Communist in the Cornfields:

Roswell Garst’s Citizen Diplomacy

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Individual Documentary

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I have always been intrigued by the Cold War and while researching this topic, I came across a fascinating photograph of Nikita Khrushchev holding hands with an American farmer in the middle of a cornfield. As I researched the man in the photo, I discovered that the Iowa farmer, Roswell Garst, and Nikita Khrushchev had formed a unique friendship that greatly impacted relations between the Soviet Union and the United States. Roswell Garst strongly believed in citizen diplomacy; the notion that private citizens can build relationships with foreign nations when governments and diplomats fail because citizens are not confined by policy and history. Khrushchev dreamed of bringing a corn belt to the Soviet Union. He believed expanding corn cultivation would solve the food insecurity problem in his country. In the midst of the Cold War standoff between the two superpowers, Khrushchev accepted an invitation from Roswell Garst to visit his farm to see first-hand America’s successful farming methods and agricultural practices.

I utilized the *Chronicling America* website to find primary newspaper articles describing Khrushchev’s visit to the Garst farm. I also accessed journals, papers, and books. I conducted oral history interviews which added depth to my project. I interviewed Elizabeth Garst, granddaughter of Roswell Garst, who provided a firsthand account of Khrushchev’s visit to her family’s farm. I also interviewed Harry Bookey, son of Lester Bookey who owned the meat-packing plant that Khrushchev visited in Iowa. A young Harry Bookey is pictured with Khrushchev in one of the most iconic photographs from the visit. I utilized clips from the interviews to provide first-hand accounts of Khrushchev’s visit to Iowa.

I discovered news footage and photographs taken during Khrushchev’s visit to Iowa. The two men were often captured holding hands as they walked through the cornfields; these images perfectly represented the idea of citizen diplomacy. The footage and photographs of protest signs
lining the streets as Krushchev entered Iowa, demonstrated the controversy and debate that the trip caused in America. I felt a documentary was the best way to capture this historic trip and the unlikely friendship between the Soviet Premiere and the Iowa farmer.

Roswell Garst welcomed Nikita Khrushchev to his farm in 1959, which sparked much debate among Americans; however, the visit between Garst and Khrushchev helped to form a mutual understanding between the Soviet Union and the United States. Khrushchev formed personal relationships with the people he met in Coon Rapids. Perhaps one of the factors that deterred Khrushchev from ever pushing the nuclear button was the reality of the destruction that nuclear war would cause. Khrushchev now personally knew the country and the people who would suffer from his missile strikes. Acting as a citizen diplomat, Garst allowed America to gain access to Soviet markets, something Eisenhower himself had failed to do. The small, simple action; the invitation extended by Roswell Garst, set in motion a chain of events that ultimately improved relations between the Soviet Union and the United States, and it all began with corn.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


This article illustrates how important Nikita Khrushchev’s visit was to the citizens of Coon Rapids, Iowa. The article details phone calls that Garst received from Coon Rapids citizens giving suggestions about what food and drinks to serve Khrushchev and how to entertain him during his visit to their town. I used this source to gain a better understanding of the magnitude of Khrushchev's visit to the small town of Coon Rapids.

Atwood, Mary. Letter to the editor. *The Des Moines Register* (Des Moines, IA), September 11, 1959.

This letter to the editor of the Des Moines Register by Mary Atwood demonstrates how many Iowans had differing opinions about Roswell Garst assisting the Soviet Union. This primary source illustrates how there were Americans in 1959 who opposed offering assistance to the Soviet Union. This source supports my research of the debate among Americans about whether Garst should host the Soviet Premiere at his home and farm.


When Nikita Khrushchev visited his father’s meat-packing plant during Khrushchev’s visit to Iowa in 1959, Harry Bookey was eleven years old. Bookey provided a first-hand account of the impact that Khrushchev’s visit had on his small Iowa town, and he also discussed the conversation he had with Khrushchev and explained the context of the famous picture that was taken of him with Khrushchev.


This article details the deal in which Roswell Garst offered the Soviet Union up to 300,000 bushels of corn which would fill 10 percent of Khrushchev's order for his “corn campaign.” This article helped me understand how Garst went about negotiating the sale of his hybrid corn seed to Khrushchev and the procedures he had to follow to ensure the deal went through as well as the importance of the state department agreeing to approve the export license. I used the headline from this article in my documentary.


