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THE SUGAR BEET INDUSTRY

By Don Buchan

The following article has previously been printed in the Spencer Daily Reporter. It is one of Mr. Buchan's many articles, a number of which have been published in a book Here Is Yesterday, which may be obtained by writing Mr. Buchan, Marathon, Iowa.

It was April of 1924 and on the streets of Terril, Langdon and Spencer, one heard such words and phrases as "Quienes?", "Usted habla Espanol?", "mujeres" and "cinco" . . . ?

It began when a new agricultural industry was introduced here: the growing of sugar beets.

Early in January, W. A. Saucke, agricultural superintendent of the Iowa Valley Operating Company of Belmond came to Spencer. He spoke to a meeting of farmers and businessmen in the Commercial Club rooms. Mr. Saucke wanted to contract with farmers to grow sugar beets. A total of 500 acres was desired for the first year, he said.

"If we can get contracts for a total of 500 acres," Mr. Saucke said, "our company will put a dump in at Spencer or any other suitable shipping point and ship the beets directly to our refining factory at Belmond."

A factory was not contemplated for Spencer at that time, dumps were considered if the acreage planted to beets was sufficiently large to warrant depositories there.

"It is not feasible to deliver beets more than seven miles over graveled roads or more than three or four miles over dirt roads," the speaker said.

Mr. Saucke carried affidavits showing that the growing of sugar beets was a profitable industry for farmers. One affidavit stated that the farmer had 45.82 acres in beets. This netted him \$37.25 an acre. Another had 21.83 acres in beets that netted him \$41.33 an acre. Still another said he put 81.78 acres in beets and netted \$29.08 an acre. This was in 1924, remember.

Mr. L. L. Atwood, well known Spencer resident stated, "We planted 40 acres in beets on the farm near Albert Lea. We cleared \$70 an acre after expenses. If a dump is located here, I'll put 40 acres of my Iowa land in beets," he concluded. "It is the most profitable crop a farmer can grow."

There were questions. "Is the growing of sugar beets detrimental to the soil?" one asked.

"No, if properly rotated with other crops, it is highly beneficial," was the answer. "We furnish Mexican laborers to do the weeding. These families live in little huts, get up early and work late and they are industrious people who make good money while they work and spend it all before they go away. They work hard in order to get the bonus promised them and also, in between times, they furnish mighty desirable help for the farmer during threshing and silo-filling time."

"How much does it cost to set up to raise sugar beets?" was asked.

"Not to exceed \$400," was the answer. "You may need a special dump box for your wagon, a small wooden shanty and plow. You can get a weeding tool from your blacksmith for a few dollars."

Mr. Atwood reported that he built a shanty out of lumber he got from a neighbor, shingled it and the whole cost was not more than \$100.

It was pointed out that the growing of sugar beets was profitable because the farmer would know in advance what he would get for his crop. In addition, he would be paid a bonus based on the market price of sugar during the months of October, November, December, and January.

The sugar contents of beets grown in good soil in Iowa was said to run just under 13 percent. A ton of beets would make about 255 pounds of refined sugar. If the grower contracted at \$5.50 a ton and the average price for refined beet sugar during the four months considered would be \$9.50, the grower and sugar manufacturer would divide the difference between the price realized for the sugar and contract, but in no case would the beet grower net less than the contract price.

Another attractive feature was the fact that sugar beets would be a cash crop. The money would be paid to the farmers within 30 days of delivery of the beets. They would not have to be held in hope of a higher market price.

A mass meeting of farmers was called on January 31, and more than 100 attended. Mr. A. L. Luick, general manager of the Belmond corporation, stated that a beet crop would bring

additional prosperity to the community. He also pointed out that the Belmont corporation had an authorized capital of \$200,000 of which \$100,000 had been paid in. "This capital is your security that we will follow out our part of the contract," said Mr. Luick. "We also have \$130,000 worth of our bonds deposited in trust to further protect you."

It was said that some beet growers had a net of as much as \$75 an acre, and the average of every farmer who raised beets in 1922 had been \$39.70 an acre. In addition to being a cash crop it was said that farmers could use the tops for feed. They were said to be as nutritious as clover hay.

Within one week it was announced that 288 acres had been contracted for. Those who signed up the first week included D. A. Thomsen, 35 acres; T. Thompson, 20 acres; P. N. Thomsen, 35 acres; George Sheffler, 25 acres; H. A. Miller, 25 acres. All of these were in the Langdon community.

Near Royal these had signed: John R. Caldwell, 10 acres; Chas. Pothast, 20 acres; Peter Beck, 18 acres, and A. H. Johnson, 20 acres. A. Maurer of near Dickens had signed up to raise 80 acres of beets.

