



75 YEARS OF PROGRESS

WPVGA Celebrates 75th Anniversary in 2023

By Tamas Houlihan, Executive Director, Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA)

The year was 1948. President Harry S. Truman was reelected in an upset over Thomas Dewey. “Howdy Doody” was the most popular TV show. Cleveland (yes, Cleveland) defeated Boston, 4 games to 2, to win the World Series.

More importantly, potato yields in Wisconsin were averaging 96 cwt.

(hundredweight) per acre. With 78,000 acres of potatoes grown in the state, total production was close to 7.5 million cwt.

Fast forward 75 years. Wisconsin potato yields are now routinely 425+ cwt./acre, and with 63,000 acres grown, the state produces over 25 million cwt. annually, ranking third in

the United States. (And Cleveland has still not won another World Series.)

The year 2023 marks the 75th Anniversary of the formation of the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA). The original Association was incorporated in 1948, so this year we are celebrating 75 years of progress.



The first WPVGA president was Ben Diercks (inset). His son, Robert, grandson, Steve (left), and great-grandson, Andy (right), have all been WPVGA presidents. Ben, Robert, and Steve Diercks are in the WPVGA Hall of Fame.



Above: Avis and Louis Wysocki are both WPVGA Hall of Fame members. Louis was instrumental in founding the Wisconsin Potato Industry Board and served as its first president in 1974. He is still active on the WPVGA Water Task Force and Governmental Affairs committees. The late Avis Wysocki is credited with founding the Wisconsin Potato Growers Auxiliary with Dianne Somers.

Below: WPVGA Hall of Fame member Jerry Bushman (center) tapes a TV show alongside “Midwest Grill’n” hosts Mad Dog (left) & Merrill with the Spudmobile in the background.





IN THE BEGINNING...

The original group of growers who formed the Association adopted the name “Potato Growers of Wisconsin,” and the Articles of Incorporation were signed by Ben Diercks, Felix Zeloski, Barron West, and Luke Kuczarski.

Diercks was elected as the first president and Edward Okray was elected vice president. (Do the names, “Diercks” and “Okray” sound familiar to anyone?)

The Association was set up as a non-profit organization to organize the potato growers and handlers of the state to promote and protect their interests; and to arrange, hold and conduct meetings of potato growers and potato handlers in the state.

Office space was acquired in the Fidelity Savings Bank of Antigo and Cliff Hutchinson was employed as the first Executive Secretary. The bank is now Chase Bank of Antigo, but the office remains there.

The initial fee for membership was 25 cents per acre. A monthly publication called “The Badger Common’Tater” was soon developed, with the first issue being mailed out in July of 1948.

In 1964, growers of other vegetables were interested in forming a statewide organization, which resulted in changing the name to

the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association, Inc.

One of the biggest accomplishments of the Association occurred in 1974 with the establishment of legislation giving Wisconsin its own Potato Industry Board (WPIB).

Members of that first WPIB included President Louis Wysocki and Dennis Zeloski. (Do those names sound familiar?) Later, in 1989, Wisconsin growers voted overwhelmingly to make the Potato Industry Board’s assessment mandatory without a refund clause.

Left: From left to right are Francis and Harriet Wysocki with Dianne and Nick Somers. Francis and Nick are both WPVGA Hall of Fame members and past presidents of the WPVGA, with Nick also being a past president of the WPIB. Dianne is credited with founding the Wisconsin Potato Growers Auxiliary alongside Avis Wysocki.


Right: WPVGA Hall of Fame member Larry Alsum (center) poses with his daughters, Wendy Dykstra (left) and Heidi Alsum-Randall (right), in Washington, D.C., overlooking the Capitol. Larry served two terms as WPVGA president, Heidi is the current president of the WPIB, and Wendy sits on the WPVGA Board of Directors.

continued on pg. 20

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continued from pg. 19



The WPIB has served as a funding and oversight board for the industry's research and marketing efforts as well as WPVGA administration.

It would be virtually impossible to list all the Association's accomplishments throughout the years. There has been considerable work done on issues such as market orders, irrigation and water issues, taxes, environmental and crop protection concerns, promotion, and education.

The Association has also worked hand in hand with the Extension Service of the University of Wisconsin College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, coordinating the annual summer field day events and funding millions of dollars in applied research.

The WPVGA has sponsored the annual Grower Education Conference & Industry Show, which has long been recognized as one of, if not the best, potato events of its kind in the country.

NOTHING IS CONSTANT, EXCEPT CHANGE

The potato industry has changed dramatically over the past 75 years. Farms are now much fewer in number but larger in size. Equipment has gotten much larger and more efficient. Irrigation is now widespread on virtually every potato farm, and variable rate irrigation systems are used to conserve water and nutrients.

