

**MORE THAN
POPCORN**

THE LIFE OF
ORVILLE REDENBACHER

by **KEVIN R. FISH**

All images of Orville Redenbacher courtesy Kevin R. Fish

When the name Orville Clarence Redenbacher is mentioned, one word immediately bursts into mind—popcorn. Redenbacher's career, however, illustrates the truth of being in the right place at the right time. His short teaching career, his years as a county agricultural agent, and his involvement in 4-H Clubs helped to guide him to his subsequent management of Princeton Farms, his work with Chester Inc., and his fame as what *Time* magazine called "the Luther Burbank of popcorn."

Throughout his varied life Redenbacher displayed a self-reliance in whatever field he chose to enter. "Whenever somebody tells me something can't be done," he said, "I make up my mind it *can* be done. I have a lot of confidence in myself." Born on July 16, 1907, Redenbacher and his involvement in food and agriculture dates back to his years at Brazil High School in Brazil, Indiana. None of his brothers or sisters studied past the eighth grade in the local one-room schoolhouse, and he was the first in his family to graduate from

"Whenever somebody tells me something can't be done, I make up my mind it *can* be done. I have a lot of confidence in myself."

high school, doing so in 1924. His major area of study was agriculture, and he belonged to the school's agriculture and science clubs. Redenbacher also participated in the band and orchestra and won selection to the National Honor Society.

After graduation Redenbacher turned down an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in favor of attending Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, where he studied agronomy. While at the university he became a member of Purdue's Agricultural Society and Press Club, and he worked at the *Purdue Agriculturist*, a student-run magazine that covered the activities of the Agriculture School and Home Economics Department. Redenbacher had an active life at

Purdue, playing sousaphone in the Reserve Officer Training Corps marching band; working as an assistant night editor of *The Exponent*, the university's daily newspaper; and serving as associate editor of the campus yearbook. He also found time to be a part of Purdue's track and cross-country teams. Reminiscing

about his days in the band,

Redenbacher noted

that by playing the sousaphone he learned how "to toot my own horn . . . which is all right as long as you do it within reason and honestly."

Although Redenbacher graduated from Purdue with a degree in agriculture in 1928, he never really left that institution, as his activities were directly associated with that university's agricultural extension work, which had begun in the early 1910s. Demonstration farms, agricultural experiment stations, and training for improvement of agricultural techniques were provided by land-grant colleges and by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which was established in 1862. One of the prominent features of Purdue's agricultural extension work included district farmers' short courses, which began in Indiana in 1907. Such courses actually were adult schools that lasted two or more days in order to give intensive practical agricultural instruction, on topics such as soils, crops, livestock, farm management, dairying, horticulture, animal and plant diseases, the home, school, church, and community. Purdue's extensive agricultural extension work also involved farmers' institutes, and boys' and girls' clubs (called 4-H clubs since 1918), county agent work, special agricultural trains, and thousands of demonstration lectures on agricultural subjects by extension specialists.