In April a coach load of Mexican laborers arrived in Langdon. A special train having four coaches and a freight car filled with household goods came to Terril. Mr. Remi Fourgee was in charge of all Mexican laborers in Clay and Dickinson counties. He rented a house in Dickens.

Many of the Mexicans could not speak English, and the first question they wanted to ask was, "Are there many weeds in this part of the country?"

In October it was disclosed that a profit of up to \$60 was expected to be realized by some beet growers. Chris Peterson of near Langdon had dug 12 rows and got nine tons. There were 22 rows to an acre in Mr. Peterson's field so he expected to harvest about 17 tons to the acre.

Lifters were put to work on the A. Maurer farm near Dickens where some of the biggest and best sugar beets ever seen by men were being harvested. Mr. Maurer had 88 acres in beets and estimated the harvest at 14 tons¹ to the acre. He expected to profit to the tune of \$4,400 or \$50 an acre.

There were 1,573 acres planted to beets in the territory

near Spencer, Langdon, Terril and Dickens. Not less than 15,000 tons were to be harvested.

The first carload of 1924 sugar made in Iowa was shipped to R. M. Hicks, president of the Spencer Grocer Company. The Belmond factory opened for business the first week in October and bagged 2,000 bags of sugar, a new record for them. The first 800 bags were loaded into the Spencer car and a huge banner hung across the full length. It read: "Going to Spencer, Ia., to Spencer Grocer Company. The first car of Iowa's 1924 crop of beet sugar. 99.9 per cent pure, the purest sugar you can buy, made by the Iowa Valley Operating Co., Belmond, Iowa, from beets grown in Iowa by the Iowa farmers."

It was made known the according to statistics compiled by the Department of Agriculture, sugar beet producers realized \$62,924,000.00 for beets delivered in 1923. An average price paid for the 1923 crop was \$18.98 against \$7.91 in 1922 and \$6.35 for the 1921 crop. The contract price in 1924 was \$5.50 a ton, but the expected bonus was to raise this considerably.

The Roy Webb farm north of Spencer had 65 acres and might easily run 15 tons to the acre, it was said. In November there was agitation for a sugar beet factory in Spencer. Mr. Hicks of the Spencer Grocer Company said there could easily be 3,000 acres of beets in this immediate area, but a factory would necessitate raising \$200,000 and that was a horse of a different color.

More than 10,000 tons of beets were shipped from Langdon, Terril and Dickens, and more than 3,000 from Spencer alone. In December beet growers began receiving their checks and it appeared that they would receive about \$6 a ton if sugar remained near \$6 a hundred pound bag.

Why did the growing of sugar beets die out in this locality? I asked many individuals and received many answers. "Sugar beets grown in this soil did not contain a high percentage of sugar," one said.

"It required so much hand labor to thin, hoe, weed, and top," another said. "As labor prices rose it wasn't profitable."

"Times change," another informed me. "It got so there was more money and less labor difficulty with corn and soybeans."

"For one thing," a lady from Terril said, "the Mexican laborers and their families were housed in flimsy shacks. Accustomed to the warm climate of Mexico they simply could not stand our winters. They stayed all winter, you know, and had no income during the long, cold winter months, so they became discouraged and wanted to return to their native country.

There were some Jamaicans imported to work in the sugar beet fields around Winnevago, Minnesota," she continued, "and there was much discontent, partly because of inadequately heated shacks which were the only shelters available to them."

What ever the reason—the sugar beet industry did not last long in Clay county. And the picturesque Mexican men, women and children have long since departed. . . .

"I AM PROUD TO BE AN IOWAN"

From The Des Moines Tribune,
Tuesday, Aug. 10, 1948

WEST BRANCH, IA.—*Following is the prepared text of former President Herbert Hoover's address at his birthday celebration and homecoming here:*

I am glad to have your invitation to come again to this Iowa village where I was born.

Here I spent the first ten years of my boyhood. My parents and grandparents came to this village in the covered wagon—pioneers in this community. They lie buried over the hill. They broke the prairie into homes of independent living.

They worshiped God; they did their duty to their neighbors. They toiled to bring their children greater comfort, better education and to open to them a wider opportunity than had been theirs.

I am proud to have been born in Iowa. As I have said before, through the eyes of a 10-year-old boy it was a place of adventure and daily discoveries.

The wonder of the growing crops, the excitements of the harvest, the journeys to the woods for nuts and hunting, the joys of snowy winters, the comfort of the family fireside, of good food and tender care.

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