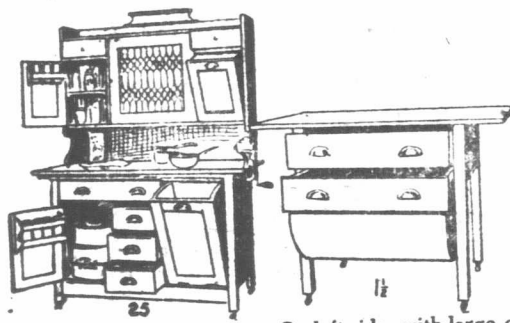


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## GROWING, HANDLING and MARKETING of POTATOES

Following is an Address to the New Brunswick Potato Growers Association at Woodstock. It was delivered by Guy G. Porter of Porter-Manzer Co. Ltd. of Perth

(Continued from last week)

Developing the market for our goods, and the intelligent distribution of the crop upon the different markets at a good price, is perhaps the most important feature of the business. This means constant scrutiny of the forces that tend to boost or break the market. There are many methods employed by the different shippers in this province in marketing their goods, but I believe the best and only practical way to market our potatoes is through a reliable representative, located in the larger selling centres, who are able to keep their fingers on the pulse of the market every hour of the day and report faithfully by wire to their shippers daily.

It is very important that markets are not allowed to become overstocked and in this connection I want to very strongly discourage the idea of consigning potatoes to Montreal, Toronto, or any other market unsold. Sometimes this can be done at a profit, but nine cases out of ten results are disappointing and sometimes disastrous. I know of many cases where shippers rely entirely on shipping on consignment basis to their brokers. These goods are shipped to the different markets, mostly Montreal and Toronto, without even first finding out whether the market requires these potatoes, or if they can be sold at a profit upon arrival.

I have known of many cases where brokers made no effort whatever to market the goods at the best price obtainable. They simply accept the first offer they received, and in many cases secured the brokerage from the shipper and also from the buyer for giving them the first bid on the car. This is one of the features we have to contend with, as this practice tends largely to keep the market in a very unhealthy condition, besides losing money for the shippers.

I also know of cases where brokers have sold dozens of cars at five and ten cents less than the market price in order to get them off his hands at a time when he was receiving a large shipment of apples; the apple deal meant a whole lot more profit to him than the commission he was making on the potatoes. Therefore the sacrifice was made at the expense of the potato shipper who consigned his stock. The average broker has very little interest in the market, other than to sell as many cars as possible in order to secure his commission. It is easier for him

to sell five or ten cents below the market at the expense of the shipper.

Another feature we have to contend with, and one of the most unbusinesslike methods any shipper can adopt, is price cutting. The shipper will often load a car of potatoes not knowing when or where he will be able to sell. If by chance he should make a sale while loading, everything goes well; but this is not easily done. He holds the car on the track for a few days; perhaps the weather is cold; he becomes overanxious to sell, and begins wiring several buyers in Montreal and Toronto. If he cannot sell at his price the first day, he cuts the price five cents per bag the second day, and keeps on cutting the price until the sale is made. This is poor business, and not only affects the profits of the shipper who sold low, but every shipper in the business. It has a very demoralizing effect upon the market, and other shippers are forced to reduce their price on shipments, going forward the same week in order to hold their customers.

I know of a case where a New Brunswick shipper, after holding a loaded car on the track for five days, wired 27 different buyers in Montreal and Toronto, quoting at five cents per bag below the market, at a time when the market was overstocked and when Montreal and Toronto buyers were led to believe that there were 27 cars loaded in New Brunswick begging for a sale, whereas in fact there was only one. This indeed has a very demoralizing effect upon the market, and is a practice which should not be employed.

We all know that we cannot undersell one another and make a profit, and we all know that if we sell without profit, or without a sufficient profit to cover all contingencies, there is only one end, and that is failure. There is still a good deal of sentiment in business; there always will be. Individual buyers will show preference to individual shippers, and cutting prices will not result in making sales.

In case of a car arriving in doubtful condition, or in case a car is shipped to a shady buyer who reports the car has arrived in bad condition, we should have our representative within easy reach of the car, and in this connection I might mention an incident that happened last fall, when a Western Ontario buyer wired the shipper, offering \$50.00 less, claiming the car had arrived

in bad condition. The card index in the office showed a complete record of outturn of all the cars unloaded by this man during the last eight years. The details of loading were checked up and found to be O. K. The matter was taken up by wire with the nearest representative. The agent travelled all night, and the next morning the wholesaler came out on the sidewalk to see a strange customer tear open a bag of potatoes and dig into it like a terrier.

"Pretty nice lot of stock, that," said the stranger, looking up. "The finest I ever saw," the wholesaler replied.