This article explains why the Soviet Union lagged behind the United States in farming
and agricultural practices in the 1950s. The article describes how Roswell Garst had helped to innovate farming in the United States and how he was considered to be many years ahead of most farmers and agriculturalists in the science of corn production. This article helped me to gain insight into why Garst was so successful in farming and why the United States was superior to the Soviet Union in the area of agriculture.


This primary source from the Des Moines Register is a collection of photographs and captions of Khrushchev’s visit to the Bookey Meat Packing Plant in Des Moines. I used photos from this source in my documentary.


In this primary source, Iowa Governor Herschel Loveless details how the National Guard would be on duty in Coon Rapids during Khrushchev’s visit. This article helped me to realize the careful planning that was done in preparation for Khrushchev’s visit and that because he was visiting a common citizen in a small, rural town, resources were limited and the state government had to step in to ensure Khrushchev’s safety.


This collection of primary source photographs includes eighteen photos from Khrushchev’s visit to Roswell Garst’s farm. The photographs are file photos from the Des Moines Register, a newspaper that covered the historic trip in 1959. I used these photographs in my documentary.


This source contains footage of a speech President Eisenhower gave upon the arrival of Nikita Khrushchev to the United States. The President welcomes Khrushchev to the United States and speaks about his hopes for both countries to have a better understanding of each other. I used footage from this speech in my documentary.


This article illustrates how irritated Roswell Garst was by the vast number of reporters and journalists that were following him and Khrushchev through his cornfields. The article describes an incident in which Garst kicks a Times reporter who refused to leave the two men alone, as Khrushchev remarks to the reporters, “We will turn the bulls
loose against you.” I used information from this article in my documentary to depict Garst's displeasure with the reporters and journalists stomping through his cornfields.


This article describes how the Garst Farm “looked like occupied territory after an invasion,” referring to how thoroughly the farm was wired for sight, sound and security. The article illustrated how there were helmeted soldiers, armed with M-I rifles hiding in every corner at the farm. I used this article to describe the vast amount of media coverage there was of Khrushchev’s visit and the extensive security measures that were taken to ensure Khrushchev’s safety.


This article describes how the fast-paced nature of the trip had taken a toll on Khrushchev. Khrushchev, however, was excited to visit with Garst, and he had many questions for his friend. Khrushchev expressed his feelings about the visit when he remarked, “this is going to be a jovial day.”


This article depicts the day Khrushchev visited the Garst farm and illustrates how irritated Roswell Garst was with reporters and journalists who interfered with his visit with Khrushchev. The author describes how Garst picks up corn stalks and throws them at the reporters in anger. This article helped me to understand that for Garst and Khrushchev, the visit was not about being on TV or in the papers; the two men simply wanted to talk about corn.


This article discusses Nikita Khrushchev’s visit to Coon Rapids and specifically highlights Khrushchev’s speech that he gave in Des Moines. In his speech, Khrushchev proposed that the earth “Be furrowed by plows, not rockets and tanks,” indicating his great desire to improve agriculture in the Soviet Union. This source provided information about Khrushchev’s visit to Iowa and described how he hoped to replicate America’s success in agriculture.

Elizabeth Garst, granddaughter of Roswell Garst, was present at the Garst farm when Nikita Khrushchev visited in 1959. Ms. Garst provided a first-hand account of the events that occurred during Khrushchev’s visit and explained the lasting consequences the trip had on her family. This primary interview helped me to understand how the Garst family was looked upon by many as supporters of Communism by inviting the Soviet leader into their home and how even though Ms. Garst was a child at the time, she could remember how the visit changed her family and their small town forever.


The article discusses how corn was the single most important product in the Soviet economy and Khrushchev ensured the press covered and pushed the success that the Soviet Union was having in corn production. The article explains that from 1953 to 1959 corn production increased by nearly 700 percent in the Soviet Union. This source helped me to understand that even though Khrushchev’s “corn campaign” ultimately failed, the agricultural practices he had learned from Roswell Garst did serve to improve corn production in the Soviet Union and helped to feed the Soviet people.


I used a clip of John Lennon’s song Imagine at the end of my documentary because the song lent itself well to the message of hope for peace and mutual understanding between all people which is what I was trying to convey with my project.


