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Owyhee Produce adds to technology and family roster

By

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As CEO of [Owyhee Produce](#), Shay Myers wears several hats, including those associated with automation upgrades and artificial intelligence as well as one for maintaining communication among the large and growing family roster at the operation.

A third-generation offspring of Owyhee Produce founder, the late Owen Froerer, Myers works with his grandmother, parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, by-marriage relatives and a close-knit staff to nurture and grow the farm and packing/shipping company.

Tuned into the day-to-day tasks of each season on the farm — planting, growing, harvesting/putting into storage — and in the shed with its upgrades, Myers is also tuned into each of the various company positions filled by 11 Froerer family households. To say this is an enterprise of kinship is an understatement of huge proportion.

The most recent family addition to the company is Colsie Froerer, who joined the food safety/HR departments this season. Shay's sister, Bailey Myers, who works in agriculture tourism/marketing, said, "Colsie is also a part of the third generation and was working as a schoolteacher in Utah before she moved back home to help us continue to grow."

As the headcount multiplies — the fourth generation now well-established with great-grandchildren — the company is also expanding its horizons technologically.

"New automation has been our focus for the 2023 season," Myers said in July. "We have added two new palletizers to deal with the labor difficulties that everyone is facing, and for our customers benefit we have also updated our cameras and internal sorting to TrueSort AI from Ellips to better grade the quality of each onion we ship."

Another upgrade in the shed is for employees, he said. "We finalized the installation of a new music system that will allow them to listen to music they request as well as creating a more flexible work schedule for those employees who need it."

Owyhee Produce keeps its eye to the development of AI and mechanical efficiencies as the 21st century blazes along, upgrading as needs arise and/or change. And to see how far the family farm has come since its roots were planted in the early 1950s, one need only look at the progression of technology and the number of Froerers who've become involved along the way.

It all began soon after the Korean War ended when grandfather, Owen, returned from his military service. The young man and his new bride, Colleen, set about to create a family farm where their offspring and generations down the line could grow together in every sense of the word.

During those early years when the Nyssa, OR, farm was new, Owen's "high tech" equipment consisted of a disc, a plow and two Clydesdales — but he and Colleen were determined to make their family farm a reality.

They raised four children, and the path became clear as the years went by.

During 2006 the farm expanded its scope and began packing and shipping its own onions, and over the years it has grown from 200 onion acres to well over 1,600.

Owyhee Produce shipped from its newly constructed packing shed near Parma, ID, in 2018 after Snowmageddon leveled a number of buildings. The shed used 21st century technology with a line capable of both internal and external sorting with near infrared for the external sorting. A spectrometer followed, picking up any internal defects through light refraction — a quantum leap from discs, plows and Clydesdales. And this year's upgrades lift the shed to yet another level.

The milestones have been part of the plan, and in 2019, when the Froerer patriarch — husband of 65 years, father of four and grandfather/great-great grandfather — passed away, Owyhee Produce had become what he worked for since the beginning. It was and is a well-established and continually growing family farm with a 2023 product line that also includes distilled mint oil, watermelons and asparagus.

The company's family of brands includes Shay Farm Kid, Produce Common Sense, Buck Naked Onions, Cookoo Melons, Wicked Sweet Tearless Red Onions and Froerer Farms — with another brand to be unveiled this year. Bailey Myers said, "We do have a new Distinctly Different label we are excited to roll out in full force this year."

In the predominant onion category, Owyhee has long been a major grower/shipper of conventional and organic yellows, whites and red onions. More recently, Wicked Sweet Tearless Reds were rolled out in the past few years, and the Buck Naked Whole Peeled came on-line in 2019.

Of course like every other operation in the Treasure Valley, Owyhee Produce has weathered storms, literally and figuratively, over the decades. Myers said 2022 ended up being somewhat of a disappointment. Weather played a role in the end result, and he said, "It was not what we expected. Prices weren't poor, but they certainly were not what we hoped to see. There were reduced volumes and fewer growers in 2021 and 2022 due to difficult growing conditions both years."

More companies are becoming multi-tiered, and Myers said there are "more and more grower/shippers/packers. If you want onions in your shed you are probably going to have to grow most of them."

Owyhee Produce deals with labor and other ongoing issues each season, and Myers said, "Labor costs as connected with Adverse Effect Wage Rates are becoming surprisingly challenging and don't appear to be sustainable over the long-term, with relief coming only in the form of automation."

He also looked at the high-profile issue of carbon emissions/climate change.

"The other problem we face is consumer misunderstandings around carbon emissions and other pollution," Myers said. "We need look no further than Europe, specifically the Netherlands, where both people and government policy are shutting farms down. The days of just being farmers and doing are about over."

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About Kathleen Thomas Gaspar |

Kathleen is a Colorado native and has been writing about produce for more than three decades and has been a professional journalist for more than four decades. Over the years she's covered a cornucopia of crops grown both in the United States and abroad, and she's visited dozens of states – traveling by car from her home base in Colorado to the Northwest and Southeast, as far as Vancouver, BC, and Homestead, FL. Now semi-retired, Kathleen continues to write about produce and is also penning an ongoing series of fiction novels. She's a wife, mother of two grown sons and grandmother of six, and she and her fly fisherman husband Abe reside in the Banana Belt town of Cañon City.

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