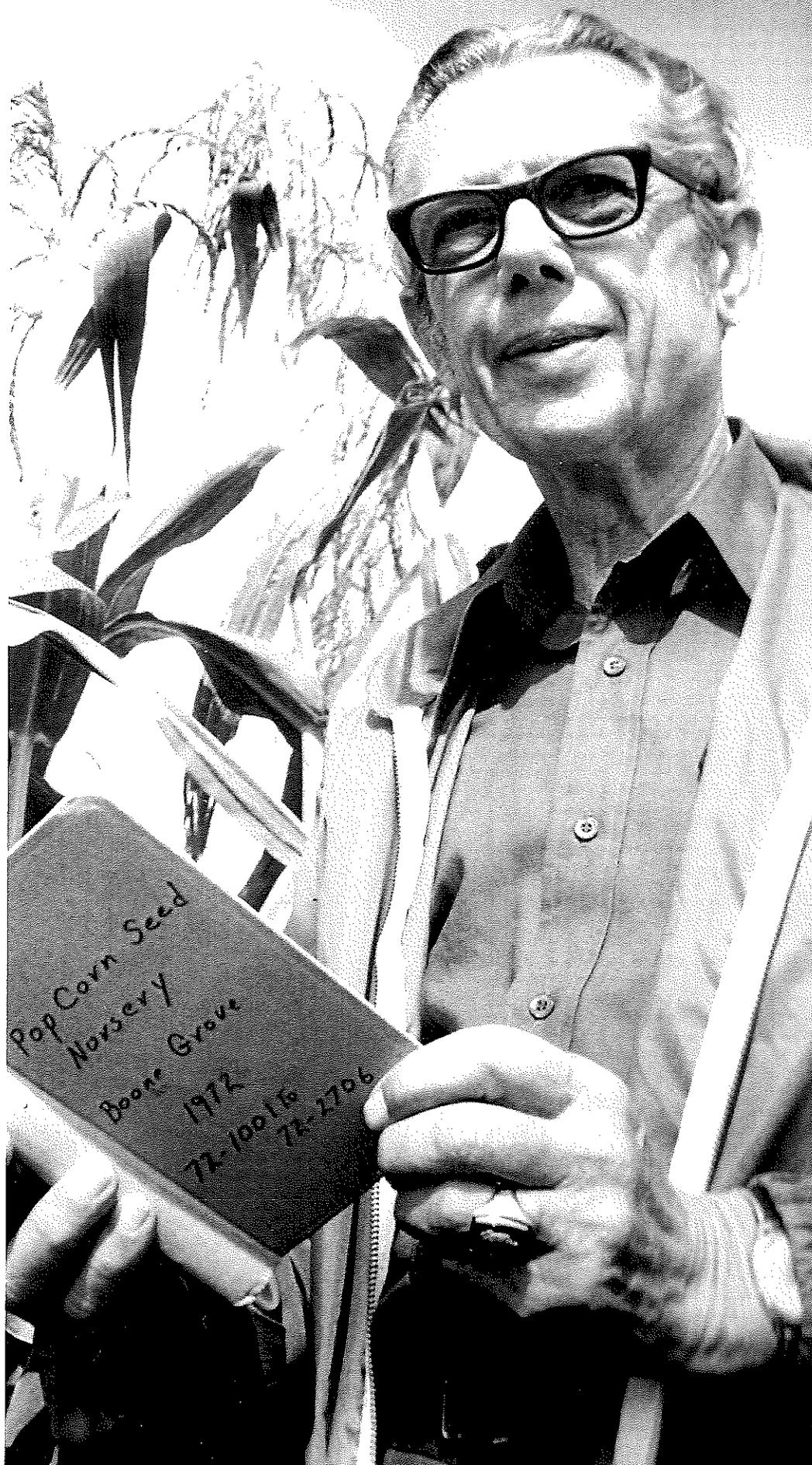
Redenbacher's first job after graduation from Purdue involved teaching vocational agriculture at Fontanet High School in Fontanet, Indiana, during the 1928–29 school year. He took his students to apple orchards to trim trees and to dairy farms to judge dairy cattle. In 1929, following his brief stint as a vocational education

teacher, Redenbacher became involved in another aspect of Purdue's agricultural extension work—as an assistant county agricultural agent, moving to Terre Haute, Indiana, to become an assistant county agent for Vigo County. When the county agent moved to Indianapolis, Redenbacher succeeded him and retained the position until December 31, 1939.

During his career as a county agent, Redenbacher often made use of one of the country's most popular forms of entertainment—radio. He became the first county agent to do farm broadcasts from his office and from mobile units, doing so from radio station WBOW in Terre Haute. Redenbacher's use of radio benefited from the fact that radio ownership by farm families had been on the rise in the Midwest. In 1925 radio ownership in the western Midwest ranged from a low of 4 percent of farm homes in Wisconsin to a high of 12 percent in Illinois. By 1940 the range was from 59 percent in Missouri to 85 percent in Iowa and North Dakota.

Before, during, and after his work as a county agent, Redenbacher was involved in 4-H clubs. (He actually began in 4-H at age eleven in 1918 with a pig, and earned 4-H ribbons by the time he graduated from high school.) For many years he worked for the organization on both the local and national level. According to the 1931 Terre Haute city directory, he was a country boys' and girls' club agent while living in the community. Also, Redenbacher organized the first Junior 4-H Leadership Club and Camp in Terre Haute and participated in and coached judging teams.

Before his face became well known through his frequent television commercials, Redenbacher's popcorn was more famous than he was. During an appearance on the television program To Tell the Truth, the panel was unable to correctly guess his occupation even though they were fed his popcorn.



His efforts on behalf of 4-H were honored in 1932, when he received the first Indiana State 4-H Alumni Recognition Award. A year later he took home the National 4-H Alumni Award from the National 4-H Club Congress.

