

The potatoes are all in the root cellar now. No longer do I go to the garden or potato patch with colander in hand before cooking dinner. That was a daily occurrence from the third of July until this past week. For most of that time, it did not involve pulling up a hill of potatoes. Instead, it involved “stealing” a tuber or two from under each plant in a bed until I had enough for dinner. That meant that I scabbled almost all the hills in a bed in the beginning of July when I was finding potatoes from marble size to the largest that might be about like ping-pong balls. By September, though, reaching under a plant for a potato more than likely brought up something more the size of a baseball or larger.

So, the dirt under my fingernails will no longer be a problem. Now, I can go to the root cellar with a pan and bring up whichever potatoes seem to be the best fit for whatever else we are cooking.

This year, we sorted out the small potatoes when we put them into crates for storage in the root cellar. Some of the little ones went into pails to use when I wanted to cook a dish for which small tubers are more appropriate. But, most of the little potatoes went to the barn, eventually to be cooked to become food for the two pigs.

There are eleven bushels of potatoes in the root cellar. Just writing that sentence made me think—not about potatoes, but about “bushels.” Where did the word “bushel” come from, and what does it mean here today?

The term is derived from an old French word *boissel* that was used to measure grain. In the U.S. today, a bushel is a level dry measure consisting of four *pecks*, that total thirty-two quarts. That means that the weight of a bushel of oats, for instance, is much less than the weight of a bushel of potatoes. A bushel of oats should weigh 32 pounds. A bushel of potatoes is 60 pounds.

We store our potatoes in bushel and half-bushel crates. It is interesting—to me, at least—how this system influences thinking. I am quite sure that most shoppers who buy potatoes in a store, even if they buy a large twenty-pound bag, don't think in terms of a “third of a bushel of potatoes.” But, that is what twenty pounds would be. And yet, those of us who raise our own food often use the traditional designation for the weights and amounts of potatoes and other crops.

There is so much specialized knowledge that all people possess that depends on their lives, upbringing, traditions, and needs. I don't think most individuals give themselves enough credit for this

store of facts, practices, and procedures. It applies to much more than the weight of a bushel of potatoes!

But, those potatoes do occupy an important place in our lives. Decisions about meals every day are necessary before choosing Satina, Strawberry Paw, Swedish Mandel, French Fingerling, or Onaway. And, as the volume in the bushel crates decreases in late winter, we will be sure that we keep enough potatoes to plant for the next crop. And we will look forward to those tiny new potatoes before the Fourth of July.