



Beneficial Disasters

► **DISASTERS** that overtook American agriculture a decade ago had much to do with our preparedness for the present emergency on the food front.

For most city dwellers, the droughts of the mid-thirties have faded to disagreeable memories, like bad dreams we had last month. The weatherman remembers—he and the farmers. It was the first time in living men's memories that the Corn Belt had to write "failure" at the foot of the column when the year's crop was totaled up.

With the drought and heat came two insect plagues—grasshoppers and chinchbugs. Grasshoppers ate anything they could get a bite on. Chinchbugs attacked only grasses and grains, but they devastated field after field of oats, wheat and corn.

Men's eyes are sharpened by disaster. In a time when everything seems to be perishing, whatever survives is bound to be noticed. Two crops thus attracted attention to themselves. Hybrid corn, which was being adopted at a rather moderate rate by conservative farmers, stood up to the drought noticeably better than the older, more familiar varieties. Soybeans, which were also slowly making headway, were immune to the savages of chinchbugs, and apparently were not as much sought after by the grasshoppers, either.

In desperate need for some kind of catch crop to replace the ruined fields of grain and provide feed for livestock, farmers made late plantings of soybeans for silage and hay. In one Midwestern state alone, soybean acreage increased seven-fold in the first bad drought year. And in the few following years, farmers went over practically completely to the cultivation of hybrid corn. In the

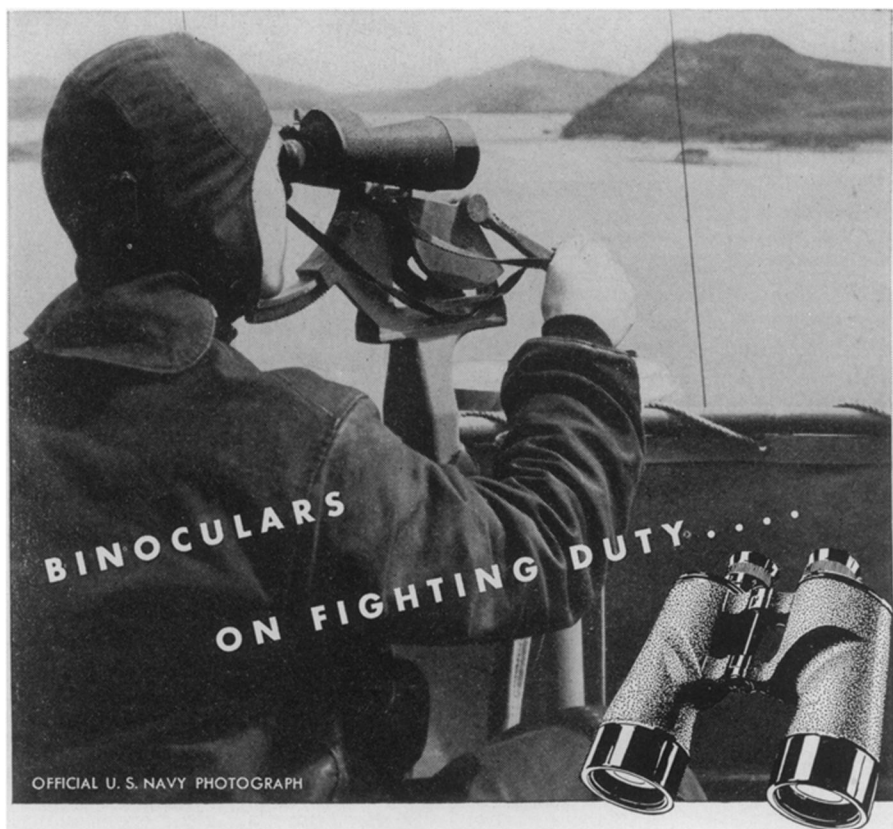
crop season just closed, less than one per cent of the corn acreage in Iowa was planted to the old-fashioned varieties.

Now, in a time of urgent national need, we are getting the benefit of those blessings that came to us in such thoroughly disguised form. Hybrid corn was not bred primarily for drought resistance; that is a virtue that was almost accidentally discovered. Increased yield, permitting the farmer to retire erodible sloping lands, had been the primary objective. Farm Editor Henry Wallace es-

timated that it would bring a ten per cent boost in yield per acre; actually the increase has been double that, or better. And soybeans, at first grown for cattle feed and sometimes to press for oil, now become a sturdy and acceptable supplement to our war-curtailed supplies of protein food.

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A yearling *bear* in Montana, apparently asphyxiated, was resuscitated by artificial respiration applied by Forest Service first-aiders.



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