While he was involved in 4-H Club work and immediately after leaving his position as a county agent, Redenbacher spent several years as the manager of Princeton Farms. The original name of Princeton Farms was McDonner, which Redenbacher described as just a crust of land. Princeton Farms was actually one of four companies that evolved from a single coal mine that was opened in Princeton, Indiana, in the early 1920s by Robert J. Smith. Smith had founded the Deep Vein Coal Company in Terre Haute in 1902. In 1924 he added the King's Mine Station, which was south of Princeton, and developed that deep shaft mine. Smith and Anton Hulman Jr. became the president and vice president, respectively, of the Princeton Mining Company, whose offices were in Terre Haute. Looking to increase their coal business, the partners eyed buying the coal rights for the Princeton Farms property, but it proved easier for them to buy the twelve thousand acres of land to obtain the mineral rights rather than to buy the coal rights alone.

Hulman heard Redenbacher's WBOW radio reports, and he and Smith hired Redenbacher to manage Princeton Farms, a position he held from January 1, 1940, until December 31, 1951. After Smith died in 1942, the development and management of all four industries of the Farms was conducted by his two sons, Henry P. and Uriah R., and Henry's sons, Donald of Terre Haute and Robert J. of Princeton.

Redenbacher's years at Princeton Farms included his first involvement with the product that made him famous—popcorn. During the Great Depression, the Farms needed to divert corn acreage. The first

thing that Redenbacher did as the manager was to build a hybrid dent seed corn plant, one of the first popcorn processing plants in the United States. Under Redenbacher, Princeton Farms began to produce Purdue University popcorn seed hybrids. The hybrid seed corn research and testing program was conducted at Princeton during the summer. Then, in 1941, Redenbacher began conducting this program in the winter in Homestead, Florida, with Princeton Farms' own nursery. But it was not until 1946 that Princeton Farms developed its own viable popcorn seed hybrids. These new hybrids were Princeton hybrids, and Princeton Farms began producing these in addition to Purdue hybrids. Princeton Farms did grow some popcorn on its own land and also contracted with farms in southern Indiana and around Ridgeway, Illinois, to grow more popcorn. In addition to hybrid popcorn seed, Princeton Farms produced commercial popcorn, soybean seeds, seed wheat, dent seed corn, a registered herd of Hampshire hogs, Hampshire sheep, a registered herd of Angus cattle, and Guernsey cattle.

While Redenbacher was the manager of Princeton Farms, there were several competitors in the popcorn business, but Princeton achieved success with its product. In 1944 and 1945 it began packing popcorn in cans and polyester bags sold in one-pound, two-pound, and five-pound sizes. As popcorn sales expanded in the 1950s, Princeton Farms attempted to produce the best quality popcorn and to sell it to quality retail outlets. The Princeton Farms' secret was in the varieties that it produced and in the processing methods, using ear-corn drying and curing rather than the combine harvesting that was used by most other competitors. Most of the competition preferred selling bulk popcorn because of the growth of drive-in theater outlets across the country. Most processors

in the bulk popcorn market put their best quality in the bulk packs and sold inferior popcorn in the consumer package because most ordinary buyers were only interested in a cheap price.

What actually brought Princeton Farms into commercial popcorn production was the J. A. McCarty Seed Company, which was one of the biggest operators in the popcorn industry. McCarty bought the Farms' popcorn seed. Then, after the Chester Hybrids company was begun by Redenbacher and Charles Bowman in the early 1950s, McCarty bought much of his seed from that company. McCarty almost went bankrupt in 1948 when high production and low prices hurt many popcorn processors. The McCarty company suffered from a very wet season that struck southern Illinois and southern Indiana and did not have a plant for drying popcorn. Redenbacher had a twenty-eight-foot high continuous dryer for dent seed corn at Princeton Farms in which the shelled grain went all the way to the top and then tumbled down to the bottom through the hot air. McCarty had so much wet corn that he hauled truckloads of it to Valparaiso and returned to Evansville with dry popcorn. Since Redenbacher had so much popcorn, he decided to go into the popcorn processing business. Redenbacher dried McCarty's entire popcorn crop continuously day and night one winter. The Farms had no efficient way to do it, so they built a new popcorn plant. Subsequently, McCarty's company borrowed Princeton Farms' blueprints to build its own popcorn processing plant in Evans-

ville, paying \$500 for the use of the plans. The plans were drawn up by an engineer at the Princeton Mining Company.

