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**Immigrant labor's historic role in sugar beet industry**

UPPER THUMB — The thriving sugar beet industry known today is largely due to immigrant labor. Sugar company officials realized that in order for the industry to prosper, a lot of cheap and dependable labor was needed to help with the most labor-intensive crop there was to produce.

In 1902, 52 German-Russian families were brought from Nebraska to help cultivate and harvest beets in the Thumb, according to Dan Gutleben, who authored, “The Story of Pioneer Sugar.”

However, when World War I started, fewer German-Russians were used in the fields, so farmers began to hire more Hispanic field workers.

In the 1930s, sugar company officials went to San Antonio, Texas, to recruit migrant workers for the greater Saginaw area.

“Growing sugar beets was hard work. Migrants worked from sunup to sundown. It was a way for them to gain access to the United States, help get them out of poverty with a guaranteed a paying job,” explained Marylou Olivarez Mason, executive director of the Hispanic/Latino Commission of Michigan.

Hispanic migrant workers would arrive in March and work until November. In between, when they were not needed in sugar beet work, they would pick vegetables, blueberries, cherries and apples, as well as hoe other crops.

“The next group of immigrants to help in the beet fields were World War II prisoners of war (POWs),” said Wayne Dillon, who is the unofficial historian of the Colwood area and a retired educator.

More than 6,000 German POWs were held in Michigan at 32 POW campsites.

“The main POW camp was at Fort Custer, with satellite camps throughout the state,” said Gail Lesoski, who did extensive research for Caro’s sesquicentennial celebration a few years ago. “POWs were used as laborers. There were five satellite camps in the Upper Peninsula, with the rest scattered throughout the state.”

At one time, nearly 300 Nazi Prisoners of War (POWs) were housed at the Tuscola County Fairgrounds, and they worked fields in the area, according Dillon.

In 1945, there were 428,252 World War II POWs in the United States, consisting of German (371,683); Italian (51,156); and Japanese (5,413). Croswell and Caro had German POW camps, and in Pigeon, there was a camp of Italian POWs. The Italians were used to work in the Pigeon coal mines.

“At the end of World War II, the POWs were shipped back to their country, but many of them liked the American way of life and returned,” explained Dillon. “Many became friends with the farmers they worked for, and they helped them be able to return and start a new life here.”

By 1940, more than 60,000 migrants were working annually in agriculture in Michigan, and by 1957, it is estimated the population of migrant farm workers increased to 106,000, according to information from the study, “Migrant and Seasonal Workers in Michigan’s Agriculture.”

“It’s estimated there are still about 40,000 to 45,000 Mexican migrant workers.”

Over the years, sugar beet growing has become less labor intensive with the development of better planting, cultivating and harvesting equipment, as well as herbicides to help control weeds.