

Comrade Khrushchev and Farmer Garst

Summit in an Iowa Cornfield

by Stephen J. Frese

The parade of foreign policy usually skipped rural Iowa, but on September 23, 1959, the eyes of the nation focused on Coon Rapids. Invited guests, curious onlookers, anxious reporters, and sharp-eyed photographers surrounded Roswell and Elizabeth Garst's white, wooden farmhouse. Awaiting the official motorcade, National Guardsmen lined the 75 miles of highway running between Des Moines and Garst's farm in Carroll County. Soviet Premier Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev was touring the heart of the midwestern corn belt to see for himself (as one journalist put it) why "agriculture, America's biggest success, [was] communism's biggest failure."

Khrushchev was exploring capitalist agricultural practices, hoping to adapt them to Russian collective farms (*kolkhozes*). His encounters with Iowa farmer Roswell Garst helped open dialogue between the world's superpowers. Khrushchev believed that "an exchange of opinions would help . . . the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. come to understand each other better and show greater pliancy in settling controversial matters." Roswell Garst agreed. "You know," Garst told Khrushchev, "we two farmers could settle the problems of the world faster than diplomats."

Iowan Roswell Garst had begun sowing the seeds of his agricultural empire as early as 1916. In the following decades, he explored cutting-edge technologies: hybrid seed corn, intensive use of nitrogen fertilizers, and cellulose-enriched cattle feed. He partnered with Charley Thomas in the early 1930s to develop Garst and Thomas Hybrid Seed Corn Company, one of the largest operations of its kind in the nation. By the 1950s, Roswell Garst was well known among agriculturalists as innovative, independent, and vocal—and opinionated.

Westerners knew little about Khrushchev when he emerged as the undisputed leader of the Soviet Union in 1955. Would he offer hope for peace? Or would he trigger World War III and nuclear annihilation?



HE HAS THE MOON BUT WE HAVE THE HARVEST

Political cartoonist Frank Miller depicts Khrushchev, suitcase in hand, headed toward an Iowa farm, with a full moon and rocket overhead. On the day Khrushchev arrived in the United States—September 15, 1959—he announced that a Soviet rocket had reached the moon. The cartoon appeared on September 20, in anticipation of his arrival in Iowa two days later.

Born in 1894, Nikita Khrushchev was the son of peasants; as a boy, he tended sheep. "We children were lucky if we had a decent pair of shoes," he recalled. "We wiped our noses with our sleeves and kept our trousers up with a piece of string." He learned the blacksmith and locksmith trades, joined the Bolsheviks in 1918, served two years in the Red Army, and then climbed the Communist Party ladder one rung at a time until he reached Josef Stalin's inner circle. When Stalin died in 1953, Khrushchev's comrades underestimated him because he lacked formal education. Loyal to Stalin for almost thirty years, the man political "experts forgot to notice . . . turned out to be the dark horse in Stalin's stable," the *Des Moines Register* reported. Ten

days after Stalin's death, Khrushchev became first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the platform from which Stalin had vaulted into absolute power.

Khrushchev's first priority was to shift from Stalin's emphasis on industrialization and military expansion to the condition of Soviet farms. Under Stalin, the Soviets had produced little milk, meat, or eggs and suffered mass starvation. "My father thought that the Soviet political system could give people a better life," explained Sergei Khrushchev, Nikita's son, in a December 2003 interview. War breeds destruction; increased agricultural production, Sergei's father had insisted, promised Russia a prosperous future. "Persons are much more important than missiles," Sergei continued. "If you are producing missiles, you are wasting your resources. If you increase food production, you make life better for your people."

In a February 1955 speech before the Communist Central Committee, Khrushchev demanded that corn production increase by 800 percent by 1960. Offering a rare—and well-publicized—expression of praise for the United States and its animal husbandry, Khrushchev called for a Russian corn belt to produce grain to feed livestock. "That's just what the Russian economy needs—more and better livestock so the Russian people can eat better," stated *Des Moines Register* editorialist Lauren Soth that same month.

