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University of Calgary Press

Regular, W. Keith. "Neighbours and networks: the Blood tribe in the southern Alberta economy, 1884-1939", University of Calgary Press, Calgary, Alberta, 2009.

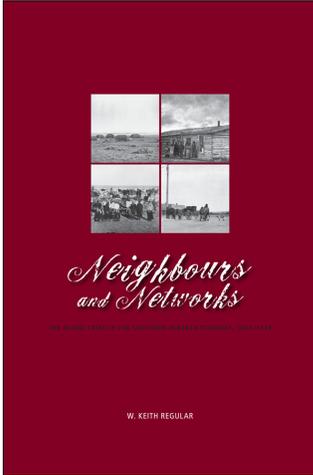
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NEIGHBOURS AND NETWORKS: THE BLOOD TRIBE IN THE SOUTHERN ALBERTA ECONOMY, 1884-1939

by W. Keith Regular

ISBN 978-1-55238-654-5

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4: 'All the Indians have gone to the beet': Blood Labour in the Raymond Sugar Beet Fields

INTRODUCTION

The local industry that offered the Bloods the greatest opportunity for the sale of their labour was the sugar beet industry at Raymond. However one rationalizes the Bloods' presence, it is clear that in this case Blood labourers were vital to sustaining the industrial process during the first phase of its operations from 1903 to 1915. They appear to have played a minor part in the industry thereafter. Though studies of the Bloods have paid little or no attention to their participation in the sugar beet fields, this work was, in many ways, central to both the industry and the Bloods' livelihood for more than a decade.¹

THE INDUSTRY: LOCAL EVOLUTION

During 1901, Jesse Knight, a Mormon from Provo, Utah, with some encouragement from Elliot Galt and John W. Taylor of the Latter Day Saints, chose a site east of the Blood reserve, at Raymond, to establish a sugar beet processing plant. Local settlers regarded the site as fit only for hay land, but Knight became convinced it had great potential for the cultivation of sugar beet.² The *Raymond Rustler* later defined the sugar beet business as: "an industry requiring a great amount of labor and the investment of a large sum of money." Interestingly, it pointed out that the two main requirements of money and manpower "were not obstacles but incentives." Incentives were so attractive that Knight hastily put down a \$50,000 deposit as security in an agreement with the North West

Irrigation Company and the Alberta Railway and Coal Company to purchase the 200,000 acres of land needed for his enterprise.³ Knight believed that, with suitable land and plenty of available labour, the outlook was exceedingly promising for an industry that could fill an insatiable consumer demand for a product at present entirely imported from outside the region.⁴ The Raymond area stood to reap great benefits as an estimated 150 people would have continuous employment in the factory and others would be “employed continuously by the company in their own fields, as experts[,] managers and office hands,” to say nothing of the farmers and workers who would be needed to grow beets.⁵

Initially the company hoped to cultivate enough of its beets to meet its own needs. This failed and by 1904 the company’s production methods changed with the enlistment of local farmers to grow beets under contract, an arrangement that was to be continued in future years. The Cardston *Alberta Star* revealed that the company planned to have 4,000 acres in beets, 3,000 cultivated by the company directly, with local farmers cultivating the remaining acres. The new arrangements promised to pay farmers \$5.00 per ton and a share of the government bounty on sugar, thus bringing the price paid to the farmer to \$5.35 per ton.⁶ Although it appeared lucrative, contract beet growing never solved the company’s perennial shortages. Dawson says that the company “was never able to secure more than 22,000 tons of beets a year, and in some years the tonnage dropped as low as 8,000.”⁷

Shortages became so severe that by 1913 J.W. Evans, Agricultural Superintendent of the Knight Sugar Co., tried to induce more local farmers to plant sugar beet by promoting both the agricultural and financial benefits of beet culture. Beet cultivation, he argued, brought a number of benefits, including the encouragement of crop rotation and an increased yield for other crops. The industry also created a demand for labour, thus making possible the employment of children who, otherwise, in his opinion, provided no economic benefit. Beet cultivation also offered price stability, since growers knew the price of their product before planting. The fact that farmers of small means could grow beets was also touted as an attraction. In 1914, for example, instructions were given in the *Leader* on how to prepare the land for planting.⁸ In a last-ditch attempt at persuasion, Evans waxed poetic, “Then let us raise the SUGAR BEET, No question bout the pay ‘Cause if we work the balance sheet[,] Will show a better day.”⁹

In case there were still skeptics, Evans went on to argue: “A comparison of a ten ton crop of sugar beets with a forty bushel crop of wheat

assumed to be grown on summer fallowed land” yielded a net profit per acre of \$18.70 for beets compared to \$14.05 for wheat or a difference of \$4.65 in favour of beet growing. “In addition to this the beet tops are worth from \$5.00 to \$10.00 for feed.” He also admonished the local population to support this Native industry: “If it is true, ... that ten pounds of imported sugar are used in Lethbridge to one of Raymond, we as citizens ought to be heartily ashamed of ourselves.... Lethbridge coal is good enough for us. So is Raymond Sugar.”¹⁰ The reported payroll of over \$10,000 during the plant production run was money kept in the community, and the employment of about three hundred men when other work was scarce was also calculated to tie the Knight Sugar Company fortunes to the general well-being of the community.¹¹

By December 1914, it was evident that the appeals to local loyalty, and the highlighting of benefits for the local economy, were not enough. In December 1914 the *Leader* reported that the Knight Sugar factory was planning to move its operation closer to Great Falls, Montana. With relocation imminent, the locals marshalled their influence and enthusiasm with a public meeting on December 20, 1914, to protest the move and attempt to secure “a guarantee of 2,000 acres of beets next year,” the minimum required to bring about a reconsideration of the proposed move.¹² It was too late, however, and by January 8, 1915, the *Leader* had to admit that, “Beets talk and 1,800 acres isn’t very strong language.”¹³ Consequently, on January 15, the paper announced the loss of the sugar plant to Layton, Utah.¹⁴ It was an ignominious, if temporary, end to an enterprise that had seemingly held out such promise.

