

BUILDING HOPTOPIA:

A Labor History of One the Pacific Northwest's Most Iconic Industries

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Puget Sound, WA

Chapter 1

Brewer's Gold: The Pacific Northwest as the Hop Capital of the World

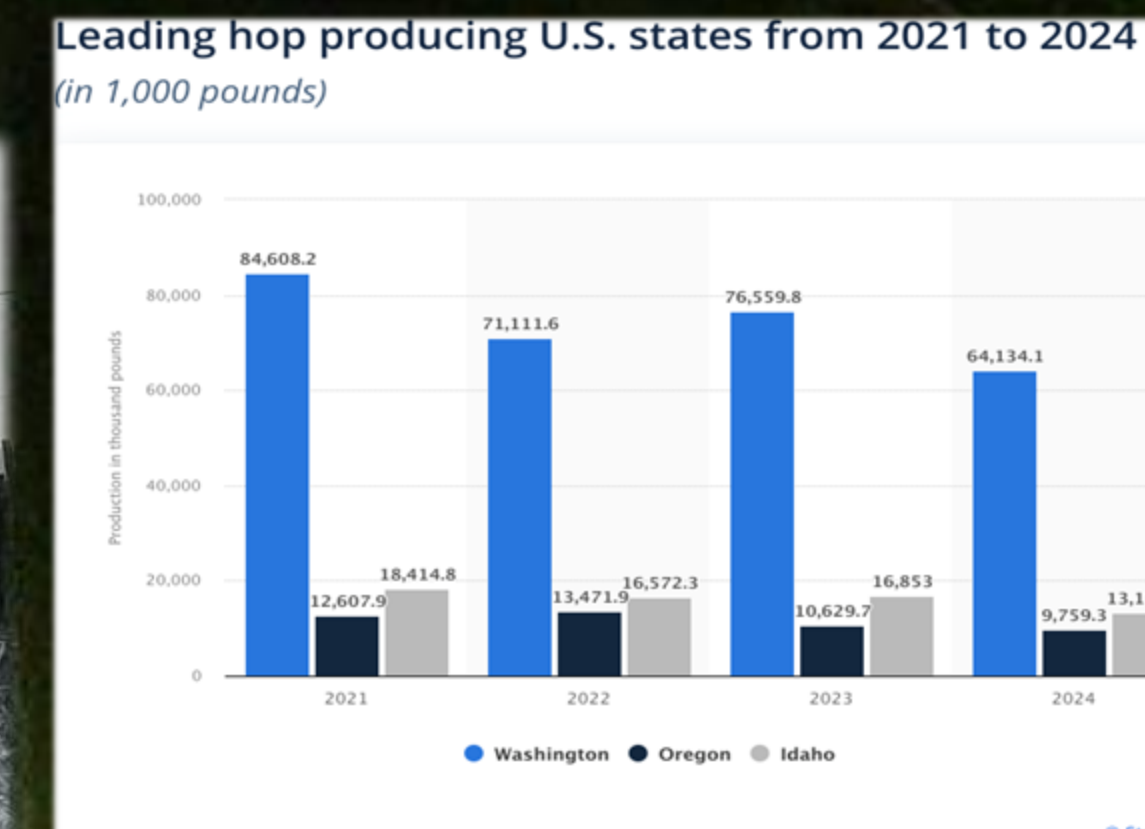
- Hops are the female seed cones that function as a staple ingredient in beer. They supply its bitter “finish,” provide powerful aromas, and are an antibiotic and preservative in the brewing process. Strung onto poles, hop vines produce sticky, aromatic, 2- to 3-inch cones that are dried and shipped to breweries. Harvest periods are short: 3 weeks in late summer, when concentrations of lupulin in the cones peak. Without enough hands to pick at the right time, the crop rots on the vine.
- Transplantation of hops to the PNW occurred in the 1830s. Fort Vancouver, at the confluence of the Willamette and Columbia, provides the earliest evidence of hops cultivated for sale, as the Hudson's Bay Company governor George Simpson included hops in shipments to provision Russian fur traders in Sitka, Alaska.
- Publicized by Puyallup, Washington's Ezra Meeker, the PNW's hop fields put the region in the national and international spotlight from the 1860s-on and cultivated its reputation as the hop—and later craft beer—capital of the world. This reputation continues to shape the Northwest in profound ways. The irony is that few people are aware of the beer industry's labor history.
- Timing was everything, as 1882 featured a precipitous decline in the output of Europe's leading hop farms due to poor weather, while disease infiltrated America's leading yards in the East and Midwest. A worldwide hop shortage ensued, prices skyrocketed, and brewers from all parts of the world fixed their attention on the Puget Sound as the most stable hop-growing region in the world.
- Central to this history is railroad transportation, seasonal labor, migration, and Indigenous dislocation. The earliest accounts of the hops industry demonstrate that a dizzying array of society's “others” harvested what came to be called “brewer's gold.”
- The history of hop-picking suggests to us that despite their seeming dissimilarities, working people have a lot in common until they're told, whether through politics, xenophobia, fear, or conspiracy theories—they don't.



