

# *When Potatoes were King: A look at the Jasper Potato Growers Association*

*Trava Olivier, December 2021*

Commercial agriculture in Minnesota had its roots in wheat production. Wide open expanses of land being broken into farms and newly laid railroads to ship the crop to flouring mills across the United States led to high profits for the growers. By the turn of the twentieth century this single-minded crop production led to depleted soil quality and outbreaks of rust, a fungal disease that affected the wheat plant, as well as the presence of invasive weeds such as the Russian thistle. For the farmer, that meant a sharp decline in productivity and profitability. Experts in agriculture began to urge farmers to diversify the types of crops they grew.<sup>1</sup>

One crop that grew in popularity was the potato. Farmers in Minnesota had long grown these tubers for their own tables. The deep, fertile, well-drained soil of Minnesota was suited for their growth. The northern part of the state was the first area to realize the financial gain of planting potatoes for commercial purposes. Soon the University of Minnesota was encouraging farmers across the state to plant former wheat acres into potatoes.<sup>2</sup>

By 1917 farmers in the Jasper area took part in the financial success this crop brought to those who grew it. Newspaper accounts revealed farmers earned between \$0.70 and \$0.80 per bushel for their harvest and tell of farmers who traveled to Jasper to take part in receiving the top price paid.<sup>3</sup> One Jasper area farmer, Ed Roelandt, was the top local producer of potatoes in both 1917 and 1918. In 1917 he planted just 44 acres and produced 12,659 bushels of potatoes.<sup>4</sup> The following year he planted 110 acres and harvested 14,074 bushels.<sup>5</sup>

In 1919 a total of 120 rail cars full of potatoes shipped from Jasper. Farmers harvested an average of 80 bushels per acre and were paid an average of \$1.20 per bushel.<sup>6</sup> The top producer in the 1919 season was Henry Hoyme whose 75-acre field yielded 7500 bushels and sold for \$1.25 per bushel.<sup>7</sup> These figures placed Pipestone County as the top potato producing county in southwestern Minnesota that year.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Historic Context Study of Minnesota Farms: 1820-1960" prepared for the Minnesota Department of Transportation by Granger, Susan and Kelly, Scott. Accessed December 17, 2021:  
<https://www.dot.state.mn.us/culturalresources/docs/crunit/vol1.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> "Historic Context Study of Minnesota Farms: 1820-1960 Appendix A" prepared for the Minnesota Department of Transportation by Granger, Susan and Kelly, Scott. Accessed December 17, 2021:  
<https://www.dot.state.mn.us/culturalresources/docs/crunit/appendices.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> "Potatoes are Coming to Town," Jasper Journal (Jasper, Minnesota), 18 October 1917, Page 5, Column 5, Paragraph 2.

<sup>4</sup> "44 Acres of Potatoes Net Almost \$10,000," Jasper Journal (Jasper, Minnesota), 1 November 1917, Page 1, Column 2, Paragraph 2.

<sup>5</sup> "Small Fortune Made in Spud Crop," Jasper Journal (Jasper, Minnesota), 31 October 1918, Page 1, Column 2, Paragraph 1.

<sup>6</sup> "Potato Harvest Now Over," Jasper Journal (Jasper, Minnesota), 29 October 1919, Page 1, Column 2, Paragraph 1.

<sup>7</sup> "Some Potato Yields," Jasper Journal (Jasper, Minnesota), 24 October 1919, Page 1-column 3, Paragraph 2.

<sup>8</sup> "Pipestone County Leads in Potato Yield," Jasper Journal (Jasper, Minnesota), 20 November 1919, Page 1, Column 5, Paragraph 1.