Soth continued: "We have no diplomatic authority . . . but we hereby extend an invitation to any delegation Khrushchev wants to select to come to Iowa to get the lowdown on raising high quality cattle, hogs, sheep and chickens. We promise to hide none of our 'secrets.' We will take the visiting delegation to Iowa's great agricultural experiment station at Ames, to some of the leading farmers of Iowa, to our livestock breeders, soil conservation experts and seed companies. Let the Russians see how we do it."

Soth also suggested sending a delegation of Iowa farmers, agronomists, and livestock specialists to the Soviet Union. At a time of increased polarization between Eastern Europe and the West, Soth's editorial expressed a minority opinion in the United States. He never thought the Soviets would see his proposal, much less accept it. But they did. "Soviet spies read the *Des Moines Register*, translated this editorial, and put it on Khrushchev's desk within a few days of publication," explained Elizabeth (Liz) Garst, granddaughter of Roswell Garst. Meanwhile, "both the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *New York Times* echoed the idea approvingly, and officials in the State Department and Agriculture were—like it or not—obliged to take the idea

seriously," writes Roswell Garst biographer Harold Lee.

It was a surprise to everyone—including the U.S. State Department—when Khrushchev accepted Soth's bold invitation. That summer, twelve Americans (five of them from Iowa) traveled to the Soviet Union, and Khrushchev sent a delegation to Iowa. After extensive negotiations, the State Department required that only scientists and agronomists—no politicians—be included in the Soviet delegation to the United States. Their plane flew directly to Des Moines, never going near Washington, D.C. The federal government wanted to distance itself from this initial agricultural exchange.

According to Liz Garst, the Iowa Farm Bureau selected only small family farms with no hired labor for the Soviets to tour, in an effort to prove to them that family farms of 80 to 160 acres were superior to Soviet collective farms. "The smallest farms in the Soviet Union were at least 20,000 acres," she explained. The farms managed by Garst, totaling about 5,000 acres, were omitted from the tour itinerary even though they employed the latest technology in grain and livestock production—exactly what the Soviets had come to see.

Using his own influence and connections, Garst managed to meet the visiting deputy minister of agriculture, Vladimir Matskevitch, and described his techniques to the Soviet official. Determined to see Garst's hybrid seed corn operation, Matskevitch refused to accompany his delegation to the next day's scheduled stop. Instead, he accepted the ride Garst provided to Coon Rapids and spent the day with Garst, taking detailed notes he later delivered to Khrushchev.

Impressed with Garst's operation and how his technology could be adapted for Soviet collective farms, Matskevitch invited Garst to come to the Soviet Union later that year. Garst believed a visit could ease Cold War tensions, and he hoped to sell—with the permission of a reluctant U.S. State Department—hybrid seed to the Soviets. He recognized both superpowers' problems in agriculture: for the United States it was surpluses; for the Soviets, it was scarcity. He believed U.S. surpluses could be a "weapon for peace."

State Department officials remained suspicious after the initial agricultural exchange, but Garst argued that he should be free to discuss all he knew about agriculture and to sell equipment and seed if they wanted to buy: "It would be ridiculous to tell them about how rapidly we could plant corn and then say 'we won't sell you a corn planter.'" After much deliberation, the State Department granted Garst an export license and permission to travel to Moscow—although U.S. officials

were sure Garst could not sell the Soviets anything.

The State Department learned not to underestimate Roswell Garst, a master salesman with evangelical enthusiasm for hybrid corn. "If it's sound, it will sell," he often said.

Garst began his Soviet tour in Moscow in September 1955. While in Odessa, he was interrupted in his speech about how American technology could improve Soviet agriculture by a summons to meet privately with Khrushchev in his Crimean summer home. There, Khrushchev and Garst talked about corn production, livestock, and possibilities of East-West trade. After the meeting Garst asked Khrushchev how the Soviet Union could know so little about American agriculture when they had easy access to U.S. farm journals, yet they had been able to steal the atomic bomb in three weeks.

Khrushchev laughed and raised two fingers: "It only took us two weeks. You locked up the atomic bomb, so we had to steal it. When you offered us information about agriculture for nothing, we thought that might be what it was worth."

The next day the Soviets ordered 5,000 tons of hybrid seed. Accounts of Roswell's meeting with Khrushchev appeared in Moscow's newspapers, and CBS News telephoned Garst for a report on the exchange.

