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Crapo family steeped in Idaho potato history

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Leslie Stoddard (wearing hat), Bruce Crapo's grandfather, with family members in a photo dating back to the late 1940s. Mr. Crapo's oldest brother, George, is seated at right on the front of the tractor that pulled a potato harvester, which dug one row of spuds that were placed into burlap sacks and left in the field for pickup.

To get a sense of the determination that is part of the fabric of the Crapo family, one only needs to hear the story of how the first family member arrived in the United States back in the late 1800s.

As the story goes, the family was originally from France and a family member worked as captain of a freighter that traveled between that country and the United States. On one U.S.-bound leg of the trip, the family member discovered two days into the voyage that his younger brother was on board as a stowaway. Rough seas caused the ship to wreck off the Massachusetts coast, and the two brothers were among the four survivors of the mishap.

The older brother placed his younger sibling into servitude with a Massachusetts family with plans to return to pick him up after a future voyage. That did not happen, and the younger sibling remained in the United States, where he raised a family of his own.

The stowaway apparently passed along an intrepid gene to his offspring, because years later one of his sons boarded a wagon train that was heading to a new frontier out West, where he was part of a homestead settlement in Paradise, UT.

Shortly thereafter and in search of a new adventure, he set out for Kilgore, ID, where the higher elevation and abundant snow proved to be too great a challenge. After a couple of years, he and his family migrated south and settled in Parker, ID.

George A. Crapo was one of the children raised in Parker, ID, and is the patriarch of the Crapo family that currently owns and operates Sun Glo of Idaho Inc.

George A. Crapo and his wife, Elizabeth, bought a small 10-acre tract of land in Parker, ID, in the early 1900s and were actively engaged in raising crops to provide for their six young children.

One morning in the winter of 1916, George A. Crapo took his wagon and a team of horses to the town of St. Anthony, ID, for supplies. After arriving home that night, he came down with a cold, and three days later he died of pneumonia.

Elizabeth Crapo was suddenly put in the position of having to raise her six children as a single mother while paying the mortgage on the land. The family lived on next to nothing and learned the value of working together in order to achieve their goals.

Today, there are 15 branches of the Crapo family that are involved in the business, according to Bruce Crapo, a member of the family's third generation, whose father, Maurice, was one of George A. and Elizabeth Crapo's sons.

"Farming has always been our life," said Mr. Crapo. "We grew up following our dad and doing everything he did. We didn't have a lot of money, so we mostly worked. It was a great way of life. It was a lot of hard work, but it became who we are and what we do. Like the saying goes, you can take the boy off the farm, but you can't take the farm out of the boy."

From a very early age, Mr. Crapo said that he remembers hearing his father's pick-up truck start at the crack of dawn every morning, signaling the start of his rounds to check the fields. When his father returned from his early-morning inspection, Mr. Crapo would be ready to join him for the remainder of the day.

"One morning when I was about 5 or 6, I had an epiphany," said Mr. Crapo. "I remember following

my dad through a mud bog and I realized that the best place to step was in his footsteps. I couldn't quite match his strides, so I had to jump. But I knew the best thing for me was to be in those footsteps. I guess it was a sign of things to come."

Mr. Crapo's father was one of three brothers in the family's second generation who shepherded the company through its early days toward a leadership position in the Idaho potato industry.

According to Mr. Crapo, George L. Crapo, the oldest of the brothers, went to school and got an education. As he saved money, he would buy a piece of ground and the brothers would farm it together. He mostly did the accounting for the family operation while the others worked the fields, but all were integral parts of the organization.

The second-generation Crapo brothers farmed on what is known as the Egin Bench, which at the time was one of the largest sub-irrigated tracts of land in the world, referring to the process by which water would permeate up from the ground and irrigate the crops from below.

Sub-irrigated land required that canals be dug and lateral ditches created to effectively use the water, thus it was not the most efficient way of farming.

In the 1970s, the Crapo family helped usher in the use of sprinkler irrigation to the Egin Bench region, which helped revolutionize farming in the area, according to Mr. Crapo.

"With sub-irrigation, you couldn't put nitrogen in the water and it limited production," he said. "So when my generation brought in center-pivot irrigation, it changed farming and improved efficiency, yields and packouts."

The second-generation brothers had an uncanny ability to work together, and that came from having to band together at such a young age to survive after they lost their father, according to Mr. Crapo.

"They got along very well," he said. "They argued, but they never made it personal. It was important to be able to separate business and family when necessary."

And there was an intrinsic trust among the brothers that carried through their entire lives, said Mr. Crapo, who offered a story as an example.

"My uncle George and my dad used to share one wallet," he said. "Whenever one went to town to get something, he took the wallet and spent what was needed and put the change back. They never once questioned what the other one spent money for or what they did. That was the kind of trust they had between them."

Sun Glo of Idaho Inc. started as a processing plant, and in 1976, the Teton Dam broke and flooded the processing line. Afterward, instead of rebuilding it as a processing plant, it was converted into a fresh-pack plant, which it still is today. In its place, a new processing plant called NorSun, which made frozen baked potatoes, was built and became part of the Sun Glo group.

In early 1980s, Mr. Crapo's brother, George, bought into Sun Glo, and when the NorSun facility was sold to a group of New York investors in 1999, George Crapo took his share of the proceeds and bought out the other partners in Sun Glo, bringing it entirely into the family fold.

Currently, there are 25,000 acres of crops under Sun Glo's management, 7,000 of which are

potatoes.

As a multi-generational family business, Mr. Crapo said that he and his generation are currently in the process of setting forth the procedures and protocols to pass on the business to future generations.

“It’s a weighty responsibility to move the business forward from generation to generation, but we have some very capable [family members] who are ready to step up,” he said.

Mr. Crapo said that the introduction of sprinkler irrigation was the most significant advancement in the history of the company, but taking over the Sun Glo fresh-pack operation was another major event for the company, as it put the Sun Glo name in front of consumers and the potato trade.

“Before, we grew the spuds, dumped them in the warehouse and never saw them again,” said Mr. Crapo. “But now with Sun Glo, it adds a new dimension because that potato goes into a bag with our name on it and it is being delivered to a grocery store. So that’s a big responsibility that we do not take lightly.”

Along with that responsibility comes a need for vigilance on the food-safety and traceability fronts, said Mr. Crapo, who added that the company is working very diligently to be in compliance with industry standards.

Mr. Crapo said that he admires the work of the Idaho Potato Commission, which has been promoting the state’s prized potato crops for three-quarters of a century.

“Especially in the last few years under the direction of [IPC President] Frank Muir, there have been some great strides in marketing the Idaho potato brand,” he said. “They have brought it to the forefront with national advertising. They have put the Idaho potato brand on the map, and they need to be commended for the efforts they put forth. They work very hard, and I don’t feel that anything is wasted on our assessments that we pay.

“All of them, not just Frank but the whole team and the commissioners, are a tremendous asset for us,” Mr. Crapo added. “I don’t know that we can put a price on what they have done for the industry. You can travel around the country and if you say ‘Idaho,’ people will almost invariably say ‘potato.’ They are very responsive to the needs of those of us on the industry. It requires such passion and dedication on their part.”



Third- and fourth-generation members of the Crabo family

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