

History
of the
U.S. Food and Drug Administration

Interviewee: Emil Corwin

Interviewer: Robert A. Tucker
Ronald Ottes

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Place: Chevy Chase, MD

RT: This is another in the series of interviews on the history of the Food and Drug Administration. Today, August 27, 2003, we are interviewing Emil Corwin, press officer from the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition. The interview is taking place [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] It is being conducted by Ronald Ottes and Bob Tucker of FDA's History Office.

Emil, would you please give us a brief review of your education and career experiences prior to coming to FDA. Then we'd like to go into the years you have spent with the agency.

EC: I was born in East Boston, Massachusetts on April 28, 1903. A year after graduating from the Massachusetts Agricultural College (now the University of Massachusetts) in Amherst, Massachusetts, I worked for the Springfield Republican, an independent daily in Springfield, Massachusetts. My nearly two years there as a staff reporter led to an opening on the press staff of the United Press in New York, then located near the Brooklyn Bridge in lower Manhattan.

My first day in the job was memorable for the size of the press room. It was as large as an armory, and the collective noises from teletype machines, Morse Code operators, typewriters, telephones, loud voices everywhere, and soon to include my voice. I used the phone frequently for interviews. Among those I interviewed was Amelia Earhart. I asked her what she knew about a flyer who was reported lost flying solo in attempting a long distance flight. Others I interviewed included Flo Ziegfield, the Broadway producer of the "Follies," and other productions, Lou Gehrig after he retired from the Yankees, and a character known as "King of

the Hoboes.”

RT: Regarding the pilot you contacted Miss Earhart about, was this an attempt to emulate Charles Lindbergh?

EC: Could be. At that time others were inspired to make long distance solo flights.

RT: Were you a cub reporter then?

EC: Well, having worked more than a year on the Springfield Republican, a newspaper that had to be on President Coolidge's desk in the White House every morning, I may be considered a cub graduate.

RT: Had you studied journalism in college?

EC: No.

RT: What was your college degree?

EC: Bachelor of Science. Although, my brief tenure with the United Press ended with the Wall Street crash of 1929, the college degree helped me land a job on the editorial staff of the Newspaper Enterprise Association (NEA), where for the next five years I worked at NEA's New York and Cleveland offices as a photo editor and feature writer. A co-worker on the NEA editorial staff was Bruce Catton, later to become famous as a Civil War historian.

During this period, in the early 1930's, NEA writers were instructed not to mention radio in their stories. The new medium of communication, radio, was considered a competitor to newspapers. My membership in the newly formed Newspaper Guild, under the leadership of

Heywood Brown, was also unpopular at NEA. So it was my good fortune that the National Broadcasting Company had recently moved to quarters in Radio City.

I joined the NBC Press Department in 1935 as editor of publications, and continued in that post until Pearl Harbor. I was then recruited by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington, D.C. to help develop radio programs that would stress the importance of food conservation and the role of the American farmer in growing record harvests for the allied war effort. A feature of this period was an all network Farm Mobilization Day featuring President Roosevelt, and a Stephen Benet "Thanksgiving Day tribute to the American farmer" titled "A Time to Reap."

My experience in Washington broadened when I joined the staff of the United Nations' oldest specialized agency -- the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 1935. I served as liaison officer between FAO offices in Rome headquarters and United Nations headquarters in New York. Later I was transferred to FAO in Rome to take charge of radio programs world-wide.

In 1952-1953, I served as a member of a five-man United Nations mission to South America to learn to what extent U.N. technical assistance to several countries had helped their programs in agriculture, education, fisheries, and health care. The mission was headed by Carlos Davila, former president of Chile. I wrote and participated in a series of six radio documentaries based on the mission finding. The series, featuring Melvin Douglas, was broadcast world-wide under the title, "We Saw Tomorrow."

RT: All of those activities that you were engaged in were a good precursor, I guess, to what you did for FDA?

EC: True. But now, the problem became difficult when I had to decide whether to renew my contract to stay with FAO in Rome. My wife, two sons and I had a very critical decision to make. We decided to leave, even though I had no clear idea what I'd do when we got back to the U.S.

RT: At that point, as I understand what you're saying, you were coming to the terminal aspect of a contract with FAO. Is that correct?

EC: Yes.

RT: When you came back, where did you next move after leaving FAO?

EC: I got a job with the American Cancer Society at its New York headquarters.

RT: Was that where you got into the smoking issues?