Indigenous hop pickers, White River Valley, WA, 1902. Washington State Historical Society.



Hop picking in North Yakima, Washington, 1910. Sundquist Library, Yakima Valley Museum.



Statistics from Hop Growers' Association, 2025. Washington produced 74.1% of the U.S. hop crop in 2023 and 74.5% in 2024.



Hops conveyed into hop picking machine, Yakima Golding Farms, 1945. WSU Special Collections.

Sacramento Valley, CA

Chapter 4

“I Don't Want to Live in Hell”: Migrant Pickers, California's 1913 Wheatland Hop Riot, and the IWW in History and Memory

- A strike by hop pickers at Durst Ranch in August 1913 led to the Wheatland Hop Riot, at that time the most violent farm labor confrontation in California history and an omen of future infamous conflicts in the U.S. throughout the 20th century.
- Ralph Durst's ranch, located on 640 acres in Yuba County, was the largest employer of agricultural labor in California, reliant on thousands of seasonal workers (migrants & immigrants) to pick, dry, and package hops before their transportation by train to San Francisco for export to England.
- Over-advertising for jobs (Durst brought in 3,000 but only had work for 1,500) combined with abysmal conditions and oppressive management, led to a riot that produced 5 deaths, countless injuries, 100 arrests. Local authorities, themselves controlled by ranch management, blamed the riot on the I.W.W., leading to a series of legal battles.
- The riot focused public attention for the first time on the plight of farm workers.



Banner announcing demands outside I.W.W. local headquarters in Wheatland, August 1914. Juanita Neyens Collection, California State Military Museum.



Richard “Blackie” Ford, spokesman for Wheatland's striking hop workers. Bancroft Library, UC-Berkeley.

Willamette Valley, OR

Chapter 2

Bridges and Walls: The Power of Culture and the Culture of Power in Oregon's Hopyards

- 1900-1940 marked the Willamette Valley's “golden era” of hop production. It even eclipsed Washington as the world's leader in hops until downy mildew and mechanization wreaked havoc on many Oregon farms. Prohibition bent the industry but did not break it.
- Oregon's hop growers mirrored Washington's by signing agreements with railroad companies, banking on the arrival of floating populations of hop-pickers. They used milk-and-honey propaganda, wildly exaggerating opportunities to flood the labor market, and promoted picking as a festive activity open to all. To a degree, the world came to the Willamette Valley; Oregon's hopyards featured Indigenous, American, European, Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, and even German POWs pickers during its golden era. However, events in Wheatland (see Ch. 4) convinced growers to minimize the unwanted attention that too much diversity could bring.
- The town of Independence, Oregon, which called itself the “Hop Capital of the World” from 1900-1940, celebrated the industry's unique history with an annual Hop Fiesta that lasted from 1930-1950 and lives on in various forms today. The original Fiesta, based on multicultural gatherings and celebrations in migrant hop pickers' camps during harvest time, enamored tourists, travelers, writers, and sociologists. The irony, however, was that during the peak years of the Fiesta, the Willamette Valley's labor force had whitened considerably. Creative experiments like school calendar delays and anti-vagrancy also ensured that a supply of white pickers—young and old, would head to the hop fields.



Hop picking in Silverton, Oregon, 1908. OSU Hops & Brewing Archives.



