

# Historical Clippings

Three Lakes Museum

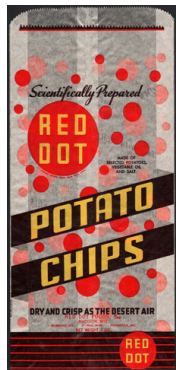
April 2024

## *Red Dot - Potato to Chips*

Potato chips have been around for a long time. Legend has it that the potato chip was invented at a resort in Saratoga Springs, New York, in 1853. The story goes, a chef at the resort cooked up the paper-thin fried chips as a snarky reply to a diner who had complained that his fried potatoes were too thick and greasy.

While gaining in popularity, for many years chips were still produced by small, regional potato chip manufacturers who kettle-fried them in small batches for the store sales. Customers scooped the chips out of barrels or glass display cases into paper bags. But chips sold this way quickly went stale.

Frederick J. Meyer and his wife Kaye, students at the University of Wisconsin Madison, started a snack food business to support themselves and by the time they graduated in 1932 they had a thriving business selling packaged snacks to Madison area grocers. It soon became apparent that potato chips were their best sellers. In 1938 they purchased a continuous potato chip making machine, built a factory and called their business *Red Dot Foods*. This also happened to be the same year the H.W. Lay & Company in Atlanta, Georgia, got its start.



Then how did the Madison based Red Dot Foods connect with the Northwoods? There were three things. When the Meyer's first started packaging and selling chips in 1938, they used glassine bags instead of metal cans. The number one manufacturer of glassine bags was the Rhinelander Paper Mill. Later in 1942, Meyer purchased over 4000 acres for a farm near Sugar Camp in Oneida County, the old logging town originally called Robbins west of Three Lakes. The primary purpose of the Red Dot Farm was to develop potato varieties, searching for the perfect potato for chips. It included a chip factory on Rhinelander's



north side that put these varieties to test. Among the major potato chip manufacturers of that time, Red Dot was the only one to grow its own potatoes and invest in long-term agricultural testing to improve productivity and crop quality.

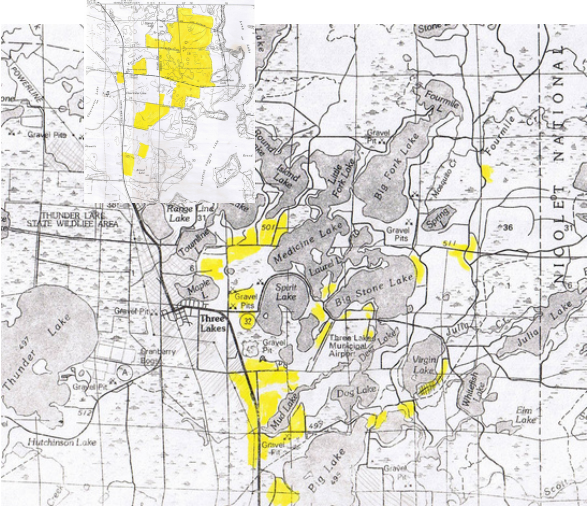
And maybe a slight reach, in 1894 the Joseph Godlewsk family had come to Three Lakes. Son George farmed the area that was purchased in 1912 by Leonard Starks, known as the "Potato King". After Starks death, his daughter, Lelah Starks took over and eventually a section that farm became the UW-Madison Rhinelander Agriculture Research Station for potato research that benefited Red Dot Foods.



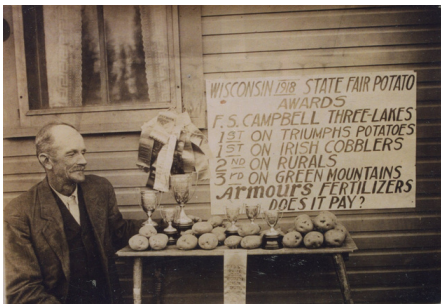
By the end of the 1950's, Red Dot was at the peak of its popularity in a field of about 250 regional potato chip manufacturers. And there were only four big ones. These included Blue Bell on the West Coast, Morton in Dallas, Lays in Atlanta, and Fred Meyer's Red Dot in Wisconsin.

By 1961 Red Dot owned eight factories, two potato farms and 83 branch warehouses throughout the country. In May of that year Meyer sold it all to the H.W. Lay & Company. By the 1970's, Lay & Co. had become Frito Lay, Red Dot had been sold again, and finally shut down in 1973.

The foundation for Red Dot Foods history in the Northwoods started well before the Meyer's. As the logging and lumber era came to a close just after 1900, Three Lakes turned to farming the vast cutovers. Eventually after trial and error it was determined that the naturally sandy soil was best suited for growing potatoes. Family owned and operated potato farms were everywhere north and south of the town. Potato growing as a major crop had begun in central Wisconsin in 1890 and was establishing itself in the Three Lakes area by 1910. Much of the early success of potato farming in Three Lakes could be attributed to the work of F S Campbell.



One of Three Lakes earliest general store operators, Campbell moved back to his farm south of town to grow potatoes after losing his store, the only brick building on Superior Street, to a dynamite explosion in 1908.



Soon he received local and regional acclaim for growing prize-winning potatoes. By 1915 he was crowned the "Potato King of Wisconsin" and lectured about potatoes all over the state. Specializing in seed potatoes, Campbell pioneered potato farming in Oneida County. One famous quote from the Milwaukee Journal, November 1915, is "Mr. Campbell helped materially to make Oneida County the champion potato county in the United States as determined by this show".

As the new potato economy took off, larger operations settled in as seed potato production was in demand. By the 1950's, farms like Sunset / Oneida and Winkler's, had expanded to the hundreds of acres. Equipment was modernized. Irrigation pipe brought water to the fields. Warehouses were built in Three Lakes and just north of town near the railroad tracks and long lines of rail cars transported the potatoes to distant destinations. By the 1970's though things were slowing down. The last passenger train departed Three Lakes in 1971 and in June of 1980 the very last freight train made its way out of the station. The line was abandoned, tracks removed and the large potato farms of Three Lakes were abandoned or sold.

The Sugar Camp potato fields west of Three Lakes tell a different story. Henry Sowinski and his sons Alvin and David of Sowinski Farms had already been farming and growing potatoes when Fred Meyer brought Red Dot Foods north. They made their connection with Red Dot in the early years, contracting to provide chip potatoes to the Rhinelander processing plant. When Meyer sold to Lay, they continued their business commitment to providing chip potatoes for processing. By not depending on rail transportation, Sowinski's instead grew their fleet of transport trucks to expand their business. This and an ongoing generational family business model has led them to be Frito Lay's longest potato supplier.



This early photo is of Henry Sowinski, his sons, Alvin and David, and one of his grandsons in a field.

In case you missed it, March 14th is National Potato Chip Day. But really, any day is a good day for chips!