

Hope Sykes, Teacher and Author

Her Legacy: Bringing to public attention the working conditions of Germans from Russia who labored in sugar-beet fields

Before she married Howard Sykes, who owned a gas station on Vine Drive, Hope Williams taught at nearby Plummer School, where many of the students were children of Germans from Russia and the school was surrounded by sugar-beet fields. These immigrants had come to the area to work in the fields, since the environment was much like the Volga River Valley where they had farmed for centuries. Forced from their adopted homeland in the mid-nineteenth century, they migrated westward to the United States. Many settled in the Midwest, including Eastern Colorado.

The need for child labor in the fields often kept children from attending school. Hope was affected by their working conditions and their cramped, meager living situations; she often visited homes to help with educational and health problems. After she stopped teaching, she often stayed out of sight behind a screen at the gas station to hear and record the speech of the Germans who came to the store. The detailed dialects and language usages she collected, along with her awareness of the school children's plight, led her to write a book, *Second Hoeing*, about a fictional family of sugar-beet farmers, Germans from Russia, who could never get the dirt out from under their fingernails.

In 1935, after the controversial book was published, Congress began addressing child labor laws, and many were changed. The *New York Times Book Review* attributed Hope's book in part to the revision of those laws.

Second Hoeing is still in print and remains a definitive work about the history of inequities and issues around child labor laws. Although she wrote and published another book and several other writings, Hope's book made a significant difference in the lives of farm workers' children.

Written by Barbara Fleming, Author, Coloradoan Columnist and Living Her Legacy Wordsmith