

# HALL

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By EDWARD G. LOWRY

Author "Washington Close-Ups," "Banks and Financial Systems," etc. Contributor Political and Economic Articles to Leading Periodicals and a Writer of Recognized Authority on the National Government's Business Methods.

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XIX.

### JUST KEPT GROWING

The origins of these antiquated, cumbersome, costly, inefficient pieces of the national machinery that we call the executive departments show how any establishment if well watered with government money will expand and hold together, no matter how conflicting and incongruous its functions. Hardly one of these great business establishments—for that is what they are—was planned. As they are today they just happened.

Take the Department of Agriculture, for example, one of the greatest and most complex and widespread of all the departments. It is in closer touch and more directly affects the greatest number of people in the United States than any other branch of the government with the possible exception of the post office. It began in 1839 with an appropriation of \$1,000, taken from the patent funds for the distribution of free seeds and the collection of agricultural statistics by the patent office, then a bureau in the State department. Now look at the darning thing. It is all over the place.

The title of the department indicates its most important field of activities, but its functions have been extended to include the whole range of rural industry and some branches of administration only very indirectly related to agricultural interests. For about 60 years subsequent to the Revolution the general interests of agriculture were left almost entirely to individual initiative. Federal activity was confined to relatively narrow limits and was merely sporadic. Soon after the national government was organized some attempts were made to establish a board of agriculture; but neither the first proposal in 1793 nor a second effort in 1817 was successful.

Shortly after the Revolution, following the example of Benjamin Franklin while in England, as agent of the colony of Pennsylvania during the years 1764 to 1775, American consuls and naval officers began the practice of sending home foreign seeds and cuttings for new crops, and of aiding in the introduction into the United States of new breeds of domestic animals. Even such small governmental participation was, in the beginning, rather extra-official.

In 1836 the commissioner of patents, one H. L. Ellsworth, began the distribution of considerable quantities of seeds and plants received from government representatives in foreign countries; and three years later through his influence an appropriation of \$1,000 was made for the purpose of procuring and distributing seeds of new plants, carrying agricultural investigations and collecting agricultural statistics. This was the historic beginning of the much-talked-about free seed distribution.

By an act of congress in May, 1862, since generally called the organic act, the activities of the government affecting agriculture were placed under a separate and distinct organization known as the Department of Agriculture. It did not rank, however, with the other executive departments, and the commissioner was not entitled to a seat in the President's cabinet. Isaac Newton, chief of the agricultural section in the patent office, was appointed the first commissioner of agriculture. Other officers provided by the organic act included a statistician, a chemist, an entomologist and a superintendent of the propagating garden and experimental farm.

The chrysalis was now ready to be broken. In 1889 the Department of Agriculture was elevated to the rank of the other executive departments and its commissioner was made secretary of agriculture with a seat in the President's cabinet. This was in Grover Cleveland's administration. In honor of its new rank a few more functions were taken on.

But that's enough detail. It kept on growing. Beginning with an appropriation of \$1,000 and two or three clerks, the department had, in 1910, employees to the number of 12,456, and an appropriation of \$12,965,636. Five years later the appropriation had grown to \$39,825,822 and the employees to 16,223. The employees in May, 1920, numbered 18,698 and the appropriation given by congress for the fiscal year 1921 was \$31,475,598.

The department has increased its cost of living in 82 years from a mere \$1,000—that is, \$43.33 a month—to more than \$31,000,000 a year—\$2,622,947.28 every month. That shows as clearly and as sharply as it can be shown how the high cost of government living affects your own cost of living.

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