Memorial Resolution of the Faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Madison
On the Death of Professor Robert H. Deibel

Former Professor Robert H. Deibel passed away in Sarasota, Florida on January 25, 2020 at the age of 95. Bob was born on December 20, 1924 in Chicago, where he spent his youth. His college education was interrupted by World War II, in which he served as a paratrooper. He was wounded twice, once in the invasion of Holland and again in the Battle of the Bulge, receiving a Purple Heart both times. He was captured during the Battle of the Bulge but managed to escape during the chaos of battle.

After the war ended, Bob returned to Chicago and attended the University of Chicago, from which he earned his BS and MS degrees (1952). He then joined the American Meat Institute Foundation, where he worked as a bacteriologist and eventual chief of bacteriology. During this time, he concomitantly pursued a PhD program at the University of Chicago. Bob published a series of papers that enhanced our understanding of the microbiology of fermented sausages and developed a much-needed starter culture for the meat industry. To help support his family he also worked weekends as a medical microbiologist and supervisor at St. James Hospital. Bob earned his PhD in 1962 and in 1964 joined the Department of Food Science at Cornell University as a tenured Associate Professor.

In 1966 Bob joined the University of Wisconsin as an Associate Professor in the Department of Bacteriology, with a joint appointment in the Food Research Institute. He was promoted to Professor in 1970 and served as Chair of Bacteriology in the late 1970s. During his time on our faculty he taught food microbiology to hundreds of students and received the Jung Award for Excellence in Teaching in 1968. He also served as major professor for numerous graduate students, many of whom went on to become leaders in the field.

Bob’s research and teaching emphasized the translational aspect of microbiology for food production and public health. He embraced the Wisconsin Idea and helped many food companies solve food safety challenges they faced. One story he told was of obtaining water samples from the Madison sewage treatment plant, from which he isolated bacteriophage against Salmonella that he then used to control Salmonella contamination in a local dairy processing plant. Not an approach that one would take today, but it presaged current efforts to use bacteriophage to control microbes in the environment and to treat infected patients. Those of you who were in Madison in the 1970s may remember the Barbara Hoffman murders, at whose trial Bob was an expert witness.

Bob’s work ethic was huge, and he had an entrepreneurial bent that was ahead of his time. This led him to establish a microbiological testing company (Deibel Laboratories) that grew into a national leader. Eventually these outside activities and opportunities led Bob to resign his faculty position and focus on these business ventures, although he retained an affiliate appointment in the Department of Bacteriology.

After leaving UW-Madison, Bob and his wife Carol operated nine food-related laboratory companies, which he and his son Charles later managed. Bob remained actively engaged with these companies and was a regular presence at the annual meetings of the International Association for Food Protection, until the last years of his life, when chronic health problems made it difficult for him to travel.
Bob received numerous accolades and awards for his many contributions to food safety. These include recognition by the American Meat Institute for his contributions to the meat and poultry industries (2008), the Barnum Award from the International Association for Food Protection (2009), the William C. Frazier Memorial Lectureship in (2010), and election to the Wisconsin Meat and Livestock Hall of Fame (2012).

Throughout his lifetime Bob was devoted to his family. He is survived by his wife Carol, his son Charles, his daughter Virginia, and grandchildren. Bob wished to contribute to the training of future generations of scientists who would continue his legacy in food microbiology and food safety. He and his wife Carol made an extremely generous donation that funds two graduate fellowships: The Robert and Carol Deibel Fellowship in Food Safety, and the Robert and Carol Deibel Fellowship in Probiotics.

Scientist, educator, food safety expert, entrepreneur; Bob Deibel had a lasting impact on UW-Madison and beyond.

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