Garst also provided journalists some of the first news of Khrushchev's family. Early western newspaper coverage of Khrushchev's rise to power stated that the new leader had been married, but it was not known if his wife was still living. Khrushchev's first wife died of hunger and exhaustion during the famine following the Russian civil war. Divorced from his second wife, he was now married to Nina, who would later host American agricultural delegations and accompany her husband to Coon Rapids. This represented a shift from Stalin's era, when leaders' wives and children were kept away from official events. Family, under Stalin, was a sign of weakness.

Upon his return, Garst wrote excitedly to U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson: "We thought of ourselves as Marco Polos when we were in Russia; they think of themselves as descendants of Columbus—discovering the United States for the second time."

Garst hosted several agricultural delegations from the Soviet Union, Romania, and Hungary. "There were always Russians at the farm," Liz Garst remembered. Eastern Europeans were impressed that Roswell, Elizabeth, and their children all worked on their farms. "The image of the absentee capitalist landlord, living in luxury on the proceeds of his wage

slaves, was a preconception they all freely admitted having brought with them," wrote Garst biographer Harold Lee. "They were completely unprepared for the Midwestern lifestyle."

Garst's FBI dossier grew with his successes as a citizen diplomat. Sometimes he cooperated with the FBI; other times he was confrontational. Reviewing Garst's file in 1959, the bureau saw "no indication of any subversive activities, membership in communist front groups or the Communist Party. . . . It is quite apparent that his main interest in Russia and the satellites is in the sale of his product."

In 1956, Garst returned to Eastern Europe accompanied by his wife, Elizabeth. Earlier that year at the Twentieth Party Congress, Khrushchev had condemned Stalin's crimes in a so-called "secret speech," a devastating attack on Stalin and the former ruler's abuse of power. Moscow ordered Soviet satellite governments to read Khrushchev's secret speech at their own party assemblies. In Hungary, students and workers took advantage of the instability the speech caused within the Hungarian Communist Party to launch an uprising. The Garsts were in Budapest when Soviet tanks rolled into the city, stranding them for ten days while Khrushchev's army obliterated the rebels. Roswell and Elizabeth escaped up the Danube River to Czechoslovakia on a Polish coal ship. Disgusted with military actions that contradicted Khrushchev's commitment to peaceful agricultural exchange, Garst called a personal moratorium on East-West relations: "I am afraid to sell even as innocent a product as seed corn to the Russians for fear the material would not be loaded on ships without incidents and bad publicity."

By 1957, Garst's determination to end relations with the Soviet government had faded (though not his interest in Eastern Europe—he traveled to Yugoslavia and hosted a Bulgarian delegation). Monitoring progress in the Soviet Union over the following months, Garst became angry because they had not complied with his recommendations for fertilizing and planting corn. Predicting a colossal failure if the technology was incorrectly applied, Garst wanted to see Khrushchev again to set things straight. He also wanted to discuss "getting this armaments race stopped," something he considered "the most important single thing" facing the world at that time. Garst's message in his letter to Khrushchev was blunt: improving relations between the United States and the Soviet Union was necessary so that time, technology, energy, and valuable resources would not be wasted "preparing for a war that nobody wants—nobody expects—a war no one could survive."

Finally, another visit was arranged. Roswell and

Elizabeth met with Nikita and Nina in early 1959. The men discussed agriculture and prospects for world peace during conversations salted with anecdotes, proverbs, and humor. Their exchanges were sometimes aggressive and argumentative, but they each wanted comprehensive change most of all. Liz Garst described the two men as "quite gregarious and quite cantankerous. They were both showmen, and they were both very much peasants, neither of them were refined men. To tell you the truth, they were both kind of crude. Khrushchev was famous for pounding his shoe on the podium [at the United Nations]. Roswell was famous for putting his feet on farm wives' kitchen tables." Sometimes he still had manure on his shoes. Angry outbursts over their personal opinions of the arms race often interrupted agricultural discussions. Garst could speak bluntly to Khrushchev in a way that official diplomats could not.

