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## **Ray Obendorf celebrates 100 trips around sun**

By

Kathleen Thomas Gaspar

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In the company of family and friends, Ray Obendorf celebrated his 100th birthday in June, and to the delight of everyone, he shows few signs of slowing down.



Ray

*Obendorf and his offspring, “The Obendorf Boys,” at the 100th birthday party. Photo courtesy of Obendorf Produce*

Unlike some super-senior citizens who might smile and say their longevity is all thanks to eating a pound of bacon and smoking a box of cigars each day, Ray Obendorf is a bit more in tune with a healthier — and logical — approach to living and enjoying a long life.

Obendorf’s thoughts mesh well with the findings from a 2020 piece published by the Journal of the American College of Cardiology. In it, the authors were almost poetic regarding lifespans of individuals who’ve lived to be 100 years old — and older.

Centenarians, the ACC said, “are people who have reached the extreme limits of human life thanks to their capability to successfully adapt to a variety of stressors and to remodel better and more ‘harmoniously.’”

The Obendorf patriarch has always sought to adapt to and get along, but he admitted there are other factors at play.

“Genetics,” Obendorf said. He added, however, a couple of disciplines he follows: “Stay in shape, and everything in moderation.”

Born June 24, 1923, in Caldwell, ID, the lively centenarian has been an onion man since age 14. His own father died when Obendorf was just 12, and he and his two brothers, Orville and Bernard, and sister Marie were raised by their mother and “grew up on the original homestead,” Obendorf said in an early August interview. The siblings went to elementary and secondary school in nearby Wilder.

When he was 14, Obendorf started farming onions on his own on a half-acre plot of land provided to him by a man named Ora Newgen, a land renter on the Parma, ID, homestead farm. J.C. Watson packed the young farmer’s onions, and Phil Obendorf said his grandfather grew onions every year

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until his last season, which was 2022-23.

Along the way in the family business, Obendorf, Orville and Bernard farmed together, and in 1948 Obendorf started Obendorf Farms, growing onions and hops. His initial foray into the hop industry with 20 acres turned into something much larger, and Obendorf Farms is now the largest hops grower in the state.

In 1949, just a year after starting the farm, Obendorf married his wife, Darlene, and the couple raised two children, son Greg and daughter Teresa. The elder Obendorfs had been married 57 years when Darlene passed away in November 2006; Obendorf remarried in 2008, and he and wife Carole continue to live in the house Ray built in 1948.

Son Greg, who also farms, joined his father in the farming operation in 1977, and his sons, Brock, Phil and Christian, came on as the farm grew.

In his lifetime Obendorf has seen changes take place that most of us can only consider in the abstract — operator-assisted phone service has evolved to Facetime on an Apple watch. Letters are mostly emails at best and texts more frequently. Books in the classroom? Much like “a chicken in every pot,” it’s “a laptop for every student.”

Propellers of passenger airplanes have been replaced by jet engines; Lindberg was the first to fly across the Atlantic in The Spirit of St. Louis in 1927, and Neil Armstrong was the first to walk on the moon in 1969, having gotten there in Apollo 11; in the early 1920s there were 78,000 miles of roads in the United States; 100 years later there are more than 4.5 million miles of the country crisscrossed by a web of roads and highways.

And the world has become a much smaller place.

Similarly, the world of farming and packing/shipping has evolved, with Obendorf responding to the question, What is the most amazing change you’ve seen in farming? With a thoughtful answer, he said, “Equipment, and the change in labor needed on the farm. There’s GPS and technology.”

Today’s farmers use satellite positioning for tractors and planting. Drip irrigation is more efficient and conserves water. Temperature-controlled storage maintains quality and extends the season. In the shed there are cameras that show quality inside onions. Baggers make quick work of getting onions packed. And everything can be controlled by cell phone from wherever the phone and controller might be.

A lifetime of farming; a lifetime of changes. Though he claims to be retired, Obendorf enjoys getting out with his grandsons frequently to check the fields, just as he’s done for decades. No change there.

He was destined to be an onion man, and Obendorf shares his story with humility and positivity. Advice for farmers now? “Keep your nose to the grindstone,” Obendorf said. “And be a man of your word.”

And to the burning question on everyone’s lips, how does Obendorf like his onions? “Cooked,” he said. “Scalloped.”

Happy Birthday, and many happy returns.

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## [Kathleen Thomas Gaspar](#)

### **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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