

Ralph Eugene Erb, 1917–1983: A brief biography

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Ralph Eugene Erb was born in Jerseyville, Illinois, a farming community in southern Illinois. As a youth, he was active in rural youth activities, particularly 4-H and Future Farmers of America. After graduation from high school in 1935, he enrolled at the University of Illinois, where he was a member of both the dairy and livestock judging teams. He excelled academically as reflected by his Bronze Tablet recognition upon graduation. Immediately after obtaining his B.S. in Agriculture, he began graduate study at Purdue Uni-

versity under the direction of Frederick N. Andrews. He obtained the M.S. degree in 1942 and started a Ph.D. program that was interrupted for military service in the U.S. Navy. Erb served 18 mo in the Pacific Theater of Operations and participated in the Palau and Philippine campaigns as a communications officer with the Command of Support Aircraft. He was discharged in 1946 as lieutenant (J.G.) and immediately resumed his graduate program at Purdue University, earning the Ph.D. in 1947. During these busy years of graduate study combined with military participation in the Pacific war, Erb married Rosetta ("Posy") Roodhouse in 1941. Their only child, George E. ("Ged") Erb, was born in 1953.

Ralph Erb joined the faculty of Washington State University as assistant professor of dairy husbandry in 1947 and rose rapidly through the ranks to become professor in 1953. Erb maintained an interest in both applied agriculture and basic science. He judged dairy cattle throughout the Northwest while encouraging his students to delve into the intricacies of steroid biochemistry, a newly emerging field. He maintained the work schedule of a farmer, being in his office at 6:00 A.M. and not leaving until 6:00 P.M. Jack Gorski (University of Wisconsin), a graduate student during this period, recalls a discussion with Erb about work ethic that was followed by Gorski's decision to give up playing golf. The research accomplishments of Erb and his graduate students at Washington State University were most impressive in the area of dairy cattle production, especially calf rearing and reproduction. Erb made extensive use of the detailed breeding records of the Carnation Milk Farms herd to document many important relationships between reproductive efficiency and management practices as well as veterinary procedures. He also initiated research on sex steroid hormones in cattle and other domestic species that would occupy the last 20 yr of his career. Although Erb was a strong leader with high standards, he was also very tolerant of idiosyncratic students and associates. For example, Gorski's dog even had a litter of puppies in the lab, and the event was tolerated with very good humor. On the social side, Erb and his wife, Posy, always made sure that all departmental graduate students, not just his advisees, had a great Thanksgiving dinner at the Erb's home.

Reg Gomes (University of California), Erb's last graduate student at Washington State University, recalls his service as faculty advisor for FarmHouse fraternity. In that capacity, he traveled all over Washing-

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ton visiting potential FarmHouse recruits. In anticipation of opening a new chapter house on campus in 1960, Ralph and Posy saved the chapter a great deal of money by suggesting the purchase of unfinished desks and wardrobes for all members and then sanding and staining the furniture with only minimal help from others. Erb was recognized with the national FarmHouse master builder award in 1962.

The many research accomplishments of Erb and his co-workers at Washington State University undoubtedly contributed to his being honored with the 1961 Borden Award for Dairy Production from the American Dairy Science Association. It was indeed a very high honor for a scientist who had only been a faculty member for 14 years and undoubtedly reflected the great productivity of Erb, his students, and co-workers.

Ralph Erb returned to Purdue University in 1962 as assistant head of the newly merged Department of Animal Sciences headed by his former major professor, Frederick N. Andrews. He continued as assistant department head after Andrews left in 1963 to become dean of the Purdue Graduate School, and Jake L. Krider became department head. Possessing an immense energy and capacity for work, Erb was able to maintain a large research program dealing with sex steroid physiology along with his numerous administrative duties. He twice served as acting head of Animal Sciences for periods of 6 to 12 mo, and he also served as associate director of the agricultural experiment station for 6 mo. He received the Physiology and Endocrinology Award from ASAS in 1967 and also served as president (1968–69) of the American Dairy Science Association (ADSA). Other honors included the 1978 National Association of Animal Breeders Award from ADSA and being named a fellow of ASAS in 1982.