EC: Yes. Starting as a write in the press office, I was later promoted to head national press operations. When Drs. Daniel Horn and Cuyler Hammond, two big names at ACS, found in their research that there was a direct correlation between cigarette smoking and lung cancer, it was front page news in most newspapers. It was one of the developments that led to government action.

RT: Was this about the time Leroy [Edgar] Burney was surgeon general? I seem to recall that as a name in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare [HEW] who identified the smoking situation as possibly detrimental to public health.

EC: There may be others who could share that claim, but Luther Terry as Surgeon General was a dominant figure in discouraging cigarette smoking as a health hazard. When Dr. Daniel Horn became head of the National Clearinghouse for Smoking and Health, an unwieldy title, this paved the way for greater gains in public awareness of the hazards of cigarette smoking.

RT: Smoking issue publicity was your immediate responsibility before you got to the Food and Drug Administration. What were the circumstances for your joining FDA? Was it an opportunity that came along, or what did bring you to FDA?

EC: The appeal of a new health problem under the leadership of a scientist I greatly respected.

RT: Did you join FDA's Bureau of Foods?

EC: I don't know how the various agencies were lined up at that particular time. Since the Surgeon General was a key figure in the anti-smoking program, this would place it in the Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW).

RT: What I was inquiring about is, when you came to FDA, whether you were assigned to the press office for all matters, or whether you worked primarily with the food part of FDA. Do you recall who was in charge of the then Bureau of Foods at that time?

EC: Yes. In 1964, when I went down, that was the situation that we found. The press joffice was very small.

RT: I was thinking after you came to FDA, who was in charge of FDA's Bureau of Foods? You know, we've had several directors of the bureau.

EC: Yes.

RT: Dr. Virgil Wodicka, maybe?

EC: When I joined FDA, [Alexander M.] Schmidt was Commissioner.

RT: I was just trying to place your coming to FDA in time.

EC: Before I ame to FDA, the National Clearinghouse for Smoking and Health was an entity. Its offices were moved two or more times, before moving to Atlanta. I was one of those who chose not to move. It was then Jack Walden, FDA press chief, took me on as a member of his Press Office.

RT: When you first came to the FDA, what did you work on primarily?

EC: A variety of assignments writing press releases, articles for the *FDA Consumer Magazine*, responding to calls for information.

RT: So those articles -- did they relate primarily to food issues?

EC: Yes, but also to drugs, medical devices, legal activities, etc. One of the big issues was saccharin, which was on the list of taboos.

RT: How about the area of food additives?

EC: That, too. Of all the FDA-related documents I own, the largest number deals with smoking and health. I wanted to keep as much on the subject as I could, because I felt this was going to be a health problem that's going to last for a long, long time.

RT: Now, when Commissioner David A. Kessler was here, of course, that's when the smoking issue was really raised up.

EC: Exactly.

RT: To the forefront.

EC: He brought it back again. It was dormant for a while. And for a long time—

RT: There were some congressional hearings on the tobacco issue about whether the agency had jurisdiction in this area. During that period, was use made of some of the articles and papers that you had developed?

EC: Well, Kessler brought in a whole new staff to work exclusively on this issue. He revived interest in this problem, and helped make it the big issue it is today.

RT: When Dr. Kessler came in, he also did some other things that probably generated various press initiatives. Orange juice, remember? Did that generate work for you?

EC: Not really. I had nothing much to do with that, but I wrote about other issues, of which the orange juice was a part.

RT: What were some of those other issues that you worked on?

EC: Let me see if I can give you some of that.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

EC: The source of information would be in the *FDA Consumer*. Bbecause of a flooding problem that I had in this apartment, I had to put things—sort them out all anew. Things that

I've had for fifty, sixty years suffered in that flood. So I'm still not clear—after you finish the interview—I'll show you in the den where I've tried to put these things together again, but I can easily give you the bylines pieces that are in the *FDA Consumer*.

RT: Perhaps that could be added as an addendum to the transcript.

EC: Yes, I can give you a number of them, and, as a matter of fact, I've been looking over some of the things that I wrote then, but I do have a rather considerable record on that. I knew that you were coming, and I've tried going through my papers to pick out some of the things that I thought you might be interested to see.

RT: Do you remember Wallace [F.] Janssen?

EC: Of course. Wallace and I were very, very close. Very close.

RT: So you would have collaborated on some press projects together?

EC: Wally was already with FDA when I joined it, as the historian. A wonderful writer and a wonderful friend, but he died, you know, just three or four years ago.