Immediately after leaving as manager of Princeton Farms, Redenbacher went into business for himself. While he was organizing Princeton Farms, he often consulted with Charles Bowman, manager of Purdue University's Agricultural Alumni Seed Improvement Association. In 1951 the two men bought George F. Chester and Son Inc., which was a small dent seed corn dealer, grower, and distributor in Boone Grove, Indiana. "We didn't have any money and kind of wanted to be in business for ourselves," Bowman said. "We sat down and jokingly said that maybe we ought to sell know-how." Redenbacher and Bowman soon renamed the company Chester Hybrids, then renamed it Chester

Inc. in 1967. Soon after purchasing it, they moved the company close to Valparaiso. Although Chester began as a seed dealer company, it subsequently expanded its operations to include agricultural chemicals, liquid fertilizers, grain storage bins, dryers, garden supplies, and irrigation systems.

While liquid fertilizer was among many of the products of Chester, Redenbacher has been historically important because of only one of those products—popcorn. This was grown, sold, and distributed by Chester, but Redenbacher transformed the popcorn industry by moving it from a commodity-oriented business into a gourmet one. He helped to create the gourmet concept and the national market for gourmet popcorn, glamorizing and galvanizing the popcorn marketplace.

Carl Hartman was the breeding expert for the Redenbacher popcorn at Chester. Before Redenbacher's gourmet popcorn appeared, the raw popcorn industry was staid and parochial; and unpoped popcorn was primarily a regional commodity that was sold in grocery stores in the Midwest and the South as a simple, inexpensive, and fun food. Quality and individual brand differences were rarely emphasized. Then, in 1965, after several years of research, Redenbacher developed a hybrid yellow popping corn, in which the highest popping volume ratio in the popcorn industry was achieved. This was a new and fluffier strand of popcorn, or a gourmet hybrid, which popped nearly twice as large as the competition's and dramatically reduced the number of "old maids," or unpoped kernels. "It used to

Redenbacher examines a corn tassel in one of his popcorn fields in Homestead, Florida.



burn me up," Redenbacher said of the inferior brands. "Some were just junk."

Redenbacher originally called his new brand Red-Bow popcorn, which referred to his own name and that of his partner, Bowman. Redenbacher's popcorn swiftly achieved a huge presence in the popcorn industry, creating a greater interest in popcorn as a wholesome, healthy snack. With his popcorn, Redenbacher turned his name into a household staple, and he became known as the Kernel Sanders of the popcorn business. He admitted that he received many telephone calls from people who wanted to determine if he was a real person.

A professional marketing agency's suggestion was the key to the success of Redenbacher's popcorn. When this new premium popcorn seed was developed, Redenbacher and Bowman discovered that the popcorn industry and the major popcorn processors did not want to market the Redenbacher popcorn because the gourmet seed and the gourmet popping corn were too expensive to produce, harvest, process, and package. In other words, the experts told them that there was no market for gourmet popcorn. "We were told we were absolutely going the wrong way and that people wouldn't pay the price we had to have for our product, and he [Redenbacher] stayed with it," Bowman remembered. "He was just going to get it done and he did."

In 1970 Redenbacher and Bowman hired a professional marketing agency in Chicago, Illinois, to create a name for the product, and they accepted its advice to drop the Red-Bow brand name, place a picture of Redenbacher's own face on the label, and advertise it as Orville Redenbacher's Gourmet Popping Corn. "We did everything we could to make a Cadillac out of it," Redenbacher said. "They expected us to fold up. But even at the price we were charging, it was cheaper than



peanuts or pretzels." In 1971 he convinced Marshall Field's in Chicago to carry his product. By late 1971 Blue Plate Foods, a New Orleans, Louisiana, subsidiary of Hunt-Wesson Inc., concluded a deal to distribute the product in the southern United States, with Redenbacher taking the starring role in promoting his popcorn. "I'm a people handler. It's pretty much my nature," Redenbacher told a newspaper reporter. "We also had the big advantage that there are very few people who develop their own product and sell it." In 1976 Redenbacher and Bowman sold the popcorn business to Hunt-Wesson Foods (today the Redenbacher brand is owned by agribusiness giant ConAgra).

Redenbacher's promotion of his popcorn took many forms. He noted that every United States citizen was touched in some way by marketing and that, when he perfected his popcorn in 1965, he was persuaded that people would pay a higher price for what he and his coworkers regarded as a fluffier, tastier, and more tender popcorn. He added that, in spite of the popcorn experts' rejection of his creation, he had never been a quitter and that he was determined to succeed in marketing his popping corn based on its high quality rather than a low price. He traveled by car across the United States, persuading store owners to carry his product. "I never failed to make a sale on the first call," Redenbacher said of his travels, which saw him appearing to promote his popcorn at grand openings, county fairs, and television talk shows.