THE BLOODS’ SIGNIFICANCE

There is no direct evidence that Jesse Knight had the Bloods in mind when he chose the site for his sugar factory. However, they quickly became so important to the sugar company’s operations that it is inconceivable that Knight was not aware of the benefits of tapping the potential labour pool of the Blood reserve and its 1,200 inhabitants directly to the west of the factory site.¹⁵ In its early stages of development, sugar beet agriculture was labour-intensive, and a readily available source of dependable cheap labour was essential.

In southern Alberta the sugar beet season generally began in April with seeding, with the all-important thinning occurring in June. Throughout the growing season, hand-cultivating and weeding were essential.

Weather permitting, the beets were ready to harvest by the end of October. Harvesting required the pulling and topping of the beets, with sugar-making beginning when the beets were delivered to the factory. Thinning and harvesting both required back-breaking intensive labour. Thinning in particular forced the worker to crawl on hands and knees through the field. The weather, especially during the fall harvest season, was often cold and wet and this added to the physical discomfort of those working in the fields.

The Bloods, permanent residents in the area, were an ideal labour source and, perhaps, Knight had them in mind when he claimed that acquiring sufficient workforce would present no difficulties.¹⁶ One fact is clear, there was no other identifiable body of potential labour in such close proximity to the factory. Where else could one hope to find hundreds of workers available at a moment's notice? When the opportunity was available and the conditions suitable, many Bloods left the reserve each fall to labour in the Raymond beet fields.

In anticipation of a smooth startup for the 1903 processing season, Knight began arranging for field hands and the first place he apparently turned to was the Blood Reserve. In November 1902, well before the first beet planting, company representative H.S. Allen wrote Blood Indian Agent James Wilson of the company's need for "A great number of hands ... to weed and thin beets." Allen hoped Blood labourers could be hired for this work. In an effort to get good value for the company's dollar, Allen attempted to give Wilson a lesson in Native work habits, pointing out that, in his opinion, women and children would do work as good as or better than the "bucks" and, should they prove willing, "large numbers" would be employed.¹⁷

In January 1903, company manager E.P. Ellison approached Wilson once again to arrange for the Bloods' assistance with the fall harvest. Although Wilson promised Ellison help in any way possible, he refused to guarantee any specific number of Bloods for the work because he feared that they might not be able to perform this new and specialized labour.¹⁸ By March, however, Wilson again promised, keeping Allen's reservations about male labour in mind, to encourage the employment of women and children in the beet fields. By late October, however, any labour shortage had been resolved and Agent Wilson was unable to find haulage teams to deliver hay to Lethbridge owing to the fact that "all the Indians have gone to the Beet [*sic*] cutting and hauling at Raymond."¹⁹ This arrangement with the Bloods was so rewarding that the company expressed a

desire to contract Blood labourers, by the acre or on a daily basis, to thin, hoe, dig, and top six hundred acres of beets from May to October of the following year. However, still lacking confidence in the Bloods' abilities, Wilson advised that they be restricted to thinning activities and that Whites be employed for the other tasks.²⁰ The company, however, was so impressed with the Bloods' work that it hoped to use Blood labourers to also put up hay.²¹

Initially the use of Blood labour was beneficial for all concerned, and in the opinion of the new Blood Agent, R.N. Wilson, the business relationship of the Blood reserve with Knight Sugar and the Raymond citizenry was worth encouraging. The new agent was also more aggressive on the part of the Bloods, and more confident of their suitability for beet work. Responding to a Department of Indian Affairs inquiry about Indian labour in the beet fields Wilson wrote:

... there is nothing in connection with the growing of beets that may not be learned by our Indians, and as the work appears to be profitable enough I am of the opinion that we should encourage some of them to go to Raymond when required by the Sugar Company. Other points in favor of the scheme are the fact that women and children can materially assist in the occupation.

Wilson also noted that the nature and timing of the work in the beet fields did not interfere with the Bloods' yearly round of activities on the reserve.²² In the one case where they conflicted with the issuance of treaty annuities, the DIA was willing to consider an adjustment of the payment schedule, so as not to interfere with the beet harvest or with the Bloods' opportunity to earn extra income. This was an important consideration in the Department's desire to turn Natives into self-supporting independent workers on the theoretical White model.²³

Increased sugar beet acreage planted by Knight Sugar resulted in greater demand for Blood labour at various critical times during the growing season. A query from the Home-Seekers Association, Cardston District, wondered whether the organization was at liberty to hire Blood labour "as we wish."²⁴ The DIA officials, however, were not about to let the Bloods be hired on an individual basis, perhaps to ensure that fair hiring practices were followed and that pay equity prevailed. Indian Affairs official Frank Pedley stipulated that Native labour be paid at the same rate as

image not available

Figure 4.1.

"Robert Nathaniel Wilson, [ca. 1895]." Glenbow Archives, ND-34-17. Robert Wilson, as Blood Indian agent, often defended the tribe's interests against both government regulations and local business concerns.

