

Little Iowa Town Pours Out in Cold to Fete Its Nobel Laureate

By SETH S. KING

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CRESCO, Iowa, Dec. 19— "I've been waiting for 50 years to see Cresco listed as the only town on a map of the world, and now I've done it," Ralph Fitzgerald, a Cresco oil dealer, exclaimed today.

He was pointing to a map posted on a Cresco High School bulletin board that had been used recently in a nationally circulated quiz about Dr. Norman E. Borlaug, the Cresco farm boy who nine days ago was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

And Cresco was indeed on the map today as about half of its 3,880 residents poured out in the 6-degree cold of northeast Iowa to pay tribute to the town's most illustrious son, whose development of new wheat strains has cut deeply into the world's hunger.

Before the day ended, the 56-year-old graduate of Cresco High School had been feted with a luncheon, a reunion with his high school class, a two-hour reception by the townspeople, and a social hour and banquet by his close friends.

Often Came Back

Those who came did not do so out of curiosity, Dr. Borlaug, born on an 80-acre farm southwest of town, grew up here. Before, as well as after, winning the prize, he was plain "Norm" Borlaug, who came back frequently to see his mother and father, now in their 80's, and his two sisters.

Yesterday Cresco was encased in an icy fog that was so dense it obscured the modest water tower and grain elevator that mark the center of its six blocks of shops and taverns.

But today the sun was painfully bright on the crusty snow, glinting off the ice-covered, all-purpose banners, mixed among the Christmas decorations along the main street that say simply, "We welcome you."

Dr. Borlaug, a lean, vigorous man with the muscular neck of a high school wrestler, which he once was, responded in a series of news conferences and speeches by discussing many of the world's and the country's problems, some of which are



Dr. Norman Borlaug with daughter, Norma Jean, and 6 1/2-month-old grandson, William

either directly related or opposite to Cresco's.

He was repeatedly concerned with the population explosion, saying that whatever he had accomplished in the green revolution of increased food production was threatened by more hungry children.

"All we've really done is buy time, maybe 20 or 30 years," he said. "We have instilled some hope where there was complete despair. But every time the clock ticks there are 2.2 more new mouths to feed. That ticking keeps eroding away what progress we've been able to make."

But Cresco has not been worried about a population explosion. Its concern is a population drain. In the 38 years since Dr. Borlaug graduated from high school, Cresco has gained barely 500 people.

Even if Dr. Borlaug had not been back to Cresco during the 26 years he has been breeding wheat strains in Mexico, he would have seen little change in Cresco today. The old Elm Street Cafe, where he and his peers hung out, is gone. It has been replaced by a Teen Center, and Cresco's high school wrestling teams, a chief concern of the town today as they

were when the Nobel Laureate was a battler in the 145-pound class, are still winning state championships.

But the farmhouse Dr. Borlaug was born in is vacant now and the land rented to a neighboring farmer. And as the farms have become larger, the farmers on whom the Cresco merchants depend have become fewer.

Within the last five years the town has gained a small auto parts factory and a milk processing plant, and hopes to announce the opening of another small plant soon.

"Some people around here ask why we don't leave well enough alone and not keep try-

ing to bring in something more from the outside," said Arnold Baker, secretary of the Chamber of Commerce. "Well, each year we lose a few more jobs from the farms. If we didn't get something else in, we wouldn't even be here to welcome a man like Norm Borlaug."

This area is Iowa's "little Norway," and the descendants of the hearty Norwegian immigrants who settled here still talk of the need for more hard work and proper living.

So does Dr. Borlaug, a blunt, articulate man who still speaks with the lilting Norwegian inflection of this region.

"Our youth today have a

legitimate complaint," he said. "We've overprotected them. There's no better medicine in all the world than hard work. These youngsters have boundless energy, but the way things are now most of them can't even get a summer job. There's simply no way they can take part."

Shocked by Drug Arrest

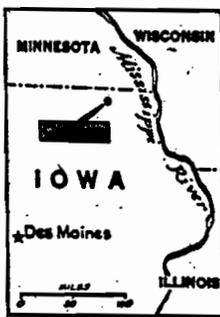
The town was shocked earlier this month when a 19-year-old youngster was arrested after selling \$95 worth of marijuana and LSD to an undercover narcotics agent. At least a dozen Cresco youngsters were involved, and people here said it might rise to as many as 50 before the investigations were completed.

"We're no worse than a lot of other little towns in Iowa," said Mrs. Virginia Turvold, wife of the local newspaper editor. "We've just been frank enough to admit it. The trouble is some of our young people haven't much else to do. So they drive over to Decorah [20 miles] where there's a college [Luther] and they can buy what drugs they want."

Dr. Borlaug repeated his concern over the pressures of exploding urban populations and the fact that too few people today seem able or willing to break themselves out into the open spaces still left.

The Nobel Prize-winner once captained the Cresco High School football team, and he still occasionally lapses into football argot.

"That is like we've had to do to make our new wheat be of any benefit," he said. "You have to be brutally frank with some governments; you have to push them into using it. It



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doesn't do any good to get 10 or 15 per cent yield increase. They won't listen to you. You have to throw the long bomb. You have to make a 100 or 200 per cent gain to change their old, worn-out practices. Sometimes maybe the people who crowd into the cities are the same way."

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