

(From the 1962 Yearbook of Agriculture, starting page 2--background on 100th Anniversary of USDA)

After a Hundred Years

THE YEAR the Department of Agriculture was born, 1862, was a year of test and trial. Nine months had gone since President Lincoln declared the existence of an insurrection and called for 75 thousand volunteers to put it down. Now people in the North were singing and whistling "John Brown's Body" and learning "Battle Hymn of the Republic." Boys and men fought and killed each other at places nobody had heard of: Mill Springs, Pea Ridge, White Oak Swamp, Chickasaw Bayou, Prairie Grove. New words and names entered the weft of the young Nation's history: Copperhead, Gatling, Monitor, Confederacy, Conscription Act, abolition.

Thus the country faced its Armageddon. The sun rose and set, though; harvest followed seedtime. People ate, slept, worked, loved, dreamed, hoped, as people do, in fear and faith. There were fewer than 32 million Americans then, one-sixth of the population a century later. About 7 million farmworkers produced the food for themselves and the others, a ratio roughly of 1 to 5; a century later it was about 1 to 26.

On farms, food was mostly grown and preserved at home. Much of the clothing was homespun. Homemade candles and the flicker of the fireplace provided light. Animals and men were the power that tilled the soil. Buildings were erected from home-sawn trees or from the sod of the prairie. Fuel came from the woodlot or was the cow chips that littered the range.

The Homestead Act in 1862 opened half a continent to the plow. Machines were being made to help the farmer, but not yet could the agricultural revolution be foreseen. The sticky, root matted soil of the prairie demanded the steel plow. The mechanical reaper, the drill, the corn planter, and the threshing machine were the wonders of the farm. The 30 thousand miles of railroad started to grow into a giant that carried farm goods to consumers in every section.

Isaac Newton, the new Commissioner of Agriculture, took pen in hand to write an introduction to his first annual report to the President. His rounded periods about the satisfactions of farming may have had a strange sound to those who read them in those days of war, money problems, expansion, uncertainty. Maybe they gave comfort and good advice to people then, as similar words may give comfort, advice, and a hopeful glimpse in this day of test and trial--or to any society that believes man cannot live by bread alone.

Thus wrote Isaac Newton: " ... Having reached this agricultural vantage ground by honest toil, guided by the lights of experience and science, it is an interesting question, to every American, What are the conditions of a still grander progress and prosperity?

"The essential conditions, it seems to me, are--peace; a continued and increasing demand for agricultural products, both at home and abroad; an increased respect for labor; a more thorough knowledge and practice of agriculture as an art and science; and, finally, a more thorough education of our farmers in the physical sciences, in political economy, in taste, and general reading

"The farmer should breathe that general atmosphere of thought, which, coming to us from distant ages and across the sea, is fanned by pulpit, press, and printed book. Our fathers endured many hardships and privations; but the young farmer of to-day possesses a wealth of advantages for general culture enjoyed by no other people. In some portions of our country these advantages are being improved, and the yield of cultivated mind, like that of the earth, is, indeed, wonderful; but as there is no royal road to agriculture,

neither is there to knowledge. The latter must be acquired by long mental husbandry, but, like that of the soil; it yields many solid pleasures. . . .

"I hardly deem it necessary to attempt to convince our intelligent countrymen of the vast importance of such a department, inasmuch as whatever improves the condition and the character of the farmer feeds the lifespings of national character, wealth, and power. What agricultural societies and publications have done for single counties and States, this department should do for the whole country, but with a liberality, wisdom, and catholicity commensurate with the resources of the nation, the importance of agriculture, and the co-operation of individuals both at home and abroad.

"It is hard to realize, and yet as true as Holy Writ, that some who shall read, to-day, these lines, will live to see one hundred millions of freemen dwelling in this dear land of ours. With peace and union restored, based on equity and freedom; with all the conditions of agricultural and mental progress fulfilled; with iron bands stretching from the pines of Maine to the Golden Gate; with the hum of factories on ten thousand streams, and swift-winged commerce flying to distant lands, what pen can sketch the possibility of this young giant of the west?

"Old Rome, with all her elements of decay constantly at work, lasted nearly one thousand years, and carried her culture, civilization, and arms to a wondrous pitch of glory. May we not hope and devoutly pray that, taking warning from history and the signs of the times, our republic may so learn lessons of wisdom, that, eradicating all destructive tendencies, she will fortify herself against decay, and become what Rome was not--eternal?" (*Alfred Stefferud, editor of the Yearbook*)

The Department is Built

PRESIDENT ABRAHAM LINCOLN on May 15, 1862, signed a bill that established the Department of Agriculture. The bill was one of three designed to serve the interests of the family farmer. The other two were the Homestead Act, May 20, and the Land-Grant College Act, July 2. Isaac Newton took the oath of office as first Commissioner of Agriculture on July 1. He inherited the staff of nine employees and facilities of the Agricultural Division of the Patent Office. The new Department a year later had a horticulturist, a chemist, an entomologist, a statistician, an editor, and 24 others.

The Department occupied six rooms in the basement of the Patent Office Building, now known as the Civil Service Commission Building. Its experimental work was done in a propagating garden between present-day Madison and Adams Drives and Fourth and Sixth Streets, Northwest. A larger area, between Independence and Constitution Avenues and Twelfth and Fourteenth Streets, was transferred to the Department for an experimental farm when the Union Army no longer needed it as a cattle yard. The Congress appropriated 80 thousand dollars for the Department's expenses the first year.

