



Amy Hopkinson

Marilyn Monroe, it was said, would look sexy even in a potato sack. In 1952, years before "Idaho potato" were the fighting words in trademark litigation, her publicist proved the point.

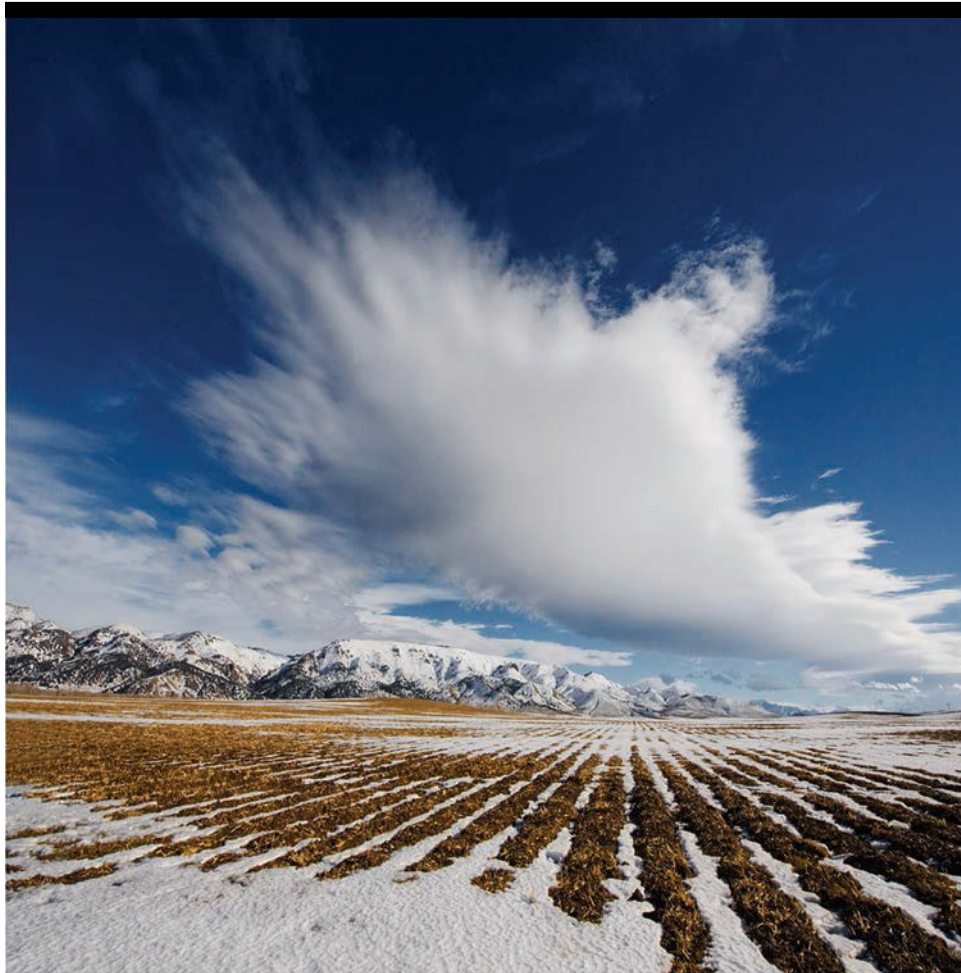
5 Potato POLITICS

by Jeweldean Hull

The Potato. That unassuming little tuber has turned the rich soils of Idaho into the Potato State, with a product known around the world. Wherever you go, people recognize Idaho for its “famous” potatoes and likely imagine potato fields rolling endlessly across the state.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, potatoes are the leading vegetable in the country and Idaho ranks first, selling nearly 13 billion pounds each year. The state, realizing early on that promotion is often as important as production, designed the first graphic license plate with a picture of a large Idaho spud in 1928. Today, Idaho license plates are still stamped with the “Famous Potatoes” slogan and although some residents would like to highlight the state’s numerous other assets, the Idaho State Legislature has declared those spud-centric plates here to stay.