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The volume of potatoes being grown around Jasper had reached a point that growers felt it would be beneficial to organize for more efficient marketing. They recognized that while the soil in the Jasper area was excellent for potato growth, the lack of a storage facility meant lowered prices during the peak harvest season when the market was flooded with potatoes from all over the country.<sup>9</sup> In late January 1920, potato growers from across the state of Minnesota met and organized the Minnesota Potato Exchange, which created a statewide marketing system intended to help producers receive the best price for their crop.<sup>10</sup> By March that same year, twenty Jasper potato farmers signed up as charter members of the newly formed Jasper Potato Growers Association. Articles of Incorporation, By-laws, and a Board of Directors were approved for this local group. The first goal identified was to raise money for the construction of a potato warehouse. The members of the Jasper group voted to erect a potato warehouse.<sup>11</sup> Shares of stock in the group were sold for \$100 each with the money being used to build the proposed facility. The group also voted unanimously to join the recently formed Minnesota Potato Exchange that would find the best market for the Jasper Potato Growers Association member's harvest.<sup>12</sup> Local farmers were approached to join and the association grew rapidly. By the end of March over forty local producers had joined. The construction of the warehouse began July 1, 1920. L.E. Bergman was chosen to do the concrete work and Frank Saunders, Pipestone, completed the building. The land was purchased from the Rock Island Railroad and was opposite the depot on land where the old Brown elevator had stood.<sup>13</sup> The 40 x 100-foot structure was completed in September. It featured basement storage with conveyors, graders, sacking machines, and sack elevators designed for fast loading and unloading. The first floor was level with freight cars and allowed up to 3 railcars to be loaded simultaneously.<sup>14</sup>

The timing of the completion of the warehouse could not have been better. The fall of 1920 resulted in the largest potato harvest the Jasper area had ever seen; 500,000 bushels. Due to the large supply, the price dropped to \$0.60 per bushel which left farmers frustrated while still thankful for the warehouse to handle the crop. They believed the price would have been even lower had

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<sup>9</sup> "Jasper Potato Growers Plan Marketing," Jasper Journal (Jasper, Minnesota), 22 January 1920, Page 1, Column 3, Paragraph 2.

<sup>10</sup> "Potato Growers Form Marketing Association," Jasper Journal (Jasper, Minnesota), 5 February 1920, Page 1, Column 3, Paragraph 3.

<sup>11</sup> "Potato Growers Meeting Next Saturday," Jasper Journal (Jasper, Minnesota), 25 March 1920, Page 1, Column 4, Paragraph 2.

<sup>12</sup> "Potato Growers Organize Association," Jasper Journal (Jasper Minnesota), 18 March 1920, Page 1, Column 1, Paragraph 1.

<sup>13</sup> "Contract Let for Potato Warehouse," Jasper Journal (Jasper, Minnesota), 10 June 1920, Page 1, Column 3, Paragraph 2.

<sup>14</sup> "Jasper's New Potato Warehouse," Jasper Journal (Jasper, Minnesota), 23 September 1920, Page 1-Column 1, Paragraph 2.

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they not had proper storage facilities to keep the potatoes in until they were marketed.<sup>15</sup> Late that fall, the Jasper Potato Growers Association held a meeting. The secretary's report showed one unpredicted problem. The Minnesota Potato Exchange had anticipated handling 600 railcars of potatoes across the state. The reality was over 1500 railcars were shipped from Minnesota overtaxing office staff and creating delays in payments to local exchanges which delayed payment to local farmers.<sup>16</sup> The local farmers were upset by this situation.

As the harvest of 1921 began, newspaper reports revealed that the directors of the Jasper Potato Growers Association had "spent a lot of money" on improvements at the warehouse that allowed motor driven machinery to dump two wagons at once.<sup>17</sup> In the fall of 1922, the price paid for potatoes had fallen to \$0.15-\$0.30 per bushel. The Jasper Potato Growers Association also had competition from a second potato warehouse in town, one built by G. Peterson & Sons.<sup>18</sup> By the end of the harvest season, both warehouses were at capacity and farmers left their late season crop unharvested in the ground as the Minnesota Potato Exchange struggled to find enough railcars to ship potatoes from across the state.<sup>19</sup> The next week *Jasper Journal* readers learned that potatoes could be fed to hogs and dairy cattle. Local farmers began feeding the smaller, inferior quality potatoes to their livestock which enabled them to sell more corn, which had been feed, to increase their profit margin for the year.<sup>20</sup>

