



The Greatest Story Never Told:

The Food Miracle in America

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March 12, 1998

Jamie Whitten Building, USDA, Washington, D.C.

The other evening in typically modest fashion *Time* Magazine celebrated its 75th birthday by inviting every living cover subject (and any others who could find ethereal transport) to a great party in Rockefeller Center. Along with that celebration, the magazine published a special issue which riffled through the pages of those years of remarkable history.

Because I have spent so many years reporting the news for *Time*, I read the historical vignettes carefully. Choosing the crucial moments and people from so much history is, of course, a difficult undertaking. Anyone who attempts it deserves commendation—and sympathy. But the selection of those stories starting back in 1923 seemed incomplete. In that whole sweep of time, there were only three items even remotely connected with the production of food in America, which has been and remains one of the grand miracles of mankind. There was the famous picture of a father and his two children struggling through a dust storm in Oklahoma in 1936. There was a small summary on the emergence of the environmental issue in the 1960s and then a paragraph about the cloned sheep Dolly. There was nothing on the mechanization of farming, hybrid seeds, the invention of hamburger, the soil conservation program, the end of the moldboard plow, the rising tide of soybeans, the tripling of yield per acre on farmland from fertilizers and high-tech planting, and the resulting gigantic harvests that produced even more bargain food (and stressed out farmers).

It would have been fitting to have noted that more than three billion pounds of beef helped win World War II just as much as tanks and airplanes. It would have been a wonderful touch for *Time* to have pointed out that it was a myth that we won the war by bombing the enemy with cans of Spam. However, Soviet boss Nikita Khrushchev claimed, "Without Spam, we wouldn't have been able to feed our army." And a young British girl named Margaret Thatcher recalled "feasting on Spam" in the war years. Later, as Prime Minister, she claimed this invention of the Hormel company was "very tasty," words that were celebrated when Hormel produced the 5 billionth can of Spam a few years ago. Instead, *Time* gave us a resume with hefty doses of Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, tail fins, and campus upheavals, along, of course, with war (hot and cold) and nuclear explosions and crime and drugs.

Those are all worthy subjects of history, but in my reverie, I recalled something that Dumas Malone, the Pulitzer Prize biographer of Thomas Jefferson, told me. We were sitting one spring day on the steps of Monticello, and the courtly old man was recounting Jefferson's experiments with growing crops and his unquenchable love of early garden peas.

"The greatness of this country," he said, "was rooted in the fact that a single farmer could produce an abundance of food the likes of which the world had never seen or imagined and so free the energies of countless others to do other things. So much of recorded history is about the struggle of individuals and families to feed themselves. That changed dramatically in this country."

That is, I contend, the greatest story never told. Well, maybe rarely told, or barely told. But it certainly is not a household story.

The *Time* summary of history was not unique. Nor was it without some revelations. It was in content the view of history by a generation in their 40s who have only vague ideas of where food comes from and how it gets to them. The Big Mac, celebrated by investment counselors and held in reverence in the White House, is judged just another novelty out of a machine. In fact, the hamburger is rated by this country's cattlemen to be an invention that ranks with the railroads in its effect on growing and marketing cattle.

I dare say that most of that generation's struggle with food is to eat less, to avoid the bombardment of new food products and preparations. That great cultural foundation of plentiful food at prices that anyone can afford is as taken for granted in our time as the air we breathe. As a matter of fact, since there is rising concern about the air we breathe, the food supply may even be lower on our worry list. Some years back when the Soviet Union was in a food pinch and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger encouraged huge grain sales when our supplies were a little depleted, he was astonished at the criticism. "It never occurred to me check," he said. "We always have too much grain."

And that brought an echo from my old days of campaigning with Senator John Kennedy, who used to mangle a quote from John Adams that went something like this: He studied war and politics, so that his sons might study philosophy, commerce, and agriculture, so that their sons might study painting, poetry, tapestry, and porcelain. I hope that I am wrong, but now and then, I think we are closing in rapidly on the age of porcelain study. If nothing else, I understand better the conflict between Adams and Thomas Jefferson; Jefferson was an undeviating apostle of the sanctity of agriculture.

Whether or not Kennedy thought the Adams idea valid, he was not versed on agriculture, other than it was an effective weapon in the Cold War. His Food for Peace program was one of the enlightened touches of those years of confrontation with the Soviet Union. When he came back from the Vienna Summit with Nikita Khrushchev, he told me about the only thing the Soviet boss feared was being unable to feed his people.

And I recall flying back to my home state with candidate Kennedy, and he called me up to his seat and asked how it was possible to enjoy the farm landscape. He was an ocean and beach person, he said. The prairies baffled him. His only tutor was poet Robert Frost, who had once told Kennedy that Iowa soil was so black and rich-looking, he considered eating it straight rather than running it through corn plants and cattle.