On the other hand, license plates alone have not made Idaho potatoes a global phenomenon. For three-quarters of a century, the Idaho Potato



James Neeley/Flickr

About 300,000 acres grow Idaho russet potatoes. Annually, Idahoans produce about 11 billion pounds. Pictured: an eastern Idaho potato field.

Commission has successfully promoted, produced and researched Idaho potatoes. In 2012, sensing another promotional opportunity, the IPC announced it was celebrating its 75th anniversary "in a big way." According to Frank Muir, chief executive officer of the IPC, for seven months "The Spud Truck," a 72 ft. flatbed trailer, traveled 15,000 miles hauling a six-ton con-

crete Idaho potato across America. The drivers, known as the Tater Team, made stops from major retailers to farmers markets around the country. The gigantic spud—which the IPC says would take 10,000 years to grow if it were real—seemed to have achieved its goal: reminding the world, once again, of its iconic Idaho potato.

The unquestionable success of the IPC has, however, come with challenges. As it stretches its potato empire around the world, the organization has had to defend itself against fierce competition, fight legal battles and recently grapple with an unlikely foe: the local food movement.

In the late 19th century, when pioneers were still settling Idaho, nearly all agriculture was local. Thanks to new irrigation projects and rich volcanic soil, it soon became obvious that a specific area of southeastern Idaho had farming conditions suited to growing potatoes. To this day, the bulk of Idaho's potato growers are located there. The Russet Burbank potato variety was established in the late 1800s in Idaho and travelers who passed through were often in awe of the size of those spuds. Between 1866 and the early 1920s, production and acreage increased, reaching 3.9 million planted acres in 1922. Soon, individual growers found they were having trouble managing the volume by themselves. They turned to the governor and state legislature for help. In 1937, officials formed the Idaho Fruit and Vegetable Advertising Commission. The growers willingly paid a tax and in turn the commission oversaw the grading, quality control and marketing of Idaho potatoes. Later, it became known as the Idaho Potato Commission.

Not long after, Idaho surpassed all the other states in potato sales. In the 1950s and '60s, dehydration and processing brought a new era to the potato industry, thanks to entrepreneurs like J.R. Simplot, who built a vast and lucrative empire on frozen french fries and other potato products. With big money being made in the potato industry, the IPC had to work hard to maintain its national and international dominance.

One recurring issue, according to the IPC, was potato fraud. In the 1950s the IPC designed unique potato bags and directly stamped Idaho potatoes as a way to distinguish them from the competition. Yet, no matter how they tried to differentiate Idaho's tubers from others, scammers managed to duplicate the bags and stamps. Finally, in 1966, the IPC went to court to legally secure the trademark for Idaho potatoes and slogans like "Grown in Idaho" and other associated names and symbols.

Defending the Idaho brand took constant vigilance. According to the Idaho Potato Commission, in 1975 neighboring Washington tried to plant Idaho's icon on its side of the border, advertising that, "Idaho potatoes grew better in Washington." The IPC decided to confront the issue legally and

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took the case to court to have the Washington Potato Commission cease any and all advertising of Idaho potatoes. Had it not stopped WPC's ad campaign, the IPC believes it would have opened the doors for anyone and everyone to abuse the Idaho potato trademark.

That is why, the IPC said, it so swiftly took action in 2009 when a tiny burger joint, the Idaho Fry Company, prepared to open its doors in Boise and begin hyping its wide variety of gourmet french fries. Although the small startup had registered its name, the IPC argued that the Commission itself legally controls any name that includes the word "Idaho" in relation to potato products.

The news media responded with several articles, often declaring it a matter of the big potato picking on the little potato. The *Boise Weekly* asked in one article, "Aren't enough local businesses struggling these days without nitpicking from the head potato heads?" Many locals commented online that the IPC was merely "bullying" the fry company.

