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Emmet County's prized potato production

by **Richard A. Wiles**

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When Emmet County was well-populated by European settlers in the mid-1870s, it was still completely forested with pine and hardwoods. Its sandy loam soil, with a heavy clay subsoil, also had a presence of lime. Unbeknownst to the white settlers, many of whom were Civil War veterans who fought for the north, that soil, or at least part of it, would one day become famous for its production of potatoes (*Solanum tuberosum*). The first mention of potato farming occurred in the July 23, 1880, *Emmet County Democrat* which reported “new potatoes are now being brought to the town by the surrounding farmers.”

On September 16, 1880, the *Petoskey Evening News* wrote about Littlefield Township farmer Peter Boyer offering Irish spotted seed potatoes for sale at \$2 a bushel. The 1880 federal census showed Boyer and his wife, Katherine, had tilled 30 acres of land while the rest of their 160 acres remained woods and meadows. Mr. Boyer was one of the first farmers producing what would become Emmet County's most precious cash crop — the potato. The English word, potato, was derived from the Spanish word, patata.



Photo from Michigan Department of Agriculture

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, “... a typical potato is 79% water, 17% carbohydrates (88% of which is starch), 2% protein and contains negligible fat. It is a rich source of vitamin B6. The potato is rarely eaten raw because raw potato starch is poorly digested by humans. However, when a potato is baked, its contents of vitamin B6 and C decline notably, while there is little notable change in the amount of other nutrients.”

In September of 1879, Charles Carol Beahan of Flint, Michigan, purchased 80 acres of land at what is now the northeast corner of Resort Pike and Intertown roads in Resort Township. Beahan had been born in the state of New York to an Irish immigrant family. He took up farming near Flint, Michigan, and later moved to Missouri. By

1885, he was working as a traveling seed salesman for the Sioux City Seed Company, the largest at that time west of the Mississippi River. Mr. Beahan moved to Petoskey in 1892 and hired a local builder, his brother-in-law Lucius “Lou” Darling, to design and build a warehouse in downtown Petoskey. The *Petoskey Record* stated in its January 11, 1893, edition that “Charles Beahan who built a large iron warehouse on Michigan Street near the railroad has opened this week.”

Selim Darling, Lou's father, had come to Petoskey in 1880 to open his carpentry business, Darling & Son. His company built many summer cottages in the Bay View Association. Their office was the site of the Beahan warehouse on Michigan Steet, which was designed by architect Lou Darling.



Archives at www.gwood.us

In May of 1894, the two brothers-in-law formed the Darling & Beahan Company. Agricultural equipment was soon added to the seed and storage and gardening



Darling

supplies part of the business. Beahan had learned much from his work at the Sioux City Seed Company, especially the importance of using mail order catalogues. To augment their business, the Hillcrest Farm was created on Beahan's 80 acres in Resort Township. The most sought-after products were the company's many varieties of potatoes, especially the Irish Cobbler. They grew their seed potatoes in the sandy, loamy soil prevalent on their land.

Darling & Beahan would ship their seed potatoes by the barrel or by the peck. Their catalog stated "A barrel of potatoes consists of 165 pounds of potatoes, or two and three-fourths

bushels, packed in new barrels of our own make. Barrels are best to ship in as the potatoes will not get so badly bruised in transit. Should anyone wish to have potatoes shipped in sacks, we will allow a reduction of 15 cents per barrel from catalog prices, which is just about the difference between cost of barrels and sacks." The catalog stated the company was the largest grower of seed potatoes in the United States

and that "We are right in the center of the best potato-growing section in the world ... We not only grow for our own immense retail trade, but we grow for many other seedsmen." Darling & Beahan also offered a free leaflet, "How to Grow Potatoes."

By the mid-1880s, it was well-known that the soil in Resort Township and near Levering, Michigan, in northern Emmet County, were conducive to growing potatoes. Many farmers began with small potato plots that they could use as a cash crop during the winter months. Potato pits were dug into the ground and, during mild times in the winter, dug open and the potatoes brought to market. One of these potato farmers was John Thomas Crane, who had a farm in Resort Township near Bear Lake (known as Walloon today). He was a graduate of the Michigan Agricultural College and was a school-teacher at one time. Crane began his farming in Emmet County in 1884.

