

The Man Who Saved Lives

By the time he died at the age of 95, Norman Borlaug had probably saved more lives than any other individual in history. In 1970 he won the Nobel Peace Prize for developing new sorts of wheat that were planted in Mexico, India, Pakistan and other countries. In those regions, where up to a billion people might have been starving if it were not for his enormous efforts, he was a hero. It seems Borlaug himself wasn't motivated by any desire for personal fame. When the call came through from the Nobel committee, it was 4 a.m. in Mexico where he lived, but he was already out in the fields. His wife found him and told him the news. "Someone's pulling your leg," he replied. Assured that he had been awarded the prize, Borlaug didn't take the day off, but carried on with what he was doing, saying he would celebrate later.

Norman Ernest Borlaug grew up on his grandfather's farm in Iowa, the USA. Although he came from an unprivileged background – the school where he was taught up to the age of 13 had one room and one teacher – he made it into Minnesota University, where he studied forestry. This was the era of the Great Depression, and Borlaug could see the effects of hunger all around him. Intending to help his fellow men, he switched courses to plant pathology, earning himself a doctorate, and later a job with the DuPont chemicals company, for which he worked on military projects during WWII. Then in 1944, he was asked by the Rockefeller Foundation to join its scheme to create a hardier sort of wheat to make hunger in Mexico less severe. Although DuPont offered to double his salary, if he stayed with them, Borlaug jumped at the chance given by the Rockefeller Foundation, and flew south, temporarily leaving behind his wife Margaret. What he did to help the people there was taking seeds from plants that had been grown in summer in the central highlands to the northern lowlands in winter, in this way making use of two harvests per year. By 1963, 95% of Mexico's wheat came from Borlaug's sorts, and the overall harvest had been increased by 6 times.

Attempting to achieve similar results on the Subcontinent, Borlaug faced many problems including the war between India and Pakistan, which broke out when the first shiploads of seeds arrived in 1965. Nevertheless, within a decade both countries were able to grow as much wheat as they needed. In his Nobel acceptance speech, Borlaug admitted the "population monster" had merely been beaten back, said *The Times*. To defeat it, man would have to create even better crops.

In the years that followed, there was considerable opposition to the Green Revolution he had led to. Some said his new methods had caused a great social and economic change, with very serious results for farmers. Borlaug had a "sharp reply" for his critics, said *The Guardian*. Many of them had never known "the physical feeling of hunger," he said, and would sing a different tune if they "lived just one month surrounded by the misery of the developing world, as I have for 50 years." He must be the only Nobel Peace Prize holder who has also been admitted to the US National Wrestling Hall of Fame.

The research to which Borlaug devoted his life continues, but it is currently estimated that each night half the world's population goes to bed after eating grain from one of the crops he invented.