RT: Yes.

EC: I'm sorry not to have that retentive memory that I used to have, but I do have information that I'd like you to see, if you will. I don't want to exclude anything that I think you might want for your record.

RT: When the agency had—and they've had a number of these occasions—been called up to the Congress for hearings, were you as a press person ever involved in supplying information for testimony?

EC: No. They had a bunch of lawyers there, and still have, I guess, at the FDA.

RT: They have the Office of Legislative Affairs.

EC: I was at one hearing, and that's about as much as I had.

RT: What hearing was that?

EC: Well, it was a hearing when the senator from Ohio, Cleveland—who has long since retired; I'd recognize his name—was asking questions in a particular aspect of the smoking program.

RO: It seems that when Jack Walden was here, whenever there was a press release on a recall or something like that, if it was concerned about a food, the press release usually came from you.

EC: Yes. Yes. Oh, yes.

RO: So I guess, in my mind, that most of the things dealing with food in the FDA, any press release on it came from Emil Corwin.

EC: No, not from me. I was only one of the press officers there, that's all.

RT: At the Foods building downtown, FDA (FOB 8), were there other press officers at that location? We thought you were the only one.

EC: No, no, no, no. No, it was more than a one-man operation for as far back as I can recall. The only one—I probably was the only—one of the first, or maybe the first. I came down with Dan Horn, when the center was a small group and this fledgling anti-smoking program.

But, you know, Luther Terry, when the first annual report on smoking and health was issued by the HEW, that attracted a great deal of attention, because that first report was developed by a group of ten outstanding scientists of the day. There's a whole romantic story about the whole situation. How these ten distinguished scientists would meet somewhere at NIH [National Institutes of Health], in some subbasement someplace, under lock and key. Everything was very quiet, kept quiet about what they were working on for the longest time. I think one man from *Newsweek* was fired because he dared to get a scoop on something they were doing at that time. I'm not clear about this. This was before I came to the program.

But it was a big press item at that time, so that after this discussion of some weeks in the subbasement of NIH on this issue, smoking and health, under lock and key, finally the first report comes out, and the press crowded up to the doors to find out what that first report on

smoking and health was going to be. And they went so far as to close the doors after all the seats were taken. They closed the doors, as I understand it, because they didn't want anybody to rush out to get on a telephone to get to Wall Street to report what they had heard. They didn't want anybody to scoop anybody else. For this part of it, I wasn't around there then, but that is the story that I understood to be the case. There was no question about the meeting of these ten outstanding scientists in a secret area, well guarded, before that first report came out.

RT: Well, Mr. Corwin, were you still at FDA when the issue of making health claims on foods occurred? I think one of the big cereal companies wanted to advertise their product as being helpful in avoiding heart attacks, and this became a very controversial issue. Were you with FDA during that period of time? That issue must have generated press work.

EC: Well, if it did, I didn't have much to do with it. When it came to foods, like saccharin, you know, the conditions they had for the use of saccharin, this was a national thing that I was in the thick of it. From that period on—my role was—don't forget, I was under the main—at FDA, I was one of several people who were working in the press office. So we all had our share of turning out releases and writing for the *FDA Consumer* and answering phone calls.

Incidentally, nowadays the press officers—

[Begin Tape 2, Side A]

RT: As we changed tapes, you were talking about the role of press officers, what the difference in the role of a press officer is currently as compared to earlier times in government. Has that markedly changed, or is it just about the same?

EC: Well, it's changed. It's changed. We had a certain amount of liberty in dealing with the media. Calls would come directly to me, for example, from wherever, mainly with people who were familiar with press officers, and you'd be able to answer them. You felt confident enough to give them an answer, and so your name got in the paper. "According to Emil Corwin, FDA spokesperson," that sort of thing. I don't think you'd see that much nowadays at all.

RT: Is that a matter of different or more—

EC: Controlled.

RT: —strict administrative policy, do you think?

EC: Yes. I do.

RT: In other words, as you said, the press officer can't express himself based on his information alone. Now it has to go through a clearance. Is that correct?

EC: Yes. Yes. This used to be a source of much concern to me, anyway, knowing that what you say is going to have your name in with it in most cases, so you had to be pretty damn sure

that what you're saying is correct. And sometimes you'd get a call, and you'd take it down and say, "I'll call you back to answer your question," and I'd check it further and make absolutely sure that the answer to the question is right, is correct. I had a pretty good record on that, for not saying things that were not accurate.