The *Detroit Free Press* ran a front-



John Thomas Crane's load of potatoes in the mid 1890s. (Photo from gwood.us)

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page story titled “Potatoes and Fish” on December 18, 1897. “Potato raising is a great industry in northern Michigan. Emmet County potatoes, like Petoskey fish, are now being quoted in many city markets as the highest standard of excellence.” By the mid-1890s, after only 15-plus years, the potato farmers of Emmet County were growing in number. The previous cash crops of wheat, oats, barley, and rye were all being replaced in value by potatoes. The *Petoskey Record* reported that 47,791 bushels of potatoes were shipped out of Petoskey in 1893 and, by 1897, over 90,000 bushels had been shipped out, bringing \$33,000 (\$1,702,500 in 2021 dollars) to Emmet County farmers.

The potato-growing area west of Levering was given the name “Potato Soup Valley.”



Kilpatrick

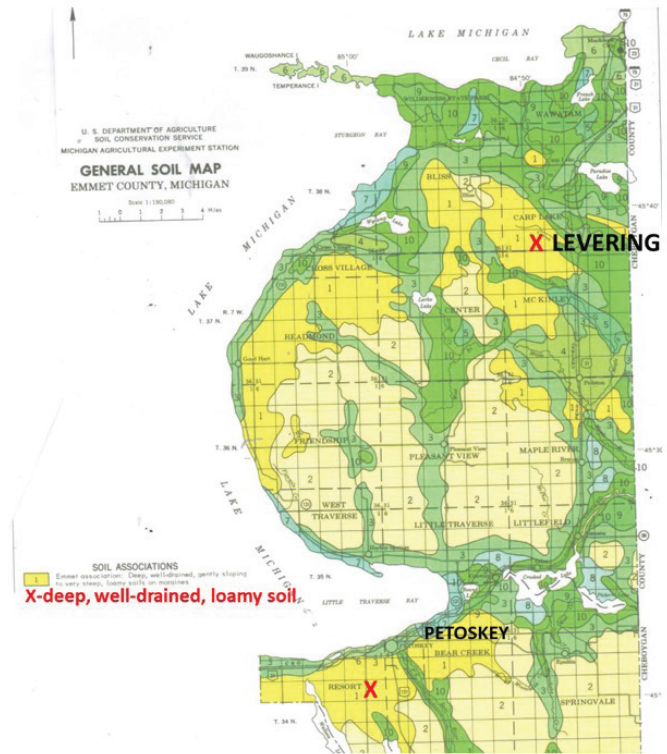
Beginning in February of 1909, Mrs. Emma Kilpatrick began writing a “Potato Soup Valley” column each week in the *Petoskey Evening News*. Emma would talk about the comings and goings of Soup Valley residents. Her column appeared in the paper until August of 1950 when she retired from writing at age 80. Her husband, Elmer, had died in 1926 and Emma died in 1962. They had established an 80-acre farm near Bliss in 1891 and raised seven children on that property.

It is believed that the potato, as well as tobacco, tomatoes, and peppers, evolved from the poisonous nightshade plant somewhere in the Andes

Mountain region of South America. Ecuador and Peru were two specific areas where wild potatoes grew and were eventually cultivated to produce food.

The first European explorers in the region were the Spanish in 1532. They found the Native American population eating the vegetable. Within 30 years, Spanish farmers on the Canary Islands were growing the crop. They would export their potatoes to Spain, France, and the Netherlands. In 1596 the scientific name of *Solanum tuberosum* was officially attached to the plant. It has been speculated that the arrival of the product may have helped to end mass starvation common in Europe. Historians believe the potato arrived in North America during the year of 1621 when the Governor of Bermuda, Nathaniel Butler, sent two large cedar chests containing potatoes (and other vegetables) to Governor Francis Wyatt of Jamestown, Virginia. The earliest known potato crop harvested in North America was in Londonderry, New Hampshire in 1719. Those plants were from Ireland and so that variety became known as the “Irish” potato.

