

First Washington Potato Queen: Jeanette Kelly Burk

The first organization meeting of the Washington State Potato Commission had not been held yet, but the potato men of the state felt the need for a little public relations through the election of a princess or a queen. After all, some of the other crop associations had a princess or a queen, as did the various festivals around the Pacific Northwest, such as the Washington State Apple Blossom Festival Queen in Wenatchee, the Rose Festival Queen in Portland, Oregon and the Lilac Festival Queen in Spokane.

The selection of a queen for good will and promotion was well established in history. The Apple Festival queen was first crowned in 1920, the Rose Festival queen in 1907 and the first Lilac queen in 1940. It wasn't surprising that the potato men felt they deserved some royalty of their own.

In the spring of 1955, grower Percy Kelly asked his daughter Jeanette, a high school student, if she would like to apply for the position.

"I was asked to write a resume describing my school and other activities," said Jeanette, now Jeanette Kelly Burk. "I also needed to submit a photo and explain my grades, plus a recommendation from my teachers was to be attached."

She sent in the information and forgot about the application, until the telephone rang one day.

"It was someone from the Washington State Potato and Onion Shippers Association telling me I had been chosen as the first Washington State Potato Queen," Jeanette said. "I was to attend the Third Annual Potato Night dinner party and dance on June 3, 1955 at the Yakima Country Club where the coronation would take place."

News accounts of the event say she was chosen by a 13-member panel of the association and that "Miss Kelly's beauty is matched by the qualifications which won her nomination and election. Her record includes: straight A student in the junior class at Ephrata High School; vice president of the junior class; general chairman of the junior prom; 1955 school service award; 1955 delegate to Evergreen Girls State at Ellensburg; president-elect of Pep Club in her senior year.

"She is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Percy Kelly of Winchester. Her father is a pioneer potato grower and dealer, formerly located at Toppenish and now located here."

Jeanette was proud to serve as the first Washington State Potato Queen, but admits the duties were not overly time consuming.

"The duties were limited," she said. "I appeared at the one banquet, received a banner and flowers and my photo was published in a trade magazine, as well as several state newspapers."

"The next year I was off to college and don't remember who the next queen was or even if there was a second Potato Queen," she said. Records show the potato industry crowned at least two more Washington Potato Queens.



The crowning of Jeanette Kelly Burke, the first Washington State Potato Queen.

Sidebar:

Officers listed on the Third Annual Potato Night program of the Washington Potato and Onions Shippers Association on June 3, 1955 were:

E.E. Benz, president; Boynton Dodge, vice president; Paul Magnusson, secretary/treasurer.

The trustees were Howard A. Michaelis, C.F. Mattson, Harry Masto, Elmer Hansen, M.C. Balcom, J.G. Magnusson, Sr., Al Beckwith, D.B. Baker, Lester G.O. Hansen and Norman W. Nelson.

The manager was Fred L. Ramsey, the traffic manager was Fred H. Tolan and the attorney was H.K. Dano.