

"An Essay on the 80's Des Moines: A World Food Center for the Nation," November 26, 1982

*Prairie Club Monthly Dinner for Members
Des Moines, Iowa
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AN ESSAY ON THE 80'S
DES MOINES: A WORLD FOOD CENTER
FOR THE NATION*

It was just three years ago this Fall the Pope John Paul II made his historic journey from Rome in Italy to Des Moines and Iowa.

The Pope made his historic journey, in part, to see Iowa and its famous land.

As many of you know, Iowa has 25 per cent of the nation's Grade A farmland – far more than other states in the Union. In his homily to Iowa and its land at Living History Farms on a crisp October afternoon, Pope John Paul reminded us all of the incredible wealth that is the land which stretches from Des Moines in all directions. Pope John Paul said, and I quoted his words:

“You who live in the Heartland of America have been entrusted with some of the earth's best land: The soil so rich in minerals, the climate so favorable for producing bountiful crops, with fresh water and unpolluted air available all around you. You are stewards of some of the most important resources God has given to the world.”

Now I appear here before you this evening as a native Iowan and as a newspaper publisher here in Des Moines. My task this evening is two-fold:

1. To present some evidence;
2. To present some questions.

More specifically, I want to review with you some of the evidence supporting the general proposition that Iowa and Des Moines have long been a World Food Capital. I also want to review with you some fundamental questions that are increasingly on the minds of Iowans questions, to use Pope John Paul's words, which are prompted by the central fact of life that we Iowans are “stewards of some of the most important resources God has given to the world.

I

Let's review some evidence.

At the geographical crossroads of North America, and in the middle of one of the most literate states in the land, Des Moines has long been a leader in the nation's agriculture and in agricultural thinking. Des Moines is the place where the Pope and Nikita Krushchev, and thousands of others over the years, have come to see American agriculture close-up...

This Fall in Iowa there was another quiet but nevertheless dramatic drama unfolding. Iowa's some 120,000 farms have set the stage for another of the state's large corn and soybean crops. In recent years, Iowa farmers harvested the largest corn and soybean crops in the nation. For example, more than \$8.2 billion in farm products were reaped in 1980. That makes Iowa second only to California in the cash value of its agriculture products.

Iowa is also meat country. Iowa is the number one state in livestock (at \$5.7 billion). Nearly half of those 120,000 Iowa farms raise beef cattle. Iowa's 16.2 million hogs clearly make Iowa number one in pork production. And many don't realize that Iowa boasts more sheep producers than any other state.

Iowa's role as a leader is a global one too. Ranked consistently among the top 10 exporting states in all goods, Iowa sends almost \$3.5 billion worth of goods overseas each year. These annual agricultural exports put Iowa second only to Illinois...

II

But there has always been more to it than soil and crops. People and ideas have also been central to the emergence of Iowa as an agricultural leader.

Since before the turn of the century, Des Moines and central Iowa have been centers for agricultural thinking, research, and publishing. The names of Henry Wallace, a Vice President of the United States, Dante Pierce, and Edwin T. Meredith have been household words in the agricultural world.

At an early time, they wrote with vision and courage, and discussed crop rotation, seed selection, better farming methods, and everything bearing on farming in their papers and publications, the Iowa Homestead, Wallace's Farmer, and Successful Farming. Meredith was appointed Secretary of Agriculture in 1920 by President Woodrow Wilson. Wallace was the father of one secretary and the grandfather of another Henry W. Wallace, appointed in 1921, and Henry A. Wallace, in 1933... Iowa's leadership stance in agriculture was summarized in language that reads almost like poetry to me in a 1938 book published by the Federal Writer's Project:

...(T)he real Iowa to the majority of Americans is the great central region, with Des Moines as its focal point: an expanse of fertile farmland, originally prairie, across which the State's own river flows. Here are the corn and wheat fields, the characteristic white houses, big red barns and tall silos; and, at regular intervals, grain elevators and church spires dominating the little towns. It is from this area largely that the State's agricultural prestige is derived. So there has always been abundant inspiration and energy to match the abundance of Iowa's land...

III

...The remarkable thing, I think, about the richness of Iowa's land and her agriculture is the vast ignorance among many of us about agriculture's awesome power and its hold on our destiny. Most Americans, I'm afraid, hold an artificial and inaccurate clichéd-vision of American agriculture the picturesque family farm with its muddy hog houses and its back forty of corn. This old-fashioned cliché obscures the vast potential of Iowa agriculture. Today the Iowa potential is world-wide and it extends to Iowa's cattle in Japan, her grains in Russia, her gasohol from Maine to California, and her corn sweeteners in Coca Cola literally all around the globe.

This modern image is a long, long way from the old image of the muddy hog house and the back forty.

IV

Let me shift gears now from a review of Iowa's leadership role in agriculture to a brief review of some of the fundamental questions I see emerging these days. I believe we are now in a time of intense questioning. We in Iowa are moving beyond myopia and clichéd thinking into a time of intense questioning about fundamentals. For Iowans, perhaps this time of questioning began with Pope John Paul's visit to Des Moines three years ago. Today, I believe, there is a changing attitude in Iowa toward agriculture, a kind of questioning and concern for the long-range issues facing U.S. agriculture. As background to the questioning, there are at least four key points which are emerging into public consciousness:

1. We know agricultural exports are large already and growing;
2. In fact, the demand for grains and oilseeds overseas is likely to increase dramatically in the next decade;
3. This greatly enlarged demand for food will put unprecedented pressure on our land and our production capabilities;
4. Agricultural land is a scarce national resource, and public concern is being aroused over the land's proper management.

This sets the stage for a series of maddening, difficult questions for which there are precious few answers. And in all of this I must remark upon the remarkable extent to which we in Iowa have had to gear our thinking internationally. I know from readership studies of our own newspaper, The Des Moines Register, that Iowa readers have deep interest in what happens abroad. Our lives are affected – our economic well-being is influenced by how the Russians react to unrest in Poland, what Brazil does with its corn and soybean production...

So this is a time of questioning;

On domestic food price policy. That is, is adequate food a basic right of every citizen? Should the government play a role in holding down prices to farmers for raw food products? If so, does the government have a role or responsibility in putting a cap on food processing, distributing, and merchandising costs?

On consumer diets. What is government's role going to be in trying to guide consumers' diets? In Iowa, for example, it makes a big difference to farmers whether consumers are encouraged to eat red meat or pasta products.

On government regulation. How much can and should the government regulate pesticides, land use, labor, and soil erosion?

On international matters. What is our national policy on other countries' restrictions on access to and prices in foreign markets? What is proper national policy on extending credit or donating commodities? What is our national policy on self-help and technology transfer? And, finally, perhaps the biggest question of all: Should food become an instrument of foreign policy, and, if so, is good going to be used as a reward or will it be withheld as punishment?

So there are some fundamental questions that are on our minds and on our editorial pages in Iowa just now...