This source is a video that I accessed through the Iowa State University online collection depicting Khrushchev’s visit to the campus in 1959 and his tour of the Home Economics and Agriculture Department. I used footage from this video to illustrate the number of spectators that came to catch a glimpse of the Premiere as he toured Iowa and the vast amount of security officials including National Guardsmen and police officers that were a part of the security detail for Khrushchev.
“Khrushchev’s Visit to Iowa 1959 - Film 2 Part 2.” Video, 10:43. Iowa State University Library Special Collections. 
http://www.youtube.com/user/ISUSpecialCollection#grid/user/DC4A7F14E8733E3C.

This film shows the news footage of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s visit to Iowa in 1959. The film is part two of a series of films depicting Khrushchev’s trip to America and focuses on Khrushchev leaving the Des Moines airport after a welcoming ceremony and going to the Hotel Fort Des Moines. I used portions of this video to provide footage for my documentary.

http://soviethistory.msu.edu/.

This source provides archival footage of Nikita Khrushchev as he gives an impromptu press conference at the farm of Roswell Garst. The video shows Khrushchev to be charismatic and very relatable to the American people. This video helped me to understand that Khrushchev changed the way many Americans viewed him because of the way he presented himself as a simple man, much like the farmers he addressed in Iowa.

Korengold, Robert J. “Russians Pin High Hopes on Khrushchev Trip.” UPI Archives. 

In this article, the author discusses how the ordinary people of the Soviet Union expected positive results from Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s visit to America. Diplomats during the time were calling the trip a “victory voyage” marking Khrushchev’s success in securing talks with Eisenhower and the fact that the Soviets had successfully launched Sputnik. This source helped me to better understand the hope that the Soviet people had for Khrushchev’s visit and how they saw the visit as a first step in ending the Cold War.


This article describes the “mob scene” of reporters and cameramen who surrounded Mrs. Khrushchev during the tour of the Garst farm. Both Mrs. Garst and Mrs. Khrushchev were irritated by the reporters and Mrs. Khrushchev was adamant that she be able to see everything that her husband was allowed to see. This source illustrated another aspect of the trip because it focused on the wives of Garst and Khrushchev and it helped me to understand that both women were just as interested in ensuring the visit was a success as their husbands were.

This article describes how while in Coon Rapids, Premiere Khrushchev enjoyed the simple life, including a country lunch and walks through the cornfields. The article helped me to understand that Khrushchev did not act pretentious while in Coon Rapids. He was smiling and cordial to the farmers and common citizens he met, which helped the people of Iowa to see the Soviet leader in a much different light.


In this article, Khrushchev is described as “red-faced and gesticulating” as he addressed a room full of diplomats. When addressing the Westerners, including the U.S. ambassador Charles Bohlen, he made the now-infamous remark “We will bury you.” This source helped to explain the history and context behind the "We will bury you" quote that fueled hostilities between the two countries.


This article provided me with information that helped me to deduce that Garst not only wanted to help Khrushchev increase the food supply in his country, but he also intended to discuss the ongoing Cold War with the Premiere. I used information from this article to support my historical argument that although Garst and Khrushchev were discussing ways to improve corn production in the Soviet Union, the relationship between the two men was the embodiment of what peace could be between the United States and the Soviet Union.


This article discusses how Khrushchev interacted with Roswell Garst during his tour of the Garst farm. The article describes how at one point on the tour Khrushchev gave Garst advice on how he could improve his corn production, to which Garst only smiled with no reply. Information from this article helped me to understand that the two men had a friendship that allowed them to be frank with each other and not become angered by the other’s remarks, which made their unlikely friendship even more extraordinary.

This article describes Nikita Khrushchev’s jovial mood during his visit to America in 1959. Many Americans did not welcome Khrushchev and there was debate in the country about the idea of a communist leader setting foot on American soil. The article illustrates how different the dispositions were between Khrushchev and many Americans at the time.

Sioux City Journal (Sioux City, IA). “‘K’ Tells Newsmen that He’ll Probably Stay With Coon Rapids Farmer on Visit.” August 1959.

In this newspaper article, Khrushchev tells reporters in Moscow that he will probably stay with Roswell Garst when he visits the United States. In the article, Garst is quoted as saying “I am going to love to have him see how we farm.” The article illustrates the close relationship between Garst and Khrushchev and how each of the men valued the friendship they had forged.