Forty years ago, when I arrived in Washington, the country was solidly urban, but there was still the memory of life close to the land. Most families were only a generation removed from farms or small towns. They had relatives back home, and the farm bloc in Congress was still remembered. Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson took me with him to his ranch, and for a couple of days we tramped through dusty pastures and watched the moon come up over the Pedernales River, and he explained that the sound of running water was heavenly to Texas ranchers.

The first big story which I did in Washington was for the old *Life* Magazine, and it was on Dwight Eisenhower's Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Benson, a sturdy partisan devoted to getting the federal government out of farming. For weeks, I followed the Secretary around the country, where he was roundly booed by many audiences and occasionally pelted with rotten eggs and tomatoes. He went before Congress and was showered with bitter criticism over his ideas. In all of this marvelous journalistic drama, it suddenly occurred to me that something was missing. We seemed to be forgetting about farm policy. Benson relished the battle—too much. The process of debate and legislation was overwhelming everything while the farmers waited. One night in his darkened limousine, Benson told me how as a young Mormon missionary in London, he used to take a soap box to Hyde Park to preach. Often he was heckled, even threatened. More than once, he said, he had leaped from his box and "took them on with my fists," to use his words. His armament was formidable, having been developed by years of pitching hay on Utah farms.

"I never lost a fight," he told me. But did he like fighting better than healing? Maybe. I never forgot something that LBJ told me countless times when I saw him cut a deal over legislation. "Hell," he used to snort, "If I can't get the whole loaf, I'll take half a loaf, and if I can't get that, I'll take a slice." Benson did not do slices.

Politicians of those years dutifully plodded to the national plowing contest, though certainly the last President who ever seriously plowed a furrow was Harry Truman. I can remember Hubert Humphrey fretting about rural poverty and the percipitous drop in the numbers of farms and farmers. "If we are going to do anything about the problems in the cities, we need to start in the rural areas and keep the people there." His was a lonely voice.

Richard Nixon once told me the farm problem would always be with us and he did not intend to worry about it. I never figured out if Jerry Ford had any connection with farms or farm policy, other than he was a lusty consumer. When Ford suddenly became President, it startled a lot of us to learn that as the House's Minority Leader, he had attended as many as two hundred political fund-raisers a year. Naturally curious, we followed him to a couple of these events, which proved to be as deadly dull as we expected. How could he stand it, a colleague of mine asked after the usual round of dreary speeches. Then they served the vulcanized chicken, and my friend gasped, "My goodness, he even likes the food."

Plainly, agriculture was a marginal concern in most of the other Presidencies I watched, though I must relate a story about Ronald Reagan. When I was a boy, I used to trudge home on many a day of hot, dirty work in the print shop and turn on the old cathedral radio to listen to the sportscast by Dutch Reagan down in Des Moines. The drought and depression were in full swing, and many people led lives of quiet desperation. But each evening Dutch Reagan's mellow baritone boomed through the living room. It dawned on me that he just might be the only happy man in Iowa right then. So perhaps Reagan did a bit to keep the farms going in those dismal seasons.

Early in his Presidency, John Kennedy went to the ranch of Senator Robert Kerr in Poteau, Oklahoma. The Senator had fixed up a marvelous platform of raw lumber and bunting, and laid out a sawdust ring around it. Cowboys herded Kerr's prize animals past Kennedy as the Senator jubilantly explained the fine points of rumps and shoulders. If I've ever seen a mystified President, it was on that day. Kennedy told me later he could tell black cattle from brown cattle, but he was never sure about the sex. Halfway through that display, I noted the Senator and the President in earnest conversation. Kerr said afterwards that Kennedy got interested in the cowboys. He wanted to know how much they made and how they lived on such meager wages. His politics was firmly rooted in the big cities. Anyway, Kennedy's favorite food was fish chowder, a long distance from prime rib.

I look back now and see how inexorably our national dialogue moved away from the production and marketing of food. Certainly it was inevitable as cities grew and farms thinned. The political clout was not there. I also think that at least in the national media, impatience set in. Writing stories about growing things, genetic experiments, seasonal weather is not the kind of exciting soap opera we crave in this cut and thrust media cult. For the most part, good stories on agriculture take time, take determined scholarship and flare to bring them alive. The farm trade press has done a splendid job, but it is far from prime time TV where most people now get their information. Certainly, here and there in the national media, you find someone who writes or broadcasts tellingly about land and the people who work it.

