life is still a tough row to hoe. "Technology, equipment and land costs an absolute fortune, and the markets don't support the costs," Brug noted. Otto agreed, pointing to efficiency in order to cover more acres.

When Weideman began farming in 1972, he produced 20 tons of beets per acre, and even in those days, he paid laborers to hoe and thin the crops. Beets were hand-topped in the field and then pulled from the soil. "You'd be lucky to plant 20 acres, earning

EMILY KEMME



A two-pound bag of GW sugar sits on a sugar beet sorter. Sugar beets are harvested from September through November and processed into white sugar crystals until February.

OPPOSITE: Perry Weideman and Mike Otto in Weideman's sugar beet field north of Greeley.

maybe $7,000 for the crop."

Modern harvester machines have enhanced defoliation methods, using spring-loaded mechanisms and a horizontal knife to top the beet's abundant foliage. And beet diggers have steel lifting devices that press the soil on each side of a sugar beet, pushing the beet upwards and onto a conveyor belt. All translates to less manual labor. With state-of-the-art equipment and economies of scale, Weideman harvests anywhere from 33 to 40 tons an acre. He can sell beets for $30 a ton.

Otto's grandfather raised sugar beets in the Windsor area, and that's how he developed an interest in the industry. He's worked with Weideman's dad and sons for years. Weaving through relatives' marriages, he and Weideman trace their family connection back to Otto's great-grandfather and Weideman's grandmother's sister. Both men agree it's a generational business that's still viable.

A lot of it comes from rich family traditions growing beets. "You'll find that in the factories and on the farms," Otto said. "It's a lot of work and a lot of risk. But sugar beets are in our blood. And it's a sweet life."

Completing the family

Hairstyles from the 1940s, shoes from the Windsor Art and Heritage Center's collection of artifacts and an apron belonging to a woman from that time period were all factors in Austin Weishel's design for a statue to be added to those already standing in Boardwalk Park.

The Windsor-Severance Historical Society, through fundraising, paid for a bronze statue to be placed in the park, but the funds raised could only pay for the father, son and daughter portions of the statue, which were installed last summer.

The Windsor Town Board agreed at the May 14 meeting to pay for the mother figure portion of the statue in exchange for what many residents call the "Old Creamery," at 501 Ash St., next to the Windsor Art and Heritage Center. Windsor Mayor Kristie Melendez said the society raised $150,000 for the first component, and according to the minutes from the town's May 14 meeting, the town likely will spend more than $76,250 for the addition of the mother.

Eric Lucas, director of the Windsor Parks, Recreation and Culture Department, said the statue displays Windsor's history of sugar beet farming, water and agriculture, and reminds residents of the ways Windsor's past has affected its present.

"I'm really honored to actually place the final, key item there," he said.

The statue, he said, will be 125 percent life-sized, about 6 feet 9 inches tall and will weigh more than 200 pounds.

Weishel said the statue likely will be completed and in place by the end of this year.

— Emily Wenger

The Windsor-Severance Historical Society raised $165,000 to commission Loveland sculptor Austin Weishel to create an 8-foot bronze statue commemorating how the sugar beet industry shaped the town of Windsor beginning in the early 1900s. The girl was left barefoot, illustrating the poverty families endured. Photo credit: Jessica Parrish
ABOVE: Artist Austin Weishel presented a maquette — a small, clay model — of the anticipated mother's statue.