

# Potato grower was innovator in his time

By Judy Mitchell  
Berks Co. Reporter

FLEETWOOD Raymond C. Snyder, a retired Lehigh County farmer now living in Fleetwood R2, feels that potato growing is an area of farming which has remained too long in the shadows. Snyder would like to see the potato "get its slice" of public recognition, and it appears that the potato could find no abler champion for its cause than a man who has

spent over half a century in the business.

Snyder, who adheres to the philosophy that "a man is never through learning," believes that at age 72, he can now say he knows "a little bit about potatoes." Snyder began learning about growing potatoes when he was nine, working the fields on the family farm with a harrow and a team of horses. By the time he was eleven he was guiding the plow, but

Snyder still recalls that when he began working the field he wasn't even strong enough to turn the equipment, and if he didn't set it straight the first time he would have to circle the entire field and try again.

When he was 22 years old, Snyder decided to make potato growing his life's work and took over the family farm, but only, he adds, after much consideration. "I had to make a choice," he recalls now. "There was a mortgage on the farm still to be paid, and my father was a crippled man." Although he'd never made a dollar's wages on the farm, there were all the years his parents and he had already put into it to think about. If he hadn't decided to stay with the farm, he says, "all that would have gone down the drain."

Snyder says that, ac-

ording to his wife, a potato farmer's job "show the hardest way to make a living." While working for his father, Snyder had loaded potatoes on box car and worked on road construction during the off-season and after he took over the farm he continued to find ways to supplement the income from his potato crops. He ran a small dairy operation to put bread on the table. He raised beef cattle and swine for a time, "to fill in, and also for the fertilizer." But Snyder never stopped learning about potatoes and continued to work towards making his potato business go.

And make it go he did. Young Snyder was obviously an innovator in his time, a brash young man who, as he recalls, his older neighbors gave a year to go under. "But they lived to see me



Raymond C. Snyder, Fleetwood, checks quality and yield of the green mountain variety potatoes, which he is testing for his son, Lee, who now operates the family potato farms in Lehigh County.

make it," he says with a smile. Snyder had already incorporated the new spray programs being promoted to combat potato diseases while working for his father. He recalls that he had a job convincing his father to try the sprays, which also required investment in new equipment; but when he was sure Raymond was willing

and able to do the work himself, the elder Snyder finally consented. Within four years of farming on his own, Snyder averaged over 400 bushels of potatoes per acre for which he was awarded membership in the Pennsylvania Potato Growers Association 400-Bushel Club.

In 1941, Snyder made the news again when he installed a pond and irrigation system, the first of its kind in the area. According to the old newspaper clippings Mrs. Snyder has preserved in a scrapbook, the irrigation system, which could match 1½ inches of rainfall in one hour, was the talk of the town. But Snyder recalls the ribbing he took from friends and neighbors because "the first year I was ready to irrigate, it really rained."

Before turning the business over to his only son, Lee, 11 years ago, Snyder had purchased two more farms, added three more ponds, built a 50 by 112 foot, temperature and humidity controlled storage building (another first in the area), and had progressed to machine harvesting.

Although he claims he's been retired 11 years now, Snyder admits that "when you have worked all your life to build something, you can't just turn your back on it. It's kind of in the blood."

In keeping with his basic philosophy, Snyder is still learning about potatoes. Although he says he grew mainly russets in his day, the tried and true standby at that time, he eventually began to follow the results of experimental test plots at such institutions as Penn State University, and "if I saw something that looked good, I tried it." Now Snyder does the testing himself, planting new varieties that interest him in two potato patches, one at the family farms in Lehigh County and another behind his home in Fleetwood.

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