

Three Generations Have Grown Double-N Potatoes in Skagit Valley

Norm Nelson grew up on a farm in Skagit Valley near Burlington, Washington. His father's farm wasn't large enough to support all of the three brothers once they were old enough to farm on their own. As a result, each one started his own operation.

With all of the various crops available in the northwest corner of Washington State, Norm chose potatoes. His farming operation centered on tubers, which held a special place in this man's life.

When he was first growing potatoes in the late 1930s, he would take his crop to a packing facility in nearby Mt. Vernon that packed other peoples' potatoes. This didn't sit well with him because his goal was to be in complete control of his crop, including growing, harvesting, packing and shipping the annual yield.

Cabbage seed was a valuable crop in Skagit Valley then. At the end of World War II, cabbage seed was selling at a premium, because people across the nation were planting Victory Gardens. The high price Norm received that one year enabled him to branch out and build the packing facility he wanted and begin packing under his own label, Double-N Potatoes.

Norm Nelson's dream of being a grower/shipper and therefore in control of his potato crop all the way to the market place came true. He never grew cabbage seed again, and ironically the next year the price of seed dropped dramatically.

Norm Nelson was one of the original Commissioners and served a three-year term beginning in 1956. He passed away in 1984.

As his father did, Jerry Nelson grew up on a farm and farmed with his two brothers, Jim and Norman, until he bought them out five years ago. Jerry also served on the Potato Commission for 12 years. Today he and his son Ryan farm together. The potato is still the focus of their efforts, but they grow a few other crops also.

"For example, we raise grass for pasture for three years as a rotation crop," Jerry said. "We use the grass for dairy pasture as we also raise a large number of Holstein replacement heifers."

Other rotation crops grown on the Nelson farm are peas and wheat, but everything is geared to the potato crop.

"We raise grass for three years and then put in potatoes on that ground for a year," Jerry said. "We might put peas in a piece of ground for two years, followed by wheat and then the next year potatoes."

"We raise the colored varieties, such as red Chieftains, white Cascades, Yukon Golds and the purples, of which the particular variety is All Blue," Jerry said. "We grow more of the Chieftains because they store better. Our smallest potato variety is the purples."

The Nelson operation has around 20 full-time employees, including people to work the farm, the packing shed and maintain the office. At peak times of the year, 75 workers are employed.

To satisfy tourists and locals who stopped by the packing shed wanting to buy fresh potatoes, Jerry created a small potato store on the street side of the shed. The store also distributes free booklets on potato nutrition, recipes and other material created by the Commission. "It's more of a community service," said Jerry, "but it does move product."

There are about 12,000 acres of potatoes grown in the Skagit Valley each year out of a total of about 60,000 tillable acres. Approximately, 15 farmers are growing potatoes in the Valley, ten of whom pack for themselves and others.



Norm Nelson breaks sod on the Nelson Farm in Skagit Valley. Pasture land was rotated with potatoes. The grass also fed his beef cattle.