In that case, I reckon they are worth all you agreed to pay for them." The agent grinned, handing his card to the astonished dealer. "Now, just add this to the bill," he continued, making a memo of his expenses covering the round trip of 200 miles, "and let me have a certified cheque for the amount. I want to catch the next train back to Toronto." He got the cheque.

Another of the forces which tends to break the market is the unreliable broker. He tells his customer he cannot sell below a certain price, but promises to report the car 10 bags short in order to make the price meet the bid of the buyer. We find numerous cases where a broker has made cuts of 10 to 20 bags per car in order to make sales at the price he was authorized to sell at. The potatoes being shipped in bulk, it is easy to report the car short. This makes bitter and very hard competition for a reliable firm to compete against, and it also makes it hard for the reliable wholesaler to operate at a profit when he pays for all he gets in the car and his competing neighbor gets 20 bags for nothing. This has not only been done once but is growing to be a habit with some of our unreliable brokers, and probably some of your shippers are wondering why your cars turn out short when unloaded.

I had an opportunity of discussing the potato situation with an agent of the Eastern Shore of Virginia Exchange last summer, and learned a great deal about their methods of selling, shipping, etc. From the very first the founders of this wonderful organization had certain ideas to carry out for the benefit of the farmer and the consumer. The first thing they did was to set a standard of quality; and in order to maintain this standard they had inspectors at each of the 47 buying stations. If a farmer brought in potatoes that were poorly sorted or affected with rot, they were sorted over at the farmer's expense, potatoes that were not worthy of the brand of No. 1 or No. 2 stock were sent back to the pigs; nothing reached the market except good No. 1 or No. 2 stock. This firm sold 15,000 cars of potatoes last season; terms, sight draft by the buyer's bank before the car left Virginia. This buying sight unseen, as the boys used to say, means confidence in the seller and confidence in the quality of the goods. These potatoes were all put up in barrels of 165 lbs. net.

How many potatoes could the New Brunswick shippers sell on these terms? Not a single car. Why? Simply because we are years and years behind the times in the grading and packing of this most profitable commodity. We have no fixed standard of quality.

I feel that we should follow the rules and customs of those who have made a success of the potato business. We should sell our potatoes in barrels or bags, graded No. 1 or No. 2. By this method we would cut out all shortages by demanding of the railway companies a clear bill of lading, showing the number of bags or barrels contained in the car. We are surely entitled to a receipt from transportation companies for the number of packages we entrust to their care. By this method of unreliable brokers and buyers would not be able to make

dishonest profits by reporting shortages at the expense of the shipper.

I have never seen a car of bulk potatoes shipped from Virginia, yet they have the largest and strongest potato shipping organization in America. Neither have I ever heard of a car of Red Star Virginia potatoes being refused, or short in weight. Red Star Virginia potatoes bring 25 to 50 cents more per barrel than potatoes grown from similar seed in other states. The land of Virginia farmer has doubled in value. These farmers would not think of going back to the antiquated methods of selling ungraded stock in bulk. Their pocketbooks show them the wisdom of doing business under modern methods. We should profit by their experience.

I am, therefore, strongly in favor of shipping potatoes in packages, either bags or barrels of regulation weight. The crop of the province must be kept under control and fed out to the different markets as required; otherwise we will have congested markets, bad slumps prices, demoralizing in the trade generally, with much uncertainty attending both the raising and shipping of potatoes.

I have in mind a plan whereby the cutting and slashing of prices, to the disadvantage of both grower and shipper, could be eliminated. From what we might call the New Brunswick Potato Growers' and Shippers' Association having its head office located in the centre of the potato growing belt. All potato shippers to be members of this association and contribute towards the expense pro rata with the number of cars shipped. All potatoes to be sold through head office, and orders to be distributed among the different shipping members pro rata to the number of cars each firm shipped during the last two seasons. All potatoes to be shipped in the name of the association, put up in packages, and graded. Each buying branch to submit its account each month to head office, to be scrutinized by auditors, and any differences of opinion to be adjusted by a Board of Directors. The selling price to be set by the association from day to day, based on information gained from its agents situated in the main markets on which they are operating. The buying price to be fixed from day to day after a careful study of market conditions.

If an association should be formed along these lines, the details could be easily worked out, and by these methods we could cut down the cost of selling seventy-five per cent. We could cut out ninety-five per cent of our losses from short weight, rots, rejections, pilfering, etc. We could eliminate the slashing of prices. We could put the potato business on a firm, sound basis, which under present conditions is most hazardous to both the grower and the shipper. Our markets could be kept in a good, healthy condition so as to ensure both grower and shipper good prices for the season's crop. It is simply a problem of "He who serves best profits most."

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