The first documented report of potato “blight” disease in Emmet County



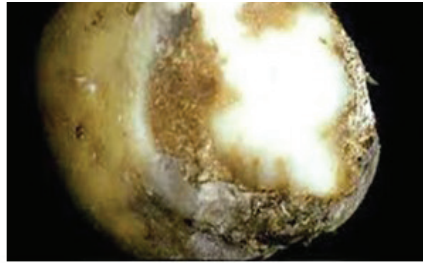
Map from Michigan Department of Agriculture

came in the *Emmet County Democrat* on October 6, 1882. It was reported in this edition that some farmers were experiencing the disease “... the late potatoes, which were struck with blight, are not rotting as badly as it was feared they might, but they are small, not getting their full growth before the vines were killed.”

The scientific name of this blight is *Phytophthora infestans*, which means “plant decay.” It is hypothesized that it originated in Peru and is a mold-like fungus whose spores spread in the wind. The spores eventually kill the leaves of the potato and tomato plants, turning them purplish black or purplish brown. During the mid-1800s, Peru was exporting bat guano to Europe to be used as a fertilizer. It is thought that some of these shipments contained the spores that would prey



Nightshade (left) and potato blossoms (right) (Photos from the United States Department of Agriculture)



Phytophthora infestans, late blight and resulting decay (Photo from USDA)

on nightshade plant species.

The first breakout of the infestation in Europe took place in Belgium in the early summer of 1845 and quickly spread to France. By August of 1845, it had spread to Germany, Denmark, and England. On September 13, 1845, it was reported in Ireland. That year historians estimate that Irish farmers had planted over two million acres of potatoes. Every year the blight got worse until it finally began to wind down in 1852. An estimated one million-plus Irish persons died (proportionally equivalent to 40 million in America in 2021). The same strain that devastated Ireland's potato crop was found to have reached the United States in 1843. By 1845, it was reported in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and the lower farmlands of Michigan.

The *Petoskey City Record* noted in its November 7, 1883, edition that the large potato crop in Emmet County's

Springvale Township "... was greatly damaged by blight in September."

Over the next 25 years, Emmet County's various newspapers hardly mentioned the disease until it was reported in the November 16, 1906, edition of the *Pellston Journal*.

"The potato crop this year is considerably below average, caused primarily by the long-continued drought and blight."

In the 1800s, a French botanist, Pierre-Marie-Alexis Millardet, discovered that a mixture of copper sulfate, lime and water could help prevent a grape downy mildew fungus that was threatening the region's wine production at the time. The fungicide, known as the "Bordeaux Mixture," was the first to be used globally and is still being used today.

Some 40 years after its original discovery as a grape-saving fungicide, the

Bordeaux mixture became an effective method of controlling potato blight as well.

In 1885 Frenchman Louis Podechard perfected a copper sulfate, lime and wood ash powder that could be spread on those early blight-affected plants. However, it took until 1887 before the United States Department of Agriculture began to experiment with the solution to help stop the blight on American farms. The first time the "Bordeaux Mixture" was mentioned in any of the several Emmet County newspapers was in the *Petoskey Record* on May 16, 1896. It stated that "This is a week when everybody who has fruit trees is busily engaged in spreading the Bordeaux mixture." Its use to fight potato blight prevention in the county did not begin to happen in copious amounts until the summer of 1910.

An article in the *Petoskey Record* on July 6, 1910, told farmers that spraying the "Bordeaux Mixture" on their early potato varieties would be a good remedy for stopping the disease. The article also stated, "This mixture can be used in connection with Paris Green (arsenate of lead) for killing the potato beetle. When spraying with this in connection with the Bordeaux Mixture, use two pounds of arsenate in 50 gallons of the mixture when the first potato beetles appear."

Paris Green had been used as an insecticide in the United States since the mid-1860s. It was the first worldwide chemical insecticide in the world. It consisted of combining copper acetate with arsenic trioxide. Emmet County farmers had been using the mixture

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since 1890, buying it from various area drug stores. Farmers continued to use it for the control of potato beetles in the 1920s and 1930s even though it was a known poison that would kill humans and animals. Only the advent of DDT (Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane) during World War II slowed its use. Meanwhile, the “Bordeaux Mixture” continued to be used in Emmet County.