His agreement with Hunt-Wesson Foods included television commercials and other advertisements for the product. Redenbacher and his grandson, Gary D. Fish (now Gary Fish Redenbacher), appeared in those advertisements, with Redenbacher always dressed in his trademark bowtie. For several years Redenbacher also handed out stickers that read, "I Met Orville Redenbacher, the Popcorn King." Valparaiso helped to celebrate Redenbacher's success by creating in 1979 an annual Popcorn Festival, at which Redenbacher often appeared as grand marshal. The Edelman public relations firm of Chicago aided in crafting the Redenbacher image. According to Valerie Woods, who was the senior vice president of Edelman and the manager of the Redenbacher popcorn account, Redenbacher was the developer of the popcorn rather than a commercial figurehead. Edelman's publicity was designed to emphasize that point.

Perhaps the most ambitious episode in these public relations efforts was a nationwide celebration that was orchestrated by Edelman to celebrate Redenbacher's eightieth birthday in 1987. Samples of the popcorn, as well as Orville Redenbacher T-shirts, were featured on specially decorated Amtrak lounge cars on a cross-country train. In each major city where the train stopped, the publicists set up what they billed as the "world's largest birthday card." Thirty thousand people signed this card. Woods revealed that there was tremendous publicity in both the local and national markets, including mentions in *USA Weekend* and on both major wire services, along with birthday greetings from Willard Scott on the *Today Show*.

There were also public relations efforts to strengthen the link between homemade popcorn and home-viewed movies. Redenbacher hosted a home-video syndication series, in which he introduced the film and provided a one-minute-intermission

rap on popcorn. In addition, he participated in a microwave publicity blitz when microwaveable flavors of the popcorn were introduced. Samples of his cheddar-cheese, sour-cream-'n'-onion, nacho-cheese, and caramel varieties were sent with an extensive press kit to food editors all over the United States. This media taste test was very successful. The new popping corn was also given positive reviews in stories in publications that ranged from *Glamour* to the *Forecast for Home Economics*, as well as the Associated Press and King Features.

