

Henry A. Wallace

Agriculturalist for the Common Man

by John Hyde

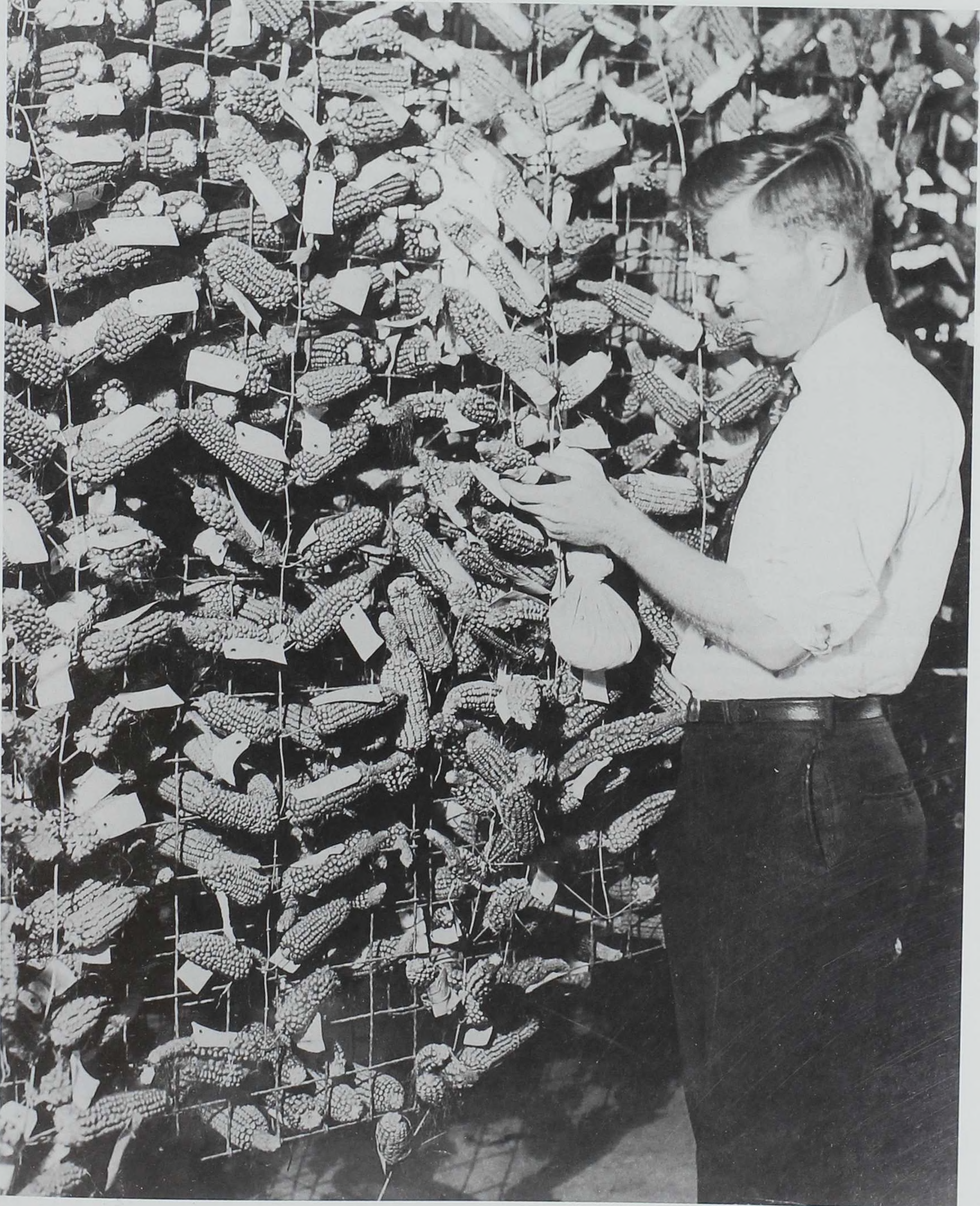
Upon the death of Henry A. Wallace in 1965, Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman remarked that "no single individual has contributed more to the abundance we enjoy today than Henry Wallace." Wallace's lifelong interest in food and agriculture was as much a part of his genetic makeup as his unruly auburn hair and big toothy grin. His beloved grandfather, a preacher and farm editor known to thousands of Iowa families as "Uncle Henry," was a passionate advocate of scientific farming and a vibrant agricultural civilization. His father—first as a professor at Iowa State College, then as an editor of the Iowa-based farm journal, *Wallaces' Farmer*, and eventually as secretary of agriculture—carried the cause to a national level. Finally, Henry A. Wallace made the family's mission truly international.