RO: Aside from saccharin, do you recall any other big incidents while you were there at Foods? Cyclamates and—

EC: Well, it's hard to say. Golly, at this point, you know, my memory isn't as clear as it formerly was, but there were other issues, yes. There are certain holiday concerns. What's the holiday when kids go around asking for handouts?

RT: Halloween.

EC: Well, there was an issue about Halloween. It was not a major issue, but it was, at the moment, of some concern of kids getting foods, candies and so on, that were spiked with other things that shouldn't be in it, so that got a lot of press around Halloween time.

But in going over the pieces that I did, I'd have a pretty good rundown of some of the key issues that were—oh, the labeling issue was the biggest of all. It's hard to believe that a decade ago, how little information you'd find when you picked up a product or a can as compared to what you find today. I find myself holding two or three different products to see how much they have of certain ingredients and how little it is in one and more in the other, so I choose the one

that has the less percentage of fat, let's say. So the whole labeling program was one of the great innovations, you know. It's a real big advance.

RT: Do you remember any commissioners who were either very supportive or, perhaps on the other side of the issue, very sensitive about press matters?

EC: That's the kind of question that I would not be able to answer. You'd have to be very close. I wasn't that close to the top to know. I'm sure that when I go to look at my writings—one of the difficulties that I had is that there's so much of it that when I—I try very hard to put everything FDA in one solid area, and it's very, very hard to do that because of the volume.

For the first time in my life, I've been very much concerned about what to do with this vast amount of material that I have, particularly with my brother, his career and my own. And I have had things that I've saved because of the historic value of his as well as my own background, for fifty, sixty years. And the blow of having this place flooded, damaging—some of the things that are so damaged. I have left them out to show what has been done.

RO: Do you have any plans now regarding what you're going to do with all of your books and articles here that you have written?

EC: Well, yes. What I'm doing is putting them in categories as best as I can so that whenever the time comes to turn these things over, my sons—I have two sons, who will know exactly what to save and what not to.

But, you know, I had letters and correspondence and articles and so on that I'd saved for many, many years, only to find that they were damaged and destroyed in this whole upheaval. As a matter of fact, it hasn't been resolved yet. I have it against the management here to resolve.

So the questions you're asking about, these are questions I have the answers to, but I'm not clear at this point about the answers. But I'll be going through much of my material which I think will interest you.

You know, I was looking through things, and I came across things—something like this. I hadn't realized about FAO and postage stamps. FAO—it's a small thing, airmail in the Philippines.

RT: Do you know if the Food and Drug Administration has had any commemorative stamps?

EC: Oh, yes, I think they've had—I think so. I'm pretty sure, because I think that just as recently as a few years ago, I was shown a proof or a sketch of a stamp that would be something like this.

RO: Mr. Corwin, you will be given an opportunity, after we have this taping transcribed, to review the transcription, and if there's certain things that you want to add, you can do so then.

EC: Let me tell you something a little apart from what you're asking about FDA. When I was with the Cancer Society and later on with—yes, the Cancer Society, I suggested to Cliff Reed, then head of the Cancer Society, to interview people who knew a great deal about smoking, professionals and doctors and others who had experience with lung cancer, to have interviews

with them and to record what they say about the cigarette smoking and their involvement with this particular program.

And a name that—I don't know whether you know George Seldes or not. George Seldes was a distinguished man of letters who never tired of protesting. Yes, look. I opened it right here. "The Origin of the Cigarette Cancer Exposé." Now, this was a man who died not too long ago, but who was a lifelong advocate of stronger measures against cigarette smoking, and I was interested enough in it at the Cancer Society, on my own, to visit him in—he lived in New Hampshire near Dartmouth College. I spent the weekend with him and had a lot of correspondence with him about this issue, and I have a number of his papers. I have a number of his records, tape recordings.

This is a man who was very distinguished, and he took an early interest in cigarette smoking, long before people began to realize what a menace this was. He used to get out a letter, something called *In Fact*, which was just a four-page thing, and hammering away at this terrible habit. And I have tape recordings of him. If you'd like them, I'd like to turn them over to you.

RT: It could be that Dr. Susan Junod, who's a full-time historian and has worked a lot on the writing of tobacco issues, might have an interest in them. Before she came over, she expressed hope that we could elicit from you some commentary about your involvement with that public health problem.

EC: Yes. Well, keep in mind that I was a minor cog in that whole thing, but nevertheless, we did big things to sound the alarm.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

EC: If you want to take these, you're welcome to them.