Automation and robotics are

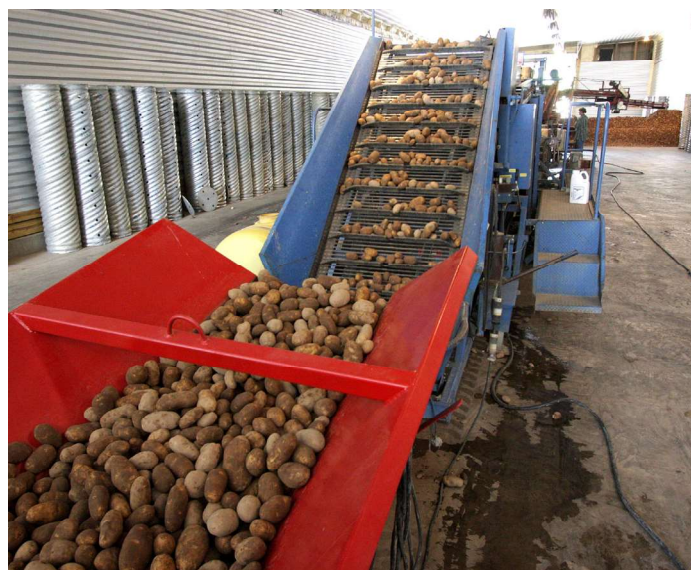
Above: In the historical photo at left, a hand harvest crew works diligently at Prosser Farms near Antigo in the early 1950s. A harvest operation, right, is shown at Plover River Farms. Harvest machinery has come a long way in the past 75 years.

commonplace in potato packing sheds. Storage facilities have improved to the point where we can now store potatoes year-round. The processing industry has become increasingly important, now accounting for over 50% of Wisconsin potato usage.

But through all the changes, the goals and objectives of the WPVGA have remained the same: research, education, promotion and grower advocacy.



A seed cutting operation is shown, at left, on Lonnie Powell's farm in the late 1940s, and a modern seed cutting operation (right) at Schroeder Bros. Farms in Antigo.





And the key to achieving these goals remains the same: a willingness to get involved, get organized and work together.

Although potatoes have been grown in Wisconsin for much longer than 75 years, it took a group of dedicated farmers with great foresight to organize and unify the growers of the state. In so doing, those pioneers

made the industry stronger and more economically viable for generations to come.

So, as we celebrate the 75th Anniversary of the WPVGA, let's pause and give thanks to those who made it all possible. Please take a moment to read through the list of WPVGA Hall of Fame inductees as well as the lists of industry presidents

An early Wisconsin potato Industry Show is depicted at left, while at right is the Wisconsin Potato Growers Auxiliary booth at a recent WPVGA Industry Show. Pictured in the second image are past Auxiliary presidents Lynn Isherwood (left) and Kathy Bartsch (right).

that follow this article.

Many farms, farm workers, and more importantly, a lot of families are

continued on pg. 22



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continued from pg. 21



better off because of their vision and hard work.

LONG-TIME, DEDICATED STAFF MEMBERS

I would be remiss if I did not mention the current staff of the WPVGA. There are several of us who have dedicated a lot of years of our working lives to the betterment of the potato and vegetable industry of Wisconsin.

Financial Officer Karen Rasmussen has 27 years of service; Executive Assistant Julie Braun recently celebrated 25 years of service; Promotions Director Dana Rady has served the WPVGA for over 10 years; and Managing Editor Joe Kertzman has over seven years of service. Part-time Program Assistant Jane Guillen is in her fifth year of service.

I'm honored to be the 13th Executive Director of the WPVGA and even

An early potato planter is shown, left, and, at right, a potato planter is filled at Heartland Farms a few years ago. Potato equipment continues to get larger and more efficient.

more honored to say I've been working for this industry for over 35 of its 75 years. I can't imagine a better industry in which to work, and I'm thankful for it every day.

