

30-08

POTATO FARMING

For more than fifty years, potato farming has been the mainstay of Worthington's economy. Open fields have been reclaimed from the forests, and employment has been given to four generations of workers.

It was in 1932 that Alberie E. Albert brought his family to Worthington from the town of Clair, a small hamlet in New Brunswick across the St. John River from the northernmost tip of Maine. He bought the former 350-acre Pine Brook Lodge farm on Huntington Road which is still headquarters for the potato operation. His younger son, Ben, heads the business today, and his older son, Jerry, heads a large potato farm in Rhode Island.

In the beginning, mainly Green Mountain potatoes were raised for table use, but in the sixties, the younger Alberts experimented with potatoes best suited for chipping stock, the term used for potato chips. These included Kennebecs, Katahdins, Russets, and more recently Norchips, Manonas, and Fritolay Varieties. These go mainly to State Line Potato Chips.

Harvesting was done by hand by workers recruited in the south by migrant bosses and brought to town in big busses. They picked into burlap sacks which were dumped into wooden barrels that were loaded onto flatbed trucks and taken to the warehouses for grading and sorting into bags for market. Health and housing for these workers created problems.

Many changes have taken place through the years. The farm has been increased to about 600 acres and the operation has been modernized through mechanization and improved seed varieties to increase productivity each year. Seed potatoes are raised on their own farm in Washburn, Maine that are specifically cultured for chip potatoes and this soil and climate.

Use of pesticides have been an aid in protecting the potato crop against blight and the Colorado potato beetle. Giant Dahlman Diggers—each costing more than \$30,000, have been in use for the past 20 years. Each machine can harvest about 10 acres a day and their use has cut the payroll from about 150 workers to 50. Seasonal workers from the area are paid by the hour instead of at piece rate, and many are housewives.

Besides the Albert family which now includes fourth generation in the business, the John Donovan Srs. with most of their ten children came from Washburn, Maine in 1942 to join the potato business. Their eldest son, Jasper, had come earlier to work for Mr. Albert. One daughter, Frances, married Ben Albert and their children and grandchildren are now active in the farm operation. Potato farming replaced dairy farming here just in time to preserve the open farm land from the developer's bulldozer and to protect the rural character of the town.