

FAS Attachés: U.S. Agriculture's Eyes and Ears Abroad

By Linda Habenstreit

On Aug. 28, 1954, a little more than a year after FAS (the Foreign Agricultural Service) was established, U.S. agricultural attachés were returned to USDA (the U.S.

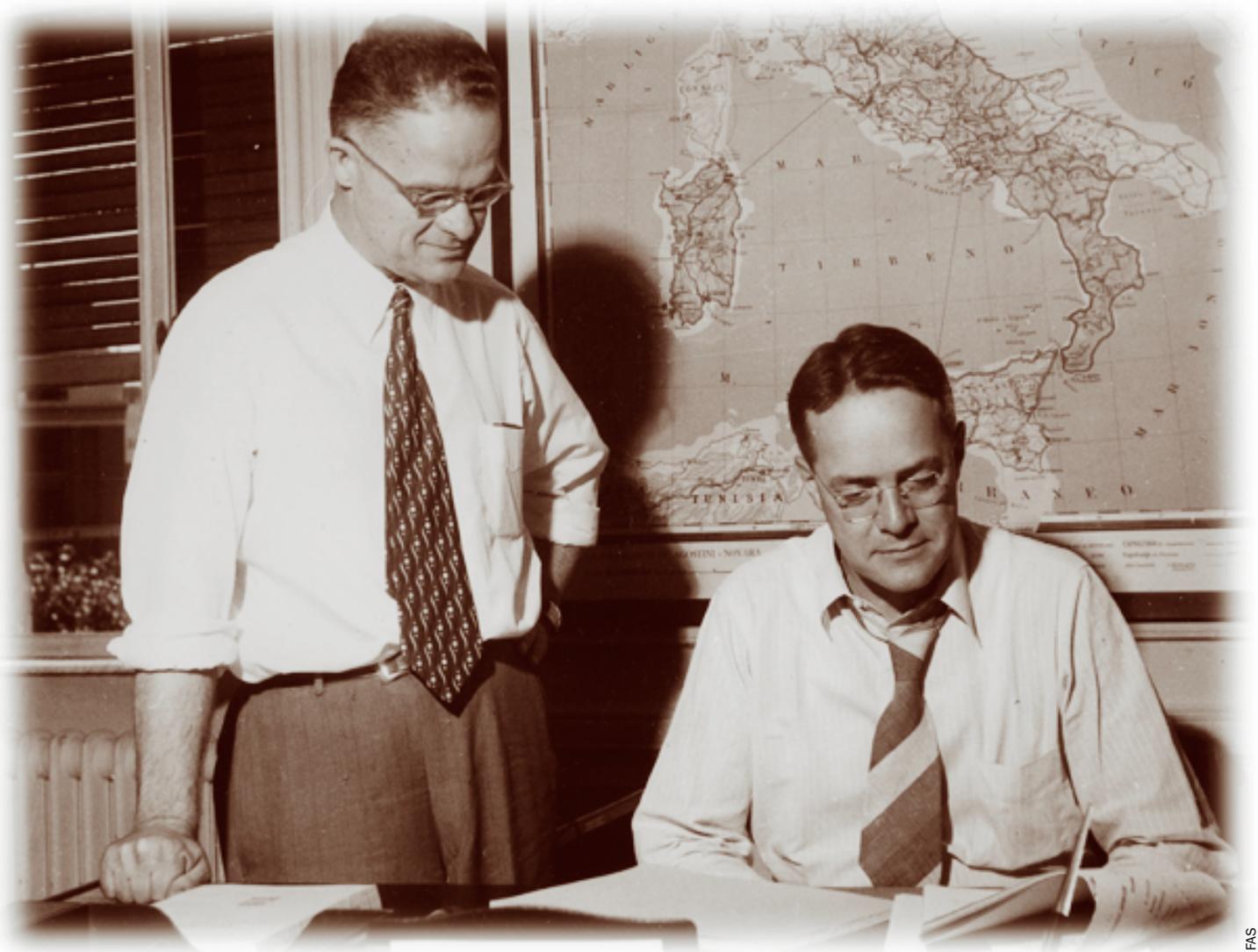
Department of Agriculture) from the U.S. Department of State by a provision of the Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act of 1954.