This article written by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Lauren Soth is “what started it all.” In the editorial Soth who states “We have no diplomatic authority of any kind,” invites Khrushchev to send any delegation he would like to Iowa to see the success and farming practices of Iowan farmers. This source helped me to understand the background story behind how the USSR delegation came to visit Iowa prior to Khrushchev's visit in 1959.


This article written in September 1959 describes the safety detail that was charged with guarding Premier Nikita Khrushchev when he visited the United States. The article explains how police officials worried about protecting the Soviet leader during his free time and the possibility that there would be a mass picketing by Anti-Communist organizations. This article helped me to understand how the safety of the Premiere was of utmost importance because many people and groups were not happy about having a Communist in their country and wished harm upon the Soviet leader.
Secondary Sources


The Cold War Roadshow is a documentary that tells the story of Nikita Khrushchev’s unprecedented trip across America in 1959. The documentary provided context as to what was happening globally during the time of Khrushchev’s visit to the United States. I used this source for the clip of President Eisenhower’s speech in which he publicly invites Nikita Khrushchev to visit the United States.


This article contains lectures given by Sergei Khrushchev and Rachel Garst at Drake University in celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the historic visit of Nikita Khrushchev to the Garst farm in Coon Rapids, Iowa in 1959. Sergei Khrushchev explained how the relationship between Roswell Garst and his father developed in the context of the Cold War, and then turned to Rachel Garst, granddaughter of Roswell Garst, and remarked, “Your grandfather was one who made a hole in the Iron Curtain.” I used the information from this source to support my thesis that Roswell Garst was instrumental in forming a mutual understanding between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.


This article describes Nikita Khrushchev’s trip to Coon Rapids, Iowa in 1959. The article discusses how Khrushchev wished to feed his people by improving agriculture practices in his country, and he looked to Roswell Garst to help him increase corn production in the Soviet Union. This article helped me to better understand the events that led up to Khrushchev's visit to Iowa and the repercussions Khrushchev experienced as a result of his failed “corn campaign.”


The author of this blog describes how corn and Khrushchev shared a similar fate in the Soviet Union with neither having made a great impact on the Soviet Union. This article helped me to better understand that although Khrushchev’s intentions were noble with his “corn campaign,” because the crop never proved to be a success in the Soviet Union, corn ultimately contributed to his fall from power.
This episode of *Farmweek* discusses the historic trip of Nikita Khrushchev to Coon Rapids, Iowa, and how important agriculture was to improving life in the Soviet Union. The episode provides video footage of Khrushchev’s trip to the Garst farm as well as quotes from Garst himself discussing his hybrid corn seed, which I was able to incorporate into my documentary.

In this video, Roswell Garst walks through his cornfields and discusses his Hybrid corn seed and how it is processed at a plant in Coon Rapids. I used footage from this video which showed Garst in his cornfields.

This radio program discusses three key factors that contributed to the success of agriculture in the United States in the 1950s. These factors included the use of fertilizers and insecticides, the improvement of farm technology and machinery, and the development of hybrid seed, specifically the hybrid seed corn developed by the Roswell Garst seed company. This source helped me to better understand why Roswell Garst was regarded so highly by the Soviet Union and how important his contributions were to agriculture around the world.

This paper focuses on Nikita Khrushchev’s unlikely friendship with Iowa corn farmer Roswell Garst, and how their friendship culminated in Khrushchev’s unprecedented trip to the Garst farm in 1959. The paper explores how the friendship between the two men helped to ease tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States. This source helped me to gain an understanding of how Garst’s invitation to Khrushchev to visit his farm was a form of citizen diplomacy and how Khrushchev’s visit helped to improve relations between the Soviet Union and the United States.

In this article, Elizabeth Garst, granddaughter of Roswell Garst, describes the relationship her grandfather developed with Khrushchev and how Garst wished to both make money by selling his corn to the Soviets as well as help the hungry Soviet people.
Ms. Garst also describes the legacy that she and her family have created at the original Garst farm. I used this article to gain insight into the relationship between Roswell Garst and Nikita Khrushchev and Garst’s reasons for wanting to help Khrushchev.


Bill Horan, a fourth-generation farmer, describes how Khrushchev’s visit to the Garst farm in 1959 did not end the Cold War; however, their meeting was beneficial and citizen diplomats today can learn from these two men. The blog helped me to understand that even today, food insecurity is a problem in many areas of the world and how citizen diplomacy can contribute to improving this issue.


