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Wilcox Fresh: 75 years of adapting and innovating

By

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In 1948, two generations of the Wilcox family established Floyd Wilcox & Sons in the little town of Thornton, ID. Seventy-five years later, the fourth generation of family members has moved into leadership positions with the same fire in the belly to grow, pack, sell and ship the best potatoes they can in whatever packs align with the demands of their customers and consumers.

“Over the years, we have done a real good job of staying current and adapting to marketing trends,” said Derek Peterson, vice president of sales and operations and the son-in-law of Lynn Wilcox, one of the three members of the third generation that ran the company from the 1980s well into this 21st century. “Innovating and evolving our operations to meet demand has been key to our success.”



Keith Wilcox in his Air Force attire.

In fact, Peterson said that point is evident with the company's most recent expansion — the purchase of Southwind Farms in Heyburn, ID, last year.

“They have a unique business,” he said, speaking of Southwind's focus on specialty potatoes such as fingerlings. “It was a business expansion that made sense. Like us, Southwind Farms is a vertically integrated company. They are so complementary to what we are. Branching out horizontally was a great way to add variety for our customers.”

Peterson added that Southwind remains under the same management team with most of the key employees remaining in their same jobs.

“Nothing has changed,” he said. “We will continue to look for opportunities to grow and expand. We are of the firm opinion that it is the only logical direction to take. You have to expand and grow, that's our M.O.”

That method of operation was evident in the very early days of the company. According to the company's website, “Floyd Wilcox and his three sons, Keith, LeRoy, and David did most of the construction of the original facility. They poured the concrete for the foundation, went to the hills and cut logs for the floor joists, laid the blocks and built all of the equipment to begin their sorting operation. The original building was around 7,000 square feet in total space.”

In those early years, Peterson said the family operation concentrated its efforts on 100-pound sacks of russet potatoes, which was the preferred potato and delivery method of choice in the 1950s and '60s. The warehouse basement was divided into holding bins, and in the early years each bin would be rented to a different Idaho potato grower. Each grower would harvest his crop by hand and then haul the crop in burlap bags to the holding bins.



Wilcox Fresh's Thornton, ID, warehouse.

The Wilcox facility had an up-to-date conveyor and sorting system to separate the No. 1s from the No. 2s and ship them to the customers for each. In the 1970s, different pack sizes emerged and new potato varieties started to come to the forefront. Peterson said being a leader in value-added packs

has always been a focus for the Wilcox family.

Today he said the SKU count is very extensive. “That’s a good question,” he said. “I’d have to sit down and figure that out. But the credit has to go to all the family members that have adopted new technology and added the different SKUs over the years. We must have a hundred different configurations.”

He added that many of those innovations are operational that occur behind the scenes and out of view of the end customer. “We have added so much efficiency over the years,” Peterson said. “We have become 30-40 percent less dependent on labor because of our use of automation.”

He noted that optical sorting and grading has lessened the need for workers in this continually tightening labor market. And robotic palletizing of the cartons has also automated some tasks that were previously labor intensive.

“The goal is for these innovations to not be noticed by our customers, but the fact is they have noticed,” he said. “We have fewer issues and ship a more consistent pack.”

It was in the 1980s that Keith’s sons Lynn, Terry and Ron took over the reins and began the upgrading of the operations that has continued to this day. The company’s name was changed over the years to Wilcox Fresh and in the 1990s it became clear that a new facility was needed.

In 1998, an 88,000-square-foot facility was constructed in Rexburg, ID, where the business is currently located. That facility has been expanded twice and is now more than 100,000 square feet in size.

“We are running out of room again,” Peterson quipped, indicating another expansion isn’t too far off on the horizon.

In the past decade, Wilcox Fresh has continued to expand and launched the Mother Earth brand, which more fully illustrates the true position and nature of the organization, according to its website. The company’s website also proclaims that Wilcox Farms has about 13,000 acres.

Peterson said the future is indeed bright for both Wilcox and the potato industry. He sees a lot of continued growth in the value-added category for potatoes as well as in the varieties.

“The Russet potato drives tonnage and is still king, but reds and yellows offer a lot of volume for the category,” he said. “In fact, yellows have shown impressive growth in recent years. It’s a great culinary potato.”

While the operation is focused on potatoes, it is a crop that needs to be part of a rotation so Wilcox also grows red, white and yellow onions as well as sweet potatoes. Wilcox also farms grains and alfalfa and has a cattle operation.

Peterson said the fresh potato industry is in a strong position currently achieving returns that are about as high as he has seen. He noted that in mid-February, the FOB market for 40-50 count potatoes was in the low \$30s while 80 count cartons were returning \$25. “Normally, we would be at about half that,” he said.

He said high input costs and environmental factors, including water issues, have decreased the

overall volume of fresh potatoes and created the situation in which the available supply is being met with very good demand, creating the good market, which is necessary because of the ever-increasing costs.

“It’s good to see that there is money to be made in this business,” Peterson said. “Everyone is finding a home for their potatoes.”

He added that it is also a good thing that the first and second generation of the Wilcox family launched their potato business in Idaho 75 years ago.

“The Idaho Potato Commission does a fantastic job,” he said. “We absolutely get a premium for our potatoes.”

Top photo: Wilcox Fresh's Rexburg, ID, warehouse.

[Tim Linden](#)

About Tim Linden |

Tim Linden grew up in a produce family as both his father and grandfather spent their business careers on the wholesale terminal markets in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Tim graduated from San Diego State University in 1974 with a degree in journalism. Shortly thereafter he began his career at The Packer where he stayed for eight years, leaving in 1983 to join Western Growers as editor of its monthly magazine. In 1986, Tim launched Champ Publishing as an agricultural publishing specialty company.

Today he is a contract publisher for several trade associations and writes extensively on all aspects of the produce business. He began writing for The Produce News in 1997, and currently wears the title of Editor at Large.

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