RT: Well, we might take them. Thank you. Let us take them with the commitment that they be returned to you.

EC: No hurry, because I haven't had occasion—I tried to sell this, to have interviews on tape, to tape interviews with other people who were equally well informed about this issue and could speak about it. And I wrote to people in government as well as here, and they didn't go for it, so—

RT: Well, let me pass these on to Dr. Suzanne Junod—

EC: All right.

RT: She can return them to you after she's examined them.

EC: Don't worry about it. Don't worry. What did I say, '79 there? 1979?

RT: Yes. I'll have to look. I can't tell the date.

EC: Well, I was just curious because I believe it was around seven years ago.

RT: It may say on the tape itself.

EC: July of 1979. In Windsor, Vermont, it is, not New Hampshire. That's his home. You look him up. He's quite a distinguished person.

RT: Well, thank you.

EC: You're very welcome. What is this?

[Crosstalk]

RT: Well, Mr. Corwin, we've covered a broad range of your experiences. As we conclude, is there any comment you would care to make in summation, about either your personal experience in FDA or about the agency, as to where you think it may or ought to go in the future as far as press matters are concerned?

EC: Well, I think it's interesting to have been with this problem from a very early period, particularly since I myself had been fascinated by this habit. This is a bit of personal history, which is sort of—I smoked cigarettes. I think most newspaper people did, when I worked on the newspapers. We always had a pack of cigarettes there by your typewriter. You'd get stuck on a paragraph, you'd pick out a cigarette and smoke.

My first experience with tobacco was as a boy, working on a tobacco farm. This was in Connecticut. It was where they grew tobacco, Shady Grown Tobacco. And at the end of one hot day in the field, the farmhand picked out of his back pocket some leaves of tobacco, and he started to chew it, and I must have looked at him very longingly, and he said, “Would you like a chew?” So I took a chew, and, you know, within less than a minute I became very sick. It was a hot day, and he said, “Sit down under the tree over there.” Oh, boy. And I was out sick. I lived in the owner of the farm’s main house. I couldn’t go to work the next day. I was sick.

However—this is interesting—three years later, I’m now working in Atlantic City as a waiter in Childs Restaurant. You probably don’t remember these, but Childs Restaurant was on the boardwalk, and through two or three summers of my college years, I waited on tables in Childs. One day on my day off, walking by a store, I saw tobacco in the window, cut black tobacco, black, juicy. I went in and bought it. I went in and bought that plug of tobacco. Then I came outside, tore off a bit of it, put it in my mouth, and said, “Oh, my gosh, I have the same feeling that I had on the farm a few years before when I got terribly sick.” So luckily, there was a restaurant right across the street, and I went in and I said, “Coffee,” or whatever, because it saved me, I think, from another crazy incident.

Now, to top that, to show you how you can lose your thinking process, years later, I’m now in the U.N. mission I told you about Bolivia. I was in Bolivia. My job was to interview people on what the United Nations was doing for their district. I went by the marketplace, and they were selling coca leaf in big burlap bags in the marketing area, and I thought, “Gee, I’d like to try that.” [Laughs] An old lady with dirty hands got out a leaf from a burlap bag, and I bought some of the leaves, and then you had that little metal thing that you take to get out the juice or whatever, and I took it to my room. I was all alone with a recording machine, and I

thought, “Let me put down the experience of chewing coca leaf.” And I chewed it, and every fifteen minutes or so I’d say, “Well, it’s a little numb on this side cheek,” this sort of thing. I forget now whether I wanted to swallow the juice or not to be sure I was getting the real impact of it, but I’m recording it as I went along. Now, fifteen minutes later, I said, “Well, the left cheek is getting a little numb,” and this kind of thing.

Well, the next morning when I came down to work four or five other people were there, and I told them about my experience. They thought I was absolutely out of my mind, because this was a place where typhoid—where the marketplace, they had a spell of typhus or something. But luckily, I pulled out of it. But I mention it to show you how crazy you can sometimes be, and that certainly was. But luckily, it didn’t go beyond that.

RT: Well, we appreciate your giving us this interview, Mr. Corwin, and we will proceed to get it prepared for a transcript so that it can ultimately be put in the National Library of Medicine, FDA Archives, for researchers to include in their review. We thank you very much.

EC: Not at all. It’s a pleasure. And if you’d like to—if these interviews with this author appeal to you, you may have them.

RT: Thank you.

EC: Because I won’t have time to do what I planned to do with it.

[End of interview]