

80 The Great Potato Heist 83

It was a common practice among Fussville farmers to keep an eye on crop conditions around their neighbors' farms. It was a way of "keeping up with the Joneses." When Harry Claas started to plant, cultivate, hill or harvest, neighboring farmers knew it was time to do the same. The growing season in the spring and summer of 1930 had been blessed with good, warm weather and ample, timely rains.

The garden crops and especially the potato crop benefitted from those favorable conditions. The production yields were really going to be good. By the middle of July 1930, Harry started to do a little "test" digging of some of his potato crop, to check on how far along the tubers were in the maturation process. It became clear that everything was on track for an early harvest.

Most farmers planted at least enough garden crops to feed their own families while allowing for a surplus to share with nearby friends or relatives. But Harry and Tonie planted not just to feed their family; they grew potatoes to supplement their sales for their Milwaukee customers. It was the single most important of their garden crops.

25 Picking potatoes.

July 25, 1930 - "Picking potatoes."

By late July, the harvest for this very important crop got underway. And in just a week, Harry and Tonie began to supply their Milwaukee customers and markets.

1 To town with butter.
2 " " " potatoes.

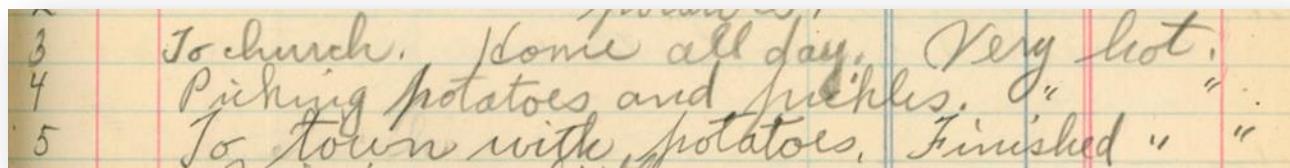
August 1, 1930 - "To town with butter."

August 2, 1930 - "To town with potatoes."

The Depression's impact on many ordinary folks was severe. Joblessness was rampant, particularly in Milwaukee and nearby towns. As a consequence, finding and affording the basic necessities of life was a constant challenge. It had created hardships for most everyone, but the greatest hardship that many people had to experience was finding

enough food to feed their families. It was a time that often saw many ordinary folks turn to drastic measures, in order to provide basic necessities. Nothing demonstrated that sobering fact more than the “great potato heist” of 1930. Or at least that’s how it might have appeared.

There were others who were keeping a close eye on Harry and Tonie’s crops, the potato crop in particular. Farmers occasionally had to deal with petty thieves raiding their crops, especially their garden crops of sweet corn and potatoes. It was one of the business hazards of the farm, especially during hard times like this.



3 To church. Home all day. Very hot.
4 Picking potatoes and pickles. Very hot.
5 To town with potatoes. Finished. Very hot.

August 3, 1930 – “*To church. Home all day. Very hot.*”

August 4, 1930 – “*Picking potatoes and pickles. Very hot.*”

August 5, 1930 – “*To town with potatoes. Finished. Very hot.*”

The summer harvest was underway in earnest. Although they were unaware, some men had been stalking the potato field from a distance. They knew that Harry and Tonie sold their produce to the customers on their Milwaukee route and at area farmers markets in the city. Those men were watching from a distance and they knew that this farm garden had produced a bountiful crop of potatoes.

They followed the trail to Harry’s Fussville farm, driving slowly in the daylight, up and down Lilly Road, scoping out the exact location of the potato field. They scouted out a spot where they could park their cars. They hatched a plan to avail themselves of Claas potatoes, under the cover of darkness.

It seemed like such an unlikely circumstance, in a countryside surrounded by such bounty, that anyone would need to steal food. But such was the nature of the Depression and its impact, turning ordinary folks into common criminals. Harry and Tonie had made a number of trips “to town” to deliver potatoes to their customers. Maybe the men who had been doing the stalking had families to feed. And maybe this was an act of desperation on their part. Or so it would have seemed. Potatoes were a staple and surely Harry Claas wouldn’t miss a few bushels. There were plenty more growing in his field.

Just after dusk, on the evening of Monday, August 25, 1930, those men made their way to Fussville. The weather was clear and mild. In the nearly full moonlight, the men made

their way to the potato field. They turned off the headlights on their cars and carefully turned into the Claas driveway where it intersected with Lilly Road. There they parked their cars out of sight, shielded by the trees and bushes that lined the driveway.

