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Potato Festival Honors Agricultural History

For decades, they toiled in hot and dusty often back-breaking conditions picking, sorting, grading, weighing and packing the potatoes that made Perris an agricultural engine of Southern California from the 1940s to 1960s.

High-school students, families and multiple generations brought the potato harvests in each year. The top prize was the White Rose potato, highly valued by chip makers who processed the spuds into millions of pounds of the sought-after snacks.

The lucky workers found jobs in air-conditioned offices for \$1 per hour. Younger, less experienced employees loaded potatoes into sacks while stooped over, earning 5 cents for every 65 pounds they delivered.

The Perris Valley Historical and Museum Association paid homage to the hundreds of residents who made potatoes king of the crops in the Perris Valley. The annual Potato Festival took place June 11 during the Rods and Rails show at the Orange Empire Railroad Museum.



Perris Valley resident Dean Bleer recalls his days as a potato picker during the annual Potato Festival June 11 as Katie Keyes looks on.

Katie Keyes, a member of the historical museum board of directors, recalled the times she worked grading and bagging potatoes. She also worked in a packing office.

"The soil, water and weather fueled the growth of the potato farming in the Perris Valley," said Keyes, who started working at 14. "The work was hard and hot in summer. But it was fun because all of your friends were working there too."

Keyes said that the potato industry poured millions of dollars into the economy during bumper years.

Dean Bleer said he started picking potatoes when he was 11 years old. His job was to scoop potatoes into bags while walking stooped over through the fields. By the time he was 16, he ran the hand-carts that loaded sacks of potatoes on waiting railroad boxcars, which delivered them to distant points. The work took its toll on his back. Bleer walks with a cane today, the result of all those hours stooped over to gather potatoes.

Still, he is proud of his contribution to the Perris potato industry.

"That was the crop that fueled the economy," Bleer said.

By the end of the 1960s, water rates began rising dramatically. Land once used to plant potatoes became more lucrative as business centers and residential developments. But the impact of the potato industry remains a vital part of the history of the Perris Valley, Keyes said.

"The City of Perris has always supported our Potato Festival and we appreciate that very much," Keyes said.

Perris City Councilman Mark Yarbrough attended the festival. He noted that potatoes and railroads contributed to the growth and development of the Perris Valley.

"One of the things we do in Perris is remember and celebrate our past," he said.



Perris City Councilman Mark Yarbrough (second from left) with residents who worked harvesting, packing and shipping potatoes during the heyday of agriculture in the Perris Valley.

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