



# A rewarding life unfolds due to positive influences and encouragement

By Lori Ward Bocher

It's interesting, sometimes, how life unfolds. Some encouragement and support, a scholarship, some invitations, a desire to be challenged – and you go from being a Kansas farm boy to Dean of a prestigious college at a major university. That's how life unfolded for Elton Aberle, the new Dean of the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

As a boy, he never really planned to go to college. And, as a college student, he assumed he'd go back to the family farm. But by meeting certain people or experiencing certain events at critical times in his life, he has ended up spending his life not on the farm, but on college campuses throughout the Midwest.

"I'm a native of northeastern Kansas, the small town of Sabetha," Dean Aberle relates. "I was born (1940) and raised on a general livestock and crop farm – the typical type of farm at that time. We raised corn, grain sorghum, oats, alfalfa, red clover. We had beef cattle, dairy cattle, pigs, chickens. We were typical.

"As anyone would at that time, I had my chores. I learned how to do field work, how to chop weeds," he continues. "When my brother and I were old enough that we left to go to school, the dairy cows disappeared from the farm. Dad said if he didn't have the help he wasn't going to continue milking cows."

## **A special scholarship...**

Dean Aberle was active in FFA during his high school years and he eventually became an FFA state officer. His FFA advisor was the first to influence his career path. "There was this scholarship in feed technology that was offered by the feed industry," Dean Aberle explains. "My FFA teacher said it was something I should look at. I applied, I received it, and I had no idea what feed technology was other than it dealt with manufactur-

ing feed for the animal industry.

"The only reason I went to college was because I received that scholarship," he continues. "It wasn't very much – \$200, I think. But it paid tuition at the time. My FFA advisor definitely had an influence on my life by encouraging me to do something that my family had not really done before."

Dean Aberle's parents had a grade-school education. "So when I said something about going on to college after high school," he points out, "they looked at me as if to say, 'What?' But my dad was always one to say, 'If that's what you'd like to do, then I'll support you.'"

At Kansas State University, he majored in feed technology/milling industries for two years before switching to an animal husbandry major. "I had grown up on a farm, had a lot of animal experience, and became involved in meat judging and livestock judging teams at Kansas State," Dean Aberle explains. "There's a tendency to migrate to those things that really interest you,

and that's what I did."

## **Encouraged to continue...**

While in college, he assumed that he'd go back to the family farm. Enter the second person to have a major influence on his career path. "At Kansas State, I got to know a meat science professor who knew I was interested in that area of study," he recalls. "He was moving from Kansas State to Michigan State, and he encouraged me to consider graduate school. After graduating from Kansas State in 1962, I followed him to Michigan and entered his graduate program. Again, it goes back to the people you meet and the fact that they have confidence in you and encourage you to go on."

At Michigan State, he earned an MS degree in meat science in 1965 and a PhD in food science in 1967. "I specialized in the meat product and muscle biology area," Dean Aberle points out. This time, it was more of an experience, not a person, that encouraged him in his next career move.

"While in graduate school, I had

quite a bit of opportunity to assist in teaching. Once I had responsibility for an entire course," he explains. "I found out it was something that I liked very much, as well as the research. I enjoyed the interaction with the students and was stimulated by the fact that I could have such an influence on their lives."

#### ***Professor, then administrator...***

So in 1967 he accepted a position as an assistant professor in the Department of Animal Science at Purdue University. He progressed through the ranks to full professor by 1975. "My responsibilities were in teaching and research," Dean Aberle explains. "I taught the food chemistry course in their food science undergraduate and graduate curriculum. I also taught a course in meat science and conducted research in the meat science area."

In 1983, there was a knock on the door that prompted his next career move – one from teaching and research to administration. "The University of Nebraska invited me to look at their position as head of the Department of Animal Science," he recalls. "I had been in Indiana and Michigan for 20 years, and agriculture back on the Great Plains where I grew up had changed a lot in that 20-year period. It was intriguing to go back. It was a challenge because I didn't know if I could be successful

as a department administrator. I think I took the job more for the challenge than any other reason.

"I really never set out to be an administrator," he continues. "But the opportunity came up. It was something new. It was still in agriculture. It was much broader than the kinds of things I had been doing in meat science. And so I took the job."

Nebraska's animal science department includes livestock, dairy, poultry and meat sciences. Aberle continued to teach a little, but dropped his research program. He was in charge of more than 40 faculty members. He also assumed responsibility for a major building project – a new animal science building that was dedicated in 1988. "I still think it's one of the best facilities of its type in the US, designed for intensive teaching and research in the animal areas on a campus that's right in the middle of a city, just as the Madison campus is," he points out.