Even before then, agricultural officers were posted in foreign markets to be U.S. agriculture's "eyes and ears." The first U.S. agricultural attaché in the modern sense was Edward Foley, an agricultural trade commissioner, who went to London, England, in 1919 to study markets for

American agricultural products in Europe.

Foley's duties were not unlike those of U.S. agricultural attachés today. Reporting on a country's crop conditions and production, consumer preferences and marketing system are the bread and butter of an attaché's work.

In fact, in 2002, U.S. agricultural attachés worldwide generated 2,899 reports. These reports ran the gamut from



Robert Tetro at his desk at American Embassy in Rome, Italy. Circa 1950



U.S. Agricultural Attaché Firsts

First Female Attaché—Ana M. Gomez, Mexico City, Mexico, 1948-65.

First P.L. 480, Title I Agreement—Negotiated with Peru on Feb. 7, 1955.

First Foreign Market Development Agreement—Signed May 23, 1955, between FAS and the National Cotton Council (now Cotton Council International).

First Joint FAS/Foreign Market Development Cooperator Activity—Representing U.S. agriculture at a foreign trade show, 1955.

First African-American Agricultural Attaché—W. Garth Thorburn, Paris, France, 1956-61.

First U.S. Agricultural Trade Office—London, England, 1977.

First U.S. Agricultural Attaché Given the Rank of Ambassador—H. Reiter Webb, chief negotiator for textile matters, 1979-81.

First Electronically Transmitted Attaché Report—July 1, 1981, from agricultural counselor in London, England, to FAS headquarters in Washington, DC.

First U.S. Agricultural Attaché To Serve Overseas as an Ambassador—Christopher E. Goldthwait, U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Chad, Aug. 9, 1999.



FAS

U.S. Ambassador John Gunther Dean presents Agricultural Attaché Robert C. Tetro with President Reagan's foreign service appointment in Bangkok, Thailand. 1982

First Female U.S. Agricultural Attaché To Serve as Ambassador—Mattie Sharpless, U.S. Ambassador to the Central African Republic, Oct. 23, 2001.

First 27 Posts Staffed by Agricultural Attachés in 1953 That Are Still Operating Today—Buenos Aires, Argentina; Vienna, Austria; Brussels, Belgium; Ottawa, Canada; Santiago, Chile; Bogota, Colombia; Cairo,

Egypt; London, England; Paris, France; Bonn, Germany; Guatemala City, Guatemala; Jakarta, Indonesia; Rome, Italy; Tokyo, Japan; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Mexico City, Mexico; The Hague, Netherlands; Wellington, New Zealand; Lima, Peru; Manila, Philippines; Moscow, Russia; Pretoria, South Africa; Madrid, Spain; Stockholm, Sweden; Bangkok, Thailand; Ankara, Turkey; and Caracas, Venezuela.

agricultural situation reports to trade policy monitoring reports to commodity reports on hundreds of products.

As former U.S. Agricultural Minister-Counselor Bill Davis said, "From the beginning, the duties and services of an agricultural attaché have remained constant—to support the three traditional pillars of FAS: market information, market access and market development."

In addition to attachés' market infor-

mation responsibilities, P.L. (Public Law) 480 helped to establish a public-private sector partnership to promote exports—the Foreign Market Development Program (cooperator program).

The diverse duties and activities that attachés perform today originated with that legislation. The Agricultural Export and Trade Expansion Act of 1978 authorized a network of agricultural trade offices to represent the interests of the U.S. agri-

cultural export trade abroad, further refining services.

"The concept of an agricultural trade office was to partner with the private sector to provide a 'one-stop' facility for U.S. exporters to demonstrate their products to potential foreign customers," said Lyle Sebranek, FAS Deputy Administrator for Foreign Agricultural Affairs. Today, 17 agricultural trade offices operate in our major markets.

Wearing Many Hats, Attachés Accomplish Much

U.S. agricultural attachés wear many hats, serving as diplomats, negotiators, reporters and market representatives for U.S. agricultural producers, processors and exporters. Their accomplishments for U.S. agriculture are innumerable, as the following anecdotes illustrate.

Serving as diplomats representing U.S. agriculture to host country government officials, importers, traders and the public

In 1982, as John Beshoar, former agricultural officer at the American Embassy in Tokyo, Japan, neared the end of his assignment, he met with the Director of the Import Division in the Food Agency of the Ministry of Agriculture.