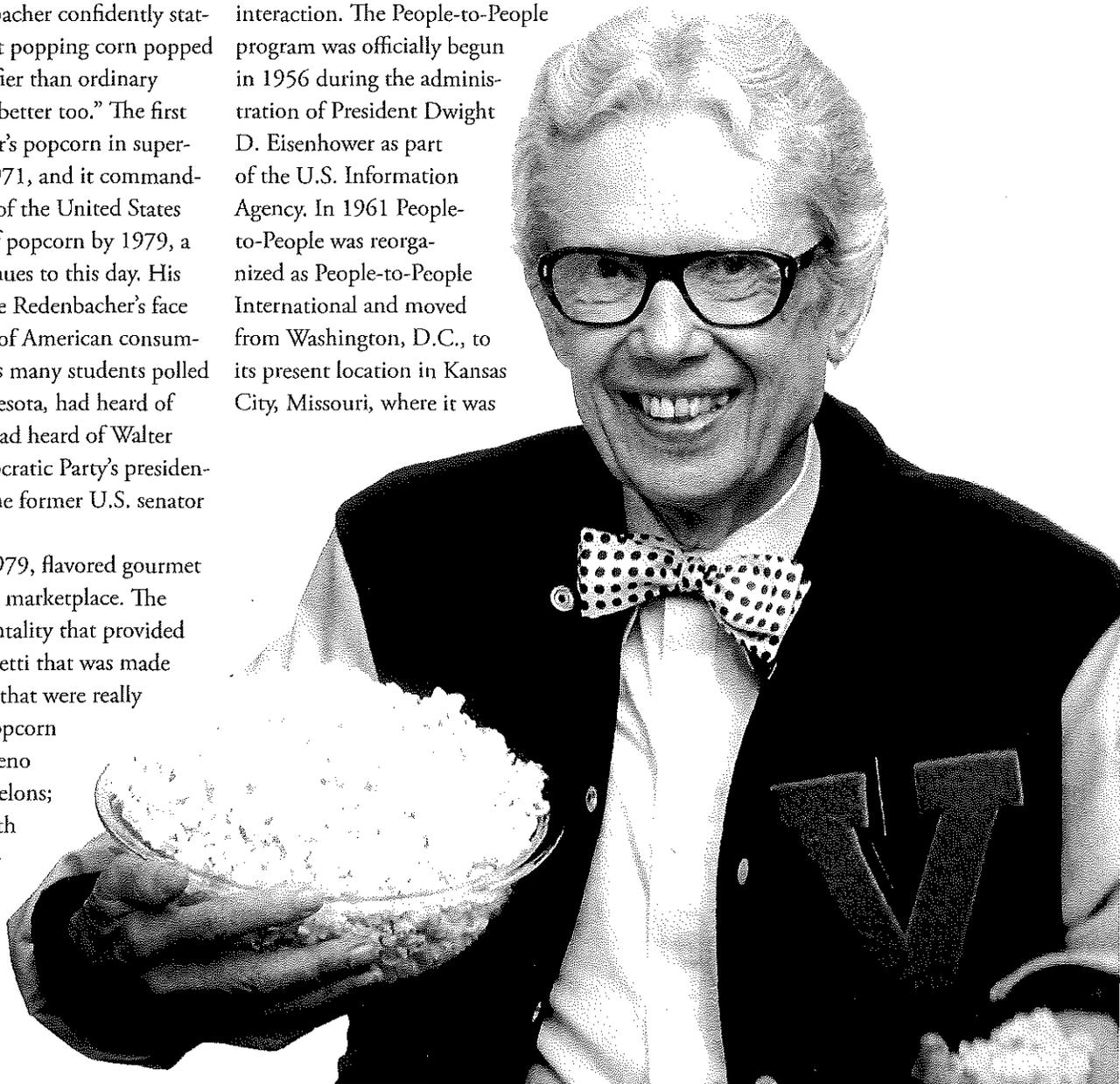
This publicity resulted in Redenbacher's gourmet popping corn being very successful over the years, but the publicity aspect that was mainly responsible for his success were his folksy television advertisements, with Redenbacher confidently stating that his gourmet popping corn popped up "lighter and fluffier than ordinary popping corn. Eats better too." The first sales of Redenbacher's popcorn in supermarkets began in 1971, and it commanded the largest share of the United States supermarket sales of popcorn by 1979, a situation that continues to this day. His advertisements made Redenbacher's face familiar to millions of American consumers. In 1984 twice as many students polled in Saint Paul, Minnesota, had heard of Redenbacher than had heard of Walter Mondale, the Democratic Party's presidential candidate and the former U.S. senator from Minnesota.

Also, in about 1979, flavored gourmet popcorn entered the marketplace. The same marketing mentality that provided such things as spaghetti that was made of soap and oranges that were really candles furnished popcorn that tasted like jalapeno peppers and watermelons; this trend started with Redenbacher. Subsequently, microwave popcorn was

introduced by Pillsbury in 1982. Redenbacher entered the microwave popcorn market in 1983, and his brand led the competition by mid-1988. Microwave popcorn, both buttered and plain, gained almost instant acceptance. Popcorn products for hot-air poppers likewise found a following. Furthermore, the Redenbacher popcorn became the official popcorn of Disneyland and Disneyworld.

During his time with Chester and his involvement in the promotion of his gourmet popcorn, Redenbacher traveled to many countries, with many of these trips being sponsored by People-to-People International, an organization that attempted to foster peace and understanding among nations through person-to-person interaction. The People-to-People program was officially begun in 1956 during the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower as part of the U.S. Information Agency. In 1961 People-to-People was reorganized as People-to-People International and moved from Washington, D.C., to its present location in Kansas City, Missouri, where it was

"lighter and fluffier than ordinary popping corn. Eats better too."



incorporated as a private concern.

In 1962 Redenbacher made his first trip with PTPI to the Soviet Union. Later, he was included in the organization's first trip to Mexico, then went on PTPI's trip to South America, and subsequently on its journey around the world. Afterwards, he directed the first PTPI tours to Africa and Lapland. The trips in which Redenbacher participated were part of the People-to-People agriculture program. His visit to Africa included a stop at a farm in the Republic of South Africa that handled the popcorn seed that Chester sold to that nation. Several years later, in 1987, he resigned as a director of this organization because he could no longer attend meetings.

Redenbacher's attitude fit in perfectly with the PTPI program. He had been interested in the program ever since it was created. Also, he had always wanted to travel and see the world, but he agreed with the organization's purposes as well. Furthermore, he believed that the work and experience that he gained from this organization provided him with more knowledge of the world and the differences between people than anything else that he had ever done. Finally, he was persuaded that communication among people could ease world problems.