And I have to admit that Hollywood stirs itself for an occasional movie about farmers. If you build a baseball field and ghostly players emerge from the corn, the audience will come. Or if the economic crisis gets tough enough and there are foreclosures on farms and bankers get threatened and some distraught farmers hang themselves, we can even expect Sally Field to arrive on the stage. The record-breaking blizzards and floods capture attention for a spell. But food production—the nation's heartbeat—is not really the reason behind the national media's attention. They seek the spectacle, and that has rarely been the way on the farm.

You have all heard the national lament: where have the heros gone? And if you are like me, you have dispaired more times than you want to recount how our children are finding their idols in Hollywood and on television—these heros simply acting out the exploits of others. In my judgment, farms and ranches are the last repository of true American reality where men and women each day employ their abilities in an environment where

there still is great risk and natural forces that demand intelligence and courage. This is the stuff of heroism. Now and then we read about a farmer who held off a flood or grass fire or who grew a 500-pound squash. But most farm achievements are ignored by the national media. I have a special pantheon from my years of reporting, and it includes the likes of Brooklyn-born Michael Carey, who writes poetry when he is not tending 800 acres of corn and soybeans near Farragut, Iowa, and Polly Dickinson, of Maybell, Colorado, who a couple of times each year wraps her rosary beads around her saddle horn, and in rain or heat, helps herd the family's cattle to market and finds in that small ritual a drama equal to anything from Hollywood.

I have sometimes wondered what would happen in this country if there ever was a real food crisis. I don't doubt that the scene from the movie "Gone With the Wind" where Scarlet gnaws on a radish and then retches really occurred on some southern plantation. The Great Depression left pockets of hunger. Yet, even in those trying national moments, there was enough food produced to feed the American people. War and politics got in the way, not the farmers. Jimmy Carter, when flying out to Iowa to participate in the World Food Prize ceremony, told me that his father had turned against Franklin Roosevelt when he read about the government attempting to boost farm prices by killing little pigs and dumping milk in the ditches when there were people who did not have money for food. That, Carter's father reasoned, was against God's will.

For all of that, nobody really knows what a food shortage might bring except that it would be tragedy beyond anything we have experienced, with the possible exception of the Civil War. We know the chaos from the imagined oil shortage back in 1973. Historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. has written about how close we came to social upheaval in the farm states in the Great Depression. But that was a crisis of glut and not enough money in the right places. Yet, some groups of farmers, feeling they had lost control of their lives, were ready to revolt against the system. If the specter of hunger were ever loose in this land, the chaos might dwarf anything we have known.

I do not believe we are in immediate danger of a major food catastrophe in our time. But I am alarmed at the increasing indifference in our general culture to the food issues which are now so clearly ahead of us on the road we travel. They deal, as you know better than I, with land use and water and toxic run off and erosion and great pressures from population increase and commercial intrusions into cropland. Others are better suited to talk about these problems. But they are real, and they are urgent. A couple of years ago, Paul Johnson, then head of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, issued a report called "A Geography of Hope." The phrase came from historian-naturalist Wallace Stegner in his early plea to preserve the nation's wildlands. Johnson's cogent booklet traced the remarkable progress of soil conservation over the last 70 years. But Johnson made his own plea for the need now for a renewal of an energized partnership between the private sector and the government to preserve the character of the 907 million acres (half the United States land mass) of privately owned range, pasture, and cropland. When Johnson issued his report, I looked for media interest and saw very little.

I have over many years carried a thought given to me by former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz. He told me that when I did any story on U.S. agriculture, I should measure it against the fact that the United States possessed in its wide lands, its weather patterns, its capitalized farmers and its know-how, the world's greatest resource. Nothing was as valuable to humankind, nor anything so coveted for good or evil. And while that resource functioned, it would often be taken for granted, but if it faltered, so would our society.

Historian Schlesinger once mused that democracies have a hard time taking cautionary steps against future trouble. They respond well to crisis but then when the troubles subside, they turn inward. I would hope that we do not need a national food crisis in the next decade or next century to make us use the necessary wealth from both public and private sectors to assure that the United States will nurture its land and shape its agriculture so that the food supply always will be plentiful and affordable.

It could be that much of my concern stems from nostalgia, a yearning for a rural society that cannot come back. But there is some virtue in such thoughts that came from a simpler time when debate was more direct and dealt not only with food, but the people who produced it and the quality of their lives. Those two things are inseparable, no matter how much the rural population shrinks. I arrived in Washington and took my place in the national media as one of

few who still felt that agriculture was not only the bedrock of our culture, but provided an environment which could be as fulfilling as any. A quote from Wes Jackson comes to mind now. At some point when I was down at his Land Institute in Salina, Kansas, he said this: the farms and ranches and small towns of the United States are the last factory of decency for our people. At first I thought that was a rather severe indictment of the rest of society. But as time has gone by, and I have moved around this country even more, I am ready to believe that Wes made an important point — as Jefferson did two centuries earlier — about the discipline, strength, honesty, patience and generosity that God and nature impose on those who work the land successfully. Few others are so shaped by such a cosmic hand.