Let's keep this industry moving Full Spud Ahead! **BCT**

LEADING THE WAY SINCE 1948

WPVGA Presidents:

B.H. (Ben) Diercks (1948-49)
Edward Okray (1950)
James D. Swan (1951)
Melvin Luther (1952)
John Okray (1953-54)
Charles Creuziger (1955-59)
Emil Jorgenson (1960)
A.F. Hoeft (1961)
Jack Diercks (1962-65)
Emil Perzinski (1966-68)
Louis Wysocki (1969-71)
Lonnie Krogwold (1972-74)
Robert H. Diercks (1975-76)
Nick Somers (1977-78)
Bob Guenther (1979-80)

Cy Sorrells (1981)
Richard Pavelski (1982)
Ernest Bushman (1983-85)
Howard "Hod" Chilewski (1986)
John Wolter (1987-88)
Steve Diercks (1989)
Robert Stodola (1990)
Bob Lapacinski (1991)
Francis Wysocki (1992-94)
Jim Okray (1995)
Terry Wex (1996-97)
Robert Stodola (1998)
Al Sowinski (1999)
Mike Wolter (2000)

Jim Wysocki (2001)
Andy Diercks (2002)
Larry Alsum (2003)
Jim Bacon (2004)
Ron Krueger (2005)
Jeff Sommers (2006)
T.J. Kennedy (2007-08)
Kevin Sigourney (2009)
Mike Carter (2010)
Kirk Wille (2011)
Brad Faldet (2012)
Jeremie Pavelski (2013)
Larry Alsum (2014)
Andy Wallendal (2015)
Mark Finnessy (2016)

Eric Schroeder (2017)
Josh Mattek (2018)
Wes Meddaugh (2019)
Rod Gumz (2020)
Bill Guenther (2021)
Alex Okray (2022)
Randy Fleishauer (2023)



Wisconsin Potato Growers Auxiliary Board Presidents:

2023 – Brittany Bula	2004 – Deb Bacon
2022 – Devin Zarda	2003 – Carole Gagas
2021 – Kathy Bartsch	2002 – Carole Gagas
2020 – Kathy Bartsch	2001 – Carole Gagas
2019 – Kathy Bartsch	2000 – Lynn Isherwood
2018 – Kathy Bartsch	1999 – Lynn Isherwood
2017 – Paula Houlihan	1998 – Lynn Isherwood
2016 – Paula Houlihan	1997 – Judy Schroeder
2015 – Jacquie Wille	1996 – Gerri Okray
2014 – Kathy Bartsch	1995 – Gerri Okray
2013 – Lynn Isherwood	1994 – Gerri Okray
2012 – Lynn Isherwood	1993 – Chris Anthony
2011 – Lynn Isherwood	1992 – Caroline Wild
2010 – Carole Gagas	1991 – Caroline Wild
2009 – Lynn Isherwood	1990 – Caroline Wild
2008 – Lynn Isherwood	1989 – Jane Zdroik
2007 – Lynn Isherwood	1988 – Arlene Malek
2006 – Deb Bacon	1987 – Anita Polzin
2005 – Deb Bacon	1986 – Anita Polzin



1985 – Anita Polzin
 1984 – Anita Polzin
 1983 – Kathie Baginski
 1982 – Pat Diercks
 1981 – Pat Diercks
 1980 – Helen Wanca
 1979 – Arlene Malek
 1978 – Dianne Somers
 1977 – Dianne Somers
 1976 – Dianne Somers
 1975 – Dianne Somers

Associate Division Presidents:

2023 – Matt Selenske	2011 – Danny Wysocky	1999 – Peg DeLapp
2022 – Julie Cartwright	2010 – Jim Beach	1998 – Peg DeLapp
2021 – Chris Brooks	2009 – Steve Tatro	1997 – Dan Zierke
2020 – Kenton Mehlberg	2008 – Steve Tatro	1996 – Dan Zierke
2019 – Kenton Mehlberg	2007 – Skip Tenpas	1995 – Mike Hurst
2018 – Casey Kedrowski	2006 – Skip Tenpas	1994 – Mike Hurst
2017 – Sally Suprise	2005 – Dale Bowe	1993 – Dennis Schultz
2016 – Wayne Solinsky	2004 – Dale Bowe	1992 – Tom Koss
2015 – Chris Brooks	2003 – Bob Ebben	1991 – Tom Koss
2014 – Eugene Mancl	2002 – Tony Grapsas	1990 – Paul Roberts
2013 – Eugene Mancl	2001 – Tony Grapsas	1989 – Paul Roberts
2012 – Danny Wysocky	2000 – David Bauknecht	

Wisconsin Potato Industry Board Presidents:

