

Memories Of Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz

SARA WYANT

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Note: Former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz, 98, died Feb. 2, 2008.



There are several words that could be used to describe Earl Butz: Devoted Husband, Father, Economist, Educator, Champion, and Secretary of Agriculture. But most of what he was can't be easily captured in any type of a title. And some of his best stories can't be appropriately captured in print.

For a lot of today's "Baby Boomers," President John F. Kennedy symbolized the hopes and dreams for those lucky enough to live in America in the early 1960's. A few years later, Earl Butz became a cabinet member and delivered a similar sense of promise and optimism for those wanting to make a living off of the land.

During his five years as agriculture secretary, net farm income more than doubled over the previous 10 years and farm exports tripled. He engineered a massive grain sale to the Soviets in 1972 and the Soviets essentially bought up the U.S. grain reserve. Much to the chagrin of environmentalists, Butz encouraged farmers to plant "fence row to fence row" to fulfill the growing demand.

Many farmers remember those early "boom" years under Secretary Butz like no others.

"It was like a tremendous burden had been lifted," noted one farmer who sent us an e-mail after Butz's death, but asked not to be identified. "We were finally making money and we had a champion who was watching out for us. He made us proud to be producing food for the world."

Indiana Farm Bureau President Don Villwock described Butz as a "dear friend, a hero and a mentor."

"Although not every farmer agreed with him, we knew we had a Secretary that stood up for us and our industry, no matter what the venue: inside the Administration, in the press, or in the halls of Congress. He gave us pride and hope and a vision of what we could be."

His Purdue family

Earl Butz was a part of Purdue University's College of Agriculture for most of his career, beginning with his undergraduate days in the late 1920's. He became the first person to earn a Ph.D. in agricultural economics from Purdue and later served as dean of Purdue's agriculture department from 1957 to 1967. He was dean of continuing education and vice president of the Purdue Research Foundation from 1968 to 1971. In 1999, Butz donated \$1 million to Purdue's Department of Agricultural Economics.

Well into his 90's, you could still find him working on the Purdue campus, nestled in an office on the fifth floor of Purdue's Agricultural Economics Department. Photos of former Presidents, world leaders, and other dignitaries lined the walls. Behind his desk he kept family photos of his two sons, six grandchildren and his beloved wife Mary Emma, who he lost in 1995 as a result of Parkinson's disease.

Of all the jobs he has had over his lifetime, Butz told Purdue's "Connections" newsletter in 1994 that the one he enjoyed the most was "teacher."

"Teaching was the most pleasant thing I did. It's an honor to influence students, and the opportunity to teach is a tremendous thing," he says. "It still makes my day when I walk across campus and someone tells me how much I may have influenced their life. I just hope it was for good."

The national stage

In his governmental posts, Butz was Assistant Secretary of Agriculture in Washington, D.C., from 1954 to 1957 under President Dwight Eisenhower. He was Secretary of Agriculture from 1971 to 1976 under Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford.

As Secretary, some would argue that Butz's long-term impact on farm policy was negligible. He was able to ride the wave of farm profitability that stemmed from the food and nutrition programs and trade expansion started under previous Democratic administrations, noted a long-time farm policy observer.

Yet, others say it was Butz's belief in the free market, rather than government intervention, that was his strong suit, as well as his legacy.

In a conversation with Agri-Pulse senior editor Stewart Doan, Arkansas Secretary of Agriculture Dick Bell called Earl Butz the most effective Secretary of Agriculture in American history. As Assistant Secretary for International Affairs and Commodity Programs, Bell was a member of Butz's inner circle at USDA.

Bell said that Butz "definitely had his ideas on where he wanted agricultural policy to go, which was market orientation, and kept pushing that. If you look at farm policy today, it really goes back to that watershed period when we began to open up markets in the communist world for our products. It changed farm policy completely, and I think for the good of U-S agriculture."

Bell also credited Butz with changing Washington's attitude toward farm policy.

"He recognized that we never could pass farm legislation without having the food stamp program as part of our department, and we worked with the urban people to get that done," said Bell.