In addition to PTPI, Redenbacher involved himself in the work of Kiwanis International. He had first joined the organization in 1930 in Terre Haute, eventually serving as president in 1939 and as lieutenant governor in the Evansville Division in 1945. Redenbacher's efforts to promote popcorn were recognized when he was inducted into the first National Popcorn Hall of Fame in 1988. Also that

year, he received an honorary doctorate in agriculture from his alma mater, Purdue.

Redenbacher died on September 19, 1995, at the age of eighty-eight in his condominium in Coronado, California. His face is still identified today with the product he spent most of his life promoting. Redenbacher and popcorn have become so entwined that in January 2007 ConAgra used a digital double (crafted by the company that did the special effects for the films *Titanic* and *Apollo 13*) for Redenbacher in a television commercial during a telecast of the Golden Globe Awards show. Although some saw the use of a man dead for more than a decade as macabre, Gary, the grandson who had appeared with

Redenbacher in many of his commercials, approved of the digital magic. "I see it as a way to remember the man I love," he said.

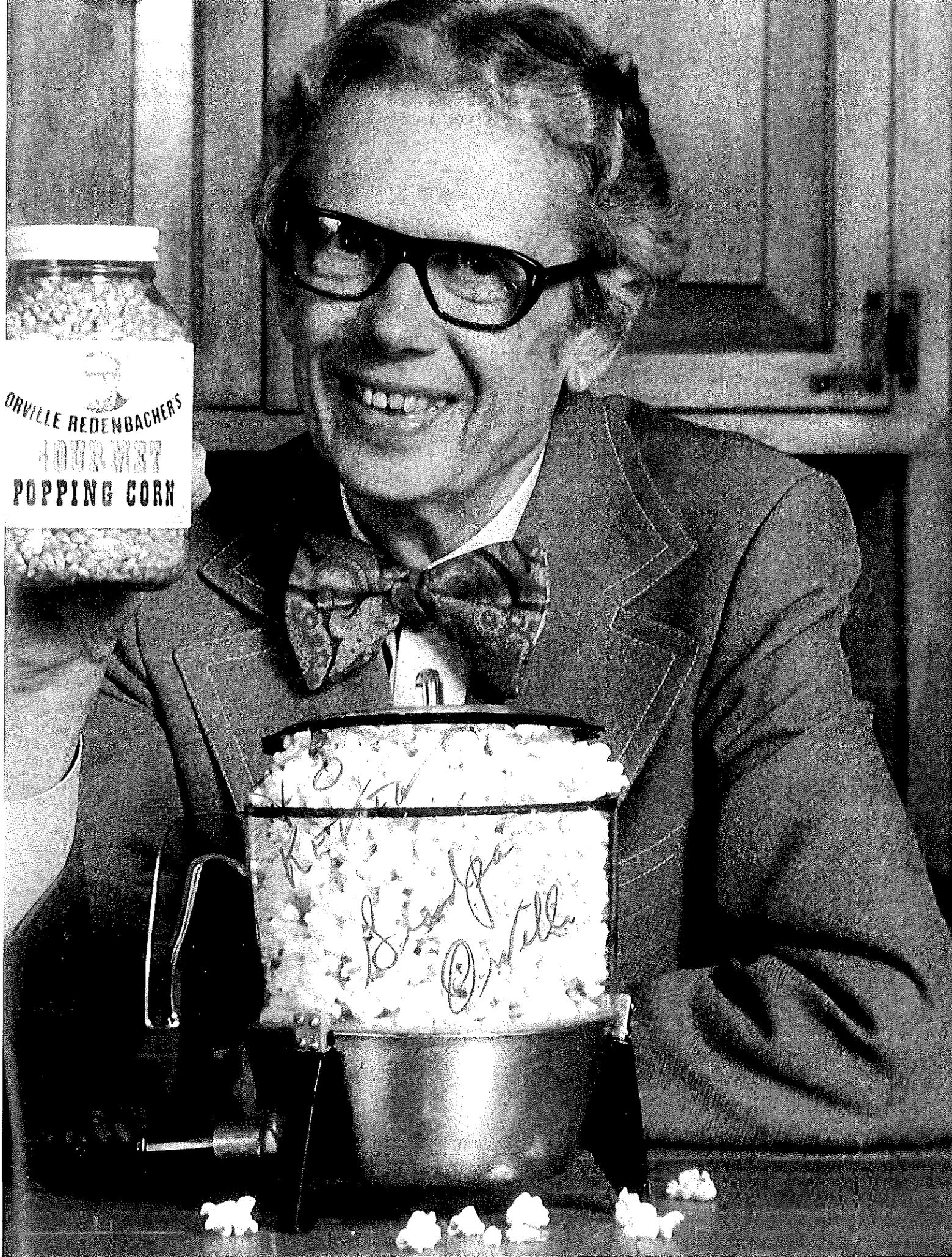
Kevin R. Fish is a freelance writer living in San Jose, California. The grandson of Orville Redenbacher, Fish received his master's degree in history from San Jose State University in 1984 and currently teaches at charter schools in his home city. •

