

Transcribed Excerpts from "Diplomatic Farmers: Iowans and the 1955 Agricultural Delegation to the Soviet Union," 2013

Diplomatic Farmers: Iowans and the 1955 Agricultural Delegation to the Soviet Union
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ON A BALMY SEPTEMBER EVENING in 1955, 1,500 people crowded into a high school auditorium in Sioux City, Iowa, to hear Whiting farmer Herb Pike describe his recent visit to the Soviet Union. Pike had been part of a 12-member U.S. delegation that had just spent 32 days traveling nearly 10,000 miles across the Soviet Union to inspect Soviet farms while 12 Soviet officials were touring U.S. farms. Pike's Sioux City talk was the first of more than a hundred lectures he would give over the next several years. Recalling the Soviets' friendly welcome, Pike assured his audience that he had seen neither starving people nor preparations for war—chief concerns of Americans fearful of Soviet aggression. Under Josef Stalin's regime, few Americans had traveled to the Soviet Union since World War II. With the Soviet premier's death in March 1953, Soviet leaders, especially Communist Party chairman Nikita Khrushchev, had begun to promote a policy of "peaceful coexistence." As a result, more Americans were able to obtain visas. In 1953 and 1954, 101 private American citizens received permission from the Soviet government to travel to the Soviet Union; the number increased to several hundred in 1955, and by 1959 had climbed to 10,000. President Dwight Eisenhower viewed Soviet interest in exchange visits favorably, but State Department secretary John Foster Dulles was reluctant to promote cultural ties, concerned that Soviets would have a propaganda advantage...

The flight back to Moscow was more than 1,300 miles. There the delegates presented their observations and recommendations to Soviet agriculture officials. Among their concerns was the excessive use of farm labor and lack of incentives for workers. Specific suggestions included planting sorghum and legumes rather than corn in areas of insufficient rainfall, and using terracing and contour plowing to combat erosion. Rural adult education, particularly for women, was stressed as a means to improve living conditions and family and home management. Not surprisingly, the delegates encouraged future exchanges of farmers, scientists, technical specialists, and students. Soth also reiterated the delegates' grievances. Sweetening his criticisms, he complimented Soviet hospitality and arrangements that had allowed them to see the country's major agricultural regions. Soth again complained about the fixed schedule. He reminded the officials that they had failed to provide the promised statistical information necessary to better appraise the visited farms as part of the whole system. One petulant Soviet official claimed that the tour was not an "ironclad one that you had to follow blindly." Speaking extemporaneously, the minister of state farms offered a few rough agriculture statistics, admitting that 1955's grain harvest was expected to fall short of its goals. He accepted the Americans' criticisms and promised that if they returned in two years "they would find that many of their suggestions had been implemented."