Whites, in cash, and that accommodation be provided to workers if they were not expected to provide their own. Both Pedley and (earlier) Wilson expressed a preference that the Bloods be hired for certain tasks only, and these generally were outside activities: a reflection of the Darwinist belief that Natives needed the outdoor freedom. As for wages, "It is stated that from \$1.00 to \$1.75 per day can be made."²⁵ In the end, however, the 1904 season likely brought less opportunity for labour wages in the sugar beet fields when drought saw both grain and sugar beet harvests reduced.²⁶

By the 1905 growing season, it was evident that Knight Sugar had come to rely on the Bloods as the main labour source for their beet production. That fall manager Ellison once again asked for Bloods at Raymond and reminded the agent that they would be paid "what it is worth."²⁷ Blood workers, in turn, began to count on the employment at Raymond as an important source of yearly income. Depending on the numbers employed, the

sugar beet work was profitable. The Department reported that “Some of the Blood Indians ... earned over \$2,000 in topping and hauling beets.”²⁸ In fact this work became so profitable that the Bloods avoided less remunerative work. For example, the delivery of twenty-five tons of hay requested by George Skelding of Macleod was delayed because most of the Bloods and their teams were in the Raymond beet fields. In fact the exodus from the reserve was so complete that, on October 23, the agent was not even able to arrange delivery of a load of sawdust because of a lack of freighters and equipment.²⁹

In 1906, the *Calgary Herald* recognized both the Bloods’ capacity for work and the skill acquired after three years of experience with all aspects of sugar beet cultivation. The writer noted: “One likes best to watch the Indians at work; they make their long, rapid strokes with inimitable grace and the utmost nonchalance. When the whites are listlessly and laboriously getting in the last hours of a long, hot day, [the Indians] seem quite as unexhausted as in early dewy morning.” This opinion does not support the contention that one of the main dissatisfactions with Indian labour was that they damaged beets during the thinning stage.³⁰ The acquired skill and dedicated labour did indeed bring its rewards. The company estimated that about \$12,000 was paid to Natives in wages in 1905. Although the company had to estimate what was paid by local farmers and did not know if all the labourers were Bloods, it is fairly certain the vast majority of workers were indeed Bloods from the reserve.³¹

In the fall of 1906, with a fourth harvest imminent, the importance of the Bloods’ contribution to the Raymond sugar beet industry was blatantly obvious. One local farmer using Blood labour wrote Agent Wilson in the hope that the coming annuity payments could be delayed so as not to interfere with the harvest. To impress upon Wilson the urgency of his request, he added: “If you can arrange this for them it will be a great favor to the Knight Sugar Co. and us as we are *depending* on them to harvest the crop.”³²

On October 24, E.P. Ellison made the case for Knight Sugar with the same urgency. He pointed out that Blood workers had employment until December 1 and requested a deferment of annuities for thirty days.³³ The request was accommodated but this was later found to be a mistake as the poor weather cut the harvest short. Wilson wrote, with some irritation and concern, that the delay in treaty payments had left many of the Bloods short of funds to purchase necessary winter clothing. But when weather or culture did not dictate otherwise, the Bloods were dedicated workers.

Agent Wilson's report for 1908 observed that during the previous spring "several hundreds" of the Bloods secured a month's employment thinning beets "and in the month of October practically the whole population of the reservation was busy harvesting beets in the same fields."³⁴

An apparent exception to the general rule of Indians being designated field labourers occurred when a Blood by the name of Prairie Chicken grew beets for Knight Sugar on contract. The factory leased him ten acres, ploughed it for twenty dollars, disked and levelled it for ten, furnished seed and planted it for eighteen, supplied needed water for six, and charged him thirty-five dollars for rent, for a total investment of eighty-nine dollars. The company agreed to purchase his beets at five dollars a ton delivered to the factory (a distance of one and a half miles) and speculated that "with good care he should get from 8 to 10 tons per acre from the land." The ever-cautious Agent Wilson sanctioned this contract on the understanding that the payments were to be deducted from the sale of the beet crop and that the Department would in no way be responsible should the joint venture fail.³⁵ Prairie Chicken experienced some initial success as he was reported thinning his ten acres of beets in July.³⁶ The final results of his efforts remain a mystery.³⁷ Were he successful, however, Prairie Chicken, even with the minimum estimated harvest, stood to net \$311.00 on the sale of his beets.

En masse or individually, the Bloods' contribution to the sugar beet industry was significant. Royal North West Mounted Police Commissioner A.B. Perry believed the Bloods' participation critical due to the large numbers involved and because of the scarcity of non-Native labour. Officer J.O. Wilson, Lethbridge, felt it was impossible to carry on the beet industry except for the Indians.³⁸ This 'stoop labor' was so difficult that it was considered "too tedious for the white man, the yellow labor was tried, but without success. The work was then given to the Indians, who, with their stolid natures, have proved to be the most successful."³⁹ Given prevailing attitudes about the nature of the work, and the belief that it was unsuited to Whites, Natives were especially desired for both the thinning and harvesting phases of the operation. Unappreciated in the above assessment was the willingness and determination of the Bloods to earn a living even at the cost of physically demanding labour in what generally would be considered the most uncomfortable of circumstances.

Sporadic attempts to import labour for the beet fields had no permanent impact on the industry, and in the fall of 1911 Knight Sugar once again anticipated the Bloods entering into their employ. Clearly, Blood

labourers were needed, and Raymond Knight implored Agent Julius Hyde, “we would like if possible for you to let all the Indians come that you can spare, thinking that it will both benefit ourselves and the Indians also.”⁴⁰ Almost a month later, Knight Sugar urgently requested a deferral of treaty payments so as not to hinder harvesting and immediately stated the crux of the company’s problem. The Bloods’ presence at Raymond was essential “as we are very short of help, and will likely lose a lot of our beets unless the Indians remain to help us.”⁴¹ By this time, company dependence on the Bloods’ labour throughout the various phases of growing and harvesting sugar beets was all but complete. Missing, however, was the realization of this reality and so the Knight Sugar Company failed to appreciate precarious reduced margins for success, which were directly related to the treatment of the people in their labour pool.

