

ORVILLE REDENBACHER AND CHARLIE BOWMAN

PLEASE NOTE: All consumer requests for Orville Redenbacher branded products should be directed to ConAgra, Inc.



Orville in School

George Brown of Marion Ohio has been preparing to write a history of the Popcorn Industry beginning in 1980. As part of this history, he interviewed Orville Redenbacher at his home in Coronado, California on August 3, 1981. This interview follows and the details are factual but are extremely detailed in discussing Orville's breeding activities.

ORVILLE: From being a County Agent in Terre Haute, Indiana, I joined Princeton Farms. Basically they were interested in acquiring the rich coal deposits near Princeton, Indiana. At that time they were the largest farm industry in Indiana. It proved easier to buy the farm to get the mineral rights than to buy the coal rights alone. With the other farmers in the area you had to get them to sell their mineral rights and many did not want to bother to do that. So, rather than waste your efforts on only buying the mineral rights, most of the time you could buy the land and rights for various amounts.

GEORGE: So that was how the Princeton Operation started down there?

ORVILLE: Yeah, well in the Depression we had to divert corn acreage. In my first year in 1940, the first thing I did was to build a Hybrid Seed Corn Plant. In 1941 I started with Hybrid Popcorn Seed at Princeton Farms.

GEORGE: Can I have a copy of this story?

ORVILLE: I kept it out for you. This has been printed since more details of it are in The People. I'll get the reprints.

GEORGE: You gave me a copy of this earlier. I have one (tan booklet).

ORVILLE: Take an extra if you want.

GEORGE: Since we are setting up the museum, I will take it for the character pictures.

ORVILLE: Yes.

GEORGE: Nice, who did that?

ORVILLE: Oh, that was when I was up in Toronto. They used it in the Sun Magazine Sunday Supplement when they interviewed me for a story, and I did not even know he was doing that. They ran that in the story. I can give you a photocopy of this sketch. Hunt Wesson used the sketch to produce note paper for notes and letters that were written from time to time.

GEORGE: Fantastic idea! You had sent me a note on that pad style a while back. It's a neat idea. Let's get back talking more about Charlie Bowman and your early popcorn history. The material that we got in recent years from Paul Cardinal, Princeton' current General Manager and his predecessor, H.B. Fulford is too recent to have helped in telling your story at Princeton Farms. Why don't we go back to when you were a County Agent, and also get more of your educational background.

ORVILLE: Yes, after I graduated from Purdue, I taught Agriculture for one year. I then moved to Terre Haute to become an Assistant County Agent. I opened an office in Terre Haute, established eight of them, and became one of the eight.



Purdue Band

GEORGE: That was at Terre Haute before you worked at Princeton Farms?

ORVILLE: At a little town Northeast of Terre Haute in the same County. I became a Vocational Agricultural Teacher there from July 28, 1928 to May 31, 1929. I then went into the County Agent Office as Assistant County Agent for a year and nine months. The County Agent was moved to Indianapolis so I took over as County Agent and stayed on until December 31, 1939. Since both Tony Hulman and the Smiths lived in Terre Haute, I knew and worked with them. They also owned The Indianapolis Speedway. They talked me into

quitting the County Agent work and going to work with them at a pretty good increase in salary. I moved to Princeton, Indiana and became a professional Farm Manager for that operation.

GEORGE: Was it called Princeton Farms at that time?

ORVILLE: Oh, No. The original name was McDonner. Nothing there, just a crust of land. Some was owned by the Deep Vein Mine Company, some owned by Princeton Manufacturing Company, and some owned by the Smiths. All was just co-mingled.



**Editor at
Purdue**

GEORGE: What was the full name of the Smith Family? I knew the Hulmans, but I am not familiar with the Smiths.

ORVILLE: Well, down there as far as they were concerned, their two big projects were the Princeton Mining Company, the biggest one. They also had Deep Vein Coal Company. The Princeton Mining Company was the one that really owned the deep shaft mine and they owned a lot more coal besides that under their 12,000 acres. They could not get the rights to this coal without buying the 12,000 acres. No, they did buy 2 or 3 small tracts to finish out certain areas. When we got to farming it became illogical to have farms here and a few acres owned by others, so some buying cleaned up this problem. We started to farm all that land with hired labor. We had at the start of World War II, 38 boys drafted off our farms before they began to exempt agricultural workers. We finally got ourselves in a bind and had to do some 50-50 tenant leases. Like I said, we in my first year there developed a hybrid seed corn plant.