At the visit's end, to reciprocate the Khrushchevs' hospitality, Elizabeth Garst invited Nikita and Nina to visit their Iowa home. Their relationship became international news when, on August 6, 1959, Garst was informed that Khrushchev had asked to visit Coon Rapids. Iowa Governor Herschel Loveless initially opposed Khrushchev's planned visit, fearing the encounter would fuel Soviet propaganda. The hostility of Eastern European immigrants toward Khrushchev, Loveless declared, might make the visit a "precarious venture." Many (politicians and private citizens) shared his views. Reactions in Coon Rapids varied. Some thought Garst's interests were purely business: he stood to make money on Soviet sales. One resident stated to a reporter: "You just don't feed your enemies." Another Coon Rapids resident summed it up this way: "I think it's wonderful having the spotlight on our town. Coon Rapids was unknown before, but for one day . . . the whole world will know our town."

Garst himself was unshaken in his belief that Khrushchev should come to the United States. "[Roswell] got lots of hate mail, but nobody knows how much or what they said because he put those letters in the trash can," Liz Garst recalled.

Despite initial reservations, in the month before Khrushchev's trip to the United States nearly 300 cities, towns, organizations, clubs, and individuals submitted invitations requesting the Soviet premier to visit. Invitations arrived at the U.S. State Department and Soviet Embassy everyday. *Washington Post* journalist Tom Wolfe credited America's unofficial "Corn Belt Ambassador to Moscow," Roswell Garst, with starting it all when he had invited Khrushchev to see his Coon Rapids farms.

Khrushchev landed in the United States on September 15, 1959. He arrived in Washington, D.C., amidst the tightest security measures ever undertaken for a visiting foreign visitor at that time. According to reports in the *Des Moines Register*, "even the manhole covers along the 15-mile route from Andrews air force base [were] battened down and sealed." Khrushchev's conversation with Eisenhower in the White House represented the first direct two-way discussion ever held between the president of the United States and the premier of the Soviet Union. At the end of Khrushchev's ten-day trip, he would meet again with Eisenhower for in-depth talks at Camp David. Khrushchev next traveled to New York City, where, according to the *Register*, 7,300 men (including sharpshooters and judo experts) were assigned to protect him in this "haven of anti-Communist refugees." Khrushchev addressed the United Nations, then flew to Los Angeles, where he threatened to end his U.S. visit and return immediately to Moscow because he was offended by the L.A. mayor's "frosty reception." The crisis passed and Khrushchev lunched with Hollywood stars and film industry moguls before traveling by train along the California coast to San Francisco, where he met with union leaders and workers, toured the International Business Machines (IBM) plant in nearby San José, and tasted apple pie for the first time.

The front page of the *Des Moines Register* heralded Khrushchev's arrival in Iowa on Tuesday afternoon,

SHSI (DES MOINES): WALTER VAN HORNE COLLECTION



Khrushchev rides with Governor Herschel Loveless, an interpreter, and Secret Service men in Des Moines.

September 22. According to the *Register*, approximately 25,000 spectators lined Des Moines streets along Khrushchev's route. Crowds, for the most part, were "politely silent." News coverage portrayed Khrushchev's sense of humor and described Iowa's friendly if not enthusiastic welcome. Khrushchev visited the Des Moines Packing Company at 1700 Maury Street, where he and his wife, Nina, sampled their first American hot dogs during their 40-minute tour. Reporters described how cautious security agents had checked the hot dog with a Geiger counter before Khrushchev ate it. "It's excellent. Don't change the formula," Khrushchev remarked through a translator. Plant president Lester Bookey's eleven-year-old son reportedly told Khrushchev that even though the Russians beat the United States to the moon, "we can beat you in sausages." Outside, striking workers from the Iowa Packing Company picketed, carrying signs in both Russian and English urging all people not to eat Swift meat.

During a tour of a farm machinery assembly line at the John Deere Des Moines Works, Khrushchev's comments emphasized the competitive nature of U.S.-U.S.S.R. relations. According to reporters on the scene, Khrushchev told officials that "we will beat you some day" in the arena of manufacturing.

The hectic pace of Khrushchev's travel schedule caught up with him in Des Moines, and Richard Wilson reported in the *Register* that the fatigued Soviet premier had "lost the bounce of the first days of his American journey." Following dinner Tuesday evening with the Greater Des Moines Chamber of Commerce, Khrushchev had his interpreter read his entire speech in En-

glish, rather than delivering it a paragraph at a time in Russian with pauses for translation.

