

2009

Father of Green Revolution Dies at 95

Aaron Neal

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/inquire>

 Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Neal, Aaron (2009) "Father of Green Revolution Dies at 95," *Inquire, the UAB undergraduate science research journal*. Vol. 2009: No. 3, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/inquire/vol2009/iss3/8>

This content has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the UAB Digital Commons, and is provided as a free open access item. All inquiries regarding this item or the UAB Digital Commons should be directed to the [UAB Libraries Office of Scholarly Communication](#).

Father of Green Revolution Dies at 95

Aaron Neal

On September 12, 2009, the world mourned the loss of plant scientist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Norman Borlaug. Though his name never reached household use like scientists Einstein, Fleming, or Curie, Borlaug is considered by many to be the greatest person to have ever lived. “Norman E. Borlaug saved more lives than any man in human history,” said U.N. World Food Program Executive Director Josette Sheeran. “His heart was as big as his brilliant mind, but it was his passion and compassion that moved the world.”

Born in 1914 to the descendants of Norwegian immigrants, Borlaug spent most of his youth working on his family’s farm near Protivin, Iowa. In 1933, he enrolled at the University of Minnesota where he subsequently received his Bachelor of Science degree, Master of Science degree, and Ph.D. in plant pathology and genetics. In 1944, Borlaug accepted an appointment organizing and directing the Cooperative Wheat Research and Production Program in Mexico, a joint undertaking by the Mexican government and the Rockefeller Foundation.

To combat the rapid spread of newly emerging wheat rusts, parasitic plant fungi capable of destroying entire wheat harvests, Borlaug developed hardy, disease-resistant varieties of wheat through crossbreeding and genetic engineering. A mere twenty years after arriving in Mexico, his wheat varieties increased the country’s wheat harvest six-fold, allowing Mexico to become self-sufficient and a net exporter of the crop. Borlaug’s immense success quickly gained the attention of other nations, leading to the spread of his wheat varieties and the transformation in global agriculture known as the “Green Revolution.”

In 1970, the Nobel Peace Prize committee recognized Norman Borlaug’s efforts by selecting him for the award. “More than any other single person of this age, he has helped provide bread for a hungry world. We have made this choice in the hope that providing bread will also give the world peace.”

While Borlaug’s efforts have saved over one billion lives, he

encountered harsh criticism for his approach. Many opponents of the Green Revolution considered Borlaug’s genetic cross-breeding of plants to be unnatural or to have negative effects. Others criticized his emphasis of large-scale, input-intensive farming techniques over the subsistence farming countries typically relied on. Borlaug took these concerns seriously, though he dismissed many critical Westerners by saying, “If they lived just one month amid the misery of the developing world, as I have for fifty years, they’d be crying out for tractors and fertilizer and irrigation canals and be outraged that fashionable elitists back home were trying to deny them these things.”

Despite his enormous success, Borlaug remained humble and dedicated to solving the world’s hunger problem. He took a distinguished faculty position at Texas A&M University in 1984, where he continued developing disease-resistant crops in addition to teaching students and advocating the elimination of global hunger. “I want to see science serve a useful purpose to improve the standard of living for all people,” Borlaug said. “You can’t build a peaceful world on empty stomachs and human misery.”

The legacy of Norman Borlaug is undoubtedly felt on every continent by millions and millions of people every day. It is estimated that every day, half of the world’s population, over three billion people, consume grain descended from Borlaug’s wheat varieties. As the father of the Green Revolution, Borlaug did more to advance agricultural self-sufficiency and sustainability than anyone before him, especially in under-developed nations. “Dr. Norman Borlaug’s life and achievements are testimony to the far reaching contribution that one man’s towering intellect, persistence, and scientific vision can make to human peace and progress,” said Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. “One of Dr. Borlaug’s favourite quotations was to ‘reach for the stars’. In doing so, Dr. Borlaug helped millions of people escape from a life of hunger and deprivation.”