

The Community Page

Larsen Farms: A National Leader

“We aren’t your average potato grower,” Larsen Farms proclaims. Much of the reason for the accuracy of this claim is that Larsen Farms has been built into a vertically integrated operation.

Blaine Larsen noticed, early in his farming career, that the potato went through many hands between the farmer and the family kitchen. Each step produced a profit for the handler/middle man, so he determined that he would be that handler at each step. He wisely saw that not only would that increase profits for him, it would also cut time and costs for the consumer.

To begin this integration, Larsen potatoes are harvested and stored in one of 70 state-of-the-art storage facilities in Idaho and Colorado. Rather than selling the potatoes directly from the cellar as smaller growers do, Larsen bags and processes the crop himself, then transports the fresh potatoes to the produce supplier or rail line via his own trucking fleet. If the potatoes are destined for dehydration, they are transported in bulk to what has been his own dry pack operation.

Because of their large storage capacity and the highly regulated conditions, Larsen Farms can maintain a plentiful supply of fresh potatoes year-round. The Larsen Farm label is a promise that the potatoes meet their own strict standards and the customer’s expectations. Larsen Farms’ goal is simply to be the leader in quality and value in the industries they serve.



Taking a field break.



Blaine, his brother Richard Larsen, and Blaine’s sons Bart and Brandon overseeing the family farm.

In 2006, Larsen Farms merged its sales activities with Potandon Produce that now markets all fresh potatoes supplied to them under the Green Giant label. Potandon is reportedly the largest shipper of fresh potatoes in the U.S.

Another important part of the Larsen enterprise is the Larsen Farms Hay Terminal in Dubois, Idaho, where alfalfa hay production, compression and shipping is managed by Blaine’s brother, Richard Larsen. There is a symbiotic relationship between alfalfa and potatoes in that rotating the two crops supplies just the nutrients that the other needs.

While alfalfa production is good for growing potatoes, its main goal is to supply the cattle and horse industries with high protein, low stem-moisture, large-leaf coverage feed. Proof of their success is

evidenced by the continuing growth of this market. The terminal in Dubois is the largest in the US covering 120,000 square feet, three stories high. Following a recent trade mission to China with Governor Butch Otter, Larsen Farms began shipping millions of pounds of hay to dairy farmers in China.

Understandably, Larsen Farms contributes greatly to the economy of Idaho. It directly produced nearly 700 jobs, with related impacts much greater. It began as a family farm, and Blaine still considers it so—just with a much bigger family.

This feeling of family seems to run deeply in Larsen Farms. Following the Indonesian tsunami devastation, Larsen joined with other members of the Idaho Potato Commission to donate 40,000 pounds of dehydrated potatoes through Food for the Poor.

Love of the Land

A fourth generation farmer in Salem, Idaho, Blaine Larsen discovered as a young man that he loved farming, but not the way his fathers had always done it. Blaine dreamed bigger than that.

He didn’t get much encouragement in his desires as a youth, especially when, in 1964, a speaker at his high school very pointedly discouraged farming as a career. Farming, the speaker told the students, is a dying occupation and of the 50 students there, only 25 would be able to make a living at it. Further, it would take at least a quarter of a million dollars even to get started.

This information was a deterrent to some, but to a young man of Blaine Larsen’s personality and determination, it proved to be a challenge to which he would rise rather than a discouragement.

While still in high school, he began a serious study of farming methods, and learned quickly that there were better ways to farm than he had known. He secured a job with the man who was not only the biggest farmer around, but who was also the hardest-working man Blaine ever knew. Blaine soon discovered that working for a man made one also want to work hard, and a lifelong pattern was established.

Even so, it would take more than hard work to produce enough money to get into farming on his own; thus Blaine took his first step toward independence with the \$2,000 purchase of a good, used truck, and the beginning of a hay hauling business. His innate busi-



World famous potatoes produced in the rich volcanic loam of the Larsen farms

ness sense led him to rival the ability of an established hauling enterprise that utilized five men and two trucks. Blaine, working by himself, invested in a couple of stackers, thus enabling him to offer a better price for the same job.

As the investment money accrued, he continued looking for ground to buy, eventually discovering the land around Hamer, Idaho, with its rich volcanic loam and tall sagebrush. He had faith that he could adapt circular sprinklers for such soil, and bought his first 80 acres in 1970 for the amazing price of \$30 per acre. Few

thought that a young man in his twenties could make it in a place that seemed so risky.

The growth from that small beginning to today’s Larsen Farms—one of the largest potato growers in the United States—is a story in steady, well-ordered growth. Blaine freely credits this success to ancestors who sacrificed greatly to come to this part of the country, to Paul Nedrow, his first farm employer and mentor, and to his wife Connie whom he married after high school. Blaine credits her completely for bringing tidiness and order into his life—an attribute that he claims has contributed greatly to his current success.

Blaine and Connie are the parents of two sons and two daughters, 19 grandchildren and one great-grandchild. Their two sons now manage operations in Idaho and in Nebraska.

Fortunately for Idaho, Blaine Larsen didn’t listen to the discouraging voices in his youth, and refused to abandon his dream. Larsen encourages those who would also love to follow a dream “definitely to try. The odds are that you will fail at first, but by taking tiny steps and keeping focused, you will eventually succeed.” He urges them “to watch others and learn something from everyone that you decide is right for yourself.” Further, he reminds, “It is important to always be testing and trying to improve yourself.”

One may think that’s only unsolicited advice from some potato farmer in Idaho, but, given the record of that potato farmer, you can take it to the bank.