Butz was also an articulate spokesman for farmers and ranchers inside the Nixon and Ford cabinets. "He had the respect of Henry Kissinger, Bill Simon and Alan Greenspan, who were the key people in those days; because they

admired his intellect and understanding of agriculture and the role it played in the U-S economy," Bell emphasize

Bell recalled the day in early October 1976 when Butz tendered his resignation to President Ford. He told an obscenity-laced racist joke that was overheard and later reported by John Dean, the former White House official who was indicted as part of the Watergate scandal, and who was then working as a reporter for Rolling Stone magazine.

"I know that people like Alan Greenspan tried to talk him out of resigning. I actually went over his to apartment the evening after he'd submitted his resignation - it hadn't been accepted yet - and talked with him," said Bell. "But it was obvious that he felt he had poorly served the President and that he would be a drag on Ford's election chances and ought to move on."

Popular speaker

Although his quick wit and one-liners eventually led to his downfall from the cabinet, Butz always loved to give speeches and was an entertaining and highly sought after speaker. Ironically, he spent a few days in jail for not fully reporting all of his speaking fees to the Internal Revenue Service.

Former Agriculture Secretary Jack Block agreed that, even in his later years, Butz could command an audience like few others. He remembered an Ag Journalists Conference 8 years ago in Washington, D.C. where he and Butz both spoke.

"At age 91, Earl Butz was as effective as he had been as Secretary. At

lunchtime, Secretary Dan Glickman, who was President Bill Clinton's Secretary, spoke. As Secretary Glickman finished his remarks, he turned to Earl and said, "I just marvel how you can be in such good shape and do such a great job at your age. What do I have to do to be like you?"

Never missing a beat, Secretary Butz, a strong Republican, rose to his feet with one hand in the air and shouted, "change parties." It brought the house down."

Adapt or die

About ten years ago, I was fortunate to interview Butz when I was the Executive Editor of Farm Futures Magazine. We profiled him as part of our "Twenty Questions" feature. It was a memorable event for me, both personally and professionally. When he became secretary, I was only 13-years old, the youngest of four kids growing up on our Iowa farm. But I can remember how my Dad talked about the tremendous impact he had on our family's income, and more importantly, the optimism he created for people like my brother to enter the business.

For the interview, I drove from the Chicago area to the Purdue campus with 60 fresh-baked loaves of bread in my car, delivering them to his office for the photo shoot. He had long used bread in his presentations to illustrate how farmers receive such a small share of food dollars. "It costs more to move that loaf of bread past the checkout counter than it cost to put the wheat in it, he told me when asked why it was such an effective prop. "Then they bitch about the farmer getting the heel and one slice."

At 88 years old, his gate was not quite as quick, but the fire inside, the mental quickness and the jokes ... oh, the jokes are still firmly within the former Secretary's grasp.

He also had a strong understanding of how some aspects of farm policy rarely change once they are implemented. I asked, "What will happen when the Freedom to Farm Bill phases out farm program payments by 2002?"

"Anyone who believes we're going to stop direct payments to farmers in 2002 also believes in the tooth fairy," he told me.

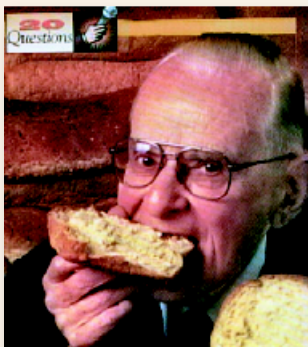
His proudest accomplishment as secretary? "Promotion of exports and opening up our foreign markets. And again, one of my best accomplishments was making farmers proud of their profession, everyone."

The last question: What message would you like to see inscribed on your tombstone?

"Well, I won't have one because I'll be next to my wife in a mausoleum. But I suppose if I have a saying I'm known for, it would be "Adapt or die". Δ

Editor Sara Wyant publishes a weekly e-newsletter covering farm and rural policy called Agri-Pulse. For a four-week free trial, go to www.Agri-Pulse.com

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Note: The photo above is the main image that originally appeared with the story, courtesy of Farm Futures. We titled the feature: "Butz still has Bite."



President Nixon with Secretary Butz in the Oval Office.