From an early age, Wallace was fascinated by plant life, and he displayed a level of intellectual curiosity and skepticism that remained his lifelong hallmark. As a boy still in his early teens, he challenged the scientific validity of the highly popular "corn shows"—based on the theory that the best-looking corn was also the

best-producing corn—and all but destroyed them within two decades. As a young man just out of Iowa State College, he began the corn-breeding experiments that consumed much of his time and interest for almost 20 years. By 1920, having absorbed the scientific work of pioneering plant geneticists George Harrison Shull and Edward East, Wallace was one of a handful of people in the nation who understood the huge potential of hybridization.

After he took over from his father, Henry C., as editor of *Wallaces' Farmer*, Henry A. used his position as a bully pulpit from which he tirelessly preached the virtues of hybrid seed. "There's a revolution coming," he told his readers. Most farmers didn't know what Wallace was so excited about. And even if they did grasp the

Henry A. Wallace inspects hybrid corn in his garage in Des Moines. In 1921 he wrote in *Wallaces' Farmer*, "For fifteen years I have tried to understand corn plants, until now the individuality of corn plants is almost as interesting to me as the personality of animals or human beings."



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Young Henry A. Wallace shows hybrid corn to his grandfather, "Uncle Henry" Wallace, influential editor of *Wallaces' Farmer*.

importance of hybridization, there was no practical system to research, develop, and distribute hybrid seed. In short, farmers couldn't buy hybrid seed even if they wanted to. Finally, in 1926, Wallace came up with a plan to make this miracle product available. He formed a company in Des Moines that came to be called Pioneer Hi-Bred International and set about to develop, grow, and sell hybrid corn seed. Most of the money to form the company came from the modest inheritance of his wife, Ilo Wallace; banks, doubtful that farmers would pay for something they could hand-select for free, refused to offer loans. It was the world's first hybrid seed company, something "entirely new under the sun," as Wallace put it.

This "entirely new" product was so promising that its sales increased even in the midst of an agricultural depression the likes of which the country had never seen. In 1933, the year of "penny auctions" and ten-cents-a-bushel corn, a fraction of 1 percent of all the farmland in Iowa was planted with hybrid seed; ten years later, the percentage was 99.5. Nationally, the yield

of corn per acre in 1933 was 24.1 bushels per acre, about the same as it was during the Civil War. Ten years later it was 31 bushels per acre. By 1981, it was more than 109 bushels per acre. In 2001 in Iowa, one farmer—yes, using Pioneer Hi-Bred seed—produced more than 400 bushels per acre!

William Brown, a talented young Pioneer Hi-Bred geneticist who eventually became the company's president, later referred to the dramatic growth in the use of hybrid seed as the world's "first green revolution." "The introduction of U.S. hybrid maize into Europe following World War II saved countless lives and transformed agriculture in that part of the world in an incredibly short period of time," Brown wrote. "The methodology of hybrid development quickly spread from the United States throughout the developed world, and U.S. genetic materials, where adapted, greatly enhanced the rapid development of commercial hybrids. Many persons deserve credit for this revolution, among the foremost of whom is H. A. Wallace."

The founding of Pioneer Hi-Bred and the popularization of hybrid corn was, of course, only a part of the mark Wallace left on food and agriculture. As an editor and author he wrote important works on agricultural practices and economics. One of his little-noticed achievements was his role in introducing statistics as an academic discipline at Iowa State College. He regarded statistics as an important tool in agricultural research and crop development. Through his efforts, including his influential book, *Machine Correlation and Calculation*, written with Professor George Snedecor, Iowa State became world-famous for its statistics program.

As secretary of agriculture during the New Deal, Wallace put in place a farm program described at the time as the most sweeping societal experiment ever attempted by the federal government. He greatly expanded the department's research and conservation programs and ushered in innovative social policy initiatives such as the food stamp and school lunch programs. He devised farsighted programs such as the "Ever-Normal Granary," whereby crops would be stored up in good years to be used up in lean years; that program, enacted into law in 1938, was the action Wallace was most proud of as secretary of agriculture and did much to enhance national food security during World War II.

Nor did Wallace's influence on agriculture end when his days on the public stage were over. After his disastrous run for the presidency as the candidate of the left-wing Progressive Party in 1948, Wallace returned to his New York State farm and resumed his career as a

geneticist and experimental farmer. He had a fondness for working with strawberries, gladioli, chickens, and, of course, corn. So successful was his chicken breeding that at one point, half of the egg-laying hens in the world were genetically related to Henry Wallace's chickens.

And he retained his keen interest in policies that would promote family agriculture, a strong rural economy, and sustainable farming practices. Even as he lay dying of Lou Gehrig's Disease in 1965, Wallace was busily engaged in correspondence with President Johnson, setting out a vision of improving rural life through a policy of industrial decentralization. "I shud-

der for my country," Wallace wrote to a friend, "when such a small percentage of our people have had childhood experience growing things."

