

# Potato Country



July/August 2008

## Remembering J.R. Simplot

Jan. 4, 1909 - May 25, 2008

POTATO COUNTRY  
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# J.R. Simplot Dead at the Age of 99



**J**ohn Richard “Jack” Simplot died peacefully at his home in Boise May 25 with Esther, his wife of 36 years, by his side. He was 99.

J. R. Simplot was the founder of the Boise-based agribusiness company which bears his name.

Born in Dubuque, Iowa, Jan. 4, 1909, Jack Simplot soon became an Idahoan when his family moved to a farm near Declo in the southern part of the state when he was 2 years old. He left school when he was 14 to go into business for himself.

The early part of his career involved farming and the storage and distribution of fresh potatoes. He started his first produce company in 1929 in southern Idaho.

In 1941, he built a dehydrator and began processing large quantities of dehydrated potatoes and onions at a plant near Caldwell, Idaho.

Under contract to the federal government during World War II, Simplot supplied about 33 million pounds of dehydrated potatoes to the U.S. Armed Forces from 1942 through 1945.

## Recognized a Need

In 1944, production began at the Simplot Company’s first fertilizer manufacturing plant in Pocatello. Jack Simplot expanded beyond the food business because farmers couldn’t get enough fertilizer during World War II, and the entrepreneur saw a need which he could fill.

After the war, the company leased land on the Fort Hall Indian Reservation to provide phosphate ore to the Pocatello fertilizer plant. The first shipments of ore were transported to the plant in 1946 from the Gay Mine, which was named for Simplot’s daughter.

In 1945, Simplot opened the first of the Simplot Soilbuilder farm service centers in

Idaho and Oregon. Today, under the new name of Grower Solutions, about 80 of the stores are providing agronomic products and services to growers in the West and Midwest.

About the same time the Soilbuilder/ Grower Solutions organization was formed, Simplot established a canning and dehydrating quick-freeze plant in which employees tested frozen potato products. The Simplot Company is credited with pioneering the first commercial frozen french fry in the late 1940s.

French fry production began at the Caldwell plant in 1946, and subsequently expanded with potato processing operations in Aberdeen and Nampa, Idaho; Othello and Moses Lake, Wash.; and Grand Forks, North Dakota. The company owns and operates two potato plants in Australia as well as a plant in Portage la Prairie, Canada, that opened in 2003.

Simplot had begun raising sheep in 1938, but phased out of that business in the late 1950s to concentrate on cattle and farming. Initially, the cattle business started out of necessity because the animals helped dispose of by-products from the potato processing plants. But the company’s feedlots subsequently developed into a full-time venture in their own right.

## Feedlot Enterprises

Today, Simplot operates feedlots near Grand View, Idaho, and Pasco, Wash.

In 1965, the company built a fertilizer manufacturing plant in Brandon, Manitoba. The plant, which Simplot sold in 2006, produced nitrogen-based fertilizer products for Canada’s prairie provinces and the northern tier of U.S. states.

Other Simplot fertilizer manufacturing operations include plants located in California at Lathrop and Helm, in addition to the original Pocatello facility.

The company in 1992 acquired a fertilizer plant at Rock Springs, Wyo., and a

phosphate mine at Vernal, Utah, in a joint venture with Farmland Industries. The operation, which was called SF Phosphates, became an all-Simplot plant when the company acquired Farmland’s interest in 2003.

In 1967, Jack Simplot shook hands with McDonald’s founder Ray Kroc, and the two agreed that the Simplot Company would provide frozen french fries to the restaurant chain. The deal led to expansion of Simplot potato processing plants and construction in 1977 of a new plant at Hermiston, Ore. It was closed in 2004. A potato plant built at Heyburn, Idaho, in 1960 was closed in 2003.

In 1992, Simplot began producing french fries for McDonald’s at the first potato processing plant in China. After many years of hard work, the Simplot Company developed a program that allows those french fries to be produced solely from potatoes grown in China rather than imported spuds.

In 1973, Jack Simplot retired as president of his company and appointed long-time associate John Dahl to the post, but J. R. remained involved with the company as chairman of the board. He stepped down from that position in 1994 when his children, Don, Gay, and Scott, and one of his grandsons, Ted, were named members of the board of directors. Jack assumed the title of Chairman Emeritus.

During many years in business, Simplot consistently supported the growth of his company by reinvesting profits.

Today, the Simplot Company is a broad-based food and agribusiness firm that employs 10,000 people. Its principal businesses are food processing, fertilizer manufacturing and retail marketing, farming and ranching, and other enterprises related to agriculture.

## Worldwide Operations

Simplot operations are located throughout the western and midwestern United States, and in Mexico, Canada, China, and Australia.

Simplot had many business interests outside his own company.

He became intrigued by the fledgling Micron Technology organization in 1980, providing seed money that allowed the chip maker to get started. Subsequently, he continued to invest in Micron stock, and helped the firm struggle successfully through its

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early years.

In addition to being a very successful businessman, Simplot also was a philanthropist. Not surprisingly, he was honored by many communities, colleges and universities, business and professional organizations, and civic and charitable groups for his financial contributions and active service. Because he believed strongly in the importance of education, Simplot made significant donations to Idaho colleges and universities, as well as other institutions of learning.

He frequently was a commencement speaker for high schools and universities, and always relished the opportunity to speak to young people about the importance of a good education.

He served on the board of directors of Micron Technology, Idaho Power Company, McDonald's Corporation, Independent Coal and Coke Company, First Security Corporation and Continental Life and Accident Company. He also served as chairman and past chairman of the board of trustees for the College of Idaho in Caldwell.

Simplot had a straightforward philosophy of business.

"My idea is to hire good people and turn 'em loose, and it has worked," he said. "I could have sold out plenty of times, but I just hung on, and now we've really got something."

### Contributions to the Potato Industry

He was especially proud of his contributions to the Idaho potato industry.

"I've been active in the potato business for 65 years, and I've seen us go from 100 bags to the acre of lousy potatoes to 600 bags of awesome potatoes," he said. "I can see a thousand sacks per acre around the corner. And I played a part in every step of it."

Although a modest individual, Simplot didn't mind taking credit for his role in convincing growers to use certified seed potatoes.

"I started my farmers out with good seed," he said. "I'd made them keep the sprouts off until the 10th of June, and then you plant those good seed potatoes, and use them for your crop the next year. That's how we raised a better potato in Idaho.

"And we started advertising potatoes long before anybody else," he added. "We're still getting a buck or two a hundred more for Idaho russet potatoes than any other spot in America."

When asked during a 1992 interview how he would like to be remembered, Simplot answered in typical fashion.

"Oh, hell, I don't care what they say about me; I'm not a publicity hound," he responded with a laugh. After pausing for a moment, he continued, "I think I've made enough marks around here that somebody will say, 'Well, that guy was pretty smart. He hung on and made a few things work.' Looking back, I have no complaints."

He is survived by his wife, Esther Becker Simplot; one daughter, Gay Simplot; two sons, Don and Scott; 18 grandchildren, 25 great-grandchildren, and one great-great grandchild. His oldest son, Richard, died in 1993.

Those who wish to send condolences to the family can do so by writing to them at [jrmemorial@simplot.com](mailto:jrmemorial@simplot.com).