Despite much bad press, the IPC steadfastly demanded that the Idaho Fry Company change its name, charging it didn't exclusively sell Idaho-grown potatoes. According to IPC legal representative Pat Kole, upon certification as an Idaho potato retailer, one has to guarantee that only Idaho potatoes will be sold, abide by the certification process and pay an annual fee of \$100. Although the Idaho Fry Company offered a unique variety of mostly Idaho fries with the slogan "fries as a main dish, burgers on the side," owner Blake Lingle admitted in a recent interview that "it is hard to buy Idaho potatoes all 12 months." Lingle buys his organic variety from Heath Farms out of Buhl, but they are only available during certain times of the year. Lingle acknowledges buying potatoes out of state the remaining months. "Customers do not notice a change," said Lingle, "when the potatoes are not from Idaho." For that reason, the IPC would not certify the Idaho Fry Company as a "Grown in Idaho" business and demanded the company change the name. Eventually a settlement was reached when the restaurant agreed to rename itself the Boise Fry Company.

Kole is quick to point out that the IPC had no intention of hurting the BFC business and in the end assisted with all costs associated in changing the business logo. Business for BFC has since flourished with two locations now open in Boise. Although the IPC and BFC refuse to give details about the name change today, owner Lingle stated in an interview regarding the controversy, "at the time it was not pleasant, but life has since moved on."

As life moved on for Lingle and the BFC, the IPC confronted what it saw as a new, and perhaps more threatening challenge to its brand: the



Boise Fry Company

Idaho Fry Company became Boise Fry Company after a trademark challenge from the Gem State's potato commission. BFC perseveres despite a disputed trademark claim to the name of the city as well.

local food movement. In 2007, the *New Oxford American Dictionary* named locavore the word of the year as the local food movement—with its belief that a fresher, more sustainable food system requires shortening the distance between farmers and consumers—gathered momentum. An exploding national interest in farmers markets, “farm to fork” dinners, locally-crafted artisanal cheeses and endless other expressions of the “keep it local” philosophy

combined with increasing consumer outrage over the perceived abuses of long-distance, industrial agriculture as expressed in numerous food recalls, taped abuses of factory-farmed animals, the use of pesticides, antibiotics and

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Guy Hand

Sunny days and nutrient-rich volcanic soil grow more than 25 varieties of Idaho potatoes, although russets are the most commonly known. Pictured: Boise-grown round reds.

genetically-modified organisms, and the often low quality of food that travels, on average, 1,500 miles before arriving in American supermarkets. The local food movement put conventional agriculture, with its focus on large-scale production aimed at distant markets, in its crosshairs and the Idaho Potato Commission soon felt like a target.

Wal-Mart, a major distribution center for the IPC, was feeling the pressure to buy from local farmers and as a result dropped the IPC from five distribution centers in favor of potatoes grown nearer each store. The decision shocked the IPC because it never thought the local "trend," as the IPC's Frank Muir called it, a threat until Wal-Mart took action. Fearing other retailers would follow Wal-Mart's example, the IPC acted quickly and was able to convince Wal-Mart that by not selling Idaho potatoes the mega-company would experience a decline in potato sales in general. Wal-Mart agreed and decided to sell both local potatoes and Idaho potatoes in their stores. Wal-



Idaho Potato Commission

Idaho Potato Commissioner Jim Tiede still farms his grandfather's homestead.

Mart is currently the only big-box store that dropped the IPC as a result of the local food movement, but its attempt to go local sent a shockwave through the Commission.

Muir pointed out that while the IPC supports local farming and buying local food in Idaho, he says it is doubtful Idaho's 1.5 million residents will purchase 13 billion pounds of the Idaho potatoes each year—an inescapable disparity that comes when any lightly populated state produces high volumes of agricultural commodities. "I want everyone in Idaho to buy Idaho potatoes," Muir said in a PBS televised interview with local food advocates, "as well as the rest of the world."