It was a fair distance from the house so they felt sure they would not arouse any suspicion. They waited until they were sure that all the lights were out in the Claas house. Armed with flashlights and bags, they made their way up the driveway until they found potato vines. There, they started to stealthily and randomly pull up the vines, removing the potatoes and placing them in their bags.

The potatoes were good sized and in no time, they were able to fill a couple bags. Carrying those heavy bags back to their cars was hard work. They decided not to be greedy. They could always come back again. They were hopeful that Harry wouldn't notice that his farm had been invaded. They carefully loaded their cars, eased their way back onto the roadway and headed back home.



The following morning, it didn't take long for the Claas boys to discover that someone had robbed the potato field. The evidence was unmistakable. Potato vines were scattered about. This was not the disciplined way in which potatoes were harvested on the Claas farm. The evidence was clear and convincing. Someone had stolen their potatoes. The boys reported the theft to Harry and after he had looked over the evidence himself, he alerted the Waukesha County Sheriff. Harry and Tonie had been the victims of a robbery.

The sheriff said that there wasn't a lot that could be done unless somehow, the thieves were caught in the act. This was just petty theft, not a major crime. But it was still a crime, though not uncommon during this time of year and especially during the Depression. Maybe the thieves would be greedy and try to repeat the offense. So Harry needed to set up his own surveillance. Similar thefts had been reported around the County on a regular basis. Those thieves might return to his garden but he needed to catch them in the act. But how?

Harry found two willing volunteers. Sons, Sylvester and Roman readily offered to keep watch in the garden, at least for a couple hours after dusk each night. They would sit quietly in the potato patch and watch and listen for any suspicious activity. They couldn't do this for any extended period, but they were patient. And there was a certain sense of



excitement in playing detective, staking out their parents' garden, hoping to catch real criminals in the act.

Less than two weeks later, on the night of Friday, September 5, those thieves returned. They were pretty confident that even if Harry had noticed that his potato patch had been robbed, by this time everything should have blown over. So, they returned to the scene of their crime. They parked in the same spot in Harry's long driveway. There, their cars would be concealed by the same trees and brush. They made their way to the same potato patch and commenced to pulling potatoes from the soft earth. They started to fill their bags.

Young Sylvester and Roman had spent the last ten nights or so, unarmed (although they might each have carried a potato fork) and lying in wait for this chance. They were never sure if anything would come of their effort. But when they spotted the thieves making their way to the potato field, their hearts raced in excitement. Roman quietly ran back to the farmhouse to alert Harry. And Harry placed a call to the County Sheriff. And the rest is history, as reported in the local newspapers.

Sentence 2 on Theft Charge

Potatoes Stolen in Town of Menomonee

Stealing potatoes in the town of Menomonee Sept. 5 drew sentences of 30 days in the Milwaukee house of correction for two Milwaukeeans today, Robert Nenker, 34, 899 Tenth street, and Osmond Olson, 28, 1232 Albany Place.

According to Henry J. Claas of Menomonee his two sons lay in wait for the Milwaukeeans last night about 8 o'clock at the edge of a large potato patch. The men carried two bags, the boys assert, and after about a peck of potatoes had been pulled out of the ground by the vines the farmer lads surprised them. Deputy George Lilly was called and made the arrests.

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In short order, the potato thieves were apprehended. They were strangers from Milwaukee. Everyone assumed that these were poor men, desperate to feed their families during the worst days of the Great Depression. It would have been natural to feel at least some pity for them. The wheels of justice moved very quickly. Tonie wrote:

6 To town. Filling silo by P. Brahm. Harry and the boys at Waukesha. Sentenced the potato thieves. Shocking.

September 6, 1930 - "To town. Filling silo by P. Brahm. Harry and the boys at Waukesha. Sentenced the potato thieves. Shocking."

The following day, the thieves were each sentenced to 30 days in jail. Tonie reported the news of these events as "shocking." But she also might have meant that some in the family were "shocking corn." (We'll never know!) That jail sentence seems a bit stiff for petty theft, at least by today's standards. But maybe some of the background information reported in the newspaper about those thieves leaves us feeling a bit less sympathetic. The newspaper went on to report:

Judge T. W. Parkinson said today he took in consideration the fact that both men were married, but said there is no excuse for them to steal potatoes from farmers since both are employed and are driving new automobiles. It was not a case of want, the court asserted and reprimanded both men for such villainous stealing.

The men were searched by Deputy Lilly, and nothing was found on their person, but today a hunting knife was found lying on the ground near the place the arrest was made.