Reviewing Wallace's life and contributions to agricultural production, one can hardly help but wonder how he would have viewed this or that issue of our time—specifically what he would have thought about the dramatic developments now taking place in the area of biotechnology and genetically modified organisms. One must be careful when speculating about how he would respond, because Wallace is a particularly difficult person to predict. He was an unusual, sometimes eccentric, man. He was a fiercely independent thinker, entirely unimpressed by conventional wisdom, and he was insatiably curious about almost everything—from the flight of boomerangs to the rituals of Native Americans. He experimented with odd diets, dabbled in esoteric religions, taught himself Spanish, and toyed with astrology. He sought truth down any path, no matter how untraveled, and he was completely unafraid of taking a wrong turn. So, having issued fair warning that I'm on hazardous ground, here are some thoughts about Wallace and agriculture—present and future.

If we know anything for certain about Henry Wallace, it is that he believed that all men and women in every nation deserved to share in the earth's bounty. Near the end of the lengthy oral history that he gave to Columbia University, Wallace remarked: "If I were to draw conclusions from my life so far, I would say that the purpose of existence here on earth is to improve the quality and increase the abundance of joyous living. Jesus took on himself the highest of all missions when he said that he came to give a more abundant life to humanity. The improved quality and increased abundance of life is a progressive matter and has not only to do with human life but with all plants and animals as well."

With that as the bedrock of his phi-



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Rudolph Martin Evans (in white hat) inspects corn with Wallace (hatless). As special assistant to the secretary of agriculture in 1936, and administrator of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration in 1938, Evans worked closely with Wallace, who was secretary of agriculture from 1933 to 1940.



On a goodwill tour to South America in 1943, Wallace inspects produce at a regional fair in Panama. His passionate interest in agriculture played out in a hands-on approach and curiosity well beyond that of most visiting dignitaries.

losophy, my guess is that Wallace would have been for those scientific advances that offer the hope of better lives—indeed, offer the prospect of life itself—to millions and millions of people around the world. I believe that Wallace would have agreed with Herbert Hoover that food should never be used as a weapon—in ideological arguments any more than in war. I believe that Wallace would have agreed with George Washington Carver that science should be the servant of humankind and not its master. And I believe he would have agreed with Norman Borlaug that biotechnology and genetic engineering, wisely used, offer a richer and more abundant life to millions of people.

Having said that, I think Wallace would have found many aspects of contemporary agriculture troubling. He would, in my view, be greatly alarmed by the increasing control large corporations have over the food supply, and in particular by the right of corporations to patent life forms. (In his own business life, Wallace never

attempted to patent his work; he believed that the way to stay successful was to keep continually ahead of your competition, not to stifle it.) He would see the lack of regard for sound environmental practices by large-scale agribusinesses as foolhardy at best; Wallace was not a sentimental man, but the thought of half of Iowa's topsoil being washed out to sea would have made him want to cry. He would have been appalled by government policies that encourage overproduction and ongoing concentration of wealth and property.

But Wallace was no Luddite. Faced with a problem created by science, he always saw the solution as more science, not less. He was a great respecter of fact. He would have wanted to know everything that could be known about the environmental and public health consequences of genetically modified food, and then he would want to address those consequences with scientific research. "I have no patience with those who claim that the present surplus of farm products means that