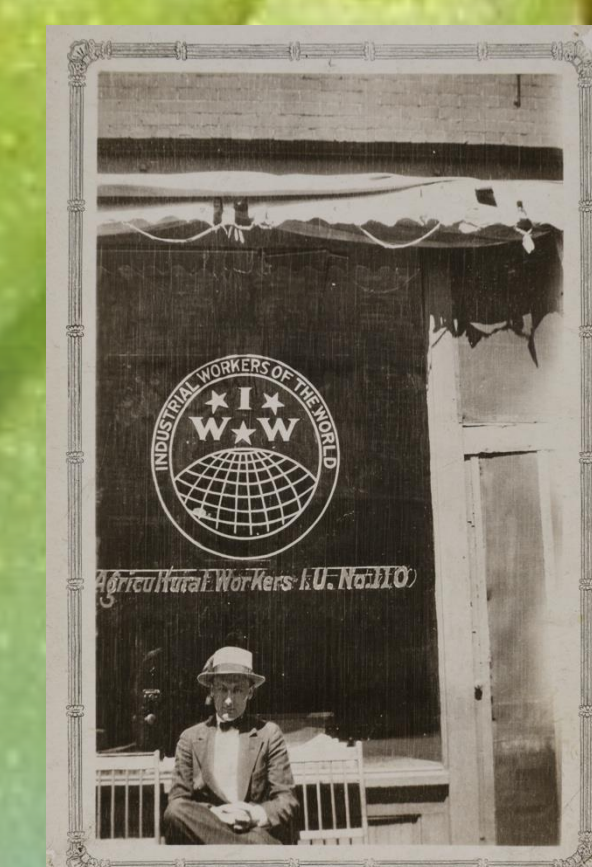
Harvesting in Independence, OR, 1930. OSU Hops & Brewing Archives.

Yakima Valley, WA

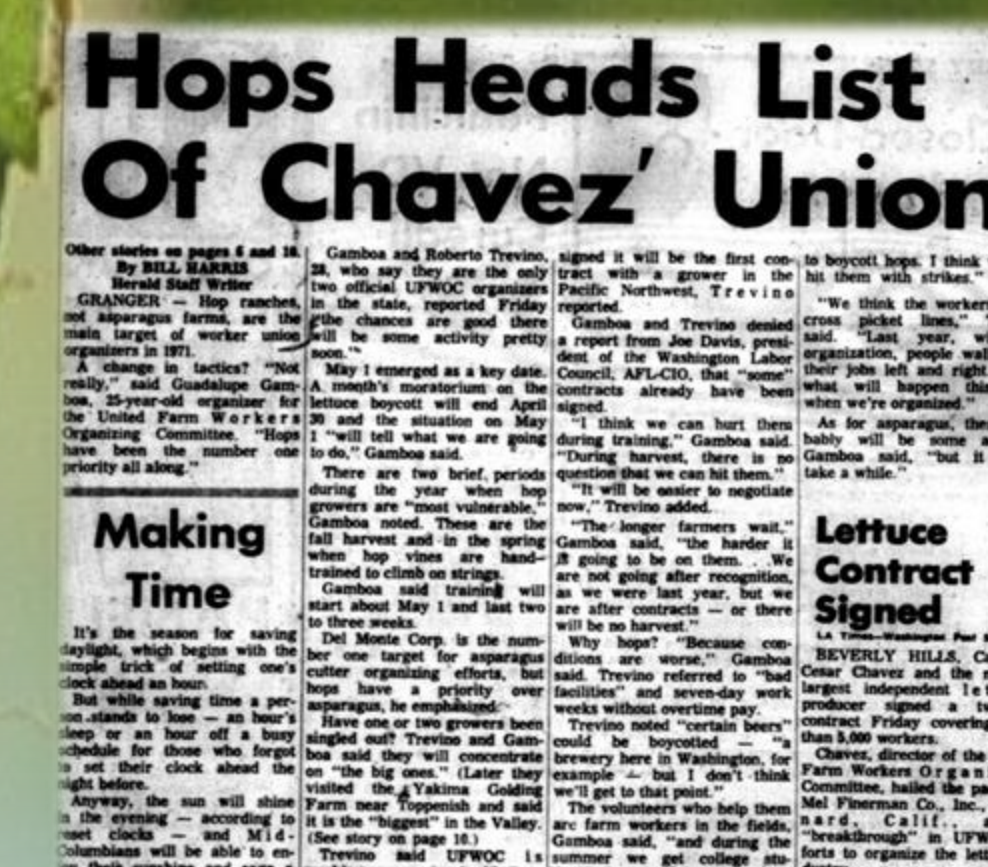
Chapter 3

Reaping Exclusion Out of Diversity: Wars Against Races, Wobblies, Wages, and Working Conditions in Washington