INDUSTRY PROBLEMS

Although the Bloods were critical to the industry, an important fact not fully grasped by the company was that the Bloods did not view sugar beet harvest labour as essential to their own survival. Sometimes they had an aversion to the taxing work and found other income opportunities more appealing. On other occasions they were indifferent to the benefits of the income earned. These changing attitudes proved a source of great frustration to Knight Sugar. According to Agent James Wilson, in October 1903, approximately 150 Bloods were engaged in filling hay contracts and were thus not available for sugar beet labour. He sensibly enough concluded that the trip to Raymond was too difficult for the elderly who were available. It was only several weeks later, with their other work completed, that the harvest at Raymond received the attention of the larger work force.⁴²

Many Bloods were willing to work in the beet fields, but only if the times they were required meshed with their own needs, in other words, when obligations and preference did not dictate their presence elsewhere. They considered themselves free and independent and unwilling to become part of a captive labour pool where others largely determined the value of their labour.

That the Bloods were unwilling to entirely adapt their routines to accommodate Knight Company’s seasonal demands was a realization not easily grasped by the whole community. J.W. Woolf, a company manager, wrote Agent Wilson in apparent frustration, in September 1903, that the sugar factory was prepared to hire up to four hundred Bloods at the White

labour rate of eight dollars per acre for topping and throwing the beets into collection wagons. There was a warning, however, that, should Wilson fail to convince the Bloods to appear at Raymond, he, Woolf, would be “compelled to bring in foreign labour.”⁴³ Hartley reports that the company hired seventy-five Chinese labourers the previous spring but is silent on the success of this venture.⁴⁴ Here, perhaps, is an indication of the White attitude to the labour-intensive work. Woolf’s promise to now pay at the White labour rate suggests that initially the Bloods had been paid less and this may well explain the source of his current frustration as well as his appeal.

In 1904 Knight Sugar wanted about fifty Bloods to work its fields but, in light of experience and expectation, stipulated that they needed a guarantee that their contracts would be fulfilled. This proviso grew out of an unhappy experience in the fall of 1903 when “a large number” of Blood workers, not unexpectedly, abandoned the beet harvest to receive their treaty payment. Aware of the problem, the Department expressed the desire that arrangements be made so that, in future, the one activity might not interfere with the other.⁴⁵

That said, however, Agent Wilson was unwilling to offer the guarantees that Knight Sugar wanted: that the Bloods perform stated amounts of work. His argument was that the beet work was “new to them and they must acquire considerably more familiarity with it than they now possess before being in a position to sign contracts.” Wilson added for good measure: “Our Indians are not Chinamen to be farmed out by bosses [*sic*].”⁴⁶

Wilson also took the opportunity to comment on what he perceived as the double standard applied by the Company in the employment of Indian labour: “When harvesting beets in the fall the hauling in, one of the most profitable jobs, is done by White men, Mormons, and as our Indians have lots of wagons and horses we should insist upon the Indians being permitted to haul in all the roots ‘lifted’ by themselves.”⁴⁷ Wilson’s observation may in part explain the Bloods’ willingness to abandon the backbreaking labour in the fields at treaty payment time. Treaty money, free for the taking, certainly had more allure, especially when one recognized, as Blood beet workers surely did, that the least physically demanding and best paying work was reserved for Whites.

It is also possible that the avoidance of work in the beet fields by some Bloods was an effort on their part to break the agent’s control over their economic decisions. The agency’s attempt, in 1904, to have Knight Sugar garnishee the wages of Bloods in debt to the Department succeeded in

finding only one of those on the list working for the company. Manager E.P. Ellison speculated that the remainder worked for local farmers and at any rate he doubted if the agent's request would be granted.⁴⁸ He likely recognized that to accede to the Agent's wishes would compromise his future appeals to the Bloods for their labour.

The 1906 growing season strained relations between the Blood labourers and individual contractors at Raymond, the result of an apparent bid by contractors to force down the costs of Blood field labour. But the Bloods were having none of it and by late November the sugar beet crop remained unharvested. This situation brought an urgent request from one contractor, J.T. Smellie, to Agent Wilson for some two hundred Bloods to work his seventy acres, and three hundred acres belonging to Knight Sugar as soon as the weather proved favourable. Agent Wilson's response, however, contradicted Smellie's view that only inclement weather was responsible for the delay. Although the weather was, at the time, too cold and wet to allow for outside work, Wilson stated:

Should such a thing occur as a warm spell I will be glad to send over any Indians who can be found that are *willing* to go but I have serious doubts of your being able to get any further material assistance from here this year. Those to whom I have mentioned the matter ridicule the idea of returning and blame the beet farmers for the present situation. They say that they were at Raymond quite long enough to lift the whole crop had they not been delayed by attempts to force down the price and other vexations. If a period of mild weather does come such as to encourage an attempt to dig beets you had better come over and see what you can do yourself with the Indians.⁴⁹

It appears that Knight Sugar had adopted what Pentland terms a free market and commodification view of beet labour, intending to "hire labour freely for as short or long a time as it was wanted, at the lowest wages necessary to obtain it." The company, however, seems to have missed that it was not expedient for it to force the issue with the Bloods as there was no surplus pool of labour to manipulate and so the cost of labour would not default to its own low market price, determined by competition.⁵⁰ Essentially it was a seller's and not a buyer's market.

