

R. Douglas Hurt

Agricultural historian and head of the department of history at Purdue University

Interviewed by Jack Shepard on May 13, 2003

Q: Can you set the scene for me of American agriculture in the decade or so before Franklin Roosevelt brought on Henry Wallace as the secretary of agriculture?

Douglas Hurt: The situation of American farmers following the First World War was one of great uncertainty. During the Great War agricultural prices increased dramatically. They increased far beyond the cost of production, and farmers in the Midwest and around the country generally experienced very good times. The problem was, once the war ended in 1920, the farm economy collapsed. The demand for European imports declined. There was considerable surplus production, increased competition by foreign competitors, the Argentines, the Canadians, for example. Price declines were very sharp and very rapid. And the American agricultural economy essentially experienced a period of about three years of very hard depression. The economic collapse was quite severe. It begins to reemerge with some strength about 1923. Throughout the 1920s agricultural prices tended to be above those of the pre-war agricultural prices. The problem was throughout the 1920s the cost of production increased more rapidly than did farm prices. For the first time in the 20th century American farm men and women were confronted with a very hard cost price squeeze. It's one really they never escaped during the entire 20th century. So, the 1920s was a time of great uncertainty, a time in which farm men and women began to think about a new relationship between agriculture and the federal government, one which the federal government should do something for agriculture beyond just helping them become more efficient and more productive. What that was-- no one was quite certain. There were a number of ideas about what government should do to support agriculture, but whatever government did it was going to change the relationship with farm men and women for all time.

Q: Can you tell me how the general population was made up? There were a much larger percentage of folks that were on the farm at that time. Approximately what was that percentage, and approximately what was the percentage of gross national product?

Douglas Hurt: In 1920 for the first time the rural population decreased to less than fifty percent of the entire American population. Rural people are not necessarily agriculture people. Between 1870 and 1890 the farm population in the United States dropped below fifty percent. But there's still a very large rural contingent across the countryside with the exception of a blip in the 1930s where you have a number of people coming back to the land because they lost their positions in cities and factories. You have a continuous decline in the farm population across the country. The agricultural gross national product and the export of agricultural commodities was a major contribution to the health of the American economy in general. To have a decline of any substance in agricultural production for marketing was going to have a ripple effect across the economy in a very broad scale.

Q: The larger percentage of folks working and living on the farm...did that add weight to the importance of the farm issues? We see a secretary of agriculture going on to be the vice president of the United States and nearly go on to be the President of the United States, so obviously these issues were much more on the front burner than they are today. Would that be a fair assessment?

Douglas Hurt: Sure. Throughout the 1920s Henry A. Wallace believed that to have a strong

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national economy you had to have a strong agricultural economy. He believed they were inextricably linked. But more importantly he also believed in social justice. He believed that the federal government had a responsibility not just for making agriculture more efficient but also for improving the quality of life, the standard of living for farm men and women. So, his ideas about the relationship between government and farm men and women were in many ways very different from his predecessors as secretary of agriculture or agricultural officials in the USDA.

Q: Is that the major change that Wallace brought forth-- the relationship between government and farmers?

Douglas Hurt: This is his lasting mark on American agricultural history and agricultural policy. His legacy is indelibly imprinted on American agricultural policy in the 21st century. The changes that occurred in the United States across the farming community beginning in 1933 when he became secretary of agriculture are unprecedented, and they're long lasting. There's no escape that his legacy was one that benefited the farm men and women. It was not one that was easily replaced. In fact, it hasn't been replaced even though there have been efforts to do so.

Q: When we say the relationship between farmers and government changed, can you tell me the big picture of what it was like before these Depression policies came into effect that changed it and how it changed? Can you give big pictures on both of those sides?

Douglas Hurt: Prior to 1933 the federal government, largely through the United States Department of Agriculture, really was interested in helping farmers become more efficient, more productive and in that way, through marketing, increased their income and standard of living. This was largely done through the extension service and the county agents. With the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1929 Herbert Hoover tried to give some support of the federal government to shoring up agricultural commodities. The economic situation by then in the farm community was very serious, and it was really too little too late.