GEORGE: That was your first year as the Farm Professional Manager?

ORVILLE: That was January 1, 1940, when I arrived. We grew our first Hybrid Dent Corn in 1940 and our first Hybrid Popcorn in 1941.

GEORGE: Well then the Hybrids you produced were Purdue Hybrids?

ORVILLE: Yeah, they were all Purdue Hybrids. I did not have time to produce my own. I was at Princeton 12 years until December 31, 1951.

GEORGE: Your starting in your own seed business was not a long time from when I graduated from Purdue in February 1950.

ORVILLE: You have to keep in mind that I started my first crop of Hybrid Popcorn seed in 1941. Most of this material got to Purdue via Dr. Brunson (a popcorn breeder originally from Kansas) in 1938. Up until that time, Agriculture Alumnae had tried to reproduce what Glenn Smith and Brunson had developed for Purdue.

GEORGE: Were you able to get the inbred seed later on? As we know, Agriculture Alumnae would not release inbred or single crosses for a number of years thereby financing further research from their earlier successes. Were you able in that interim to get some seed stock or inbreeds from Brunson to initiate your own research?



ORVILLE: Keep in mind that P-38, Purdue 31, and Purdue 32 were all single cross females with an inbred male. For example, on P-32, the female is Purdue 20, and on Purdue 31, the female was Purdue 22. Well, at first I couldn't get the inbreeds for Purdue, 20 or 22, but I could buy the Single Cross, and then the male inbred. So, the very first year the only Three Hybrids I could make were Purdue 31, Purdue 32, and Purdue 38.

4-H Ribbons

GEORGE: They had released the inbred and the two single crosses, Purdue 20, and Purdue 22?

ORVILLE: Yes, the male inbreeds were released. So then I started going to Florida with our own nursery in the winter of 1941. We then started our own breeding but it was five or six years later that we came up with our Hybrids using materials that we could get that had potential. We then came up with Princeton Farms Hybrids in addition to producing Purdue Hybrids. Actually, we did not come up with Princeton Hybrids until 1946.

Agricultural alumnae had the first Hybrids, Purdue #1 and Purdue #3. Business just flowed into them. They were the only source and they were a tax supported organization, expected to multiply the material and eventually turn it over to private firms.

The Agriculture Experiment Station in Iowa at Iowa State College was doing Hybrid breeding by Dr. Eldredge. Later on his son, Crosby Eldredge, started Ames Seed Farms producing other people's hybrids and eventually via Jim

Murray doing their own breeding work.

GEORGE: Packaged popcorn at that time was mostly Purdue 20?

ORVILLE: Yes, but then that soon changed. TV Time originally used Purdue 20, exclusively from Agriculture Alumnae. To save money, other cheaper to produce corns were used. Ben Banowitz, the owner, went bankrupt, to be bailed out by his brother.

GEORGE: Was it his brother?

ORVILLE: Oh, Yeah, his brother was a multi-millionaire contractor. He owned many Chicago buildings and bailed him out 3 times eventually.



**1995 Popcorn Festival,
Valparaiso, IN**

GEORGE: Well, I remember TV Time and the financial problems they had. I know for a time Ben Banowitz was out of the management. The CEO of TV Time, John Bishop, became President of The Popcorn Institute.

ORVILLE: That was when Ben bought that huge plant at Bremen, Indiana.

GEORGE: He used to run out of Chicago, didn't he?

ORVILLE: Yeah, he started on the 11th Floor in Chicago. We worked with him. I got acquainted with Ben when I worked at Princeton Farms and we produced all of his commercial seed. I did that in addition to the Popcorn Seed Business. When I went to Princeton, we grew all of his Purdue-20 popping corn. I did that in addition to the Popcorn Seed Business. It was the only commercial popping corn we did.

GEORGE: Those early years when I came into the business with my Dad, TV Time was spending very heavily on TV ads in major Eastern Markets, such as New York and Philadelphia.

ORVILLE: That's one of the reasons that caused him to go broke that one time. He spent approximately \$2,000,000 in advertising giving all his profits away.

GEORGE: In one year he spent over \$2,000,000 on advertising?

ORVILLE: Yes.

GEORGE: I don't know about the Mary Poppins Doll Program. Why don't you tell me about that?