The Bloods' abandonment of the harvest was frustrating for the industry and there was likely some temptation to criticize their work habits. But

there were none more interested than the Department and Agent Wilson in having the Bloods perform productive labour for which they received cold hard cash. Wilson's comments and concern leaves no doubt that, on this occasion, the beet harvest, with its exposure to the elements, was beyond sensible human endurance. Suitable and comfortable housing was needed for shelter and warmth and warm clothing were required against the chill of the fall damp and snow. It is difficult to blame the Bloods for abandoning the beet work when plain common sense dictated such a course of action.

The Bloods also brought with them to the beet fields particular habits that frustrated their employers. When J.T. Smellie was approached by two Bloods for work in February of 1907, he indicated a willingness to employ one, provided he "would consent to stay steady during the season ... but they [Indians] must make up their minds to stay with it and only go to town Saturday afternoons." For this they would be paid twenty cents an acre with the expectation of making three or four dollars a day if they were dedicated. Similarly Ellison wrote the reserve agent hoping to recruit fifteen teamsters willing to work, not for days, but for months, at forty dollars a month without board. Clearly the Bloods did not subscribe to non-Native contract labour expectation and work habits and so Ellison queried Wilson on "how we can best handle the Indian labor in the Beet fields."⁵¹ The Bloods' own preferences and needs, the labour-intensive nature of the work, employee and employer relations, and the weather all contributed to produce a less than ideal experience for the Bloods. Few of them showed up in the fields for the thinning operations in June 1907 because Fourth of July celebrations in Montana proved more of an attraction than thinning beets at Raymond.⁵² Regarding the Bloods' attitude towards the beet harvest, the agent observed: "the Indians will drop it and come home as soon as the weather gets too cold for such work no matter what quantity happens to be still in the ground."⁵³ This must have been particularly galling to the company that was, during 1906-7, experiencing its "high point in productivity."⁵⁴

Some problems encountered with Blood labourers, however, were rooted in the nature of the industry and were more the making of the employer than the shortcomings of the employees. The Bloods were often affected by the restrictive and demanding agreements between contractors and Knight Sugar. A contract between Knight Sugar Company and Thomas Bennett, for example, indicates that Bennett tied himself to specific obligations that included the requirement that his beets test at 12 per

cent saccharine and 80 per cent purity. Bennett also had to rent and keep in good repair the company boarding house. The contract further stipulated that Bennett produce a specified tonnage of beets, accept the expense for both the preparation and rental of the land at \$1.00 per acre, and other per acre costs as follows: ploughing at \$2.00, smoothing at \$0.85, seed at a rate of \$1.35, planting at \$0.40, cultivating twice at \$0.80, ploughing up the beets at \$1.25, and haulage of the beets to the factory at \$2.35.⁵⁵ Little wonder that contractors such as Bennett felt themselves squeezed between Knight Sugar and their hired labour. They had to agree initially to costs and wages based on a sugar beet whose quality and quantity they could not guarantee or predict.

The 1907 season brought the first public admission that the industry was not achieving its expected potential and that the whole venture was in trouble. The *Raymond Chronicle* reported in May that beet seeding had begun late and that beet acreage was down from the previous year because of fewer contracts. The paper attributed this shortfall to ‘labour scarcity’ and stated “although Indian labor will be available as far as it can be made to go, the drawback being that there is not enough of it” was likely an indication that contractors were not competitively remunerating labour in a market with expanding and competitive opportunities.⁵⁶ Adleman says that a period of increasing harvest wages began in 1907 and that “Wages rose by almost 60 percent between 1907 and 1912.”⁵⁷

The accuracy of the *Chronicle’s* assumption about the shortage of labour is difficult to gauge. Farmers have always planted their crop without assurance of harvest labour and fluctuations in availability are common to the history of agriculture in the West.⁵⁸ One never knew how this situation would change from one season to the next. Perhaps in this period of increasing harvest costs contractors unwilling to accept the risks as being worth the effort turned their fields to crops that were less labour-intensive and therefore cheaper to harvest.⁵⁹

There is no doubt, however, that Knight Sugar believed labour to be the main problem as later in the month the *Chronicle* reported that Manager Ellison had returned from a business trip east in which he had made arrangements to ensure adequate workers for the approaching season. According to the *Chronicle* “Labors [*sic*] agencies and emigration bureaus were brought into requisition and we are assured labor will be shot in here in such quantities that a scarcity will not again occur.”⁶⁰ This new source of labour was likely calculated to arrive for the fall harvest as the *Chronicle* reported an “Indian Influx” completing the June thinning activity. “These

image not available

image not available

Figure 4.2.
“Field of sugar
beets, Raymond,
Alberta, July 1904.”
Glenbow Archives,
PD-310-153. A pic-
ture of the expanse
of sugar beet fields
where many Bloods
did backbreaking
labour.

nimble fingered ‘bloods’ are hailed,” the *Chronicle* said “as the salt of the situation who will save the crop.”⁶¹ Without the Bloods the beet industry would indeed have been in dire straits, its very survival doubtful.⁶²

In 1908 another solution to the labour shortage appeared with the report that Knight Sugar had entered into contract to have its lands operated by a Japanese “syndicate.” This new arrangement, along with the importation of labourers from British Columbia, was, the *Alberta Star* said, essential to the survival of the beet business at the present time.⁶³ Strangely this reported labour shortage is not in keeping with Agent Wilson’s report that practically the whole Blood reservation was engaged in the beet fields during the 1907 season. On October 9, the *Star* reported that the Raymond beet harvest was on in earnest with the best crop in some years. The respite was brief. Although beet acreage reached its height during the 1908 season of 5,200 acres, it decreased annually thereafter. No report was made of Japanese or Indian labourers at work on the 1908 beet harvest.⁶⁴