2023-2024 – Heidi Randall	2006-2007 – Tom Wild	1989-1990 – Nick Somers
2022-2023 – Heidi Randall	2005-2006 – Tom Wild	1988-1989 – Nick Somers
2021-2022 – Heidi Randall	2004-2005 – Tom Wild	1987-1988 – Nick Somers
2020-2021 – Heidi Randall	2003-2004 – Tom Wild	1986-1987 – Glen Wolter
2019-2020 – Heidi Randall	2002-2003 – Terry Wex	1985-1986 – Glen Wolter
2018-2019 – Heidi Randall	2001-2002 – Steve Diercks	1984-1985 – Brian West
2017-2018 – Heidi Randall	2000-2001 – Doug Rendall	1983-1984 – Brian West
2016-2017 – Heidi Randall	1999-2000 – Sam Ourada	1982-1983 – Brian West
2015-2016 – Heidi Randall	1998-1999 – Sam Ourada	1981-1982 – Joe Okray
2014-2015 – Heidi Randall	1997-1998 – Donald Isherwood	1980-1981 – Donald Schroeder
2013-2014 – Tom Wild	1996-1997 – Donald Isherwood	1979-1980 – Jack Jilek
2012-2013 – Tom Wild	1995-1996 – Andrew Wallendal	1978-1979 – Robert Diercks
2011-2012 – Tom Wild	1994-1995 – Steve Diercks	1977-1978 – John Mommsen
2010-2011 – Tom Wild	1993-1994 – Bernard Lapacinski	1976-1977 – John Mommsen
2009-2010 – Tom Wild	1992-1993 – Gregory Wysocki	1975-1976 – Dennis Zeloski
2008-2009 – Tom Wild	1991-1992 – Gregory Wysocki	1974-1975 – Louis Wysocki,
2007-2008 – Tom Wild	1990-1991 – Nick Somers	Robert Diercks, Vice President

Complete List of WPVGA Hall of Fame Members and Years Inducted

1990
 Joseph L. Bushman
 Ben H. Diercks
 Myron Mommsen
 Edward J. Okray
 John Okray
 W. James Prosser
 Lelah Starks
 James D. Swan
 Barron G. West
 Felix Zeloski

1991
 Henry M. Darling
 Robert H. Diercks
 Melvin E. Luther
 Albert M. Pavelski
 Henry L. Woodward

1992
 Lawrence Krogwold
 Michael Patrykus
 John A. Schoenemann
 Clarence Worzella
 Louis E. Wysocki

1993
 Champ Bean Tanner
 Ernest Bushman
 Melvin Hugo Rominsky
 Lawrence (Larry) Lapcinski
 Wayne Brittenham

1994
 James Burns, Sr.
 Myron D. Groskopp
 James Wencil (J.W.) Mattek
 Hal Roberts

1995
 A.F. (Bill) Hoeft
 Bennett Katz
 Eugene Katz
 Donn "Hokey" West

1996
 Charles M. Creuziger
 Alois (Al) Okray
 Joseph Jacob Okray
 Stanley J. Peloquin

1997
 Anton (Tony) Gallenberg
 Howard F. Chlewski

1998
 Dave Curwen
 Francis Gilson
 Emil Perzinski

1999
 John J. Bushman
 James G. Milward

2000
 Dean Kincaid
 Henry V. Sowinski

2001 *(Presented in Feb. 2002)*
 James J. Mattek
 Francis X. Wysocki

2002 *(Presented in Feb. 2003)*
 Robert Hougas
 Gerri Okray

2003 *(Presented in Jan. 2004)*
 Larry Binning
 Peter Wallendal

2004 *(Presented in Feb. 2005)*
 Jerome Bushman
 Harold Sargent

2005 *(Presented in Feb. 2006)*
 Ed Wade
 Dennis Zeloski

2006 *(Presented in Feb. 2007)*
 Don Kichefski

2007 *(Presented in Feb. 2008)*
 Walt Stevenson

2008 *(Presented in Feb. 2009)*
 Victor Anthony
 Jeffrey Wyman

2009 *(Presented in Feb. 2010)*
 John Landa
 Robert Stodola

2010 *(Presented in Feb. 2011)*
 John H. Schroeder
 August Winkler

2011 *(Presented in Feb. 2012)*
 Fred and Kathryn Meyer
 Howard "Skip" Tenpas

2012 *(Presented in Feb. 2013)*
 Steve Diercks
 Mike Finnessy

2013 *(Presented in Feb. 2014)*
 Myron Soik

2014 *(Presented in Feb. 2015)*
 Robert Helbach

2015 *(Presented in Feb. 2016)*
 Charles Cofer
 Robert Guenther

2016 *(Presented in Feb. 2017)*
 Donald Hamerski
 Richard Pavelski

2017 *(Presented in Feb. 2018)*
 Nick Somers

2018 *(Presented in Feb. 2019)*
 Dr. Keith Kelling

2019 *(Presented in Feb. 2020)*
 Larry Alsum
 Dick Okray

2020 *(Presented in Feb. 2021)*
 Marv Worzella
 Norm Worzella

2021 *(Presented in Feb. 2022)*
 Paul Miller

2022 *(Presented in Feb. 2023)*
 Randy VanHaren