Potatoes became the world’s number one food crop by 1920. Beginning on December 10, 1918, the federal government set up standards for grading potatoes and inspectors were hired to grade crops. Grade No. 1 was given to mature, bright, smooth, well-shaped potatoes. They had to be completely free from bruising or disease. By the early 1920s, Emmet County was receiving attention as one of the state of Michigan’s best areas for growing the crop. The receding glaciers had left a sandy loam in portions of Resort Township and the area west of the village of Levering.

According to Keats Vinening, a one-time Emmet County Extension Agent, in an article titled “Pennsylvania Started a Seed Potato Industry Here” (*Grand Rapids Press*, November 8, 1964), back in 1919, a Pennsylvania farmer bought some potatoes from Michigan and found that, when planted, these potatoes did well in the Pennsylvania climate and soil. These potatoes had come from Mancelona, Michigan. A crop specialist from Pennsylvania visited the Mancelona area and asked if there could be a way to implement safeguards concerning potatoes that could be used as “seed potatoes.” This request was the impetus for



Ray Eppler (photo from gwood.us)

forming the Michigan Certified Seed Potato industry. Resort Township’s Ray Eppler grew his first certified seed potato crop in 1920, the Russet Rural variety.

In 1884, Germany-born John Eppler took up farming in Emmet County’s Resort Township. He died in a freak accident while working the farm in the winter of 1909. His two sons, Ray and Guy, would go on to become premier potato growers. They took over the family farm after their father’s death and engaged increasingly in the farming of potatoes.

In 1919, at the age of 30, Ray Eppler purchased 80 acres from the Darling & Beahan Company on what was then-called Washout Road (later to become Eppler Road). The property was just west of Petoskey and was rich with that potato-loving loam. Ray became a premier certified seed potato grower and continued to be one for 40-plus years. Meanwhile, his brother, Guy,

was judged the state’s premier potato grower in 1929. Also given an honorable mention in 1929 was 52-year-old Pellston potato farmer James Dermott Robinson. The Iowa-born farmer had come to Emmet County in 1904 after graduating from the University of Michigan Law School. Prior to that graduation, Robinson had been an Iowa high school science teacher. After his business as a Pellston attorney did not pan out, he turned to beekeeping.

In 1920 Mr. Robinson became the manager of the Levering Cooperative Market Association which dealt with storing and selling Emmet County farm produce. He also continued his apiary business until 1923 when he resigned and went into the potato-growing business. His 80-acre farm near Levering was amid loam-rich land (known as the Levering Belt) and soon became one of the foremost premier potato growing farms in Emmet County. Robinson began with the planting of the Irish Cobbler variety, an early maturing potato that had first been introduced to the United States in 1876. It was said to make great mashed potatoes. Robinson decided early on that, to increase his yield, he needed to irrigate his crop. No one else in the country was doing that.

Former high school science teacher Robinson studied everything he could about potato farming and, as a result, he became a pioneer in Michigan for using irrigation for his crop. He also was a pioneer in the heavy use of fertilizer, along with crop dusting. All of this helped to grow his yield per acre. In 1946, he achieved a state record of 721 bushels of potatoes in just one acre. The very next year he retired after



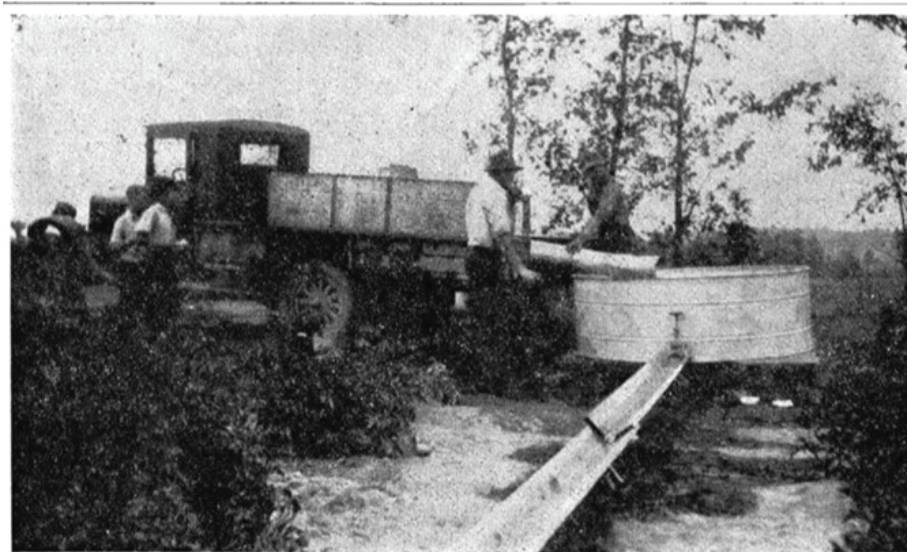
James Dermott Robinson
(photo from gwood.us)