The continual preoccupation with the need to import labour was based on the view that the Blood labourers were undependable. What was not recognized, however, was that the Bloods refused to become a captive labour pool at the beck and call of Knight Sugar. The rhythms of their own lives and the potential offered by other opportunities determined how attractive sugar beet labour would be at any particular time or season. In the fall of 1911, for example, there was concern that looming treaty payments, an occasion for which the Indians were not willing to be absent from the reserve, would leave the beet fields short of essential labour. On October 12, Agent Hyde warned Raymond Knight to expect an exodus of Bloods from the area for treaty payment. Hyde agreed, however, even in the face of the Bloods’ objections, to arrange treaty payments at an earlier date so as not to compromise the company’s harvest interests.⁶⁵ Anticipating that the beet harvest would be finished by the end of October, Hyde set treaty days for November 7 and 8. A fall storm curtailed the harvest and left the company facing the prospect of having to leave half its beet crop in the ground as the planned dates loomed. Hyde was then asked to postpone the new treaty payment date to November 20.⁶⁶ Despite urgent appeals, Hyde’s hands were tied and only a few Bloods worked the company’s fields in the fall harvest of 1911. To make matters even more difficult for the company, there was a rumour that the agent wanted the Indians to demand “\$8.00 per acre for pulling and topping beets” or else they should quit. If true, this would present a serious problem as the industry claimed that this work was only worth \$5.00 an acre.⁶⁷ That there were problems with Knight Sugar

operations is illustrated by the fact that the company acquired twenty-three men from Utah to help with sugar manufacturing in October.⁶⁸

Labour shortages were again a problem in the fall of 1912 when the company requested “about fifty Indians ... at once” for beet field labour.⁶⁹ The difficulty with recruitment this time, however, was due to the fact that the Bloods had found more profitable employment elsewhere and thus the company faced stiff competition for hands. Although some of the Bloods agreed to go, Hyde advised that because of the demand for “Indian labor” many of the Bloods had already departed the reserve for Lethbridge and so Knight Sugar was directed there in its search for more field hands.⁷⁰ The company had earlier done a recruitment campaign for field labour in Europe and succeeded in acquiring fifty-eight labourers from Belgium – not enough, apparently, to satisfy its labour demands.⁷¹

Another aspect of the company’s difficulty recruiting sufficient Blood labour may have been of its own doing: its willingness to surrender an individual’s wages to the agent at his request. Thus in 1913 the company garnisheed the wages of one Hind Bull, sending Agent Hyde \$14.55 for the ten and one half days worked.⁷² The unfortunate Hind Bull had earned only \$15.55 in total of which one dollar went for horse feed.⁷³ The end result was that Hind Bull pocketed nothing for his efforts. This behaviour was not likely to endear the company to him or to encourage his working in company fields if employment was available elsewhere.

RETROSPECTIVE AND CONCLUSIONS

Critics then, and scholars since, have attempted to explain the failure of the Knight Sugar Company in 1915. On April 26, 1917, in a retrospective, the *Cardston Globe* presented its version of this “most unfortunate chapter of Raymond’s history,” and correctly observed that acrimony between Knight Sugar and local farmers was the problem. “The latter could not understand the attitude of the company,” the *Globe* observed, “while they in turn seemingly would not cater to the wishes of the man on the land. The result was ill feeling, non-cooperation and finally – no beets.” The troubles, the *Globe* believed, began with minor grievances, the farmers wanting concessions – the nature of which the paper did not explain – which the company did not give, so farmers abandoned beet cultivation. The company then undertook beet growing on its own account, and “A certain class of outside labor was imported but it was not a success. Then another race [Japanese?] was brought in but they were unable to grow sufficient beets to make the

running of the factory profitable.” The *Globe* stated that the fault was not with the country, which was well suited to the growing of sugar beets, and “not in the ability of the farmers to grow beets but in his ability to overlook the shortcomings of the Sugar company.”⁷⁴ Thus the failure of the industry was put to the failings of man, not the land.

John F. Sweeting, Industrial Commissioner for the C.P.R., had, in 1914, investigated the industry at Raymond. In a presentation before the Western Canada Irrigation Congress, which met in Kamloops, British Columbia, in July 1916, Sweeting argued that the history of sugar beet cultivation made its ‘unlimited’ potential self-evident, but it “remains a question of capital and labour to extend production up to market requirements.”⁷⁵ Sweeting did not give details about the labour but his contention was supported by another beet grower who stressed, “I cannot produce sugar beets at Agassiz [B.C.] and pay twenty cents an hour for ordinary labour and twenty-five cents an hour for a team, and pay interest on \$150 an acre on land. That would be the quickest way for me to starve to death.” He concluded that the biggest obstacle to success in the business was ‘labour.’⁷⁶ An observer from the Lethbridge Experimental Farm presented the argument that the collapse of the Knight Sugar Co. operations was due to the failure of management to “bring in the proper labour” creating dependence “on local labour and Indian labour. There were other reasons, too, but that was the principal reason.... If the manager does not see to that question of labour; that is, thinning and topping, the factory cannot be operated successfully.” Another observer unequivocally stated, “the labour *has* to be imported.”⁷⁷ Raymond Knight also believed the latter to be true and reportedly said “the sugar industry failed because the *proper labor* was not available at the proper time.”⁷⁸

Unfortunately, because the critics did not elaborate on the problems with local or Indian labour, it is difficult to evaluate these criticisms. The company had imported labour and that too had failed. Despite evidence to the contrary, both critics and supporters of the sugar beet industry regarded labour as the weakest link in the chain of factors that hampered the successful development of Knight Sugar. Considering the period in which this industry had its rise and fall, one should not find this conclusion surprising. This was a difficult time for labour/management relations in Canada as workers strove to share in the booming Canadian economy during the pre-World War I period. This was followed by depression and unemployment in 1913 and 1914.⁷⁹ Much of this unrest occurred in Alberta and British Columbia, and it is inconceivable that this atmosphere of

conflict, along with the employer's own attitudes, did not contaminate the view of labour's place in the failure of Knight Sugar.