“Rice was the most sensitive agricultural issue in Japan,” said Beshoar. “The price paid to Japanese farmers was kept artificially high, and there was always a huge surplus. The idea of rice imports was anathema. Wild rice was included in the Japanese import ban.

“When I met with the director, I repeated what I had been telling him for years: that his staff had been presented with scientific evidence that wild rice is not rice, that it is produced by Native Americans, that produc-

tion is limited to small quantities, that the only potential market in Japan is upscale restaurants serving Western cuisine and probably not Japanese rice at all.

“I asked if he would approve my long-standing request to approve imports of wild rice before I was reassigned. Without batting an eye, he said, ‘O.K., I’ll do it.’ And he did.”

When Gerald W. Harvey was agricultural counselor at the American Embassy in Cairo, Egypt, in the mid-1980s, his staff was putting together the annual cotton report when they discovered that Egypt’s cotton consumption would overtake its declining production in the near future. With cotton imports banned, this meant Egypt would soon be unable to meet its cotton needs.

“We proposed that Egypt open its market to imports, using shorter staple U.S. cotton to offset some domestic demand. The added benefit would be to free up more Egyptian extra long staple cotton for export earnings. The officials accepted our proposal.

“After rapid action by the Egyptian government to remove import barriers, commitments by the U.S. government to provide export credit guarantees and technical support to the Egyptian spinning industry by the U.S. cotton industry, exports of U.S. cotton to Egypt were soon underway.”

Serving as negotiators, identifying and removing trade barriers to make U.S. agricultural exports more competitive

While former agricultural attaché William Doering was working in Washington, DC, in 1974, he joined an interagency committee headed by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms to negotiate changes to proposed European Community regulations that would impose tariffs on U.S. wines, effectively closing the market.

“We negotiated for nine years, getting one extension after another and reaching agreement on dozens of rules. On July 26, 1983, both sides signed a wine accord.

“The accord opened the European market to U.S. wines and brought consistency to the wine trade, allowing our exports to soar.”

In April 1975, when the war in Vietnam ended, John DeCourcy was an agricultural attaché in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. At the time, USDA had been donating U.S. agricultural products to South Vietnam under P.L. 480. It became unsafe to deliver the donated commodities, so ships diverted U.S. cargoes to other ports.

“On FAS instructions, I went to Singapore,” Decourcy explained, “where I found 32,000 metric tons of rice, 10,000 tons of wheat and 5,000 to 6,000 bales of cotton sitting at the dock. I took bids and wrote contracts to sell the products.”

In September 1998, Frank D. Lee, agricultural minister-counselor in Mexico City, Mexico, found a novel way to keep the Mexican market open to U.S. apples. “Mexico was the largest destination for U.S. apples, but the Mexican government had prohibited imports due to sanitary-phytosanitary concerns,” Lee explained.

“Working with the U.S. apple industry and USDA’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, I proposed a new concept to Mexican authorities—sign a letter of intent indicating that both parties intend to abide by specified provisions.

“Both sides agreed, the borders were opened and U.S. apple exports flowed again. The language of the letter of intent became



Rice harvesting in Coy, Arkansas.



Allied checkpoint, one of many Cold War guard posts along East-West frontier. Berlin, German Democratic Republic. 1973

the basis for the final agreement with Mexico. Today, Mexico continues to import U.S. apples at record amounts.”

Serving as expert reporters on commodity production and supplies, trade trends and market opportunities, providing timely information essential to the FAS global reporting system

When agricultural attaché H. Reiter Webb arrived at the American Embassy in Cairo, Egypt, in 1976, the first item on the schedule was to obtain livestock data.

“Unfortunately, the existing data was nine years old,” said Webb. “My predecessor had been evacuated from the American Embassy in 1967 after the Arab-Israeli Six Day War, when Egypt broke off diplomatic relations with the United States. We reconstructed the livestock data from 1970 onward.”

Robert J. Svec was assistant agricultural attaché at the American Embassy in Moscow, Soviet Union, in 1972.

“That year, the Soviets began buying grain earlier than anyone expected,” said Svec. “At the time, USDA did not require U.S. companies to report export sales, so there was no way of knowing how much grain the Soviets were buying.

“When the Soviets announced the amount they had purchased, the agricultural staff in

Moscow and FAS headquarters in Washington were shocked. The Soviets had purchased 20 million tons of grain—almost three times the amount they had purchased the year before.