With Henry A. Wallace we have a very different approach to American agricultural policy. It is an interventionist agricultural policy in which the federal government sees its responsibility of aiding farmers in a very activist way. With Henry A. Wallace the United States Department of Agriculture becomes an action agency that is dedicated on a host of levels to not only improving efficiency on the part of farm men and women but for making their life better, the "quality of life" as Wallace termed it, a matter of social justice was of preeminent importance.

Q: Was this something that affected agricultural policy for just a few years or was it a long lasting impact?

Douglas Hurt: With the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 the foundation is really laid for agricultural policy throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century with the exception of 1996, when there was a concerted effort to change the way federal government responded to farm problems particularly through price support and acreage reduction programs. It proved very quickly that this was a policy that had disastrous effects, so that when new farm legislation was passed in 2002, essentially the foundation stones of the Wallace years are still there. The

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Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938, as amended by the Agricultural Act of 1949 has not been repealed. That's the foundation stone of American agricultural policy. So far as Henry Wallace is concerned, the Agricultural Adjustment Act certainly had its foundation in the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 and the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act that replaced that in 1936. His imprint is there. The programs have changed, but the intent of the federal government is still social equity, justice, helping farm men and women have a better life not just through productivity but equity of purchasing power and standard of living comparable with other men and women across the country.

Q: Government has also taken a role in educational ways by providing guidance to farmers for the way they farm, the way they can do things more efficiently and the scientific application to agriculture also. Is that not correct also?

Douglas Hurt: Oh, certainly the federal government remains very active in the scientific and technological development through the experiment station system and through its research labs in Beltsville, Maryland. This has been a policy of the USDA since its creation in 1862. That's not going to go away, but with Henry A. Wallace we have a different approach to aiding farmers that no one had ever experienced before.

Q: In your book you placed Henry Wallace right at the top of the heap as far as secretaries of agriculture. Can you explain to me why?

Douglas Hurt: I think without question Henry A. Wallace is the most important secretary of agriculture this nation has had. He was in many respects a visionary, but at the same time he was a very practical politician who understood agriculture. I think no secretary of agriculture understood not only agriculture but farming the way Wallace did. He understood the scientific aspects of improving efficiency-- whether it's through his own personal experiments with the development of hybrid corn, whether it has to do with the expansion of the technology of irrigation in the Southwest and the far West. He also knew as a farmer himself about hard work and sweat and what it was like to live on a farm. So, he knew agriculture inside and out in a way that other secretaries of agriculture largely did not. That's because of his keen mind and his inquisitive personality. And he also had a political savvy to understand the art of the possible.

Q: So, in history of American agriculture he's right up there with the most important characters that have participated?

Douglas Hurt: Well, I think he is without a doubt the most important secretary of agriculture in American history.

Q: When Wallace was doing his experimentation with corn one of the things he said was that corn was the backbone of the Midwest and the Midwest was the backbone of the country. Do you agree with that comment, and can we still talk about it that way today?

Douglas Hurt: Well, I think in a very broad sense he was correct. Most people don't understand that the corn that's produced in the Midwest ends up on the family table, but it doesn't end up as

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whole grains of corn that comes out of a can or corn on the cob. They consume Midwestern corn as pork and beef and poultry of various sorts. That's how most of the corn crop is consumed, but so far as the financial and economic backbone of the Midwest, without question the linkage between very high productive corn crop and the very intensive and extensive hog production in the Midwest is linked.

Q: I want to talk a little bit about Wallace's hybrid corn advances. What value do you place on them as far as the agricultural transformation that happened in the United States? Of course there's mechanization, there's fertilization, and the hybrids play a role. How significant a role do they play?

Douglas Hurt: Well, the development of hybrid corn is one of the major achievements in American agricultural history-- not just in the 20th century but throughout the course of our history. Wallace having the keen mind and being a very brilliant inquisitive individual saw even as a high school student that something was wrong with the way that farmers selected seed corn to improve their production. This is at a time also in which a number of scientists are rediscovering the genetic principles of Mendel. Wallace was one to argue--and most farmers didn't believe him--that just because you looked at an ear of corn that was large and the rows were perfect and the kernels were big and you shelled out the seed and held it in your hand and it looked like great seed, it wasn't necessarily going to produce a plant that itself was productive.