During his 17 yr at Purdue University, Erb trained numerous graduate students who had very successful careers as independent scientists. The following section contains quotations from certain of these individuals to reflect Erb's personality and his direction of graduate students. Reg Gomes (University of California) came with Erb from Washington State University and was his first Purdue graduate student. He notes that "Ralph Erb has been described as intimidating, demanding, and hard-nosed, but I do not recall ever hearing him raise his voice, dress-down anyone, or make unreasonable demands. Rather, he always treated each of us as if we were as good as his expectations for us. For example, he never asked me, 'Have you read the recent paper by so-and-so?' but he began discussing the paper with me as though he knew that I had read it (whether I had or not). It was then my turn, if I hadn't, to admit that I hadn't read it or bluff (which never seemed to fool him), or to resolve that I would become as current and knowledgeable as he was. I think that he helped each of us to discover what we could be at our best." Another student from this period, Ron Randel (Texas A&M University), confirms these

sentiments, recalling that "Ralph Erb served as a strong role model and mentor for students. He challenged his students to excel in science. His example and training in critical thinking and use of the scientific method has served his students well throughout our careers."

Allen Garverick (University of Missouri) recalls that "while I was a graduate student, Dr. Erb was assistant department head, but still carried on an active research program. Dr. Erb demanded much from his graduate students, but expected no more from them than he expected of himself. During the many evenings that students spent in the lab or office, Dr. Erb was also working and often stopped by the lab on his way home. Although busy, he always had time to visit with his students or students of other faculty. A legacy of this attitude is that many of his students stayed in academia and made noteworthy contributions to the science of reproductive biology. His program was also one of the earlier ones that carried out collaborative studies with other scientists. Many of his students followed his example of collaborative work with others as their careers matured. Certainly, his students learned to work together as graduate students and to carry their share of the load. Colleagues and former graduate students often still get together at scientific meetings, and the discussion invariably reverts to their days at Purdue and to Dr. and Posy Erb."

Boon P. Chew (Washington State University), Erb's last Ph.D. student, recalls that "Dr. Erb's philosophy had always been to work hard, work efficiently, and plan ahead. He cared deeply about his students, and he never expected his students to do whatever he was not willing to do himself. What always impressed me was his deep knowledge of so many disciplines. Yet, his serious side was always balanced with his wit and sense of humor. There were many weekend visits to Burger King when he almost sent me rolling on the floor with laughter. If I were to describe Dr. Erb with one word, it would be that he was a great TEACHER."

It seems obvious that Erb's greatest contribution is his legacy of graduate students and junior faculty that he helped to develop into hard workers, critical thinkers, and clear writers. He often stated that the accomplishments of his former students represented the greatest satisfaction of his professional career. Erb could be very demanding when, in his opinion, graduate students were not sufficiently motivated. However, any student or junior member of the faculty, like this author, wanting to work hard found a willing and cooperative partner in him. It was his intense desire that graduate students and young scientists have an environment where they could perform to the limit of their individual capacities. During his many years as assistant head of the Department of Animal Sciences, he fostered the career development of many junior scientists whom he had helped to select. He was invariably fair and generous with limited resources, but he also

provided invaluable guidance to junior faculty members about the pathways to academic success.

Reg Gomes (University of California) recalls with fondness the opportunities to go fishing and bowling with the Erbs, to play bridge and softball, to show cattle with Ralph, and to finish furniture with them both (see above). “No matter what Ralph was doing, he was always doing it with intensity. He was a fierce competitor, with his goals for himself serving as his toughest opponent. At the same time, he had a marvelous sense of humor and delighted in friendly contests of wordplay or sparring. He especially loved it the few times a secretary or technician would match him word-for-word.”

Erb served as major advisor for 26 M.S. and 20 Ph.D. students at Washington State University and Purdue University. He also served as a mentor for numerous junior faculty members. Through these former students and junior faculty members, Erb will continue to influence research in dairy production and reproductive biology to an extent that will undoubtedly exceed his own immense contributions through almost 300 research publications. He retired from Purdue University in 1978 and moved to Olympia, Washington, where, until the time of his final illness, he enjoyed his retirement while continuing to contribute to the scientific literature and engaging in consulting activities.