The theft of sweet corn and potatoes has been reported by many farmers throughout the county and most of them are taking steps of their own to protect their crops. In most instances, farmers find, people who are stealing draw up at night in new and large automobiles and pull the vines from the ground. Because late potatoes are still green the potatoes come with the vines when they are pulled out. Digging therefore is not necessary.

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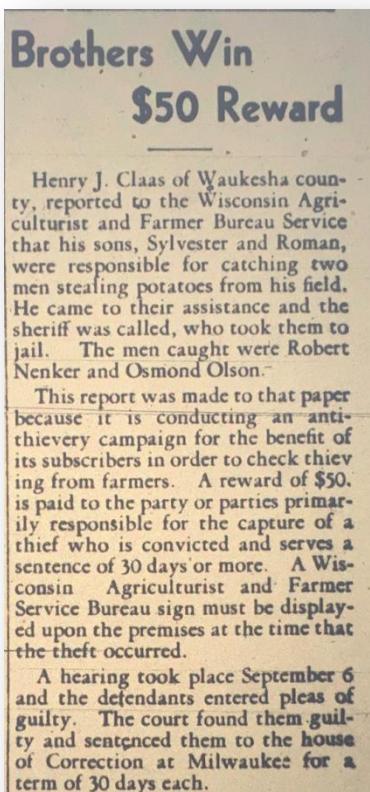
Those ordinary guys were now common criminals. The details of this incident have been long forgotten, buried somewhere in the annals of the Waukesha County system of justice records. We don't know whatever happened to those men after they served their sentences. Hopefully they learned their lesson. Hopefully they kept their jobs and families and they went on to long lives and honest livelihoods.

13 Harry, Rosie & Roman to Waukesha about
the potato thieves.
14 Tonie and the others at the

September 13, 1930 - "Harry, Rosie and Roman to Waukesha about the potato thieves."

One week later, there were additional proceedings. Harry, Rosie and Roman were summoned back to Waukesha "about the potato thieves." We don't know why or what the outcome may have been for that meeting. Perhaps there may have been damages assessed or some type of compensation. Or maybe Harry was pleading for mercy on the criminals' behalf. We just don't know.

But there was a footnote to this whole affair. According to a piece reported in the local newspaper, the efforts of Harry and Tonie's sons did not go unrewarded. This bit of news was reported:



Brothers Win \$50 Reward

Henry J. Claas of Waukesha county, reported to the Wisconsin Agriculturist and Farmer Bureau Service that his sons, Sylvester and Roman, were responsible for catching two men stealing potatoes from his field. He came to their assistance and the sheriff was called, who took them to jail. The men caught were Robert Nenker and Osmond Olson.

This report was made to that paper because it is conducting an anti-thievery campaign for the benefit of its subscribers in order to check thieving from farmers. A reward of \$50. is paid to the party or

parties primarily responsible for the capture of a thief who is convicted and serves a sentence of 30 days or more. A Wisconsin Agriculturist and Farmer Service Bureau sign must be displayed upon the premises at the time that the theft occurred.

A hearing took place September 6 and the defendants entered pleas of guilty. The court found them guilty and sentenced them to the house of Correction at Milwaukee for a term of 30 days each.

There was a silver lining behind this whole affair. The Claas boys, Sylvester and Roman were recognized for their bravery. They were still teenagers. But we can only imagine the excitement that raced through them, that night of September 5, 1932. We can only imagine the fear that might have gripped them as they confronted two strangers whom they caught in the act of stealing from their farm. It might have been even more frightening had they been aware of the hunting knife with which the thieves were presumably armed. Perhaps it was best that they hadn't known.

That newspaper article concluded:

The reward of \$50. was divided equally between Sylvester and Roman Claas, as the parties responsible for the capture of the thieves.

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There is something very sad about this affair. We don't know what drove these men to do what they did. They were married, they had jobs, they drove new cars. If somehow, theirs was an act of desperation, Harry surely would have given them some potatoes. He was a generous and compassionate man. He wouldn't have missed a bag of potatoes and besides, the crop back in the summer of 1930 had been abundant. Maybe they could have helped in the harvest as a simple exchange for some potatoes. Harry might have even thrown in some other garden produce. Maybe even some butter. But that didn't happen.

Sadly, those men were caught in the act of a crime, they were apprehended, convicted and sentenced for misdemeanor theft. We don't know whatever happened to them. And only Tonie's brief comments and these newspaper articles are all that survive.