As the potato season of 1923 dawned, likely due to poor profits from the previous year, less acres were dedicated to potato production both locally and nationally. Growing conditions were not favorable in all areas and led to a 9-million-bushel shortage over the average of the previous five years.<sup>21</sup> With lowered production, market prices were anticipated to rise but as the harvest reached the market, that was not the case. Potato prices remained the same as 1922 at \$0.30 per bushel, both years considerably lower than the 1921 rate of \$1.00-\$1.10 per bushel.<sup>22</sup>

When the Jasper Potato Growers Association held its annual meeting in June 1924, an affirmative vote was cast to sell more shares of stock to cover a \$12,000 debt that still existed for the

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<sup>15</sup> "Jasper 'Buried' By 500,00 Bu Spuds," *Jasper Journal* (Jasper, Minnesota), 7 October 1920, Page 1, Column 1, Paragraph 1.

<sup>16</sup> "Potato Growers Met Saturday," *Jasper Journal* (Jasper, Minnesota), 25 November 1920, Page 1, Column 1, Paragraph 3.

<sup>17</sup> "Potato Warehouse a Busy Place," *Jasper Journal* (Jasper, Minnesota), 22 September 1921, Page 1, Column 1, Paragraph 2.

<sup>18</sup> "Marketing Spud Crop Very Low Market," *Jasper Journal* (Jasper, Minnesota), 26 September 1922, Page 1, Column 3, Paragraph 2.

<sup>19</sup> "Potato Harvest Over No Profit For Producer," *Jasper Journal* (Jasper, Minnesota), 19 October 1922, Page 1, Column 2, Paragraph 2.

<sup>20</sup> "Potatoes Make Good Hog Feed Claims Specialist," *Jasper Journal* (Jasper, Minnesota), 26 October 1922, Page 1, Column 5, Paragraph 2.

<sup>21</sup> "Late Spud Crop 42, 535,000 Bushels Short," *Jasper Journal* (Jasper, Minnesota), 30 August 1923, Page 1, Column 3, Paragraph 2.

<sup>22</sup> "Potato Crop Has Started to Move," *Jasper Journal* (Jasper, Minnesota), 27 September 1923, Page 1, Column 1, Paragraph 1.

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corporation. Nothing more about the Jasper Potato Growers Association appeared in local newspapers for two years. In May 1926 the *Jasper Journal* printed an article that announced the Jasper Potato Growers Association was in the hands of a receiver and that it had been dissolved by a judgement of the district court. A hearing was set for November 5, 1926, at the courthouse in Pipestone to resolve the claims against the corporation.<sup>23</sup> The next three editions featured notices for the sale of the Potato Growers Association warehouse and equipment. The sale was to be held on June 26, 1926.<sup>24</sup>

Subsequent editions of the *Jasper Journal* failed to report any information about the sale of the property. Searches in the *Pipestone County Star* and *Pipestone Leader* around the date of the sale also failed to produce any information. The final piece of information located on the Jasper Potato Growers Association and its warehouse was in the Jasper Centennial book. It indicated that the warehouse was a part of the warehouse of the Jasper Farmers Elevator in 1988.<sup>25</sup>

The existence of the Jasper Potato Growers Association was short lived, and many questions remain unanswered. What the articles located reveal implies that lowered prices led to lowered production. Economics would indicate that fewer potatoes produced would lead to higher prices which did not happen. Evidence from these articles implies that as farmers suffered personal financial losses the indebtedness of the Jasper Potato Growers Association went unpaid, and the organization was dissolved for financial reasons. It also seems to indicate that growing potatoes as a crop in the Jasper area quickly became a thing of the past.

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<sup>23</sup> "Potato Growers Assn. in Hands of Receiver," *Jasper Journal* (Jasper, Minnesota), 13 May 1926, Page 1, Column 2, Paragraph 1.

<sup>24</sup> "Notice of Sale," *Jasper Journal*, (Jasper, Minnesota), 27 August 1926, Page 8, Column 1, Paragraph 7.

<sup>25</sup> "A History of Jasper, Minnesota," by the Centennial Committee, 1988, Star Printing Company, Pipestone, Minnesota, Page 42.