But this is how farmers chose seed until the 1930s. They saved their seed and replanted some of it the next year. There were all sorts of contests around the country to select seed and courses were taught at the university about how you select seed and all sorts of characteristics an individual was supposed to look for to find it. But Wallace thought something was wrong about this. His own experiments in his backyard garden proved what other scientists at many research universities were also proving--and that is what you planted that looked like it would be magnificent seed and produce a magnificent crop really could produce a very poor yielding crop. So, there had to be something else involved. Well, those farmers that held seed in their hand didn't understand or were unprepared to believe that there might be something else involved within that seed that was going to determine the crop that resulted from whatever they planted.

Wallace really starts some significant experiments with hybridization in 1913, but his legacy so far as hybrid seed is concerned is not as a scientist himself, although he had a very good understanding of genetic principles, but rather it is that he develops and entirely was responsible for the emergence of a very new agribusiness industry-- and that's with the creation of the hybrid corn company in 1926. It's with that for the first time hybrid seed corn is sold commercially. But more important than that, his company has evolved with the development of various hybrid seed varieties and with the production of the seed varieties. So Wallace understood that you could isolate all sorts of things in various varieties of corn and produce varieties with very calculated specifics. But more than that, he is the one that actually put the business organization together that made this marketable for farmers. But the problem was, even in 1926, most farmers were unwilling to believe the science behind the hybrid seed production. They wanted to be able to see and hold and touch and judge corn that way. So, it's really not until the 1930s that you have much of a shift towards the purchase of hybrid corn.

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Farmers didn't like it for a number of reasons at first. They were very reluctant learners and very reluctant individuals to adopt it. First of all, it cost, comparatively, a lot of money.

Q: They could use their own seed for free.

Douglas Hurt: Right, they'd get their seed for free if they raised their own crop with a no pollinated variety. But also they just didn't trust that something they were paying a lot of money for was going to be anything better than what looked good in their corn bin, so they came along slowly. But it's remarkable that one of the programs that Henry Wallace is responsible for also encourages the adoption of hybrid seed. That's with the Agricultural Adjustment Act which provided for a crop reduction program so that to reduce the surplus of corn farmers could participate in the program and for various price supports on the part of the federal government they pledged they would reduce production. Well, what farmers did was take their worst lands out of production and then, being very practical individuals as they are, thought about how they could increase production on the lands they had left. Well, the answer was hybrid seed corn. So, on one hand Henry Wallace is administering and supporting the program to help farmers cut back production and increase prices. At the same time he's had a very major role in marketing the solution to increasing agricultural production on fewer acres of land.

Q: There's a little bit of irony -- Wallace wanted vibrant rural communities and farmers to stay on the land. Some of the results of hybrid seed were the massive increases of production which required fewer people to be on the land and a migration away from the land. Isn't there a little bit of irony here?

Douglas Hurt: Well, there is. It's a problem that's never been solved. With increased agricultural productivity, consolidation of farms in part encouraged by the USDA, and the various programs that farm men and women can participate in, there's become a consistent trend for farmers to leave the land. This has happened through most of the 20th century. In fact American farm men and women are incredibly productive. There are probably still too many farm men and women on the land.

Q: We're still having problems with surpluses. Now we're not storing, but surpluses have been a problem for quite a number of years, haven't they?

Douglas Hurt: Well, the surplus production has been a problem that no one has been able to find an answer. At least there's no golden bullet that's going to dissolve all of the problems of agriculture. Many people have argued for marketing support of various kinds to increase dumping or the expansion of international markets. They've advocated much more restrictive acreage reduction and control program. There have been all sorts of variations of these ideas through the 20th century since Wallace was secretary of agriculture. No one has come up with a solution that really meets everybody's needs. Part of the problem is that farmers are so diverse. Nobody speaks for one group of farmers. What's good for the corn farmers is not necessarily good for the dairy farmers. What's good for the wheat farmers isn't necessarily good for the truck farmers along the coast. It's very difficult to craft a policy that even has many parts and pieces that touches everyone fairly and equitably.

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Q: Wallace said near the end of his life that the ever-normal granary was one of his proudest accomplishments, but it wasn't a new idea at all was it?