Commissioner Newton began in 1863 to try to get an appropriation for an office building. The Congress appropriated 100 thousand dollars for the purpose in 1867. The building was ready the following year. It was near the site of the present Administration Building. It served as headquarters for the Department until 1930.

Even before the Department was established, its advocates urged that it be made an Executive Department, headed by a Secretary who would be a member of the Cabinet. Agriculture, the single most important economic activity in the Nation, they said, should be represented in the innermost councils of Government. Finally, in 1889, the Congress elevated the Department to Cabinet status. The Department then had 488 employees and an annual appropriation of 1.1 million dollars. The number of employees

jumped to 1,577 in 1891, when the weather service of the Army Signal Corps was transferred to the Department and the Weather Bureau was established.

The appointment of James Wilson of Iowa as Secretary of Agriculture in 1897 began a new era in the Department's history. He served 16 years and set guidelines that made it an outstanding research organization.

Personnel and appropriations reflected the physical growth: The Department had 2,444 employees in 1897 and 13,858 in 1912. The Congress appropriated 2.5 million dollars for the 1897 fiscal year and 20.4 million in 1912. Secretary Wilson had asked for 2.5 million dollars for a new administration building to be flanked by laboratory wings. He got 1.5 million dollars. He directed that the wings be constructed and that the central part be left to a future time. The wings were completed in 1907.

The Department had a few employees working outside Washington almost from its beginning. Some carried out research projects. Others, including employees of the Bureau of Animal Industry, were working on disease eradication and similar programs. The Department established experimental farms and laboratories in various parts of the country to work on specific problems. There was, for example, an experimental tea farm at Summerville, S.C., from 1880 to 1887. Most experimental work, however, was carried out in State agricultural experiment stations, established on a nationwide basis with the passage of the Hatch Act in 1887.

The Arlington Farm, a tract of about 400 acres on the Virginia side of the Potomac River opposite Washington, was acquired in 1900. The Bureau of Plant Industry used the land until 1941, when it was transferred to the War Department as a site for the Pentagon. The experimental work was transferred to Beltsville, Md., 15 miles from Washington, where a farm of 475 acres had been acquired in 1910 for the investigations of the Bureau of Animal Industry in animal husbandry and dairying. Before long, the greatly enlarged Beltsville farm had become the Agricultural Research Center. To get information about scientific developments to farmers in a usable form, the Department began issuing farmers' bulletins in 1889 and in 1894 started to publish as the Yearbook of Agriculture the books that since 1849 had been known as *Part II: Agriculture* of the annual reports of the Commissioner of Patents and *Agricultural Report*.

It also was necessary to adapt results of research to local conditions. So, in 1906, the first county agent was appointed to do something about boll weevils, which were destroying cotton in Texas. Other agents were appointed in the South and elsewhere. The Congress extended the system throughout the United States in 1914, with the passage of the Smith-Lever Act, which provided for the cooperative financing of the county agent system, operated in each State under the direction of the land-grant college.

The First World War meant increased emphasis on production--and therefore on methods and equipment--to meet military and civilian needs. The number of employees rose sharply during the war and, after a postwar drop, increased slowly beginning in 1922. The Department by 1926 had 20,742 employees, of whom 4,707 were stationed in Washington. Little had been done since 1907 to provide space, and many employees worked in rented buildings all over the District of Columbia.

Construction of the main Administration Building, connecting the laboratory wings that had been completed in 1907, was authorized by the Congress in 1926. Construction began in 1928 and was completed in 1930. One construction engineer called it "the most beautiful edifice of any kind in the world." Authority also was given to build the Cotton Annex, which was finished in 1937, and an "expansible" building--the South Building.

The South Building was much larger than the Administration Building and Cotton Annex together. Construction began on June 1, 1930, on two wings. Now there are seven. The entire project, including the James Wilson and Seaman A. Knapp Memorial Arches, which connect the Administration and South Buildings, was completed in 1937. It cost 10 million dollars. The South Building has 4,292 rooms and a floor space of 1,335,522 square feet.

Outside Washington, additional installations at Beltsville, the new Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, Wis., and four regional laboratories dedicated to developing industrial uses for farm products were particularly important during the 1930's.

The Congress passed the Agricultural Adjustment Act in 1933. The act and later legislation assigned the Department responsibility for assisting in the stabilization of farm prices, with a goal of securing for farmers parity of income with other parts of the economy. The Department later was assigned responsibility for new farm credit programs, soil and forest conservation, rural electrification, and research in many branches of economics and science.

The new functions, basic departures from the earlier duties of research and regulation, required a larger staff. The Department had 26,544 employees in 1933. The high point in Department employment was in 1937, when there were 106,217 employees, of whom 12,420 worked in the District of Columbia and 93,797 were stationed elsewhere.

On June 30, 1961, the Department had 87,262 employees, of whom 11,686 worked in the District of Columbia and 75,576 were stationed elsewhere. These employees worked in nearly 10 thousand offices located in every State and Territory of the Union and in about 55 cities abroad. They were responsible for handling 7.3 billion dollars, appropriated for the conservation of agricultural and forest resources, foreign assistance, investment in repayable resource and farm loans, and the protection of the farm part of our economy and the Nation's food supply. (*Wayne D. Rasmussen and Gladys L. Baker*)



USDA Administration Building today