

"Finding a Fortune in California Potatoes"

GEORGE SHIMA

Most Successful Potato Grower
in the United States Tells How

Many Years of Toil and Experiment and Failure Were Necessary Before He "Found" His Fortune

"Hard Work" the Keynote --- "In Raising Good Potatoes Where Poor Potatoes Were Raised Before I Have Added to California's Resources," Says This Optimistic Agriculturist

If you mention George Shima to many people they will tell you that he is styled the "Potato King," and that he "cornered the market in 1910 and made a fortune."

If you speak his name to the experts of the college of agriculture, University of California, they will tell you that he is one of California's most enlightened agriculturists, and that he has achieved success through years of effort to improve the quality of the potatoes grown on the river ranches.

Well, here is the story of George Shima, from the time he came to the state in 1889 to the present day, when he sits in his home in College avenue, Berkeley, and, in touch with the most modern ideas in agriculture, directs the affairs of his great ranches by telephone.

It might interest you to learn that Shima was penniless not many years ago—"broke." And it may be of further interest to know that this was after years and years of struggle to produce good crops of good potatoes. George Shima spent some of the best years of his life learning how to grow potatoes, and where to grow them.

When he arrived here in 1889 he had exactly \$1,000—given him by his father, who was a government official in Japan.

"Without that first \$1,000 I could not have done what I have done," says Shima. "It takes too long to save \$1,000 working as a laborer in the fields. "When I came here I might have gone to college. Most of the Japanese who were coming here at that time had that ambition. The first graduates from Harvard and Yale, Oxford and Cambridge, were given positions of high honor when they returned to Japan with their degrees. Now, of course, there are so many of them that it has ceased to be a distinction.

"I made up my mind to forego college, and give myself to a study of business conditions in America. The first thing I did was to go to work in the potato fields at Colma, and for three years I worked there and on the river ranches, studying the methods of the growers, and in the evenings studying American business conditions and customs."

It has been said that Shima started with nothing, and, working in the fields, saved his money until he could operate independently. He did work in the fields; that much is true. But he had his \$1,000 salted down, and he kept adding to it, awaiting the time when he felt that he could go out for himself and make a success of his venture.

After three years of work, of study and of shrewd observation the keen young Japanese started out for himself. In partnership with an American, he leased 60 acres of land and planted it to potatoes and beans. And at the end of the season, after harvesting the crop, the partners divided just about enough to pay back what they had risked in the venture.

Next year, 1893, found Shima going it alone. He bought horses and implements, leased some land, and succeeded in losing practically every cent he had, as a result of the financial depression through which the country was passing at that time.

For the next three years he continued to plant potatoes. Each season's end found his supply of money a little lower. Every year put him farther back on the wrong side of the ledger.

And that wasn't all. In 1896, at the end of this series of misfortunes, his creditors took steps to have him put out of the potato business. He was up to his ears in debt, and his horses and farm implements were seized. It seemed that Shima, after six years of struggle, should go back to work in the fields, his time without his \$1,000 in the bank with which to build dreams of future successes.

But an American friend, who admired his pluck and believed in his ability to grow a better type of potato than was then being produced, came to his aid, bought him horses, implements, seed potatoes, feed and provisions, and Shima started at it again.

"I had for six years been watching the methods of the Chinese, Italian and Irish potato growers, asking them questions by the hundred, and reading the reports of the department of agriculture," says Shima in telling of his new start.

"The trouble seemed to be that the work of growing potatoes had been left to foreigners, and that the best minds of this country had not given their attention to it. The potatoes that were then raised on the river lands were watery, they did not bring a good price, and they were hard to sell at all in competition with the product of other sections."

In 1897 Shima made his first profits—eight years after he arrived here from Japan. In 1898 he was successful again, and he determined to pay off every debt that had accumulated against him during his lean years.

A large note that he had given before his failure in 1896 was at this time still in the hands of the lender, though the statute of limitations had run against it and it was outlawed. The holder had seized Shima's horses in the fall of 1896, and left the grower without means of cultivating the soil.

"He was an old man and without money at the time," Shima said. "I went to him and told him I had the money to pay the debt. And I gave it to him."

That incident explains why Shima has always been able to find money to finance his undertakings.

"Whenever I have needed money I have always found some American friend to help," Shima says. "I never make written contracts. If I say that I will sell a man potatoes at \$1, and they go to \$2, I keep my word. And if any one breaks his word with me I have nothing more to do with him."

Shima increased his acreage of leased land with every successful season, but every season was not successful. He built up from 150 acres of leased land to 1,000 acres, and now he owns 400 acres and leases more than 4,600 more.