Selling to the rest of the world puts the Idaho Potato Commission squarely at odds with the

local food movement. Back in 2007, Muir clearly acknowledged that as he stood in front of the Idaho State Legislature addressing the economic threats posed by the locavore movement to conventional Idaho agribusiness. Muir warned that if the State of Idaho formally supported the local food movement through a seemingly innocuous declaration that local food advocates had drafted for passage, Idaho would then be indirectly signaling support of local food movements in every state, therefore suppressing Idaho's ability to

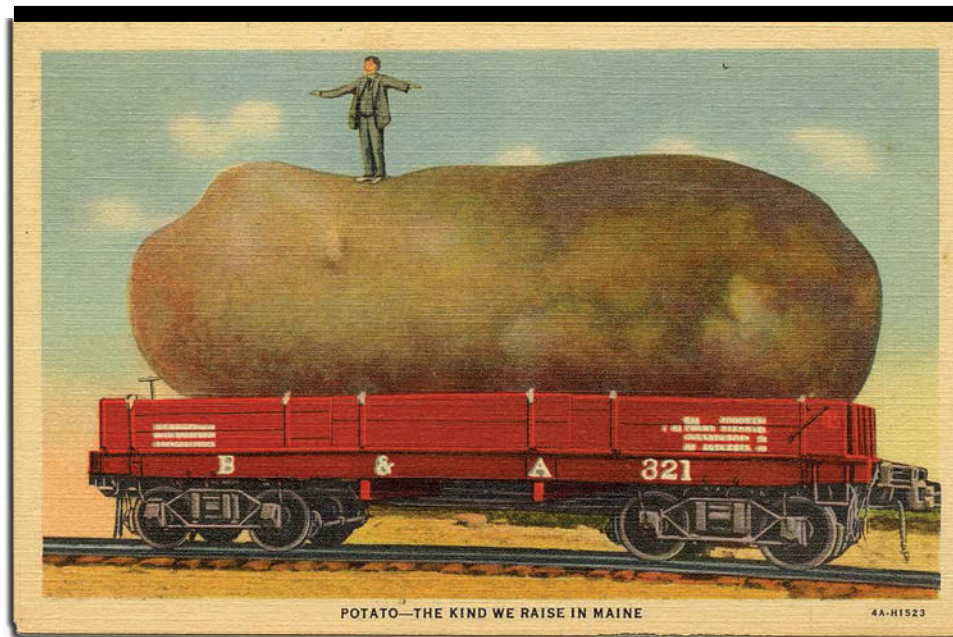
export agricultural products to those states. It was a variation on the Wal-Mart problem.

Proponents of the declaration argued that small-scale farmers who sell their products locally also generate revenue for the state and should be recognized and supported by the state as vigorously as are Idaho's export agriculturalists. According to the Farmers Market Coalition, the Capital City Public Market in downtown Boise generated an estimated \$4.5 million in economic activity for the local economy in 2011. That is indeed small potatoes by agribusiness standards, but the hustling and bustling Eighth Street farmers market draws more than 20,000 visitors in the summertime, attracted largely to the fresh produce grown by small-scale, locally focused farmers in Boise and the surrounding area.

Not surprisingly, that popularity has attracted interest from Idaho's agricultural commissions. One summer afternoon in 2012 it was brought to the attention of the Bean Commission that possible mail order beans were sold as certified Idaho beans. That incident raised questions about the certification process of all produce, according to Pat Kole from the IPC. However, Kole and Muir point out that the IPC does not tax farmers who grow less than five acres of potatoes and they normally "turn a blind eye" as Muir indicates, to small-scale farming and those selling at the CCPM. After the issue arose, though, one farmers market merchant decided to take matters into her own hands by looking into licensing potatoes sold through the CCPM.