In the years of my Iowa boyhood, there was economic depression, drought, dust storms, grasshoppers, and the back-breaking labor required for even a meager existence by all of us in the rural society. Yet, it was generally not an unhappy existence. Perhaps it was that "hope" that Stegner wrote about. I recall Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace coming to visit his birthplace in Adair County. It was a big event for that small corner of America. He was the most famous native son — still is today. Wallace, I had been told countless times at Sunday family dinners (where the table was naturally crowded with our bounty), was the man who had saved agriculture and prevented serious social upheaval with his fervor and imagination in changing American agriculture.

My father was editor of the weekly *Adair County Free Press*, and he loaded his camera and me in the family Ford to witness the Secretary back at the house in which he was born. Wallace stood in front of the porch, ruffled and hesitant. The farm couple in the shadows was plainly overwhelmed by the celebrity. I stood far back and watched the clutch of Washington bureaucrats who had come with Wallace, dark fedoras pushed far down to keep them from the restless prairie wind. I recall the face yet today of the ill-dressed farm wife — anxious, worn, hand to her mouth to cover bad teeth. All the struggle of life and nature was in her face. I think today I understand what burned in Wallace's heart then. It was to help the millions of people like that farm wife to have a life of dignity and happiness on the land.

Even as Wallace stood awkwardly in the farm yard of his birthplace, good things were happening in that world, things that he had put in motion. Almost every week the family newspaper had stories about new terraces being built, tree shelters being planted, farm ponds dug. The electric lines stretched farther and farther into the county and the 4-H clubs became a young army. When I fly across the country these days and I see the glint of thousands of farm ponds in the setting sun, when I glimpse the graceful designs of crops in contours and the enduring shelterbelts that march from Canada to the Gulf, I think that these are the fingerprints of Henry Wallace put down on our land over the last 65 years, a stunning legacy from an uncommon man. My friend Wes Jackson says that Wallace was one of a handful of true genuises ever to be a cabinet member. Having known scores of cabinet members over the last 40 years, I am inclined to think that he may have been the only one.

The Wallace homestead is now an experimental farm, and much of the land of Adair County has healed from the ravages of drought and bad farming practices, born out of ignorance and economic desperation. But as always in human affairs, other problems have arisen, solutions have spawned new puzzles. Too many of the tops of surrounding hills show brown fingers of clay, the black loam eroded and still being washed away. The population of Adair County is roughly half what it was when Henry Wallace was born there, the farms twice or three times as large. There is an empty, decaying farm house or barn in almost every section. Modern paved roads crisscross the land, but many of the tiny trading centers are boarded up. The town square of Greenfield, the county seat, is blighted with hollow buildings, the commercial life pulled away by those same shiny roads. And water quality in ponds, wells, and streams is a constant worry.

We could use another Henry Wallace, or maybe many Henry Wallaces, and not necessarily those who experiment with new crops and have technical skills in growing and marketing food. The time calls for men and women who understand this is a quietly crucial moment for our exuberant, well-fed nation. Decisions made now will, as in Wallace's day, echo through the next 65 years. Henry Wallace above all else understood the crisis of his time — spiritual and well as physical — and the need for bold action to use and preserve this greatest of all resources: our land and those people who tend it.

Hugh Sidey

Hugh Sidey is a Contributing Editor of *Time* Magazine and author of its column, "The Presidency." Like Henry A. Wallace, he was born in Adair County, Iowa. His father was a country newspaper editor in Greenfield, Iowa. His grandfather and Henry A. Wallace's father were friends. Sidey graduated from Iowa State College in 1950 with a bachelor of science degree in journalism. In 1955, after working for midwest newspapers, he joined *Life* Magazine and later became the political and White House correspondent for *Time* Magazine.

For nearly forty years, journalist Sidey covered the lives of American presidents, from Dwight Eisenhower to Bill Clinton. He is the author of or contributor to five books on the Presidency and appeared for over twenty years as a panelist on the national television program, "Inside Washington."

Yet, throughout his distinguished career as a journalist and student of the Presidency, Sidey has never forgotten agriculture or rural America. For two decades now, in a column called "Hugh Sidey's America," he has occasionally written about that part of the country between the big urban areas, with features and insights about small farms, ranches, and towns. Recently, when helping to develop a book and video to celebrate Iowa's sesquicentennial, he renewed a deep appreciation of the contributions of Henry A. Wallace to American agriculture.

Financial assistance from Pioneer Hi-Bred International, Inc. in support of the Henry A. Wallace Annual Lecture is gratefully acknowledged.

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