Labour problems undoubtedly played a role in the operational difficulties experienced by Knight Sugar, but how significant a part is questionable. A major labour problem beyond anyone's control was *demand* and the resulting market-driven wage levels. It is hard to escape the conclusion that sugar beet culture was simply unprofitable in inflated wage circumstances and that the industry could not afford to meet market demands for labour.

There were other factors that compounded this industry's problems. According to sociologist C.A. Dawson, it was the combination of weather, supply, and labour that ultimately brought about the failure of Knight Sugar. The problems for the industry were rooted in the initial miscalculations about the Southern Alberta environment. The Mormons had settled in that part of Alberta during a cycle of 'wet years,' and so erroneously concluded the area suitable for sugar beet agriculture. The arrival of Chinooks that resulted in the thawing of beets, after they had been initially frozen, were, if not common, certainly more than rare occurrences. Consequently, according to Dawson, the company failed to secure sufficient beets, never more than 22,000 tons, sometimes as low as 8,000.⁸⁰ According to one estimate, once production began, the Raymond plant required 400 tons of beets for a twenty-four-hour run, and the season lasted for approximately two months.⁸¹ Both Raymond Knight and J.E. Ellison had criticized the lack of support from local farmers as one of the problems.⁸² In part this was explained by the farmers' preference for growing grain or raising livestock, likely because such activities were more traditional, familiar, and predictable.⁸³

Industry boosters promoted beet cultivation, and indeed mixed farming in general, on the basis of a false economy. Far from being economically profitable, beets, requiring approximately 115 hours of hand labour to the acre, were "more than ten times the labour required for an acre of grain."⁸⁴ It was the cost of labour, not the supply that could alter this reality. Had the Bloods been willing to work for Knight Sugar for less than they could command for their labour elsewhere, they would have alleviated the pressure on the company thus allowing it to stagger on into oblivion. However, to expect the Bloods to subsidize the company with their labour was totally unrealistic.

The concerted efforts of the company in the latter phase of its existence to arrange for a more extensive beet cultivation supports the contention

that it was a shortage of sugar beets, not labour, that was the main reason for the difficulties experienced by Knight Sugar. Production for 1907 fell below that of 1906 because contract growers were abandoning the enterprise or reducing their cultivated acreages.⁸⁵ Labour shortages were a frontier reality, but the sugar beet industry should have been no more affected by labour problems than other sectors of agriculture, perhaps less so.⁸⁶ Beet harvesting occurred in October and November, after the harvesting of wheat and other grains had generally finished, and when, therefore, one could anticipate a surplus of harvesters, or at least little competition from other sectors of the agricultural economy and when labour costs might conceivably be driven down. The fact that the plant closed when the government's twelve-year tax exemption ended is a good indication that sugar beet cultivation was not a profitable enterprise.⁸⁷

Although more extensive investigation is required to confirm the part they played, other market factors were likely significant in the demise of Knight Sugar. One contract grower complained of being left with a "Hinky Dinky narrow track" when the rail line between Cardston and Raymond was upgraded to standard gauge and so he contemplated leaving his beets in the ground.⁸⁸

There are also indications that Knight Sugar lacked a certain marketing savvy. The company cancelled a sales agreement it had with Nicholson & Bain, Calgary, apparently because of a lack of sales of its product. Nicholson & Bain protested that the problem was not of its making but could instead be attributed to Knight Sugar's failure to meet consumer demand for product in twenty-pound sacks. Furthermore, an Edmonton retailer complained that one of its competitors was receiving Knight Sugar at "jobbers" prices and threatened to "cut out Raymond sugar" unless this matter were rectified.⁸⁹ Indeed, only 20 per cent of the 46,229 bags of sugar produced in 1906 were sold.⁹⁰ Quality control (the company complained to one group of contractors about beets falling to the ground and not being properly cleaned before they were loaded), the importance of government subsidies, transportation costs, competition from non-regional producers, and government regulation are other factors worthy of detailed study.⁹¹

As indicated above, others agree with Dawson's assessment of the failure of the initial enterprise, and, although these various factors, compounded by labour difficulties, may explain the ultimate failure of the Knight Sugar Company, they do not explain its survival for more than a decade. Clearly Blood labourers were pivotal to sustaining the business. True, the relationship between the Bloods, on the one hand, and Knight

Sugar and its contractors, for whom the Bloods worked, on the other, was not without its irritants. And it may well be that the company and local farmers, acting on the expectation or perception of undependable Natives, wanted an alternate source of labour. But the simple fact was that no other was available locally, and importing labour proved to be no solution; indeed, it was as problematic as it was helpful. Cecilia Danysk has observed that ‘hired hands’ were notoriously unreliable since “Agricultural labourers operated within the framework of capitalism but they pursued their own aims, which were often antithetical to those of capital.”⁹² The Bloods, however, were locally situated, unlike migratory harvesters. Year after year they provided honest, and for the most part dependable, labour in the beet fields. Both Knight Sugar and the contractors readily admitted the Bloods were essential to all aspects of beet cultivation but particularly valuable at harvest.