Like many small farmers, Josie Erskine from Peaceful Belly farm sells local produce at the CCPM. Josie and her husband Clay have been farming organically for the last 10 years, the last three in Dry Creek Valley located near Hidden Springs. Selling to restaurants, retailers and markets, Erskine follows state guidelines to keep their business licensed. However, Erskine realized that none of the potato vendors at the market were legally licensed, as the Idaho Department of Agriculture requires through the IPC. According to Kole, Erskine approached the IPC and wanted to work with them on getting local vendors at the farmers market legally certified. And although Erskine was essential in helping license those vendors, many small farmers quietly chafed at what they saw as another example of the IPC pushing the little guy around. Still, the IPC claims licensing is nothing new and if a farmer grows potatoes in Idaho with intent to sell, he or she must take legal steps. When asked why she finally decided to go through the IPC, Erskine pointed out, "Rules are rules and it was time to get up to speed."

The cooperation between the IPC and members of the Capital City Public Market to sell locally grown potatoes signaled an attempt by large



Idaho railroads have freighted Boise Valley potatoes since the Oregon Short Line reached Nampa in 1883. Valley-grown potatoes are still shipped by rail. Pictured: a vintage Idaho postcard.

agribusiness interests and small-scale farmers to find middle ground when it comes to licensing. But the philosophical differences that divide groups like the Idaho Potato Commission and the local food movement might be too wide to bridge with good intentions alone.

Michael Pollan, in his 2002 book *The Botany of Desire*, used the Idaho potato as a way to compare two vastly different agricultural paradigms: the industrial paradigm, which favors high production, vast single-variety monocultures (mostly Russet Burbanks), inorganic fertilizers and pesticides and distant markets versus the local-food-inspired farmers market paradigm, which favors small-scale, diverse crop varieties, organic and sustainable farming practices and a focus on nearby markets.

In his book, Pollan described an industrial Idaho potato grower he visited as standing "in the middle of a bright green circle of plants that have



Aggressive marketing lures busloads of tourists to the stone depot in Blackfoot that houses the Idaho Potato Museum.

been doused with so much pesticide that their leaves wear a dull white chemical bloom and the soil they're rooted in is a lifeless gray powder." Some studies indicate that more pounds of pesticide are poured on Idaho potatoes than on any other crop in the state. Later that same day, Pollan visited Mike Heath, the same organic potato grower that the Boise Fry Company uses, who Pollan said "grows a dozen different varieties of potatoes, on the theory that biodiversity in a field, as in the wild, is the best defense against nature's inevitable surprises ... instead of the uniform grayish powder I'd assumed was normal for the area, Heath's soil was dark brown and crumbly. The difference, I understood, was that this soil was alive."

Pollan concluded that Mike Heath's type of agriculture "simply can't be reconciled to the logic of a corporate food chain." In turn, Frank Muir of the

Idaho Potato Commission has said he can't reconcile his mandate to sell Idaho potatoes around the globe to the goals of the local food movement. From the Idaho Potato Commission's perspective, it may not matter. At the end of it all the IPC managed to reach agreements with the Boise Fry Company and the Capital City Public Market while convincing Wal-Mart that Idaho potatoes should stay. A potato icon itself, the IPC continues to celebrate the success story of the Russet Burbank potato taking root in the volcanic soils of Idaho. The commission has fought from one end of the U.S. to the other to preserve its trademark and has succeeded thus far to stay at the top of potato sales. While not everyone would agree with the IPC's methods, for the last 75 years it has accomplished its goal of making Idaho the potato state.

As the 2012 potato harvest comes to a close in southeastern Idaho, the Capital City Public Market in Boise quietly slows down until next spring as shoppers replace local Saturday produce with Boise State football. Millions of Americans watch a commercial of Idaho's six-ton tuber traveling across the country with its Tater Team while continuing to imagine an Idaho awash in potato fields. Meanwhile, the Idaho Potato Commission gears up for the Famous Idaho Potato Bowl and does what it knows best: promoting and protecting Idaho's iconic "Famous Potatoes."

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Jeweldean Hull recently graduated with degrees in both History and Spanish. She has traveled extensively outside of the U.S and studied in Spain. She currently works full time at the Bureau of Reclamation and plans to attend graduate school in the near future.