



# Deschutes Pioneers' Gazette

VOL. 1

JANUARY 2010

NO. 64

## *When The Potato Was King in Deschutes County*

By Jim Crowell, Gazette Editor



*Early day grower surveys the fall bounty. (Photos courtesy of Deschutes Historical Center, Redmond Museum, and Redmond Spokesman.)*

Obviously, a lot of things have changed in Deschutes County since December 13, 1916, the day the county was officially carved out of historic Crook County and Bend was made the county seat.

For example, not a single board foot of ponderosa pine lumber is produced anywhere in the 3,055 square mile county, a prospect that would seem unfathomable to any Bend resident living and working

there in 1916. That was also the year in which the two giant sawmills, built by Shevlin-Hixon and Brooks-Scanlon companies from Minnesota, began operations on the banks of the Deschutes River.

Another change, particularly profound for the Redmond area, took place within a single generation in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The county's prize-winning potato that was once grown on thousands

of acres within Deschutes County has all but disappeared from local grocery stores. Known locally as the "Deschutes Netted Gem," it was known nationally as the Russell Burbank variety.

There was even a time when the growing and harvesting of potatoes was so important to the local economy that the Redmond School district actually closed Redmond Union High School for days

(continued on page 2)

# Hard Field Labor Produced Quality Product That



*Horses, such as these at the Bradetich Ranch east of Bend, provided the muscle for digging up the potatoes in the early years.*

(continued from page 1)

on end in October so that students could assist in the annual harvest. According to the new Redmond history book, "Images of America, Redmond" in 1948, the Redmond students worked a total off 16,926 hours in the harvest and filled 156,515 field sacks.

Laverne Mallory Pelster, a Redmond High graduate in 1955, remembers well how hard the picking of potatoes in the field could be but also how much students like her appreciated the money they earned.

"It was really hard work, especially for the girls. I think we got paid by the bag and by the size of the potatoes in the bag. Sometimes we got 6 cents per bag, sometimes as much as 8 cents.

"I might be off by a few pounds but as I remember, you couldn't turn the sack into the field boss or counter until you had at least 60 pounds of potatoes in it. I remember that some of the kids used to put a rock in their sack every once in a while," she adds. "It was tough work, bending over all of the time and dragging

that bag along the ground."

Before beginning their work, pickers would attach a special belt around their waist. They would hang 20-25 burlap sacks off the back of the belt. The front of the belt consisted of a wooden bar that had two hooks on it. The picker would hang a sack on the hooks and place it between his/her legs. They would then move down the row, bending over and placing each potato in the sack and dragging it long between their legs.

"Some of the boys could fill 100 sacks a day. So at 8 cents per sack, they could make \$8 per day! Which was big money then and bought a lot of school clothes and school supplies," LaVerne says.

"Being out there in the fields with the other kids was fun and but it was also a lot of work. And, we got out of school" she adds.

Dinner potato production in Deschutes County reached its zenith in the late 1950s when approximately 5,000+ acres were planted with Deschutes Netted Gems.

Oregon State University records show that as early as 1934, there were 3,377 acres in Deschutes County devoted to the growing of table potatoes. By 1964, the number was down to 380. The number of acres fluctuated wildly in the 1960s but by 1976 it had leveled off at 1,100. By contrast, in 1976, the total number of acres in potato production in Morrow and Umatilla counties was 36,000.

Currently, only about 700 acres of land are devoted to the growing of potatoes in all of Central Oregon... Deschutes, Jefferson, and Crook counties. And all of that is for the growing of disease-resistant seed potatoes used for replanting in more commercially desirable areas such as Boardman and Hermiston.

The production of table potatoes in this area goes back to the turn of the century when individual settlers in the county grew and consumed them for basic sustenance. By the early 1920s, Deschutes County potatoes were winning national prizes in potato competitions as far away as Minnesota.

# Area Farmers Took To Local, National Potato Shows



And it was the long history of the humble potato in the Redmond economy that gave the city the deciding edge over Bend when it came to establishing the site of what became the annual Deschutes County Fair.

In 1906, a "Redmond Potato Show" was started by Fred Stanley of the newly formed Central Oregon Irrigation Company to publicize the county's agricultural potential and the quality of its newly developed strain of potato, the "Deschutes Netted Gem."

The contest between the two cities to host a showcase fair for all of the county's agricultural products began in 1920 and because Redmond had already been hosting its successful Potato Show, the Oregon State Legislature in early

*Above: The popularity of the annual Redmond Potato Show, beginning in 1906, gave Redmond the edge with the State of Oregon which designated it in 1921 to be the permanent site of the Deschutes County Fair. The annual potato show continued until the 1970s.*

*Below: Tractors replaced horses in the harvest in the 1900s.*



(continued on page 6)

# Better Equipment In The Fields And Warehouses Made

(continued from page 3)



*Above: Potato picking could be dirty, back-breaking work.*

*Below: In the 1900s, potatoes began to be transported to warehouses in bulk by trucks.*



1921 formally designated Redmond as the permanent site for the Deschutes County Fair.

The Redmond Potato show continued independently of the Deschutes County Fair until it was interrupted by World War II, and then resumed at the war's end. It continued until the early 1970s.

Up until the 1960s, potatoes were picked by hand in the fields, where they were also sorted and sacked before being transported to local warehouses. By the 1970s, most of the potatoes were unearthed by machines that loaded the potatoes directly into trucks and then were sorted and sacked at the warehouses.

The largest of the potato warehouses in Central Oregon was owned and operated by Fred Hodecker, who came to Redmond in 1938.

John Hodecker, Fred's son, still lives in Redmond and remembers the glory years of both the potato and the Hodecker business.

"At one time, I guess we probably stored and shipped out 13,000 to 15,000 tons of potatoes in a single year," Hodecker says. "Most of those came from Deschutes County farms but we also had a lot of them that came in from Crook and Jefferson County."

The Hodeckers had several large storage facilities located throughout Central Oregon but the largest was in Redmond near the railroad tracks east of the downtown area.

"Up until the 1970s, potatoes were picked by hand and it could be backbreaking work," says Steve James, who for many years has studied every aspect of Central Oregon potato crops from his office at the Oregon State University Experimental Agriculture Station between Powell Butte and Prineville.

James says that the whole complexion of the local potato business began to change dramatically in the 1970s.

"The economy of scale came in with a force after 1960. Up in the Umatilla country, increasingly large corporate



# Potato Production/Storage/Marketing More Efficient/Profitable

growers were irrigating huge new acreages with water from the nearby Columbia River. And with a much longer growing season and increasing mechanization of the potato harvesting and storage equipment, it was just a matter of time before the raising of potatoes for table consumption in Central Oregon was at an end."

Not only did the Boardman-Hermiston area become the state's leading producer of potatoes but a large national processor, Lamb-Weston, located a huge plant there to produce the bulk of the French fries used all over the world by McDonald's restaurants.

"The potatoes that are grown in Deschutes County now are bred to be disease resistant and then are sold to farms outside of this area for replanting," says James. "Our chilly, dry nights during the growing season are conducive to developing these disease resistant strains."

And so over the years, Deschutes County potatoes changed from being a basic commodity to almost a specialty crop that allows growers in other climates to produce a high quality potato in per-acre numbers that dwarf the good old days of the Deschutes Netted Gem.



(Above) Deschutes Netted Gems were stored/packaged by the thousands of tons.

(Below, left) Local residents sorted the potatoes by size and grade prior to shipping and/or storage. (Below, right) The legendary Hodecker brand label.



## FRED HODECKER POTATOES



**Central Oregon's Oldest Dealer**

Redmond, Oregon