ORVILLE: Well, he had Mary Martin on the Peter Pan Musical, so he introduced Mary Poppins and paid a royalty to use the name. He came out with big duplicate dolls he gave to customers and famous people to promote his popcorn. He was a genius in innovative ideas, but he needed a financial manager to keep him under control. He was also a good scientist, putting together his TV Time Package with the separate pouch of Coconut Oil, since combining the two would have in a few weeks produced a soapy smell and taste. He came from the Theatre Business on the 7th Floor of South 11th Street. He had the whole enterprise up there and they developed the package just as it is today. They put corn and salt in one pouch and the oil in an adjacent pouch.

Since no one else had a similar package, the equipment to manufacture it all had to be designed from scratch. He also had engineers to help him but there was no denying Ben's talent and guidance. They had used Bartlet continuous packaging for the pouches.

GEORGE: You know that Mary Poppins Box with the salt pouch at the top, built into the box. That was Ben's idea. Where did the interrelationship between H.B. Fulford and you originate? Was he with Princeton earlier in another capacity?

ORVILLE: No, Fulford was working for Igelheart, managing an elevator. I got acquainted with H.B. originally when he was a 4H Club Member, and I went down to judge the 4H animals.

GEORGE: Quoting an interview with H.B. Fulford, Redenbacher was General Manager, and H.B. came in as Asst. Mgr. and Sales Manager, aiming to expand the Hybrid Field Corn Seed Business. Fulford stayed on until he resigned to be a consultant in 1975.

ORVILLE: They called me Reddie. I mean I didn't use my first name. Most people in Terre Haute knew me as Reddie.

GEORGE: Princeton grew into the Popcorn business via the Seed route. They developed a very beautiful fiber-board can as a retail package.

ORVILLE: We started with a metal can, but due to metal shortages, changed to a paraffin coated fiber can with metal ends.

GEORGE: Okay, that's the paraffin lined that H.B. was thinking of.



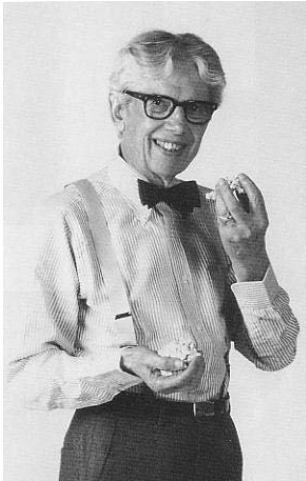
Orville and Grandchildren

ORVILLE: In 1944 and 1945 they began packing for Hulman in cans and poly bags. They sold 1, 2, and 5 lb. sizes in the poly bags. Albert Dickerson Co., started their retail packaging about the same time Princeton, Vogel, Wyandot, and Betty Zane were competing for the retail business and expanding this market. We got to know the competition very well.

In the 50's popcorn made a big growth in sales from 1951 to 1960. We studied the competition carefully. Our main push was to produce the best quality and sell in quality retail outlets. Our secret was in the varieties we produced and the processing methods using ear corn drying and curing compared to the then combine harvesting by most of the others. Most of the competition was into bulk popcorn because of the major increases in the Drive-In Theatre Outlets. We charted a plane and carefully studied all the markets we wanted to enter. This was not true of American, Betty Zane, Barteldes, TV Time Foods, to name a few exceptions. They were primarily consumer packages. The other Processors in bulk put their best quality in the bulk packs and sold inferior corn in the consumer package because many consumer buyers were only interested in a good price. The quality buyers of bulk corn booked it under contract and were very quality conscious. Princeton catered to this bulk market and had many loyal customers. The consumer package business was just getting started. In our opinion to most of the Processors, the package business was just a side issue. If they had off quality it would be channeled to the package business rather than to the bulk side of the industry. What was not good enough to sell in bulk went into the home consumption market. The quality sold in the amusement business did not measure up and that is how we (Princeton) got into the package business with our superior product. McCarty Seed Company was one of the largest bulk operators with top integrity but not a good operator.

ORVILLE: Fulford had been Assistant County Agent in Vincennes after graduating from Purdue. He spent many months at Igelheart.

GEORGE: And what was that type of business?



ORVILLE: They managed a string of elevators making cake flour such as Swan's Down, Fulford was manager of their receiving operation. They had 7 to 12 locations. The farmers had brought in soft wheat from Southwestern Indian and Southeastern Illinois. H.B. Fulford was managing those elevators and that is when I brought him into Princeton Farms to help out primarily with sales of Hybrid Dent Seed Corn. We grew to where we were producing nearly 600 Acres of Hybrid Dent Corn Seed yearly.

