

Oregon Century Farm & Ranch Program

By Larry Landis

The Oregon Century Farm & Ranch Program was founded in 1958 to recognize the state's agricultural heritage and to honor farm and ranch families that have century-long connections to the land. The Oregon Historical Society founded the program as a prelude to Oregon's statehood centennial celebration in 1959; the Oregon Department of Agriculture and the Oregon State Fair Commission were founding co-sponsors. "Agriculture is Oregon's oldest basic industry," OHS Director Thomas Vaughn and ODA Director Robert Steward explained in 1958. "The approach of the state's 100th anniversary is a fitting time to start paying tribute to those who have stayed with the soil generation after generation."

The Oregon Century Farm Program was modeled after similar existing programs in other states, including New York and Pennsylvania. To qualify in Oregon, a family must have owned and farmed the same land continuously for a hundred years or more, and the farm size had to be a minimum of three acres that produced agricultural products worth at least \$150. Applications were notarized and accepted or rejected by the chair of the board of the county commissioners, whose decisions were forwarded to the director of the Oregon Department of Agriculture.

The "program will be presented so attractively," Vaughn wrote to an ODA colleague in April 1958, "people will make a large personal effort to be included in it." His words were prescient. On September 2, 1958, at the first Century Farm awards ceremony at the Oregon State Fair, Governor Robert Holmes honored 354 farms representing 15 counties. The oldest farm that year—dating to 1842—was in Marion County, which was where 67 of the farms honored were located; Wasco County was the only county east of the Cascades represented (there was no substantial agricultural settlement east of the Cascades until the 1870s). The next year, forty-four awards were presented, twenty of them to farms owned by women.

Awards ceremonies were held about every five years from 1960 to 1990, and some awards were given through local historical societies. Annual ceremonies returned in 1990 and continued through 1996. After a period of inactivity, the program was revitalized in 1999 by OHS field service coordinator Rick Read. The name was changed to the Oregon Century Farm & Ranch Program.

The 2000 awards ceremony at the State Fair honored 20 farms and ranches and included a reunion of previous awardees. An advisory committee was established that year with members representing the Oregon Department of Agriculture, the Oregon State University Agricultural Extension Service, and the Oregon Farm Bureau. The committee reviewed applications and provided networking in the agricultural community. The management committee now has from eight to ten members, many of whom are associated with Century farms and ranches.

In 2002, the Oregon Historical Society transferred sponsorship and administration of the Oregon Century Farm & Ranch Program to the Oregon Agricultural Education Foundation, a nonprofit that works in cooperation with and support from the Oregon Historical Society, the Oregon Department of Agriculture, and the Oregon Farm Bureau. Through the foundation, the program is funded by application fees, the Oregon Farm Bureau, the Oregon Historical Society, and the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office. Nonprofits and businesses, county Farm Bureaus, and individual donors also provide significant financial support.

During its fiftieth year, on the eve of the 150th anniversary of Oregon statehood, the Oregon Century Farm & Ranch Program introduced a Sesquicentennial Award. Fourteen farms and ranches were honored with that award on February 14, 2008. Beginning in 2010, the century and sesquicentennial awards were presented at a combined ceremony at the State Fair.

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Oregon Century Farm & Ranch Program, the project published *Eating it Up in Eden: The Oregon Century Farm & Ranch Program Cookbook*, by Richard H. Engeman, management committee member and former OHS public historian. In addition to dozens of recipes contributed by Century Farm and Ranch families, the book includes vignettes and photographs depicting Oregon's agricultural history.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the Oregon Century Farm & Ranch Program has created a valuable archive that includes historical narratives, historic and contemporary photographs, most applications, awards ceremony programs, and selected administrative records back to 1958. The archive is available in Oregon Digital, the digital collections platform of the Oregon State University and University of Oregon Libraries. OSU Libraries maintains an online database on honored farms and ranches; OHS maintains the program's records from 1958 to 2004; and OSU Libraries maintains records created since 2005.

Since the early 2010s, the program's management committee has created exceptions to the continuous ownership and management criterion, primarily to acknowledge circumstances during wartime such as farms and ranches taken from incarcerated Japanese American families during World War II. Very few of the farms and ranches that have received Century Farm designation have been continuously owned by families from underrepresented groups. Oregon's nineteenth-century exclusion laws are likely a partial cause. The 1850 Oregon Donation Land Law, in particular, limited its land grants to mostly white settlers.

The annual awards ceremony has been held at the Oregon State Fair since 2000. Through 2022, 1,252 families had received Century Farm & Ranch designation, and 51 families had been honored with a Sesquicentennial Award.

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