Every opportunity he had was seized to experiment, to try new things, to endeavor to better his product and increase his output. In 1899 he tried new land that had not been worked before on the theory that it would be richer. It proved richer, but it proved also to be so much harder to break up and work that extra horses and men were needed to prepare the ground. So he lost money, and lost more money in 1900.

Then came a spring flood in 1901, the levee broke, and principal and profit were swept away.

Still Shima stayed with it. In 1902 there was a small crop on the river ranches, Shima's among them, but still the price of potatoes was very low, for other regions had bumper crops.

1903, 1904 and 1905 brought small profits.

"In 1906 potatoes were scarce elsewhere, plentiful on my acreage, and I did well," says Shima.



MRS. and
MR. GEORGE SHIMA
and their
ELDEST DAUGHTER

"In 1907 the fields were flooded again, there was a financial depression affecting the whole country, and I lost \$160,000.

"1908 ushered in the best year I ever had."

In 1908, indeed, Shima won his battle. He had 3,200 acres planted, and the yield was 115 sacks to the acre. He made "big money," and that carried him over a less successful year in 1909.

Then came 1910, when Shima is said to have cornered the potato market. "It is impossible to do that," he says. "There are too many parts of the country that grow good potatoes."

1910 and its triumphs was really the fruit of 20 years of experience. His 3,200 acres produced a good yield under his careful handling. The crops elsewhere were short, under the hit or miss plan pursued. He had potatoes, good ones, and lots of them. Other growers had few potatoes, and of a poor quality. So came the cry that Shima had cornered the market. He had really cornered a modern idea of agriculture, and that brought him a good crop in a season that in itself would have produced a poor one.

"Labor conditions are not good," Shima said recently in discussing potato culture in California. "There is a scarcity of labor, and the problem I am working on now is to use machinery as much as possible. Potatoes have been raised here by the methods employed in the countries from which the growers came. Now we must use more modern methods."

"I secured two traction engines two years ago, and am now getting two of a better pattern. I do all my plowing with engines, and we are now experimenting with automobile trucks. While I use gasoline launches and barges in towing the crop to market, there is lots of use for the trucks hauling between different fields and from one ranch to another.

"Among the problems not yet completely solved is the invention of a better harvester than the ones now in use. They give considerable trouble, especially on new land.

"I am also experimenting with a power planter and have a new device which I intend to use next year. Some of these new wrinkles have cost me much more than they were worth. Others have proved successful. And it pays to keep on trying."

Those who know credit Shima without reserve with having raised the standard of tuber grown on the river lands.

"When I first raised potatoes on the river ranches they were of an inferior quality," he explained. They were watery, not bright in color and they did

not compare favorably with the product of other parts of the country. They sold for less and people did not want them if they could get others.

"I studied this and concluded that it resulted from the fact that the water on the land became sour. So I had the land well drained before planting and first class potatoes were produced. Now these potatoes sell well and take their place with potatoes grown anywhere.

"In growing good potatoes where poor potatoes were grown before I claim that I have increased the resources of California."

He has also improved vastly the quality of seed potatoes used.

"The success of my agricultural work can be made secure by combining the technical education to be had in our colleges with the practical knowledge that comes from farming any of the various products," Shima declares. "I attribute my success to the fact that I have always raised potatoes in large quantities, and kept up the standard, improving it wherever possible."

The closest relationship exists between him and his employees, and to this fact is due in large measure the success he has had in developing the 5,000 acres he now has under cultivation.

"If this understanding and sympathy existed in more lines of industry," he says, "there would be less labor trouble."

Shima believes that great things are in store for this country through the increase in the import and export trade with the orient that will follow the opening of the Panama canal. He predicts great things for San Francisco and the bay cities in particular. As an evidence of his faith in this locality he recently purchased 11 acres of land in Kensington park.

"By 1915 the bay cities will have a million population and more," is his prediction.

Shima was married in 1900, his wife having learned English in a missionary school in Japan before she came to this country. Mrs. Shima has a brother who graduated from Johns Hopkins university at Baltimore, and the four Shima children are preparing to enter the University of California at Berkeley.

Naturally his success in business has made Shima a prominent figure in the Japanese colony in San Francisco, and he has often served on committees of welcome to distinguished Japanese guests, as well as being one of the speakers at the banquets which have been given in their honor in San Francisco.

When Admiral Togo was recently in this country Shima went to Seattle to meet him, and with Mrs. Shima, was the guest of the admiral at that time.