GEORGE: Were the Hybrid Dent Corn Varieties from your own breeding work?

ORVILLE: Some of the dents were from our own breeding work. We sold them under the Princeton Farms brand. We also sold some wholesale business for some of the Big Co-ops like GLS, Southern States, Central States, that were located in the East, such as New York, Pennsylvania, and the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, and different ones like that. In 1951 and 1952 Princeton Farms produced 600 acres of Hybrid Dent Seed and about 200 acres were sold in advance.

GEORGE: About what portion was from your own production and research.

ORVILLE: We probably were producing at the end, at the time I knew, only dent seed. They didn't sell any popcorn seed in 1981 that I know of. They quit breeding Popcorn Seed after I left, and they quit producing Popcorn Seed about two years after I left. I really can't answer you too clearly. I would say that their dent seed business has tapered off. I think the big companies such as DeKalb have become too big a factor.

GEORGE: You had told me that when you went into business with Charlie Bowman that you took with you your interest on Popcorn Breeding and had gotten their Dent Corn Breeding Program off the ground. Did the dent breeding work stop after you left?

ORVILLE: *No. Princeton brought in a breeder after I left there.*

GEORGE: *Who was the breeder? Did you know his name?*

ORVILLE: *They did bring in a Breeder for awhile. Perhaps for 2 or 3 years. But he just did dent corn. The thing that got us into commercial popcorn at Princeton was the J.A. McCarty Seed Company who bought our seed and was one of the biggest operators in the Popcorn Industry. After we started Chester in the early 50's, J.A. McCarty bought much of his seed from Chester Hybrids. He almost went bankrupt in 1948 when high production and low prices hurt many popcorn processors.*



Redenbacher Hot Air Balloon

He didn't have a dryer and had a very wet season in 1974. It was very wet in southern Illinois, and Southern Indiana. I had a 28 Ft. High Continuous Dryer where the shelled grain came all the way to the top and then tumbled down to the bottom, through the hot air.

GEORGE: *Wouldn't you call that a batch dryer?*

ORVILLE: *No. It was a Continuous Dryer. I had a batch dryer also but it was for my Dent Corn. McCarty had so much wet corn that he hauled truckloads of wet corn to Valpairaso and returned to Evansville with dry popcorn. I had popcorn all over the place so I decided I might as well be in the Processing Business. One winter I dried his whole crop. We dried continuously day and night. We had no efficient way to do it, so when we built this new popcorn plant, I went to Martin in Mansfield, Ohio, They converted their hay dryers to corn dryers, and the first steel silo they ever built was for Princeton Farms. Actually, I went back for Heavy Engineering to Purdue to help work with Martin on the strength of the duct inside. We had to change the thing at the Center. We had to make a barrier there to keep the air from by-passing. It was necessary to have an even depth of corn on the top compared to the sides, so the air would not take the easiest route and not evenly dry the stored corn. We then built a tunnel to handle the air handling and convey the corn out of the tanks as they were emptied. It was elevated by the same system used to fill the Martin Steel Ear Cribs, and then taken to the shellers and processing equipment. We designed this Princeton system with our own builders.*

Later on McCarty Seed Company borrowed our blueprints to build his plant at Evansville. He gave us \$500 for the use of the plans. The plans were drawn up by an engineer at the Princeton Mining Company. After all, this engineer was working full time with Mrs. Hulman. He was a college graduate trained engineer.

GEORGE: At that time McCarty had a plant in downtown Evansville, and then later he moved out into the countryside which is the place where he had the big fire.

ORVILLE: That was when he borrowed the blueprint and built a plant identical to ours but twice as big.

GEORGE: At any rate at Princeton you originally had 4 Martins and later today there are?



ORVILLE: 8 Martin ear cribs. And then they added the other Butler Bins for the shelled corn.

GEORGE: Then at McCarty Seed they put in 16 tall Martin ear popcorn Cribs?

ORVILLE: Yes.

GEORGE: Were they a double row or a single row?

ORVILLE: Single row. Princeton had the elevator on one end while McCarty had the Elevator in the center and the corn could go in both directions.

GEORGE: I saw a Bobby Ware's movie after the fire but the distortion made it hard to analyze the plant before the fire. I never saw the original plant.