- By the end of the 19th century, Yakima had become the PNW's leader in commercial hop production, a position it would rarely relinquish. Today it produces 75% of the nation's hops. The U.S. grows 50% of the world's hops.
- From the start, Yakima accelerated the kaleidoscopic diversity of hop picking by incorporating not only Indigenous peoples but European, Asian, Central and South American immigrants into the fields.
- Such diversity enriched the culture of the region's hopyards but also created tensions among workers, employers, and residents, especially in times of economic downturns, labor radicalism, and rising xenophobia. Labor conflicts in the 1930s and the 1960s and 70s raised major human rights concerns as well as a fierce backlash against labor pluralism.



Yakima I.W.W. Office, where a hop-pickers strike revitalized the union and led to a historic labor battle in 1933 at Congdon Orchards.



Tri-City Herald, Apr. 25, 1971. UFW identified hop pickers' wages and conditions in Yakima as the worst in the industry.

Chapter 5

The Place of Harvesters in Celebrations of the Craft Beer Revolution

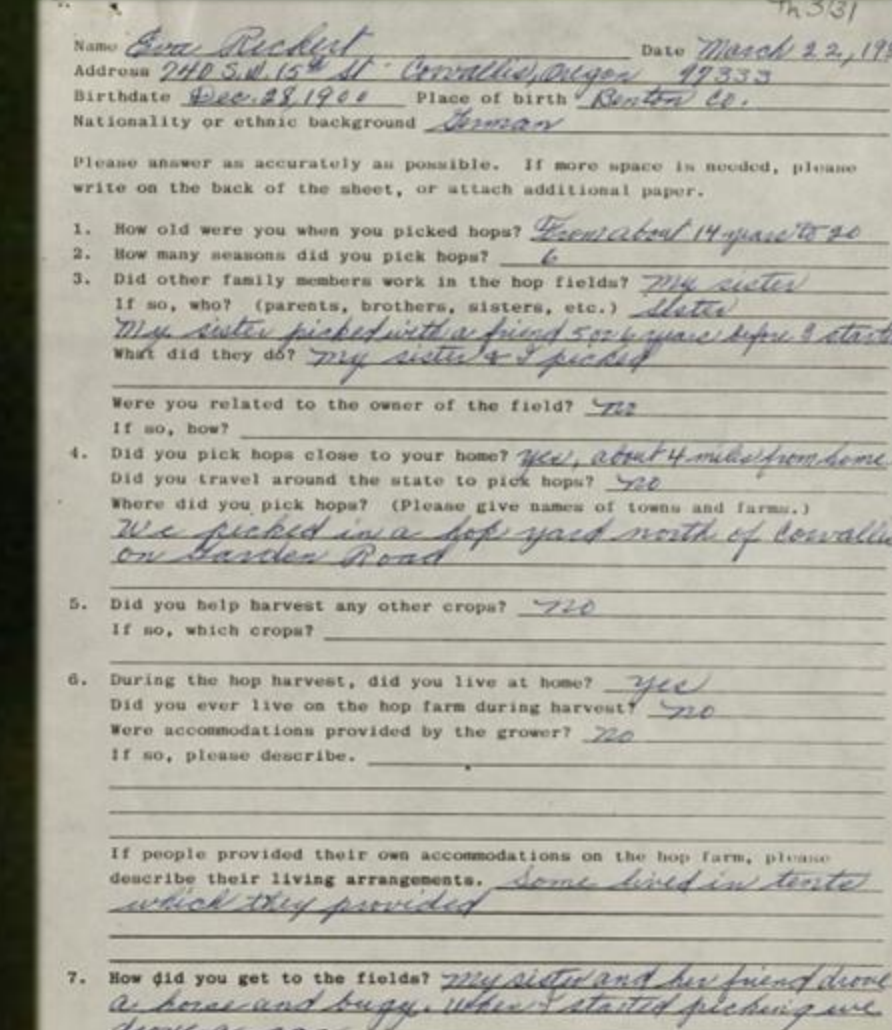
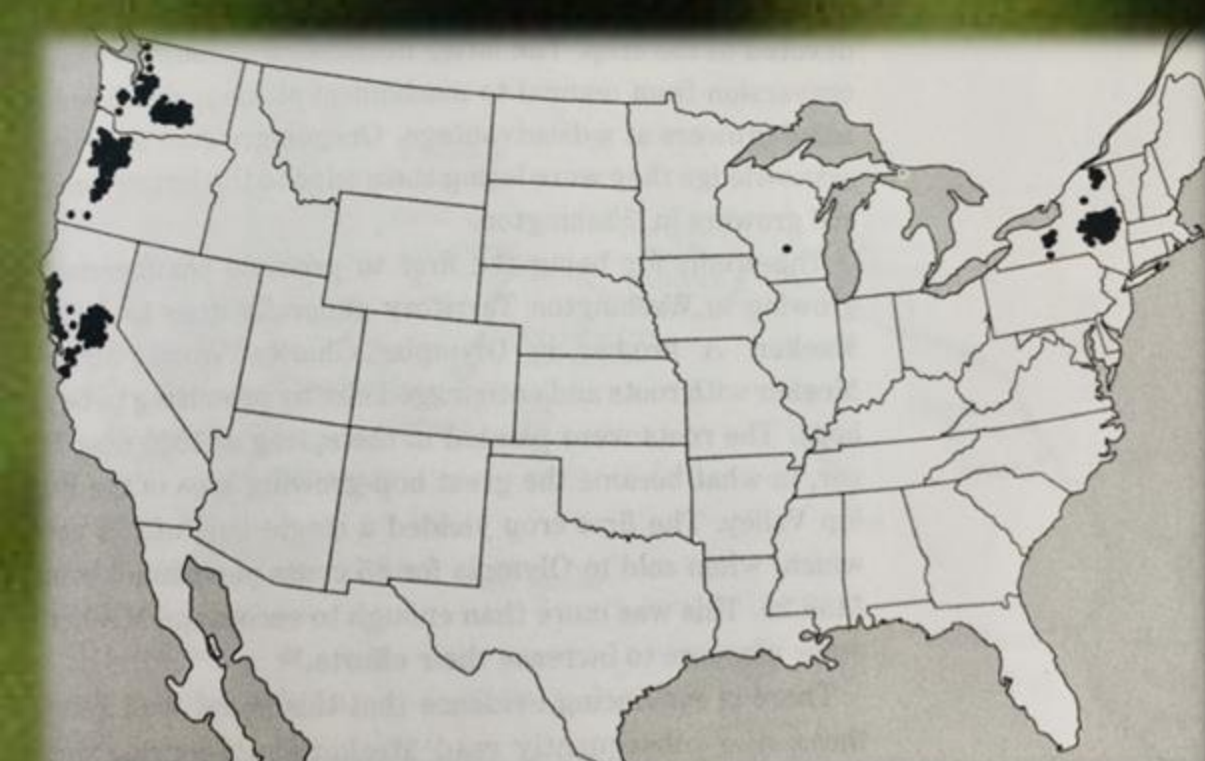
- While mechanization has transformed hop harvesting throughout the PNW, large and small growers continue to rely exclusively on seasonal labor. Thus, documented and undocumented immigrants shape the sip and smell of your favorite craft beers in ways that connect past to present—fields to pints—in a burgeoning industry that is only beginning to reckon with its diverse past and present.



Hop Picking in Yakima, 1895. Sundquist Library, Yakima Valley Museum.



H2-A workers harvesting at Perrault Farms in Toppenish, WA, 2023. Yakima Chief Hops.



Commercial Hop Production in the U.S., 1899. *Twelfth Census of the United States, Vol. 9* (Wash., DC: U.S. Census Office, 1902). Note: the Cascadia Bioregion has been the nation's leader in hop production ever since. Today it leads the world.

Oral histories of Oregon hop-pickers, conducted by Kathleen Hudson-Cooler in conjunction with the Benton County Historical Society, 1982-1983.