being named the Michigan premier potato grower seven out of 13 years.

Throughout the 1930s during the Great Depression, the Eppler brothers, Ray and John, and J.D. Robinson were top producers of Emmet County seed potatoes and other varieties. Other Emmet County top producers were Oscar Overholt (Levering), Wilfred Sterzik (Resort Township), Pearl Bonter (Pellston), Joseph Holzhu (Resort Township), Frank Guy (Pellston) and Fred Foltz (Resort Township). 1931 was a banner year for local growers and in November of 1933, the first annual Emmet County Potato Show was held in downtown Petoskey. Donations by local merchants and banks provided ribbons, cash awards, trophies, and merchandise awards.

By the year 1947, a *Northern Michigan Review* February 6 editorial called for more state and national advertising of the Emmet County potatoes.

“During the last growing season, 45 Emmet County farmers averaged over 300 bushels of potatoes per acre. Twenty years ago, there were only 20



Crude, perhaps, but this early irrigation system at J. D. Robinson's Pellston farm provided lots of water for potatoes. Water was hauled on the truck, poured into the tank, then allowed to run down this spillway between the rows. Water ran into small irrigation ditches which were dug crossways of the shute. (photo from gwood.us)



1939 potato harvest on Robinson farm (photo from gwood.us)

farmers in the state that could grow that many potatoes. These figures show that Emmet County farmers are keeping up with modern innovations and advanced methods. They use sprays, rotate their crops, use good fertilizers, care for their land, and the growing of potatoes ... We know that Emmet County is one of the leading potato producers in Michigan, but how many others know that?”

By 1950, potato blight was beginning to take a toll on Emmet County farmers (100 years after the first Irish potato blight problem). Agricultural extension agents told farmers that once it was detected on the leaves, they should cut off all the growth above the soil and burn it. Also, fungicides could be applied before the blight appeared, along with annually rotating the crops. Though blight could not survive in the soil, any

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Fred Foltz farm 1939 potato combine harvester
(photo from MSU Extension Service)

unharvested potatoes that contained the disease would become next year's greatest source of infection. Dark, dry, and temperature-controlled storage conditions were also important. Plus, if infected potatoes were to be put into storage, they would eventually rot the entire stored crop.

Blight had first appeared in Emmet County in 1883 and was a factor through most growing years after that through 1910. However, it was not a major factor in production during those specific years. Potato production continued to grow every year in the "potato belt" areas around Levering and Resort Township. Use of the Bordeaux Mixture and Paris Green dusting helped farmers have good harvests (though neither product was good for human health). Blight was quite bad in 1925 and then, during the years of 1938 through 1948, appeared in seven of those 10 years. By 1950, the county had 2,500 acres planted with potato varieties. That

year turned out to be a bad blight-riddled year.

In 1952 the disease worsened because of too much rainfall. That year the 21-year-old Emmet County Potato Show had to be cancelled. By the early 1960s, the total acreage planted in potatoes was down to just 700. Most farmers had to give up due to rising costs and the insecurity of any of return.

As of 2022, no actual cure for potato blight existed. 🌿



Images from gwood.us

Richard A. Wiles is a retired history and reading instructor at Petoskey High School and a former Spring Arbor University class instructor in research. He has written five White Paper research projects for the Petoskey Public Library involving historical events in the area, including the crash of the B-52 Air Force bombing trainer into Little Traverse Bay in 1971.

Wiles holds a Bachelor's degree in history from the University of Toledo, a Master's degree in reading development-psychology from Michigan State University and an Educational Specialist degree in community leadership from Central Michigan University.

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