



Sugar Beet Production in the Arkansas Valley of Colorado

Editor's Note: Sugar beet production in the US has always been a boom or bust story and no where more than in the Arkansas Valley of South East Colorado. It was a bittersweet era for the Arkansas Valley: Sugar factories began to spring up around 1900, operated for three-quarters of a century, and abruptly closed, leaving water that once grew sugar beets up for grabs. The water that grew the sugar beets was, by the 1970s and 1980s worth more to growing cities than to a farm economy. Like dinosaurs from the past, evidence of old factories including boiler smoke stacks can still be seen driving through towns in the Arkansas Valley.

By 1900 major irrigation canals had been developed in the Arkansas Valley, and beet sugar companies saw a golden opportunity. Beet sugar would replace imports of cane sugar and foreign dependence, supporters claimed. Sugar factories sprang up in many small South East Colorado towns. Since beets grown in the Arkansas Valley had the highest sugar content of any in the world, it was enthusiastically predicted that just as Cripple Creek had been noted the world over for its gold production, the valley would become celebrated for its unexcelled adaptability to sugar beets. By 1909, according to a story in *The Pueblo Chieftain*, there were 16 sugar mills operating in Colorado, and seven were in the Arkansas Valley. One such mill opened in 1900, with a work force housed largely in tents for the first campaign was in the town of Sugar City which still carries that name today.

National Sugar Manufacturing Company closed the Sugar City operation in 1967, after a turbulent history. Because of the nature of worldwide market forces, often controlled with international tariffs, it made little difference how many tons of beets were grown locally. Crowley County farmers were able to make money in only three of every five years.

When the mill went down, Crowley County farmers were still owed about \$250,000—which was eventually paid back by Bill Carey, 20 years latter, amid much fanfare, with the help of Andy Rooney, a neighbor of Carey's. Carrey was the grandson of Francis King Carey, longtime president of National Sugar.

The American Beet Sugar Company, later to become American Crystal Sugar, was opened by the Oxnard brothers at Rocky Ford in 1900. The land for the sugar plant northwest of Rocky Ford was sold by B.B. Kouns, who settled in the Rocky Ford area in 1892.

American would later open mills in the Arkansas Valley as well. Most would soon close, but in the early 1900s, they were the most common sort of factory in the area. In Rocky Ford, growers had to be convinced there was a need to switch from already profitable crops to beets.

Still the communities prospered from the sugar factories. Rocky Ford grew from 500 to 2000 residents during the first few years of the sugar mill. Sugar City burst forth overnight. The town of Swink was created around a sugar factory. Other towns including Lamar and Las Animas had high hopes for sugar plants that lasted only a few years.

Economics began forcing closures. American Crystal Sugar bought and closed the Holly Sugar plant at Swink in 1959. American Crystal closed its Rocky Ford factory in 1978, amid a turbulent world market. Worldwide sugar price-fixing was one of the great scandals of the 1970s, and more than half of the beet sugar plants in the United States had already closed.

Up until the end, the companies relied both on their own leased land and commitments from farmers to grow beets. The collapse of the industry in the Arkansas Valley had a big indirect impact as farmers usually switched to less profitable crops. In 1978, nearly 2 million tons of sugar beets were grown in Colorado. Today, the figure is half that, with no commercial production at all in the Arkansas Valley.

As is very common in the irrigated west, the impact on water was huge as well.

Five years after the Sugar City plant closed, Crowley County farmers had sold off their most valuable asset, Twin Lakes (water reservoirs), to Colorado Springs, Aurora, Pueblo and later Pueblo West. A decade later, the water and reservoirs under the Colorado Canal were sold off to Colorado Springs and Aurora as most farmers gave up on farming with only their junior water rights.

American Crystal owned 54% of shares of the Rocky Ford Ditch and sold the water to Aurora in the 1980s. In another 20 years, Aurora had completed its buyout of the oldest water rights in the Lower Arkansas Valley. American Crystal moved to Morehead, Minnesota and now processes beets grown in the Red River Valley of North Dakota and Minnesota.

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