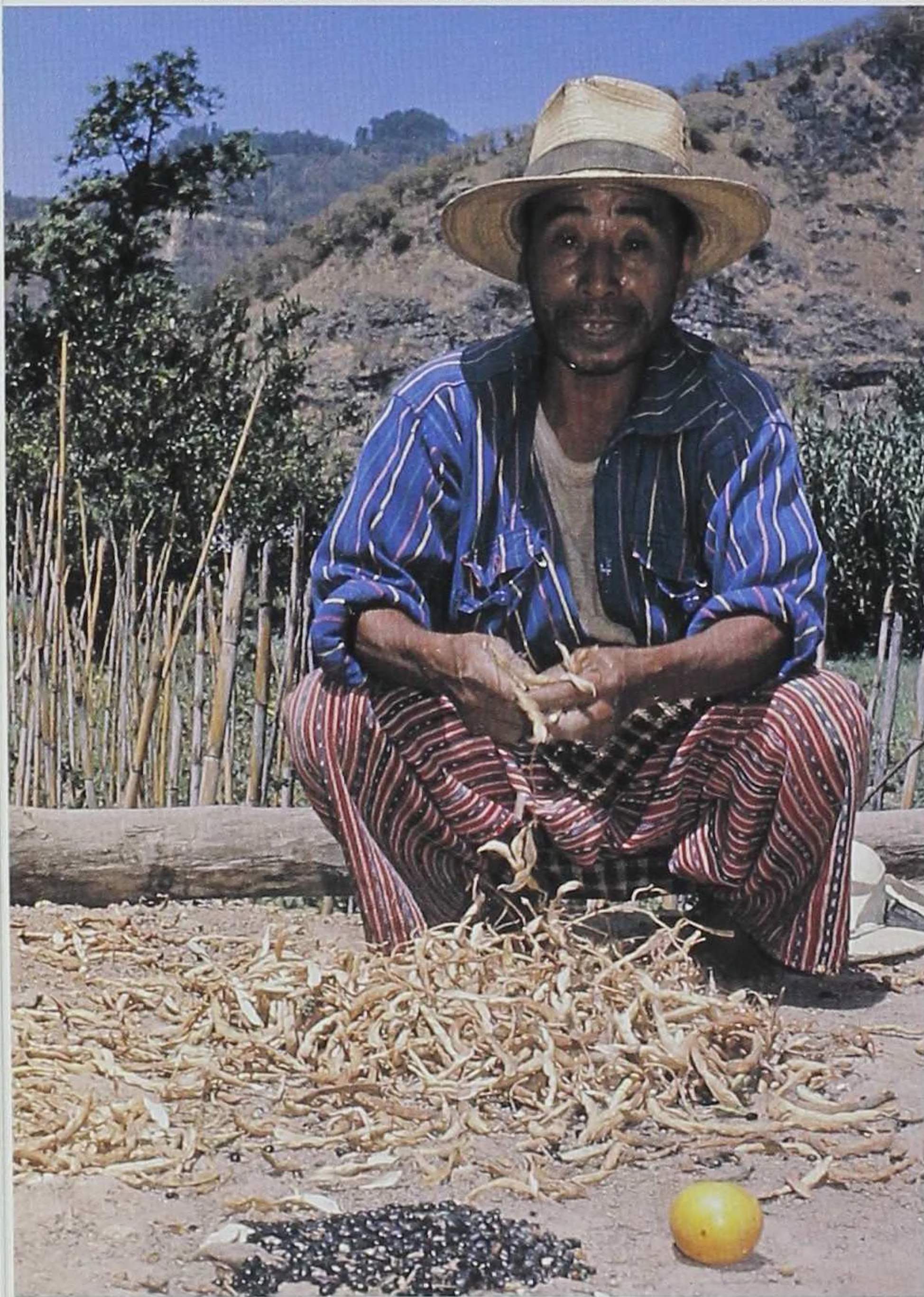
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In Asia in 1944, Wallace takes a moment to tend crops. "Eighty percent of [Asians] live on the land," the vice president told conservationists. "It is our privilege and responsibility to help them to a better way of living for . . . ourselves as well as for them."

we should stop our efforts at improved agricultural efficiency," he wrote in 1933 at the height of our country's greatest economic crisis. "What we need is not less science in farming but more science in economics. We need economic machinery corresponding in its precision, its power and its delicacy of adjustment to our scientific machinery."

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Efforts by Central American farmers like Ignacio Vuch still captured Wallace's interest late in life. Visiting Guatemala in February 1964, Wallace took note of Vuch's truck garden crops of beans, onions, strawberries, and corn, as well as his practice of saving beans for seeds and growing beans on poles.

A few months after the United States entered World War II, a war he vigorously supported in the hope that it would bring democracy to the entire world, Wallace delivered his most famous speech. It was titled "The Price of Free World Victory," but is most often referred to as the "Century of the Common Man" speech after its most quoted phrase. Even now, some 60 years after its delivery, the following passage from that speech speaks to Wallace's vision of peace and abundance: "Modern science, which is a by-product and an essential part of the people's revolution, has made it technologically possible to see that all of the people of the world get enough to eat. Half in fun and half seriously, I said the other day to Madame Litvinov [wife of the Russian ambassador to the U.S.]: 'The object of this war is to make sure that everybody in the world has the privilege of drinking a quart of milk a day.' She replied: 'Yes, even half a pint.' The peace must mean a better standard of living for the common man, not merely in the United States and England, but also in India, Russia, China, and Latin America—not merely in the United Nations, but also in Germany and Italy and Japan.

"Some have spoken of the 'American Century.' I say that the century on which we are entering—the century which will come out of this war—can be and must be the century of the common man. Everywhere the common man must learn to build his own industries with his own hands in a practical fashion. Everywhere the common man must learn to increase his productivity so that he and his children can eventually pay to the world community all that they have received. . . . Modern science, when devoted wholeheartedly to the general welfare, has in it potentialities of which we do not yet dream."

Few did more than Henry A. Wallace to use modern science to lay the foundations in agricultural practice and policy for such a century of the common man. ❖

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NOTE ON SOURCES

The research sources for this article are the same as those used for the Benjamin F. Shambaugh Award-winning biography of Wallace, coauthored by John C. Culver and John Hyde: *American Dreamer: A Life of Henry A. Wallace* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000). The book is fully annotated and includes a comprehensive bibliography.

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