



IN MEMORIAM

Robert C. Laben
Professor of Animal Science, Emeritus
Davis
1920 – 2005

Robert C. “Bob” Laben was born on a dairy farm on Nov. 16, 1920, in Darien Center, New York, to Victor and Ruth (Cochrane) Labenski. He graduated from Alden High School in 1938 and entered Cornell University where he was active in the mandatory ROTC program. On graduation from Cornell in June 1942, Bob was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Army Field Artillery and ordered to report for active duty at Ft. Niagara, New York. Eventually he was assigned to Battery B 311th Field Artillery Battalion, 79th Infantry Division and did his service as part of the invasion of Europe in 1944. He was wounded during the US Army’s move north toward Cherbourg, France. After recovering from his wounds, he was sent back into action during the “battle of the bulge” where he was seriously injured when his jeep struck a mine. Bob was sent to the Cornell for surgery and recovery, eventually receiving detached duty teaching survey and mapping courses and coaching rifle teams. In the spring of 1946, while final work was being done on his foot, he met Dorothy Lobb, a graduate student in human nutrition; they were married in November of 1946. Bob retired from the US Army as a Captain.

Because farming was no longer a viable career option due to his back and foot injuries, Bob applied to graduate school, with the help of Prof. Glenn Salisbury. He attended Oklahoma A & M at Stillwater in 1946 to pursue a master of science degree in genetics and animal breeding, and received his Ph.D. in 1950 from the University of Missouri working on a genetic analysis of Holstein dairy records. Bob was hired by the Department of Animal Husbandry at UC Davis in 1950. Over the next 36 years he was active in teaching and research and served as major professor for graduate students from many countries, including Pakistan, Sudan, Congo, Mexico, Venezuela, Chile, and Peru. Bob retired from UC Davis in 1986 as Animal Science Professor Emeritus.

Bob’s life was characterized by service to others. For more than 40 years he served as a volunteer hunter safety instructor for the California Department of Fish and Game; he was named Yolo Sportsman’s Association Sportsman of the Year in 1991 and safety Instructor of the Year in 1995. Dorothy and Bob supported many organizations assisting needy families in Yolo County, including the Short- Term Emergency Aid Committee (STEAC), Davis Community Meals, and the Food Bank of Yolo County. The Food Bank grew out of the Yolo County Coalition Against Hunger that was co- founded by Dorothy. Together, the Labens logged thousands of miles on their vehicles - wearing out several of them - collecting food from sources such as grocery stores, bakeries, farms and the Davis Farmers’ Market.

Many organizations benefited from the couple's endless energy including TREE Davis, Pine Tree Gardens, All Things Right & Relevant, International House, Davis Community Church, Great Valley Center, and the Military Officers Association of America (MOAA) Educational Assistance Program Scholarship Fund. A generous donation to the Department of Animal Science established an Educational Enhancement Fund for Animal Science undergraduates to support out- of- class educational opportunities. Bob's name appears at the University of Missouri on a permanent bronze plaque in the center of Tiger Plaza, on the South Quad of the Columbia campus. At UC Davis, a Laben, Robert, Library Special Collection (15.2 linear feet) contains extensive material regarding records on dairy herds at the UC Davis.

Bob's service to the university focused particularly on students and their welfare. At the department level he was a member of the undergraduate committee for much of his career and served as Master Adviser. He served on a number of occasions on the department's Picnic Day committee, contributing importantly to the development of exhibits that consistently attracted large audiences. He regularly served on committees of the Academic Senate, including Courses of Instruction, Undergraduate Scholarships and Honors, and Grade Changes. From 1972 to 1974 he was a Davis Division representative to the Universitywide Assembly of the Academic Senate and a member of its Executive Council.

Bob served very effectively as director of the campus Computer Center from 1965 to 1969. He was tapped for this task because the Center was having administrative problems and urgently needed someone who would be effective in getting a diverse group of people working together. Similarly, in research, he was asked to lead interdisciplinary research groups on topics important to California and the nation. One involved an investigation of DDT residues in milk; another involved a collaborative study with faculty from the School of Veterinary Medicine to reduce the incidence of mastitis in dairy cows.

Bob taught the department's Dairy Cattle Production course for most of his 36 years as a UC Davis faculty member. He also taught Introductory Animal Science, Lactation, and Animal Breeding and Genetics. Former students remember him as a caring and concerned teacher, but his greatest impact on students was his service as Master Adviser for the Animal Science undergraduate major, an appointment he held for 15 years. Bob's open-door policy welcomed students at any hour, any day. He met with every student coming into the major to gain an impression of the student's interest before assigning a faculty adviser. Remarkably, if a faculty adviser was unavailable for any reason, Bob personally provided the academic advice he/she needed; in effect, Bob advised hundreds of undergraduates each year.

In addition to formal advising, he was a strong student advocate who faithfully participated in student activities and clubs. His excellence as faculty adviser was recognized by the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences in 1983 when he received the Undergraduate Student Adviser Award. In honor of his faculty career and devotion to students, the Department of Animal Science established the Robert and Dorothy Laben Undergraduate Scholarship in 1993, based primarily on donations to the Students First Campaign. In 2006, a new Tercero Residence Hall, was named Laben Hall in his honor.

Bob Laben was an animal scientist, an academically trained geneticist, and most importantly a whole animal biologist who understood production agriculture. This knowledge allowed him to tackle issues facing the dairy industry at a systems level – not just genetics. Early research with inbred Jersey cattle elucidated the effects of inbreeding on milk production and milk composition as well as gestation length and reproductive traits. Inbreeding reduced peak milk yield, which detrimentally impacted economic return to dairy farmers. His understanding of the dairy cow and background in computer science, then an emerging technology, allowed him to become an important contributor to the development of DHIA (Dairy Herd Improvement Association), a record keeping system for dairy herd management and an important step leading to the remarkably successful genetic improvement programs now benefiting the dairy industry.

With the increase in number of cows on farms, dairies began to move from all pasture based feeding to confinement systems, which include the feeding of concentrates (grains and by-products). Feeding concentrates to lactating cows often caused milk fat depression, an economic loss to dairy farmers. Bob worked with nutrition colleagues to describe the mechanisms involved and elucidated solutions related to feeding dietary fiber that were widely adopted by dairy farmers. These studies also allowed Bob to help DHIA testing associations to move from chemical determination of milk fat (Babcock method) to infrared methodology that was more rapid and efficient for an expanding dairy cow population. Finally, Bob was well known for collaborative research he led on the toxicology and physiology of DDT contamination of dairy cows. They discovered that feeding DDT-contaminated feeds to lactating cows resulted in the storage of DDT in body fat and eventual secretion of DDT in milk. Bob was instrumental in developing recommendations that reduced the feeding of contaminated feeds and contributed to the reduction in DDT use on agricultural crops.

As a teacher Bob knew the importance of communication of research findings to clientele groups. The research information generated during his career can easily be found in the scientific literature, but he knew that to reach farmers he had to communicate through venues other than scientific journals. Bob was a key figure in establishing UC Davis Dairy Cattle Day a program initiated in 1961. Dairy Day, held each spring on the Davis campus, involved oral presentations by faculty, practical hands-on demonstrations, and published

proceedings for farmers to take home and read. Bob was a humble scientist, but his impact on the dairy industry will always be remembered and appreciated.

Gary B Anderson
G Eric Bradford
Edward J DePeters
Graham AE Gall, Chair