#### ***Finds his way to Wisconsin...***

After 15 years at Nebraska, there was another knock on the door. "Some colleagues encouraged me to at least put my name in the hat (for the position of CALS Dean at the UW-Madison). It turns out the college decided to make me an offer," Dean Aberle explains.

"Again, it was never a long-term goal of mine to become Dean of a college such as this," he continues. "But this college has a tremendous reputation and tremendous programs. That made the job offer very attractive. I recognize this as one of the top, if not the top, agricultural and life sciences college in the US. There is no other college that has great strength in some of the basic life sciences as well as great strength in the applied agricultural, natural resource and environmental sciences. You won't find that mix, nor the record of accomplishments, anywhere else."

There was the challenge, too. "I do like to have new challenges because they stimulate me," Dean Aberle admits. "I tremendously enjoy working with people. As a teacher and researcher, most of the rewards and stimulation come from your individual accomplishments. But as an administrator, you get your rewards by watching the accomplishments of others. As a department head, for example, it gave me tremendous satisfaction when I hired young faculty mem-

bers who succeeded by developing good programs and having an impact on the discipline in which they were working."

When asked why he was chosen for the head job at CALS, Dean Aberle gives some possible reasons. "I think probably because there was evidence that I could work well with faculty, departments and other administrators," he says. "That I had a fairly good breadth of experience and an appreciation for agriculture. That I had done a fair amount of interdisciplinary work between animal science, food science and agricultural engineering. And, at Nebraska, I had a record of working with several departments, not just the animal science department, trying to build strong teams across disciplines while still maintaining the strengths of our individual disciplines."

#### ***First impressions...***

So in June of 1998, he assumed the position as Dean of the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the UW-Madison. His first impressions? "First, I've confirmed those impression I had before I came," Dean Aberle answers. "The quality of the institution, the quality of the faculty, the tremendous contributions this institution has made to science and to mankind – the record is pretty clear."

"Even though the institution has had some challenges over the past decade, there's tremendous strength on which to build programs for the future," he continues. Those strengths include:

- the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation (WARF), which takes endowment earnings from intellectual property and plows it back into grants for more research;
- a faculty that is very competitive in receiving research grants, both from the federal government and industry;
- very strong research programs;
- a talented student body in an environment that challenges them to succeed.

His goals for the future of CALS? "A major need for the future is to maintain what we have here – this unique mix of strengths in our basic biological sciences along with the agricultural and natural resource sciences," Dean Aberle answers. "The discoveries that are made in the

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basic sciences are linked to applications that are made in the agricultural and natural resource areas. It's a continuum."

Funding is a never-ending challenge. "The proportion of public funding through direct appropriations has decreased and the funding coming through granting mechanisms – primarily from federal grants but also from industry – has increased. We're developing greater linkages with private industry than we have in the past," Dean Aberle points out.

"This presents new challenges," he continues. "It means that you must be prepared to compete directly with other institutions for funding. You must be prepared to compete to maintain your excellence. You must be prepared to compete to keep that application of basic science moving."

#### **The turf area...**

To date, Dean Aberle hasn't had enough time to familiarize himself much with the turf program at the UW-Madison. But he does recognize its importance. "Turf programs have become more important to us over the past quarter century as we've seen greater and greater growth in industries such as the golf course industry," he says. "And as we become more of an urban society, the importance of a turf program or other urban horticultural programs grows. That is reflected in the development of the turf research center here and in other changes."

Dean Aberle has had a brief tour of the Noer Facility. "But I was out of town when the turf people had their field day, so I've not yet had a chance to learn about the program and facility in detail," he adds. In the past, his association with turfgrass people was mostly with plant breeders who were breeding grasses for grazing livestock.

"I do enjoy golf," he points out. "I had a chance to play at University Ridge one time. It's an outstanding course."

He has also enjoyed learning about Wisconsin during his travels to field days and other events, and by visiting with alumni. "It's a beautiful state," he says. "I had very little experience in Wisconsin prior to coming here."

#### **A real Midwesterner...**

Dean Aberle has spent his entire life in the Midwest, and that's by choice. "I'm a Midwesterner," he

admits. "The people in Kansas, Michigan, Indiana, Nebraska and Wisconsin all share a pretty common kind of philosophy. They are very friendly and open people, but they tend to be a bit more conservative. I guess by nature, because of my background, I can interact with and appreciate our Midwestern people and industries."

Dean Aberle met his wife, Carrie, while a student at Michigan State. "I

acquired a wife and two degrees at Michigan," he says. Their two daughters were born while he was at Purdue. Both are married now, with one living in Des Moines and the other in New York City.

Off campus, his interests tend to take him outdoors. "If I can get away I like to hunt. And golf. Those are the two things I enjoy doing outdoors more than anything else," he concludes. ▀