The long day ended at the Hotel Fort Des Moines, where Khrushchev stayed overnight in an eleventh-floor presidential suite. Soldiers reportedly checked the rooms, gift packages, food, glasses, whiskey, and ice cubes with Geiger counters prior to the Soviet premier's arrival.

On Wednesday morning, September 23, the Khrushchev family (including two daughters, Rada and Julia, and son Sergei, then a young engineer in the Soviet missile and space program) headed to the Garst farm. More than 700 National Guardsmen lined the 165-mile route from Des Moines to Coon Rapids to Ames and back to Des Moines.

According to the *Chicago Tribune*, Garst was the only individual—except for Eisenhower—whom Khrushchev specifically asked to see while in the United States. "Before arriving here I had a picture of Mr. Garst's good farm from accounts and films," Khrushchev had said. "I have known Mr. Garst for years; however it is always better to see than to hear. . . . Let us exchange experience. This will be useful to our countries."

Hundreds of reporters greeted Khrushchev's entourage as it reached Coon Rapids that morning. Reporter Arthur Edson described the scene: "Photographers

Opposite: With reporters clustered around the back of a truck, Khrushchev (in light suit) and Garst hold ears of hybrid seed corn on Garst's farm.

BOTH PHOTOS THIS PAGE: SHSI (DES MOINES) WALTER VAN HORNE COLLECTION



Crowds gathered on the parking ramp at Tenth and Walnut Streets in Des Moines watch Khrushchev's entourage. The signs on the left say: "We are inviting you to attend the S.E. 14th St. Drive-In Theatre." The sign on the right is not so friendly.



roosted in the trees, in the barnlofts, in the upstairs windows, and reporters squeezed and jammed up close as best they could to see what was going on." The Associated Press occupied one barn; United Press International claimed another. A television tower had been built in the upper pasture, and extra phone lines were installed for the occasion. Liz Garst recalled that they set up a press parking lot for 300 cars. "Nobody knows how many reporters showed up on the farm that morning, but estimates range between 1,500 and 3,000 reporters," Liz said. Highway patrolmen, National Guardsmen, caterers, television technicians, politicians, and onlookers converged on the farm. Crowds were beyond control. According to Liz, reporters crushed the silo roof, waded through cattle lots, broke into the house to use the telephone, and trampled friends and neighbors who were invited guests for the day. "As my grandmother said, 'The reporters were really much worse than the flies.'" Reporters asked all the wrong questions, Roswell Garst complained. "They were more interested in what Mrs. Garst was going to serve for lunch than what the exchange could do for world peace."

Garst showed the visitors his large-scale planting, harvesting, and livestock feeding operations, and grew angry at reporters who crowded in too closely. "One of the more famous incidents of the day," Liz recalled, "was when my grandfather started to lose his cool [because reporters] couldn't be kept back." Reporters pressed too close when Garst was showing Khrushchev silage, and Roswell, "in a fit of temper heaved great handfuls of corn silage at the reporters." Corn silage, Liz explained, stinks. "Khrushchev thought that was really funny," Liz said. So did the world press. A photo of Garst pelting reporters and photographers with silage became one of the most published images of



Standing behind a livestock feed bunk, Garst (right) laughs at Khrushchev's remark that "even the horse over there wants to see a Communist." Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., (Khrushchev's official host on the U.S. tour) stands behind the pair.

Khrushchev's visit to the Garst farm. Roswell's display of temper humiliated his wife, Elizabeth. "My grandmother was furious," Liz remembers. "She was humiliated that her crude husband made the world press, made *Life Magazine*," throwing corn silage.

The dignitaries ate lunch under a tent on the lawn. The meal was catered for security reasons, much to Elizabeth Garst's dismay. She had wanted to prepare the meal herself in her own kitchen. Khrushchev sat with Garst and Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. (U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and Khrushchev's official host), Adlai Stevenson (former Illinois governor and Democratic presidential nominee), and Lauren Soth (whose 1955 editorial inviting Khrushchev had won a Pulitzer Prize in 1956). They discussed trade, armaments inspec-

tion, and the ability of their countries to shift to peacetime economies. Later in the afternoon the entourage moved on to tour Iowa State University and the agricultural experiment station there. The next day's stop was Pittsburgh, then on to Washington, D.C., and three days at Camp David.

