

Wire Down: Memories of the Hop Harvest

As told by Mollie Schneider Willman.
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Flowers of the humulus lupulus, ready for harvest

My mother grew up in one of many Portland, Oregon, Volga German families who provided short-term, temporary farm labor to growers in the Willamette Valley region. In the 1920's and early 1930's, they filled a seasonal need for reliable recruits to harvest specific crops such as strawberries, raspberries, and an essential beer-making ingredient: the vining, *humulus lupulus* plant, also known as hops.

As children, my sister and I enjoyed listening to our mother's stories of her hop picking adventures. Although the work was tedious, the late summer weather often blazing hot, and the living conditions sparse, my mother looked back fondly on those days spent in the company of family and friends. Her memories of picking hops follow.

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Every year, my bothers and sisters and I missed the first and last two weeks of school so that we could work alongside our family and friends in the fields. Berry picking took place in late spring, and we harvested hops in early September.

In those days, there were many farm owners seeking field workers. Some of our Albina Homestead neighbors worked the Smith Hop Yards, situated in several Salem locations. For my family, hop picking meant a trip to St. Paul and the Ernst Farm. The John Weitzel and Stricker families joined us on these occasions, making it something of a working "retreat" with family and friends.

My mother handled all of the preparation for these trips. She worked for days in advance to gather and pack staples: homemade roggebrot (ryebread), cured bacon and meat, flour, sugar, leavening, shortening, and foods like potatoes and onions that kept well. Mama also brought her canning supplies and jars out of storage to take with her, and she set aside washtubs, dishes, utensils, pots and pans, homemade lye soap, towels and such. Large trunks held everything for the family's two-week stay.

When the harvest time came, hop yard owner Norman Ernst sent a flatbed truck directly to our home. His driver loaded up our hobo-tied bundles of bedding and clothing, trunks packed full of food and supplies, and pillowcases stuffed with necessities. After all the provisions had been carefully loaded and arranged, we were lifted onto the high bed of the truck. With no side rails for protection, the rider's only security was to nestle between the bundles, everyone and everything packed in tightly for the long ride ahead.



*Butterfield Farm laborers campsite , ca. 1920's
Picture courtesy of Mollie Schneider Willman*

In the early days, Mr. Ernst supplied us with tents for camping. Later, he had a longhouse built with bunks that were lined with mattresses made of straw-filled gunnysacks. Partitions could be set up in the longhouse so that each family would have their own private living area. Until Mr. Ernst installed a pipe to bring in fresh water, the families shuttled water from a nearby stream and stored it in washbasins and large cooking pots.

We went down to the creek every morning to wash our hands and faces in the icy cold water, a brisk wake-up for the day to come. We also followed the time-honored rule: upstream water was for drinking, downstream water was for washing.

The women cooked meals outside where wood-stoked cook stoves were situated, sometimes under an open-air shelter filled with picnic-style tables and benches. With no ice boxes available for cold storage, we would fill heavy bottles and containers with perishables (milk, for example) then seal them tightly and sink them in the creek. A truck from the local grocery came by every afternoon when the field work was finished, providing us with a veritable market on wheels. The driver sold fresh meat, eggs, and other groceries.

Our mothers were “in charge” of the family camp, and they took care of everything and everyone. At the hint of dawn, the women were the first to rise, fixing breakfast and making ready for the day ahead. They worked the fields, watched after their children, prepared lunch, went back to the fields, cooked dinner, cleaned up, and got everyone ready for bed. Is it any wonder bedtime came early in the hop yards?

Throughout hop picking season, we had to wait until the morning dew was off the hops before we could start working. Contrary to the term, “picking hops,” the work involved stripping the flowers from the vines. Heavy leather gloves were a must for the task. Without gloves, tender hands and fingers would sustain miserable cuts. The older boys preferred to wrap their hands with stretchy black electricians tape to improve their speed and flexibility.

All but the littlest children pitched in with the work. While toddlers played, running through the rows, the older children were assigned the dual task of keeping an eye on the little ones while they worked the hop vines.

Each worker was sent to the field with a basket to fill. It took two full baskets to fill one hopsack. We were paid by the filled sack and its weight. Pickers were cautioned not to pick the vines “too clean;” some leaves were expected to be left in with the pickings. When we had finished stripping all of the lower vines, we would call out: “Wire Down!” A farm hand would lower the wires holding up the vine so that we could pick the upper portion. The receipt for filling a hopsack and carrying it back to the weighing station was one paper ticket for each sack turned in.



A family in the hop yard, ca. 1930's

A day's quota from the field was equal to one hundred full hopsacks which was enough, when stacked, to fill up the “hop house,” a barn used for drying the crops we picked.

While hop picking could be backbreaking and the heat was sometimes blistering, when the quota was met, our work was done -- even if it was early in the day. On the hot, sunny days after the hop house was filled, Mr. Ernst would load all the camp kids onto the flatbed to go swimming at nearby Horseshoe Lake. Sometimes a group of us would walk to the San Salvador Beach on the Willamette River for a swim, too.



Salem, OR, Public Library - Historical Pictures file

On rainy days, everyone gathered in the empty hop house. With no work to be done unless the hops were dry, we passed the time telling stories, singing, and playing together.

Our fathers stayed at home during our work campouts, tending to their full-time jobs in the Portland area. They drove to St. Paul on the weekends to bring extra supplies and spend time with us, but they rarely worked the fields.

Mr. Ernst also had a peach orchard, and the fruit was sold under the brand of Horseshoe Lake Peaches. Berries, apples, and grapes also grew in abundance on a nearby hillside. We were allowed to pick these fruits for ourselves and our families. My mother, with her canning supplies at hand, would can peaches right on the spot.

On the last day, after we were all packed and ready for the return trip, the women would each fill a pillowcase with dried hops to take home. From these my mother would make our family beer and, with the blackberries we had picked, my father made blackberry wine.

At the end of hop picking camp, my mother, who collected and kept the tickets earned by our field labor, turned all of our receipts in for tally and reimbursement. Mr. Earnst then paid her in cash according to our ticket count, and we were ready to go.

When the children returned to school, the teachers were lenient about making up lost lessons. They understood the importance of our work, not only to our financial wellbeing but to our culture, as well. The considerable effort involved in carrying out these temporary work arrangements benefited the local economy in many ways. The farmers, in need of good laborers, found hard workers in the Volga Germans they employed. Norman Ernst was so satisfied with our group that he paid my mother to recruit new pickers. The families, in turn, came home with extra money and fresh fruit and vegetables for their tables.

In casual conversations over the years, friends have asked what I did for fun in the summertime when I was a child. I would always tell them that I went hop picking with my family. This reply brought the strangest looks from people. “*Hop picking?*” came the inevitable question. “What on earth is hop picking?”

Sadly, they will never get to have that experience.



Ernst Family Farms is located at 3118 Horseshoe Lake Road NE in St. Paul, Oregon.