Douglas Hurt: Well, this was a concept that had been around, talked about on a number of levels in somewhat different context for a long time. I think probably it has roots that could be traced to the sub-treasury idea of the populists in the 1890s. But essentially the idea is that the United States would have the essential food reserves to meet crisis of various kinds for a considerable duration. And the federal government would exercise the responsibility to purchase commodities and help support prices and keep commodities in reserve to meet a host of domestic and foreign matters that were unforeseen. Nonetheless, we give food protection to the American public.

Q: Was it seen as a very radical idea at the time? And if it was, what was the resistance toward establishing this kind of program? Was it the fact that the farmers are such independent and practical thinkers? Was it just because it was a new idea? Was it getting the government involved in something that they hadn't been involved in? What were the factors?

Douglas Hurt: Well, I think the concerns, and in some cases, opposition to the ever-normal granary had to do with cost. The federal government was going to pay a considerable amount of money to farmers of all sorts of commodities to keep the reserves at levels that would make a difference. And this meant intervention programmatically in a number of ways but very expensive intervention over a long time. This wasn't something that you could do in a year or two. It had to be consistent. It had to be an ongoing policy which meant a considerable contribution of taxpayers' dollars to the operation of these programs. It changes over time as well. Commodities are added. There're other interest groups in American agriculture that want to be included.

By the end of the 20th century the American agricultural policy is very expensive for the very many programs that farm men and women can participate in. When Wallace is doing his work on hybrid seeds he told the readers of *Wallace's Farmer* that there was a revolution coming, and it was going to change everything. Well, Wallace had a keen intellect and long before even scientists were convinced that they had the matter of hybrid breeding worked out, the double cross system wasn't really perfected until 1917, but Wallace is one that knows enough about the science of agriculture and hybrid production that he could see a very dramatic change. And from the time he became the editor of *Wallace's Farmer* in 1921 until he became secretary of agriculture in 1933, he is a very staunch, consistent advocate of hybrid seed corn. For him this was the way that farmers were going to improve efficiency and increase their profits and standard of living. But he is way ahead of, not only most farmers, but a good many scientists as well.

Q: Pioneer got this scientific advance popularized. Their role was to get it out there among the people. His Uncle Henry had told him it takes farmers about seven years to adapt to something new. You just have to keep at them and eventually they'll come around to it. I think maybe that is the role of an aggressive marketing campaign like we talked about with Pioneer and other

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companies. You need to convince them that this is going to be to their best interests and it was, wasn't it?

Douglas Hurt: Oh, without question. And he used Wallaces' Farmer as a very important platform. Here's a journal that is the most widely circulated in the farm community. It's one that has authority and voice. Issue after issue Wallace is talking about the importance of hybrid seed and how it will improve farm life. He's persistent. He knew that farmers being very conservative aren't going to change unless they have a good reason to do so. And it has to be an economic advantage for them to make a very dramatic shift in the way they do things. So it took time. It's not going to be until well into the 1930s that you'd begin to see some results of this.

Q: These advances, the seed, the power, the mechanization, the fertilizers changed a lot more than just agriculture, didn't they? Can we talk about people that have grown up on a farm going and doing something else with their lives?

Douglas Hurt: The productivity of American farm men and women is essentially driving their children from the land. It's not too much to say that farm men and women want the same things for their children that urban men and women do: a good education. By giving their children a good education they open opportunities for their children far beyond the farm and usually with a higher standard of living. So, throughout the 20th century, if not before, as farm men and women have been insistent on educating their children they have almost guaranteed they are going to leave the land. But those kinds of advances changed the world, at least changed this country. I suspect that another aspect of this would simply be the development of the American agribusiness industry. It's been so complex and so far-reaching that many young men and women who leave the farm still are involved in some kind of agricultural business-- whether it's in nutrition or food processing or agricultural sales or research development. There's still linkages there. It's just that they're not on the farm.

Q: Tell me what would have to happen to boost rural population and revitalize these communities. What kind of trend would we have to see that would bring people back to the land?