"Father often reminisced about the American farmer," Sergei Khrushchev wrote years later. "Garst and his sons produced more than any of our collective farms."

Garst's pursuit of peace through agriculture paved the way for Khrushchev's negotiations with Eisenhower. "It was Roswell Garst, pioneering seed corn genius of Coon Rapids, who grubbed most of the underbrush out of the tangled pathway leading to Camp David," wrote journalist Fagan D. Adler. In a television interview conducted in Garst's backyard, Khrushchev stated, "Every conversation I have had with Mr. Garst since 1955 has been important in the build-up for the meeting at Camp David."

Critics denounced Garst as a communist sympathizer. To the contrary, Garst was a capitalist eager to open new markets and make a profit. According to Liz Garst, any profit her grandfather's company made on selling seed to the Soviet Union was offset by cancelled orders from U.S. farmers who refused to do business with a "commie sympathizer."

Roswell Garst estimated that 80 percent of the mail he received expressed hope and confidence that tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union would decrease as a result of this exchange. The rest contained bitter condemnations. To everyone who wrote him prior to Khrushchev's visit, he replied: "Hungry people are dangerous people. . . . The peace of the world is dependent upon solving the world's food problems."

The U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Un-American Activities disagreed, warning in September 1959 that the "great expectations aroused by the exchange [of visits between American and Soviet representatives] reveal the tragic failure of Western statesmen to recognize the character and the magnitude of the Communist challenge." Citing the Soviet response to the Hungarian uprising and Khrushchev's unprovoked threat on Berlin, Henry Kissinger (then associate director for Harvard's Center for International Studies) stated that ending the Cold War depended on political issues—not the Soviet's ability to produce enough food. "The exchange of visits will assist the cause of peace only if it . . . reverses the course which has repeatedly brought the world to the brink of war."

Khrushchev changed Americans' view of himself and his country for the better. "While fearful that this changeable man might someday 'push the button,' many agreed that there is a practical element of sincerity in his attempt to ease tensions," observed Richard Wilson, the *Des Moines Register's* Washington correspondent, four days after Khrushchev's visit to Coon Rapids. Although many of his explorations into American agriculture translated into successful Soviet reforms, ultimately these exchanges contributed to his political downfall. Khrushchev's 1957 pledge to overtake America in agricultural production turned into an embarrassing disaster when he tried to push through too many reforms with too few resources and inadequate infrastructure. Despite his awkward efforts to ease Cold War tensions, Khrushchev's foreign policy blunders triggered the period's most dangerous international crises when he ordered construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 and placed missiles in Cuba in 1962.

"I am old and tired," Khrushchev said following the 1964 Presidium meeting that ousted him from power. "Could anyone have dreamed of telling Stalin that he didn't suit us anymore and suggesting he retire? Not even a wet spot would have remained where we had been standing. Now everything is different. The fear is gone, and we can talk as equals. That is my contribution."

Condemned for his failures as a leader and his earlier complicity in Stalin's brutal crimes, Khrushchev became a "nonperson" in the Soviet Union. His name was suppressed by his Kremlin successors, ignored by Soviet citizens, and erased from the country's history books. "After I die," Khrushchev said, "they will place my actions on a scale—on one side evil, on the other side good. I hope the good will outweigh the bad." Khrushchev died in 1971; Roswell Garst, in 1977.

Khrushchev's attempts to reform communism prepared the ground for its eventual collapse, planting seeds of economic restructuring and openness—*perestroika* and *glasnost*—that would germinate under Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin in decades to come. In the late 1980s, Washington realized (or finally admitted) that the "evil empire" had been rotting from within—something Roswell Garst, an unorthodox diplomat, knew all along. Comrade Khrushchev and Farmer Garst recognized that agricultural exchanges provided a legitimate path toward international peace. ♦

Stephen Frese is a sophomore at Marshalltown High School in Marshalltown, Iowa. This article is an expanded version of his 2004 National History Day Senior Historical Paper, for which he won the First Place Medal nationally.