

Early research on raising potatoes in Washington originates at WSU

Research is one of the basic reasons the Washington State Potato Commission was founded in 1956. The Commission worked closely with Washington State College, which later became Washington State University.

Through a cooperative agreement, WSU hired scientists who would work closely with the Commission to solve the problems plaguing the potato producers and processors.

Bob Thornton was hired on January 2, 1967 as a WSU Extension Vegetable Specialist with specific responsibility for potatoes.

Early research with the potato commission was conducted by Dr. Bob Kunkel.



Bob Thornton (right) and Gus Hokanson, Franklin County Extension, record data for Seed Lot Trial in Othello, 1969.

“Kunkel developed cultural management schemes for potatoes,” Thornton said. “He took what was understood, what was working in other areas, and asked the question, ‘What is working in other areas and will it work in this area? And if it won’t work in this area, what do we have to change to make it work?’”

Kunkel observed and recorded standards for Washington.

“He also did a lot of work on plant population, in other words, how many seed potatoes do you plant per acre as compared with Idaho, North

Dakota’s Red River Valley and Maine,” Thornton said. “In addition, irrigation amount and time, planting dates and harvest dates were considered.”

At first the growers continued the farming practices they were accustomed to using on the farming areas where they came from, be it back east, down south or in the Midwest. When it came to a former GI with no farming skills, they could do well by watching a neighbor farm and copy their successful farming practices.

“WSU also began the Settlers’ Assistance Program, specifically designed for the people who came to the Columbia Basin and settled here,” Thornton said. “WWII vets who were allotted the land through lottery and who had very little or no knowledge of farming would receive counseling on an individual basis about farming and in this case, specifically about potatoes.”

The Settlers’ Assistance Program was an important piece of the farming puzzle to these beginning farmers, because the WSU Extension Office had a broad-based responsibility for all agriculture, including apples, cattle, cereals and other crops.

When asked about the most important topic or item he addressed and helped to solve during his 36 years working with the Commission through WSU, Bob Thornton was quick to reply and did not take individual credit.

“Along with our agricultural engineers and other WSU scientists, we developed concepts that reduced mechanical damage and therefore reduced blackspot and other

tuber damage,” he said. “We also looked at production practices, such as irrigation, soil fertility, along with harvesting and handling equipment management and design.”

Asked to name the first processing plant in Washington State, he said, “In the early 1960s, when I was working for Simplot in Southern Idaho as a research agronomist, I remember Country Gardens in Warden as being the first potato processing plant in the state, or at least in the Columbia Basin.”

Professor Bob Thornton retired from WSU at the end of 2003.