

One potato, two potato, three potato, four...

by Sarajane Williams

Potatoes — a food staple of the Pennsylvania Germans for centuries — bring to mind and palate memories of a variety of comfort foods. Potato filling, Dutch fries, potato salad, potato bread, fastnachts and cakes, potato candy or any kind of soup or stew imaginable, all continue to be standard fare in this region. Typically served for breakfast, lunch and dinner in *Deitsch* households, nutritious potatoes are known to contain more vitamin C than oranges. The starch and potassium in potatoes were also important to the diet of the industrial-agricultural era where people worked physically to make a living.

The early settlers of Lower Macungie Township typically grew a small, yellow variety of potato in small back-yard patches in quantities large enough to feed the family and to provide seed potatoes for the next season. Larger imported varieties such as white 'Irish' potatoes found our limestone- and shale-derived soil to be especially suitable for the tubers. These factors led to the planting of larger acreages and an expansion of markets into local villages and towns.

Potatoes had other uses too and other industries grew up around the product. The pink liquid discharged from potato skins, soaked in water, was used as a fabric dye. Farm implements such as horse-drawn markers, planters, cultivators, diggers, pickers, harvesters, conveyors, sprayers and tractors evolved as the demand and dedicated acreage for *grumbeere* (potatoes) increased. Moreover, this reliable food could be stored in cold cellars for use during the winter.

By the early twentieth century, potatoes had become one of the most important crops in Lehigh County. In 1912, an estimated 2,000,000 bushels of potatoes were harvested from over 12,000 acres. Large potato farms in Lower Macungie Township were owned and operated by farmers such as the Singmasters, Elias and Clinton Bastian, Williams S. Weaver, D.D. Fritch, Paul Muse, Morris Stine, Gerald Hunsicker, George Smith and Donald Lichtenwalner. The largest potato wholesaler in the Lehigh Valley region was Lloyd Kratzer of Lower Macungie, who bought crops and shipped the potatoes via railroad to wholesale markets in Philadelphia and Baltimore.

In 1952, prices began to drop, harvesting became expensive, and labor was harder to obtain. Many farmers lost money due to the considerable drop in price by 1954; instead they began to plant new cash crops like corn and soybeans.

However, a few local farmers continued to grow potatoes for local markets. During early September mornings, my mother and I would don our flannel shirts, blue jeans and babushkas and head out to a neighboring farm in Northern Lehigh County to earn some extra money. With a thermos jug of water and a brown bag lunch in hand, we would join the other farm hands on the back of an old, dusty, wooden wagon that was pulled by a tractor to the field that was ready to harvest. Fond memories of the crisp, refreshing fall air, the colorful leaves of the bordering tree lines, the smell of freshly turned soil and the sound of the pattering tractor, which broke the quiet of sunrise, are indelibly imprinted on my mind. It was hard work for the back, but good for the soul. Those were the days when a real potato was used for Mr. Potato Head. The carved half of a potato could also be dipped into ink or tempera paint, to produce block-printed, brown paper gift wrap.

The farmer kept a record of how many baskets each of us filled, lifted and emptied into the back of the wagon. In the 1960s, five cents for picking a bushel basket of potatoes wasn't bad, so I kept pushing myself to earn more. There were many times that I was so exhausted that I would throw the potatoes into the basket while I was lying on my side in the row. Kids in those days usually weren't allowed to become couch potatoes. After all of the potatoes were harvested, the loaded wagon was taken to a huge cool cellar, where its contents were emptied into a giant heap. Later, the potatoes would be graded, crated or sacked and weighed before taken to market. Many farmers sold their produce on their local, door-to-door huckster routes, as well.

Harvesting methods have since changed. Today, on very large farming operations, a harvesting machine operated by two or three people sorts, sizes, discharges and bags the potatoes as soon as they're unearthed. There is only one large potato farm left in all of Lehigh County, owned by the Geiger family. In Lower Macungie, Mark Lichtenwalner still grows a few acres of potatoes on his farm along Indian Creek Road, thus keeping alive his family's heritage. Most of the potatoes found in our local grocery stores are from Iowa and Idaho. In 2007, only 490 acres of potatoes were harvested in Lehigh County, yielding 98,000 bushels. Nonetheless, small farms in Lehigh County still produce great-tasting potatoes, which are usually to be found at local farmers' markets.

Potatoes continue to provide sustenance and comfort for most people in this region. That idea was furthered in 2008 when Walt Zawaski of Hamburg, Pa., was inspired by a television program that featured a family farm in Colorado where anyone who was in need was invited to dig unharvested potatoes. The turnout of thousands was so great that traffic was backed up for two miles into the farm. Walt realized that many people are hungry and many are probably in his own back yard. In fact, today one in five people

in the U.S is hungry. So he and his wife Linda, a Diaconal minister who is affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, began *The Potato Project*.

That first year, the two of them cut up 750 pounds of seed potatoes during the evenings and planted them in their spare one and one-third acres. With the help of scouts and local church groups, they harvested 7,700 pounds of potatoes and donated all to local food banks and pantries. The goal for the 2013 is to harvest 100,000 pounds of potatoes from the 17 acres of land that has been donated to the project. Land donors receive a receipt for tax purposes for the value of renting the land. Last year donors received credit for \$184 per acre. Seed corn that was harvested was sold to pay for seed potatoes and fertilizer in spring. The independent project exists solely through largesse of volunteers and donations of land, equipment and money. The Berks Food Bank re-bags and distributes the potatoes to smaller pantries and local church food pantries. Residents of Lower Macungie Township have been receiving potatoes from the project.

They're always looking for volunteers to help harvest, starting the first weekend in September, through November. Harvest sessions are on Saturday from 9am-1pm and 1-5pm, and Sunday from 1-5pm. Walt says, "We just pitch a tent and bring out the French fryer. Anywhere from three to 140 volunteers have shown up. Many modern families don't realize where their food comes from. One young mother just stared in disbelief and commented that she never realized that potatoes grew that way." Perhaps this is one of the best ways for people to get in touch with their roots.

For more information about The Potato Project, Google: IHartHarvest; email: IHartHarvest@gmail.com or call 484-648-0381.

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www.LMTHS.org.