

The Celery Kings of the North Fork Valley

Celery is one of the most common vegetables to buy at the grocery store. This was not always true – celery was once an exotic vegetable. This is the story of the year celery came to the North Fork Valley of Colorado, and the men who brought it. My late Dad, Charles VanDenBerg, told me about this a few years prior to his passing at age 91.

In 1936, Dad was 19 years old. The Great Depression was in full tilt, and Western Colorado was in a major drought. Life was very hard. Dad's Dutch family had moved from Iowa to Crawford, a small town in Delta County, in 1907. Dad had a whole wagonload of siblings, and no one in the area had any money. Like many ranching and farming families, they were poor but not hungry as they grew their own food and kept chickens and other livestock.

In 1934, on a visit to Denver, my teenage Dad tasted celery for the first time, and it was incredibly strange, unlike anything Dad had eaten. He loved it and told everyone he knew about this new and exciting vegetable. The book [Celery Production in Colorado \(1934\)](#) cites that farmers were beginning to plant and grow celery on the eastern plains, but there were virtually no plantings on the Western Slope. In big cities, celery had recently become available, but in rural America it was rare.

Dad was always a risk taker. After sampling celery, his path to fame and riches was revealed. He would plant celery in the verdant North Fork Valley and become the Celery King!

He convinced Andrew, one of his five brothers, to join him in the venture to become celery royalty. They obtained seeds and grew celery on an acre of fertile, well-drained soil, in what is now called Pumpkin Hollow near Paonia. Growing celery is very work intensive, requiring continuous hand labor, weeding and lots of water. This venture could not fail – he and Uncle Andy were convinced that once people tasted celery, the opportunity would take off and they would be first to the market.

The celery crop, in the rich soil of the North Fork river bottom, grew like crazy. Dad and Uncle Andy worked long days keeping up with the work of irrigating, weeding, and banking the plants for blanching. Soon, it was ready to sell.

The people in the North Fork Valley of Colorado in 1936 were deep in the midst of the Depression. When Dad and Uncle Andy began to try to sell the celery, people had no idea what it was. Odd-shaped, stringy, and bland, it could not be canned or easily dried. No one would eat it, let alone buy it with scarce Depression money. Shipping to Denver was out of the question due to the cost, and the entire crop rotted in the field, along with Dad and Uncle Andy's dreams of being Celery Kings.

Dad soon left farming forever. He went to work in Denver and later joined the Coast Guard, eventually becoming a baker and home builder. Uncle Andy bought land below Needle Rock in Crawford and became a successful rancher. He moved to Delta after his retirement and lived there until his death in 1990.

Now, in 2020, there are many who would become hemp kings. Total acres in hemp plantings in Western Colorado have expanded fast as farmers rush to supply the growing CBD markets. Growing hemp, like celery, is very labor intensive. Many think the hemp market is oversaturated already, and prices are dropping. Still, I admire the risk taking. Michael Cox, an agricultural journalist, recently wrote about farmers in a column in the Delta County Independent: “But here they are, still going, still scratching out a living because it is what they do.”

The life of a farmer is not easy! I salute our Colorado farmers, but riches are elusive, and hard work is not.

John E. VanDenBerg, 2020

From the time of celery: Charles on the left, Andy on the right, on their royal steeds! Thanks to my cousin, Andy's son Bud for sharing the photo and helping me with this story!