“This event precipitated the start of USDA’s export sales reporting system, in 1973. It also temporarily changed the world grain market from one of surpluses to one of shortages.”

Debra Henke, former agricultural attaché at the American Embassy in Berlin, German Democratic Republic, explained the importance of thorough supply and demand analysis and the invaluable insights of foreign service nationals. “We discovered that there was more feed in the country than was necessary for the number of animals,” Henke noted. “A member of our German foreign staff surmised that there must be additional animals.

“After the Berlin Wall came down, we learned the Communist party had its own feedlots and was selling meat to the West. Our suppositions were correct—there were more animals being fed than the numbers showed!”

Serving as market representatives, working in concert with foreign market development cooperators to develop, expand and promote U.S. agricultural products to foreign buyers

In the 1960s, British consumers thought of asparagus as a white vegetable. H. Reiter Webb, assistant agricultural attaché at the American Embassy in London, England, was influential in changing their thinking.

“With \$2,000 to spend to promote fresh Florida asparagus as a green vegetable, I hired an advertiser,” said Webb. “We recruited young British women to wear green pantsuits and pose for photographs holding asparagus in front of a green MINI Cooper automobile. With photos and literature in hand, the advertiser decorated grocery stores throughout London for free. The advertising campaign went over well.”

One of agricultural attaché Shackford Pitcher’s most memorable experiences was on a Swedish ferry crossing the ice-covered Bay of Bothnia in the middle of winter to see how U.S. funds were being used in a food promotion event in the ferry’s restaurants and duty-free shop.

“I was worried by the pack ice the boat was plowing through as we left the harbor,” explained Pitcher. “I went to the bridge and met with the captain to thank him for his support. It worried me even more when the captain said the real danger is getting stranded in pack ice.

“I was very pleased when we got through the next day. The enthusiasm for the excellent U.S. steak dinner assured me our promotional funds were well spent.”



Walter Stern, U.S. agricultural attaché to Cote d’Ivoire, receiving award from U.S. Ambassador Nancy Nawls.

U.S. Agricultural Attachés: Witnesses to History

January 1961—United States breaks off diplomatic relations with Cuba's communist government—Havana, Cuba, Chester E. Davis, agricultural attaché.

June 5, 1967—Six Day War—Israeli, Egyptian, Jordanian and Syrian conflict—Cairo, Egypt, James A. Hutchins, Jr., and John DeCourcy, agricultural attachés; Tel Aviv, Israel, Volorus H. Hougen, agricultural attaché.

August 1975—Japanese "Red Army," a terrorist group, takes over the American Embassy—Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, John DeCourcy, agricultural attaché.

October 1975—Lebanese civil war forces closure of the Office of Agricultural Affairs at the American Embassy in Beirut and relocation to Damascus, Syria—Beirut, Lebanon, Shackford Pitcher, agricultural attaché.

Nov. 4, 1979—Iranian revolutionaries storm American Embassy, seizing 69 American hostages—Teheran, Iran, Henry Lee Schatz, agricultural attaché.

Oct. 6, 1981—Egypt's President Anwar al-Sadat is assassinated—Cairo, Egypt, Verle Lanier, agricultural counselor, and Clyde E. Gumbman, agricultural attaché.

Aug. 21, 1983—Philippine opposition leader Benigno Aquino, Jr., is assassinated—Manila, Philippines, Verle Lanier, agricultural counselor.

February 1986—Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos is overthrown. Corazon Aquino, widow of slain opposition leader, becomes head of state—Manila, Philippines, Verle Lanier, agricultural counselor.

June 1989—Chinese military uses force to suppress pro-democracy demonstrators in and around Tiananmen Square—

Beijing, China, David M. Schoonover, agricultural counselor; Suzanne E. Heinen, agricultural attaché; Jonathan Gressel, agricultural trade officer.

May-November 1989—The Berlin Wall, dividing West and East Germany, falls—Berlin, German Democratic Republic, Debra Henke, agricultural attaché; Bonn, Federal Republic of Germany, Gerald W. Harvey, agricultural counselor and Gary W. Meyer, agricultural attaché.

Jan. 16, 1991—Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 precipitates the Persian Gulf War—Manama, Bahrain, Philip A. Letarte, agricultural trade officer.