Douglas Hurt: I don't think we'll see a return of people to the land as farmers. I think the science and the technology is such that we really need even fewer farmers than are on the land today. This is a very controversial idea. There are many people who would very vociferously oppose it. But, given the kind of productivity of any commodity that you can think of, and given the ability of men and women to seemingly increase production all the time, there's really no need in terms of nutrition volume for the American public. I think the key to people returning to the countryside is probably going to involve the kind of small business industrialization that is in some form linked to agriculture-- whether it's service industry or a matter of value-added industrial production that does something with the kind of agricultural production in an area that involves some kind of processing, marketing and distribution that can keep people at least in rural areas and the countryside if not actually farmers. We talked about how the Wallace stamp has really been our agricultural policy since that time except the years between '96 and I think 2002 if that's correct.

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The role of government has sort of become entrenched in the agricultural economy. Farmers kind of look upon these payments and supports as entitlements these days as opposed to necessary assistance. Many farmers wouldn't agree that agricultural programming and the various payments they receive for a host of programmatic participation would be entitlement. They've considered agricultural programs that have come from the New Deal years to essentially be entitlements. They don't consider government payments welfare. In fact these are fighting words in the farm community to be sure.

Urbanites see it very differently. They don't really see program payments to farmers for matters of conservation of various sorts or acreage reduction or price supports as being anything less than welfare payments for a very select group of people. But this shows how policy has changed over the years and how the demographics of our country have changed. Farmers don't have a great voice in many respects. Their strength is through the specialty commodity groups today. In those groups they do have considerable voice, but those groups are fractionated. They represent only a select group of farmers. So you have many commodity groups each asking for their share of the pie, and they want their share of the pie. There's no question about it. Whether the government payments go for farmers that are X size or Y size is a matter of great debate. And whether a corporate farm has 500,000 acres but is still a family farm. Or whether a family farm that also may be incorporated has 2,000 acres is still a very legitimate operation in American agriculture. But who is to get what and how much--that's the essential question in agricultural policy today.

Q: That complicates the question about whether we've gone a little too far. Huge operations with very, very narrow profit margins, the concentration of the industry is not only in the farm but in the seed industry these days and the packing industries and all these things. Has it become too homogenized or has it become too narrowly defined? Maybe you can tell me what you think Henry Wallace would think about it?

Douglas Hurt: Well, there's no easy and singular answer to this question, because the answer's will depend upon the kind of farmer that you talk to whether they're large, small. It also depends upon the kind of commodity that they're producing. The cotton farmers have a very considerable voice in American agricultural policy today through the rice farmers and the wheat farmers and the corn farmers certainly in the Midwest. Wallace would be, I think, somewhat ambivalent about all this. Or at least he would be uncertain. As a historian, I can't project into the future. But knowing what we know about Wallace, Wallace believed there was a matter of social justice that government had to be very attentive to. He believed that corporate America however represented whether-- it's through the banking community or the railroads or whatever aspect of corporate America, it could be very abusive to the farm community. And he always thought that government had to be regulatory, at least ensure its presence to make sure that farm men and women received their fair share or their just dues in American society. So, I think he would probably see the kind of agribusiness organizations that we see today that are very powerful no question about that with a considerable degree of skepticism. At the same time he would also, I think, have to say that these agribusiness firms have dramatically improved the productivity and the standard of living and the income of American farm men and women. So, nothing is a total

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positive or a total negative in terms of American agricultural policy, and Wallace had a very fundamental role in crafting it.

Q: America certainly must have been a very different country at that time. We have a man from the farm state, Herbert Hoover, having been president not too long before that. We have secretaries of agriculture from the same family. We have the secretary of agriculture being brought into the fold as the vice president and a smoke filled room away from becoming the president of the United States. It must have been a much different country at that time, hugely accentuated emphasis on the agricultural sector.

Douglas Hurt: Well, the agricultural community was a very powerful player in American politics during Wallace's years - it is an aspect of our economy and our politics which it had considerable weight at the ballot box. It was an agricultural economy that spoke with authority in regard to the kinds of programmatic activity that also influenced urbanites. It's during the Wallace years, for example, that the food stamp program emerges. This is a very fundamental part of the general welfare program of the federal government today. So, this is an age in which many people still had very close links to the farm. They may not have lived on the farm, but quite likely they had family members who did or had relatives who were still on the farm. We're not all that far from a very different agrarian age. The key here is this is an age of very rapid transition. Things are changing as they've never changed before. The kind of relationship between the farm community and the government and urbanites is going to be very different after the Wallace years.