

This Little Spud Went to Market

Potatoes have a big impact on Idaho Falls

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Idaho Potatoes. They are full of Vitamin C and Potassium, delectable, and on practically every dinner table in the United States. Heck, they are even on our state license plates. In Idaho Falls they are so much a part of our daily landscape we practically take them for granted. Yet this tasty tuber weaves an intricate web throughout our city, state, and across the nation. Let's follow one Famous Potato to market and see where it goes.

This spud's story starts in Ashton, Idaho, the largest seed potato growing area in the world. Seeds are purchased here, and trucked to the farm at planting time. At DeVerle and Bart Wattenbarger's farm, the "seed", an actual potato used for sprouting other potatoes, is chopped into roughly two and a half ounce sizes. The seeds are treated with a chemical so that the plant grows with a systemic insecticide already contained within its leaves.

The Wattenbargers have already prepared the soil for the potatoes the previous fall with fertilizer and fungicide. In mid April they begin working the ground again, preparing the soil for planting between the 15th and 24th of the month, depending on weather. It takes them about two and a half weeks and two large machines working full time work to get all the potatoes planted.

Ever wonder how farmers get those perfect rows of plants when they are working those huge fields? On Wattenbarger's farm planting is done on John Deere tractors with precision guidance systems on them. These giant machines are able to plant with accuracy of close to an inch, so the fields are efficient in their use of growing space. It's definitely a numbers game with potatoes.



Watering starts two to four weeks after planting, and continues through the end of August. Plants are bound and killed, and about 21 days later the potato peel is set and hard enough to harvest and for the Wattenbargers to begin the dig. There are about 40 people working the crop at harvest time, and it takes two to three weeks to complete the dig. From here, our Famous Potato is sold and put into storage for a distributor.

GPOD, General Potato and Onion Distributors, LTD, began operations in Idaho Falls. Now based in Shelley, GPOD is a key player in this tale of the potato on our table. They, and other companies like them, are the folks that beat the streets and find buyers for the

potatoes. Yet they do more than that. Not only do they establish markets for the potatoes, they also establish relationships with growers. GPOD inspects our spud in the field, purchases our Famous Potato, then hauls it, washes it, sizes, sorts, packages, and ships it.

GPOD is what's called a 'fresh shipper'. This means that they handle potatoes meant for table consumption. There are other kinds of companies that also handle potatoes, mainly 'processors' and 'fryers'. Processors are companies that take the non-table potatoes and turn them into other tasty treats like hash browns, tater tots, and powdered potatoes. Fryers supply all the fast food restaurants with those delicious fries.

"Farming is a good occupation. It allows me to have my kids with me. It's great for the family that way."
—Bart Wattenbarger

Once bagged or boxed (or put into a burlap sack) our Famous Potato is most likely loaded onto a rail car and hauled to the Hunt's Point Terminal market in New York City. Our Famous Potato might also be palletized and loaded onto a truck. It is likely to be picked up by a local company such as Killpack Trucking, in which case it's delivered to a Midwestern food distributor.

And this is where our spud gets lost in the crowd. From here, there are a variety of ways that the Famous Potato ends up on the supermarket shelves, into the





Getting the potato from the field to your table requires several steps. From left to right: Potatoes travel on a conveyor belt, to a storage bin, (opposite page) inspected for quality and off to packaging!



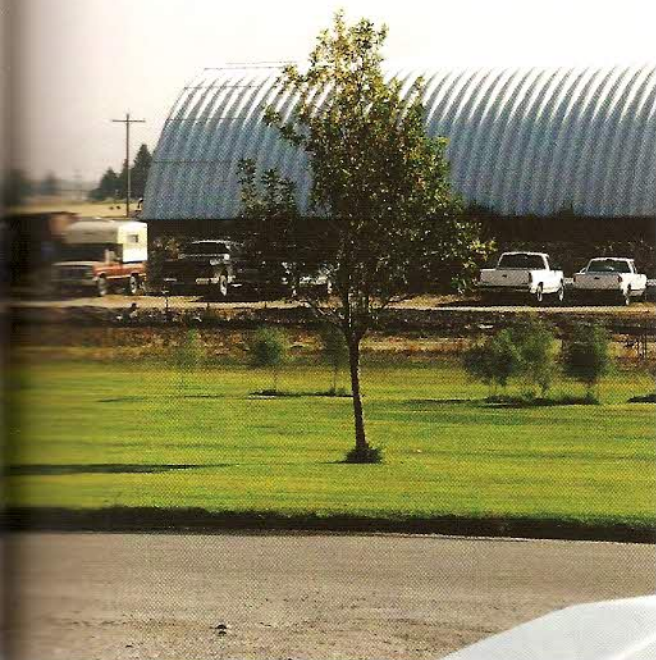
shopping bag, and onto the dinner table. If you are lucky enough to live in the Idaho Falls area, you can bypass all the transportation and pick up our Famous Potato fresh from the field. GPOD sells a box of potatoes for \$15.00. Bring your friends because it's a 50 pound box.

GPOD alone ships 1 to 1.5 million pounds of potatoes every day. Multiply that by forty-plus Idaho potato shippers, and the weight quickly adds up. Idaho is the number one potato growing state in the USA, producing over 11 billion pounds of potatoes. And Idaho Falls is the epicenter of it all.

Add support companies onto the growing and shipping business end of making potatoes famous, and it's easy to see how profoundly the potato industry touches every aspect of life in Idaho Falls. There are pallet makers, bag manufacturers, farm equipment companies, fertilizer companies, insurance companies, seed growers,

aerial spray services, and myriad other support companies that do everything from soil testing to equipment repair.

Brad Pelot of the GPOD Field Department summed it up best when he said, "There are thousands and thousands of people employed by the potato industry and agriculture altogether from farm workers, managers, farm owners, to our employees, to truck drivers, long haul truck drivers hauling them out of here, [to] the railroads. It's a pretty far reaching impact." **IFL**



Whipped, fried or chipped, potatoes are a large part of what makes Idaho Falls great!

FUN FACTS ABOUT POTATOES:

- Potatoes have more potassium than a banana.
- Potatoes are an excellent source of vitamin C. One potato provides 45 percent (27 mg) of your daily recommendation.
- French Fries were first introduced in the U.S.A. when Thomas Jefferson served them in the White House during his Presidency of 1801-1809.
- During the Alaskan Klondike gold rush, (1897-1898) potatoes were practically worth their weight in gold. Potatoes were valued for their vitamin C. And gold, at that time, was more abundant than healthy foods!
- In October 1995, the potato became the first vegetable to be grown in space.
- There is a Mr. Potato Head spin-off called Darth Tater.