Unfortunately for the industry, the Bloods, like the hired hands they were, refused to subvert their own interests for the sake of the sugar beet, even though the agent occasionally altered the tribal calendar for the benefit of the company. Blood workers were also aware of the value of their labour and, as any sensible group in a competitive market, sold it to the highest bidder. Had Knight Sugar and its contractors been less determined to drive a hard bargain, they would likely have gained a better appreciation for the Bloods’ abilities in the sugar beet fields. When wage offers for sugar beet labour were too low, however, they simply withheld their services from the market or sold to a higher bidder.

But the Bloods, as producers of labour and consumers of goods in the capitalist economy of which they were clearly a part, were willing to work more often than not, and as a consequence Knight Sugar survived as long as it did. The industry had not by 1915–16 reached such a state of mechanization that it could do without significant amounts of manual labour. An opportunity to break the fetters of the agent’s control and to gain additional income and economic independence lured the Bloods into the Raymond beet fields. No amount of chicanery or cajoling short of accommodating the Bloods’ cultural and economic agenda, and their desire for adequate pay, could keep them there. Knight Sugar and local farmer contractors never mastered the art of dealing with a homogeneous and local labour pool such as the Bloods who generally responded in concert with their own cultural imperatives. Thus there were few strategies of divide and conquer that could be employed against them in efforts to tie some or all to the

seasonal demands and ever-changing whims of the sugar beet industry and local contractors.

The closing of the Knight Sugar Company factory at Raymond ended the initial phase of the sugar beet industry in southern Alberta. The second phase began with the reopening of a factory, in 1925, by the Canadian Sugar Factory, Ltd., a subsidiary of the Utah-Idaho Sugar Company.⁹³ It appears that the Bloods played only a minor and sporadic role in the newly reconstituted industry, and why this is so is not entirely clear. A possible explanation remains the relative prosperity experienced on the reserve and the Bloods' pre-occupation with their own affairs. In the first year of production and harvest, 1925, the company imported Hungarians from British Columbia to do the contract labour of thinning and hoeing for eight dollars a day. With the crop ready to harvest, however, the local press again trumpeted the shortage of labour, a problem that also plagued the 1926 harvest season.⁹⁴ On this occasion, the labour problem was expected to be solved by settling immigrant families "right on the farms of the growers," thus ending the need to use "transient labour."⁹⁵

The industry was by this time in transition. Hill Spring students were given a two-week leave from school to assist in the 1927 harvest, which was expected to produce 45,000 to 50,000 tons of beets.⁹⁶ There was also a new invention in the beet field, an automatic beet loader developed by Frank Leavitt of Glenwood, which could "easily load 400 or 500 lbs. of beets at a single operation." Drawn behind a beet wagon, it speeded up collection. The *News* predicted that this invention would change the nature of beet harvesting, giving "promise of eliminating one of the most backbreaking and disagreeable phases of beet-growing, for the loading of beets into the wagon has always been the bug-bear of the be[e]t field."⁹⁷

When the sugar factory began its production run in October 1928, the nature of the work had changed such as to permit the employment of young high school girls for the lighter work but the identity of the remainder of the 200 employees is not clear.⁹⁸ At the close of the beet harvest in November, it was noted that "A number of foreign laborers left Hill Spring" while others found employment with the local farmers.⁹⁹ It was now obvious that the sugar beet industry had ceased to depend on local sources for the bulk of its labour needs.

The references to the Bloods' participation in the sugar beet industry during the 1930s and subsequently are sporadic. It is interesting to note, however, that, in a collection of reminiscence put together by Zaharia and Fox, no fewer than six Kainai elders born in the second and third decades

of the twentieth century recall working the sugar beet fields. Elder Margaret Fox (born 1917) noted “In late spring and in the fall many people went to work on the sugar beet farms.”¹⁰⁰ Esther Goldfrank makes reference to Blood sugar beet labour during the 1930s but offers no indication of the extent of this work. There is evidence to suggest that, although they may have participated on an individual family basis during the 1930s and 1940s, other groups, such as Hungarian immigrants and Japanese Canadians, dominated labour in the beet fields.¹⁰¹ During the war, in particular, there was a captive labour pool of interned Japanese-Canadians, German prisoners of war, and Canadian conscientious objectors pressed into the service of the beet industry. Curiously, Ronald Laliberté noted that an attempt by the sugar beet industry to recruit Blood reserve labour in 1953 was unsuccessful but he does not explain why.¹⁰²

What is uncertain at this point is whether the Bloods abandoned the sugar beet fields because they could not command fair remuneration for their labour or simply because more lucrative opportunities existed on the reserve or elsewhere. If the latter was the reason for the Bloods’ behaviour, then clearly the Bloods suffered no marginalization by their failure to participate. Indeed, if anything, it was the industry that was marginalized and forced, with Government of Canada complicity, to import under coercion cheaper northern Alberta and Saskatchewan Native labour in efforts to sustain viability.¹⁰³

Not much has emerged about the Bloods’ integrative economic pursuits in the decade of the twenties and thirties, but there is no reason to suppose that their energies waned or that their desire to participate in local economic activities subsided. Kainai elder Harold Chief Moon (born 1918), for example, laboured on a variety of projects at Fort Macleod, Claresholm, Hill Spring, and Glenwood.¹⁰⁴ The changing economic fortunes of the twenties and the economic collapse of the thirties brought more pressing problems for the Bloods and their neighbours. This period saw the collapse of commodity prices in the post-World War I period and the devastation of the Blood cattle herd during the winter of 1919–20. Those individuals engaged in agriculture experienced some success during the 1920s, but their enterprise alone could not wholly sustain the tribe. Such conditions made the search for additional income even more pressing.¹⁰⁵