OPPOSITE: An autographed photograph of Redenbacher given to the author by his grandfather. Redenbacher never let fame get the better of him, telling one reporter he was just "a funny looking farmer with a funny sounding name."



The Orville Redenbacher Gourmet Popping Corn balloon prepares to take flight in front of the Porter County Courthouse in Valparaiso, Indiana. The Redenbacher balloon was one of the first specially shaped corporate balloons. Since 1979, the northern Indiana community has hosted an annual popcorn festival the first Saturday after Labor Day.

FOR FURTHER READING: Dart, Julie Anne. "Orville Redenbacher's Image May Seem Corny, but to Fellow Hoosiers He's Really . . . A Pop Hero," *Indianapolis News*, January 19, 1988. | Fucini, Joseph J., and Suzy. *Entrepreneurs: The Men and Women Behind Famous Brand Names and How They Made It*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1985. | Redenbacher, Orville. *Orville Redenbacher's Popcorn Book*. New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1984. | Sherman, Len. *Popcorn King: How Orville Redenbacher and his Popcorn Charmed America*. Arlington, TX: Summit Publishing Group, 1996. | Smith, Andrew F. *Popped Culture: A Social History of Popcorn in America*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999.



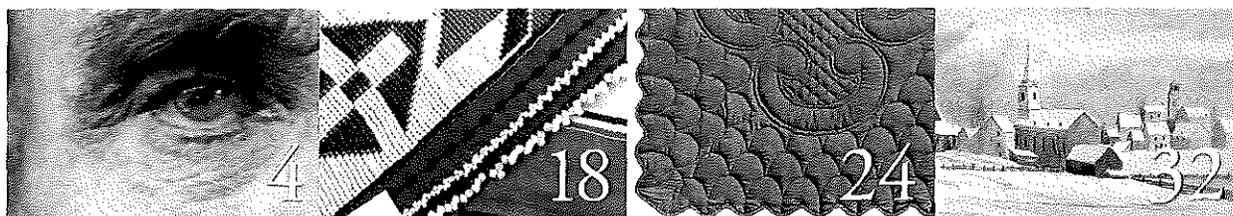
ORVILLE REDENBACHER'S
POPPIST
POPPING CORN

Handwritten signatures on the popcorn pot:
K. E. ...
S. ...
O. ...

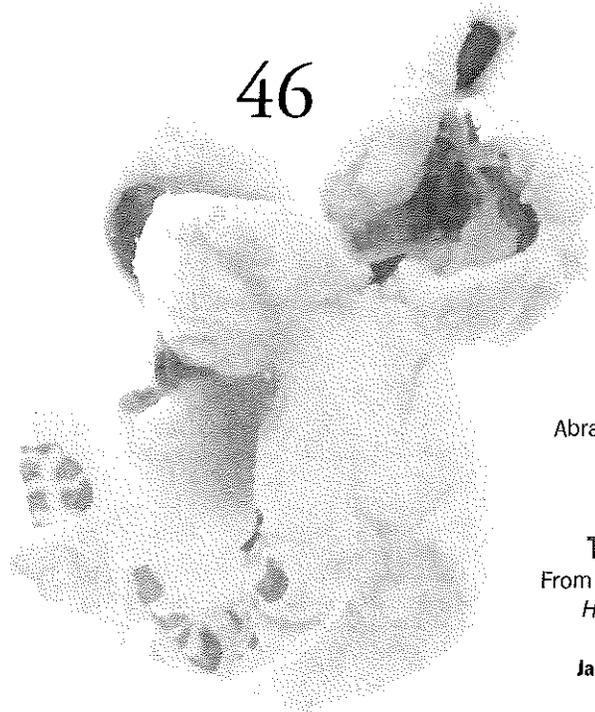
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