In this article, Sergei Khrushchev, son of Nikita Khrushchev depicts his father’s trip to Roswell Garst’s farm in Iowa in 1959. In the article Sergei states “The friendship between those two men, Garst and Father, was no less fruitful than many months of negotiations by veteran diplomats.” This article was important to my research because it confirms my thesis that Nikita Khrushchev’s trip to Roswell Garst’s farm provided a mutual understanding that led to improved relations between the Soviet Union and the United States.


This full-length documentary depicts Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s trip across America in 1959. The film demonstrates how Khrushchev managed to win over the American people during his trip and how he came to love the American people. I used footage of Khrushchev interacting with Americans in Coon Rapids from this film in my documentary.


This article discusses the 50th Anniversary celebration honoring the historic visit by Nikita Khrushchev to the farm of Roswell Garst in Coon Rapids, Iowa in 1959. This source demonstrated how even after fifty years, the visit is still very important, especially to Iowans. The article introduced me to the Pulitzer Prize-winning author William Taubman’s book Khrushchev: The Man and His Era which I later read and used for contextual information for my documentary.
This article depicts the Soviet-American relations during the Cold War as a series of highs and lows that were perpetuated by a handful of specific events. This article supports my historical argument that Krushchev’s trip to the United States led to the development of a mutual understanding, an idea that was both a cultural and a political exchange, which set the stage for better relations between the two nations during that period of the Cold War.


This biography of Roswell Garst depicts the life and legacy of Garst including the unprecedented visit to his Iowa farm by Nikita Khrushchev in 1959. The book illustrates the story of Garst’s dream to bring his innovative agricultural techniques to other parts of the world, including the Soviet Union. This source helped me to better understand the story behind Garst’s activities in the Soviet Union and how this led up to Khrushchev visiting the Garst farm.


This article describes the events from 1956 to 1959 that led up to Khrushchev’s visit to the Garst farm including Khrushchev’s infamous “We will bury you” speech, the launching of Sputnik, and the “Kitchen Debate” with Vice-President Richard Nixon. The article also describes Khrushchev’s priority of expanding Soviet agriculture. This source helped to provide context and a timeline of events that led up to Khrushchev’s visit to Iowa.


This article defines citizen diplomacy and explains how Roswell Garst was one of the most famous examples of a citizen diplomat. The article helped me to understand what citizen diplomacy is and that when Roswell Garst invited Nikita Khrushchev to visit his farm and offered him help to improve the Soviet’s food supply, Garst was demonstrating citizen diplomacy.
In this article, the author discusses Khrushchev’s desire to increase the Soviet food supply by increasing the corn surplus in his country. The article describes how Khrushchev's infatuation with corn resulted in his disappointment and humiliation and ultimately contributed to his political downfall. I used this source for background information and context when creating my script.


*Khrushchev, The Man and His Era*, written by Pulitzer Prize-winning author, William Taubman is a biography of Nikita Khrushchev. The book details the life and rise to power of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. The book was beneficial because it provided context for my project and helped me to better understand why it was important to Khrushchev to improve agriculture in his country.


This source discusses Khrushchev’s obsession with corn and how instead of focusing on efficient methods of growing and harvesting corn as Garst had instructed him, Khrushchev was only interested in increasing the amount of acreage that would be planted in corn. This article helped me to understand that Khrushchev’s failure to replicate Iowa’s corn belt was directly linked to him disregarding the plan and instructions that Garst had given him about how to increase corn production in the Soviet Union.


In this NPR program, host Allison Stewart, interviews Peter Carlson, author of the book *K Blows Top*. The interview focuses on Carlson’s book which includes many newspaper clippings and headlines from Khrushchev’s two-week trip to the United States in 1959. This source helped me to understand how many in the media portrayed Khrushchev as a hothead who would throw a fit if he did not get his way and how the headlines during the time influenced the way many Americans viewed the Soviet leader.
This article focuses on what is referred to as “corn diplomacy.” The author discusses how Roswell Garst reached out to Nikita Khrushchev and offered him a way to improve the food supply in his country with the introduction of corn. I used the information from this source to explain that the true importance of Khrushchev’s trip to Iowa was the mutual understanding that was formed between the two men, which ultimately translated into a newfound hope for peace in the midst of the Cold War.