THE WORLD FOOD PRIZE

Once a year, as Iowa's grains ripen into pure gold, the world turns its eyes toward our state—home of the World Food Prize.

Iowan Norman Borlaug, winner of the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize (and subject of the previous article), advocated for years that a “high-visibility” award be established for agricultural research. His vision took form when the World Food Prize was established in 1986. But after the prize lost its initial corporate backing, a new sponsor had to be found.

Since 1984, another Iowan—Des Moines businessman John Ruan—had also envisioned a food prize. William B. Friedricks, history professor at Simpson College, details the history of the World Food Prize in his biography In for the Long Haul: The Life of John Ruan (Iowa State Press, 2003).

Ruan knew how to make things happen. He had turned a Depression-era one-truck operation into the nationwide Ruan Transportation Management Systems, and amassed considerable wealth and power. In 1990 Ruan endowed the prize and—with the help of other Iowans—made Des Moines the prize headquarters and the site of the annual ceremony and symposium. Ruan chairs the World Food Prize Foundation.

"Iowa has always been the heart and soul of America," Ruan said in 1990. "Having the World Food Prize in Iowa allows us to focus the world's attention on improving the global food system and the important role that education plays in achieving that end."

The president of the World Food Prize Foundation is also an Iowan—Kenneth M. Quinn, former U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia. Raised in Dubuque, Quinn began his diplomatic career in the American Foreign Service as a rural development officer in Vietnam. Working with farmers there, he "introduced new technology that increased their crop yields and lifted many Vietnamese out of poverty," Friedricks writes. In 1978, he "returned to Iowa to join Governor Robert Ray's administration. Quinn played a major role in the governor's Indochinese refugee resettlement program and served as the executive director of Iowa SHARES, a humanitarian program that sent food as well as doctors, nurses, and medical supplies to Cambodia."

He returned to U.S. State Department work until he retired and moved back to Iowa to head the World Food Prize Foundation.

As Friedricks points out, many Iowans besides Borlaug, Ruan, and Quinn worked hard in the early years to secure the prize and make Iowa its home. And the project keeps growing. Now, the World Food Prize Youth Institute and an internship program connect young Iowans with students from other nations, leading scholars, and World Food Prize laureates. In 2002 the Iowa legislature designated October 16 as "Norman Borlaug/World Food Prize Day in Iowa."

That month, the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum hosted a symposium, "Four Iowans Who Fed the World" (the four papers presented there appear in this issue).

All across the state, Iowans are developing cultural, educational, and humanitarian events to tie in with the World Food Prize—events like food bank drives, Chinese and Jewish harvest festivals, community conversations focused on hunger in Iowa, a vintage auto tour on Iowa’s farm-to-market roads, lecture series, and art exhibits inspired by grains and grasses and the Iowa landscape. The day is also closely tied with the United Nations’ World Food Day.

Known informally as the "Nobel Prize for Food and Agriculture," the World Food Prize has been given to laureates from Bangladesh, China, Cuba, Denmark, India, Mexico, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United Nations, and the United States.

Fighting world hunger needs to be on our minds throughout the year. But as the Des Moines Register recently said, "There are times to relish Iowa and to nourish the sense of this being one of the Earth's favored places." The glorious autumn harvest season, when Iowa shows its food-producing might, and World Food Prize Day, when laureates are honored in Des Moines for their global work, are surely among those times.

—Ginolie Swaim, editor