ORVILLE: (Showing pictures he had with him) That was the hybrid seed corn operation. He built that first.



Sorting popcorn ears

GEORGE: That burned? When did that burn?

ORVILLE: After I left Princeton. We put in a great big fan that we had taken out of the coal mine, so that we could suck air in through the exhaust via the tunnel. We used the same tunnel to carry the corn

outside as you would convey coal in mining tunnels. Then the popcorn would be carried to the top of the elevator where we had mounted a sheller to shell the popcorn. The cobs were delivered to a big pile. We were one of the first to feed corn cobs to cattle. It was about the same time that Garst out of True Rapids, Iowa began feeding corn cobs.

GEORGE: That was the cattle feeder involved with Kruschev?

ORVILLE: Yes, we went back and forth several times and got acquainted with Garst. We made more money feeding molasses, urea, and corn cobs to cattle than we ever did feeding dent corn. We used to feed 1,700 to 2,000 head of cattle every winter as a by product. We began to get cobs from anyone who was shelling either dent or popcorn. We would go get the cobs, haul them away and grind them for cattle feed.

GEORGE: So at that time McCarty had 16 Martin Ear Cribs and handling everything on the ear basis. Remember the tall crib McCarty built near Napoleon that Milt Sigg used to call the Tabernacle? Do you have any idea how much Popcorn that held?

ORVILLE: No, I don't.

GEORGE: The ones that we had ourselves held 600 tons in the pair, 300 tons to the side. But I think that thing was in to the multiple thousands. I can't recall whether that held 2,000 tons or not but I sort of suspect that it was close to that.

ORVILLE: It wasn't engineered strong enough. Remember they had to go in there and put old telephone poles up and brace it? It started to break out.

GEORGE: Not very many things, even when you use an engineer to help you, that are really strong enough to start with for storing heavy ear popcorn.



With Grandson Gary doing TV commercials

ORVILLE: That's one thing - those guys over at the mine. They built things heavy. Over built them. And then actually the iron looks like it was turned out by ore iron companies.

GEORGE: So then you were really commercially producing popcorn?

ORVILLE: The last year I was down there was in 1951 and we had 6,000 acres in popcorn.

GEORGE: 6,000 acres of ear popcorn?

ORVILLE: Not all was growing on Princeton Farms. These were contracted acres. We had some on Princeton Farms but we contracted with farms in Southern Indiana and over around Ridgeway, Illinois.

GEORGE: So you would have had probably 1,000 acres or 2,000 acres in Princeton's land at that time?

ORVILLE: I doubt. Because, see we were trying to run 600 acres of hybrid seed corn and didn't have popcorn yet. But we had to grow most of our popcorn off the Princeton Farms because I had my popcorn seed and my dent seed corn. And, of course, one of the advantages I had at Princeton farms was not having a scattered farm here and a farm there, so I could get a lot of isolation because it was not scattered.

GEORGE: So the part of the popcorn that you produced on that Princeton land would have been minor, 1,000 acres or so?

ORVILLE: I doubt if we had over 500 or 600 acres on our own farm.

GEORGE: For the entire setup. Wyandot never produced much popcorn on the Brown farm since the war time.

ORVILLE: We were producing seed wheat, producing soybean seeds and together with our dent seed corn. And then, see, we had a registered herd of Angus cattle and a registered herd of Hampshire hogs and Hampshire sheep and we showed them at state fairs. And then we fed some 2,000 head of cattle at that time.



Orville with Charlie Bowman

GEORGE: So when you decided to go into the business with Charlie Bowman then, you had your own breeding work that you had been doing on popcorn.

ORVILLE: Both Charlie and I then had had about 11 years of experience in

breeding popcorn seed. Charlie with Ag Alumni and I with Princeton Farms, so you see there is no chance for either one of us to go into ownership. Princeton Farms was a closed family corporation. No chance of ever buying there. And Charlie was working for Purdue University and no chance of buying there. And then when the seed corn plant, the dent seed corn plant, owned by George F. Chester and Son, southwest of Valparaiso was for sale, that's where we got the name Chester Hybrids. George F. Chester and Son, Dent Seed Corn Farm. They had been in business for 13 years, successful. His son was a Purdue graduate but he hurt his back and couldn't lift a bag of seed corn. So that's when he decided to sell that and they decided to come down to St. Petersburg and go in the motel business. Not George Chester, but his son did. George Chester still had his farm and he kept growing seed for us.