

Walter LePage: Longest Serving Commissioner

“The main thing that got it going was the increase in potato acreage because of all the new growers by 1956,” Walter LePage said, speaking of the Washington State Potato Commission. “The water from the Columbia Basin Project helped to increase the acreage, and we needed help in marketing the potatoes and also in research to help with some of the growing problems.”

In the mid-1950s development of farm units in the Columbia Basin had really gotten going and that increased potato production hit the marketplace. Greater potato production led to strong price fluctuations.

“After a good year, everyone would plant more acres of spuds and the price the next year would go down,” Walter said. “We at the south end of the Basin were harvesting first, so we had the best prices and those in the north were dug when the market was flooded and the prices were lower.”

Sometimes the price was so low it didn’t pay to get the potatoes out of the ground.

“If the farmers couldn’t get the spuds out of the ground because of the price, the government would pay them to harvest the potatoes for cattle feed, also known as the Diversion Program,” Walter said. “But the farmer had to color the spuds on this program, so they couldn’t be used on the fresh market.”

One of the purposes of a potato commission would be to open new markets for the potatoes through marketing and promotion efforts.

“Everyone across the country knew about Idaho potatoes, but they didn’t know about Washington potatoes,” Walter said. “As soon as the Commission was formed, we began to promote our potatoes across the nation, and soon people recognized Washington potatoes as they did Idaho potatoes.”

The increased number of potato growers also meant there was a need to educate the new farmers.

“Through the Commission all of the potato growers benefited from the research and education programs established,” Walter said.

Walter LePage left the Commission in 1989 after serving 33 years as a commissioner.

“The need for the Commission was apparent to me from the beginning, and I could see the good it was doing for the commodity,” Walter said. “Yes, it was difficult at times to make meetings or go to trade shows for 33 years, but I enjoyed my time on the Commission. It was rewarding to help the potato industry by serving in this manner.”