August 1991—The break-up of the Soviet Union begins—Moscow, Russia, David M. Schoonover, agricultural minister-counselor; James J. Higgistson and S. Rodrick McSherry, agricultural attachés.

Oct. 8, 1993—United Nations lifts most remaining economic sanctions against South Africa after a date is confirmed for the country's first universal suffrage elections, ending the era of apartheid—Pretoria, South Africa, James Benson, agricultural attaché.

July 11, 1995—United States normalizes relations with Vietnam. In August, the American Embassy in Hanoi officially reopens—Hanoi, Vietnam, Ross Kreamer, agricultural attaché.

Aug. 7, 1998—The American Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, is bombed, killing 247 persons, including Evans Onsongo, a Kenyan agricultural specialist in the FAS office, and seriously injuring two other FAS employees—Lydia Mbithi and Moses Kinyua. The American Embassy in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, is also bombed, killing 10 persons—Nairobi, Kenya, L. Henry Schmick, Jr., agricultural attaché.





The Foreign Service Act of 1980 gave agricultural attachés diplomatic rank. “That put agricultural attachés on par with our State Department colleagues of the same rank,” said Sebranek, “making us an integral part of each ambassador’s country team.”

Electronic Age Ushers in Change

Still, these incremental refinements did not change the attachés’ fundamental duties. Technological advances have exerted a much greater impact on their work.

In the early days, Sebranek recalled, “We rarely used the telephone. We got all our basic supply and demand information on shuttle cards. We filled in the numbers at post, attached the shuttle card to an airgram, describing the reasons for the changes and put the documents in the Embassy pouch.

“These documents made their way to headquarters in Washington as best they could,” Sebranek continued, “where statistical pools would take the information from the shuttle cards and transfer it to large data sheets, combining every country’s numbers on cotton, for example. The shuttle cards would be sent back to posts to await the next regular report. That’s how we put together our worldwide data.”

Regular mail, diplomatic pouch and State cables were also used. “With our independent cable system of the 1970s, the turn-around time for information exchange became days instead of weeks,” said Shackford Pitcher, former agricultural counselor. “As more offices installed fax machines in the mid-1980s, we gained instant communication.”

Verle Lanier, former agricultural counselor and now associate administrator for Operations and Management in



USDA’s Farm Service Agency, recalled getting his first personal computer when stationed in Cairo, Egypt, in the early 1980s.

Attachés began submitting reports electronically in 1981 via telemail, a precursor of e-mail.

“The electronic age has completely changed the way attachés do their work,” said Sebranek. “Today, we think nothing of picking up the telephone or the cell phone or sending a fax or an e-mail. It has made the job of an attaché both tougher and easier because there is so much information—it’s hard to know where to start sometimes. It is information overload on almost every topic!”

Most attachés say that commodity production reporting is much less important today than it was 50 years ago. As Richard Barnes, former agricultural minister-counselor, said, “That’s because there

are numerous alternative, timely sources of commodity intelligence.”

“However, market development and trade policy work have taken on much greater importance and require much more time and effort,” noted Gerald W. Harvey, former agricultural minister-counselor.

Reading Tea Leaves: What Lies Ahead?

Looking ahead, Sebranek said, “The attachés’ area of responsibility has drastically increased. Today, attachés must be knowledgeable about WTO (World Trade Organization) rules, trade-capacity building, agriculture’s effect on the environment, agricultural investment, science and technological advances and many other issues. The work is bigger and more complex.

“No matter how many offices we open or close or how much technology



▲ Attaché Gerald W. Harvey (second from left) with U.S. Feed Grains Council members Romano Graziani (left) and Halvor Kolshus (third from left), Tobin Armstrong (in hat, representing Secretary of Agriculture) and Polish officials at dedication of Council-sponsored beef-feeding project in Szczecin, Poland. 1976

Harvey, Kolshus and Polish officials look on as Armstrong cuts ribbon at project dedication. ►

changes,” Sebranek said, “some basic facts remain the same—without the hard work of our foreign staff and the support of our spouses, our work would be much more difficult.”

Thomas Hamby, former agricultural minister-counselor, said, “I see attachés evolving from nuts and bolts agricultural technicians to communications and pub-

lic relations specialists, who must understand and confidently represent U.S. agricultural interests abroad.” ■

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