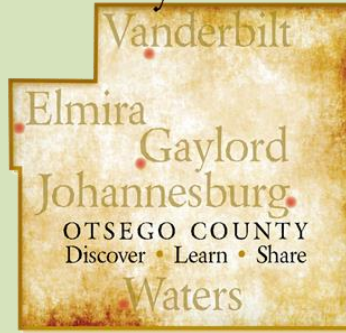


History Matters



Update # 47

November 25, 2018

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History Matters Detective

When Potatoes Were King

Hawaii is famous for its pineapple. Florida, its oranges. In Michigan, Traverse City is known for cherries and Otsego County's claim to fame is potatoes. The sandy soil and cool climate of Otsego County are ideal for growing potatoes. Some of our early pioneers discovered they could grow potatoes among the tree stumps on land that had recently been virgin forests.

The potato themed exhibit at our Museum shown in the photo to the right celebrates an important aspect of our agricultural heritage. As fewer and fewer people live on farms, it is essential to connect with our past as well as our sources of food.



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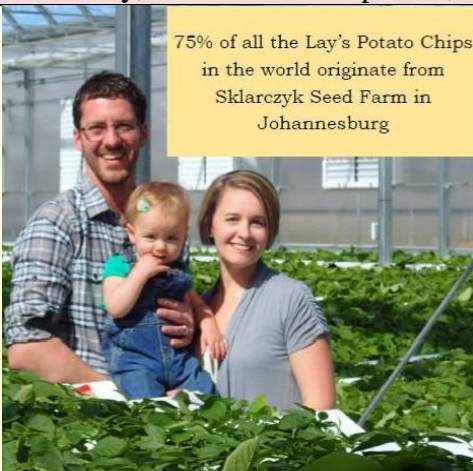
During the 1920s and 1930s, the Top O' Michigan Potato Show was held in Gaylord. The annual event took place in early November after the fall harvest. It was a big deal and drew in hundreds of contestants from surrounding counties. Governor Fred Green was there in 1928 and gave a speech to the large crowd at the evening banquet.

Popular varieties of potatoes included: Russet Rural, White Rural, Green Mountains, Irish Cobblers, Sebago, and Russet Burbank.

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Ernest Nixon, a Penn State professor, was one of the earliest experts to encourage our farmers to specialize in certified seed potatoes. Dr. Nixon was the uncle of President Richard Nixon.

The photo to the right features daughters of area growers who were part of a Michigan Week celebration in Gaylord. Do you know what year? Left to right: Maxine Nowak, Delphine Dobrzelewski, Rose Ann Nowak, Marcia Dobrzelewski, Diane Cherry, Geraldine Szezepaniak, Linda Polus, and Marsha Cherry.



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Today, growing potatoes is usually on a much larger scale and has gone high tech. Sklarczyk Seed Farm in Johannesburg is one example. Ben and his wife Alison (shown in photo to the left with their first child) are the 3rd generation operators. His grandparents, Michael and Theresa Sklarczyk, began the traditional farm in 1942. Ben's parents, Don and Mary Kay, revolutionized the business through the use of green houses, tissue culture, and hydroponics. You've got to read their fascinating story. Here's the [link](#)

So, the next time you open a bag of potato chips or order a side of French fries, take a moment to reflect on the important role potatoes have in Otsego County history.