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Lifelong Student, Teacher

Career, personal life intertwine for animal scientist, CAB leader Larry Corah.

by **Steve Suther**, *Certified Angus Beef LLC*

Growing up on a 1950s North Dakota farm, Larry Corah engaged his curiosity by helping to try the next new thing. A couple of decades prior, his dad, Leonard, kept learning after eighth grade by working for farmers and noticing differences.

The Leonard and Liz Corah farm west of Park River, N.D., enjoyed a close relationship with the Extension service and anyone who'd join in the continuing education. Its many classrooms, from wheat plots to potatoes, turkeys and Shorthorn cattle enterprises became occasions for other farmers to learn.

"If there was something innovative, our place was probably one of the first to try it," Corah recalls. When rural electric cooperatives brought power, it lit up the Corah house and barn first. When that could automate the milking parlor, it did,

before the next installation powered a silo unloader. The cows were among the first on area farms bred by artificial insemination (AI).

"My dad was curious about all the new things and how they could fit," he says, "so our place was like an NDSU (North Dakota State University) experiment farm."

Publicity was ongoing.

"There were constantly stories being written up with newspapers and magazines, so that always seemed like a normal part of farming and raising cattle," Corah says, noting their dual-purpose herd made for a steer finishing pen next to the dairy.

Like his father, Corah learned by doing — especially in 4-H and FFA — but took little interest in books until, as a senior near the bottom of a small class, he realized he wanted to study animal science at NDSU.

On the road to learning

The general nature of freshman classes and the distraction of playing college baseball didn't make for a great start, but an older fraternity brother served in a program that matched struggling first-year students with mentors.

"This guy saw something and chose me, thought he could make the most improvement in my grades," Corah says. Responding to the vote of confidence, a suddenly serious student was on his way to finishing in the top 10 of 300 NDSU seniors in 1964.

Future bride Mary helped him think about the future, too, as they met in college and married upon graduation.

Was life with Larry everything she expected?

"No, not at all," she says today with a wry

► **Above:** Larry Corah received the Livestock Publications Council Headliner Award and the Feeding Quality Forum Industry Achievement Award in 2016. He has retired from CAB to spend more time with wife Mary and family that includes their four children in four states.

smile. “I thought we would live in North Dakota, probably on a farm somewhere.”

It looked that way for a year. After that long as county Extension agent in the state, Corah wanted more and applied to graduate school at Michigan State University (MSU), where he earned a master’s degree in ruminant nutrition in 1967.

“I thought graduate school would be more about livestock judging,” he says. “Well, it turned out I had to do projects and a thesis. I also got to work with the preeminent Extension feedlot specialists in the country, who cultivated my interest in the feeding side.”

Corah was a manager-in-training at Oscar Mayer in Wisconsin when an Australian he met at MSU offered him a two-year appointment in producer education and feedlot development in southern Australia. He and Mary; daughter Michelle, 2; and Tom, 20 days, made the move.

Mary was “all for it, looking forward to the adventure and knowing it was just for two years.”

At the Hamilton Station in Victoria, Corah planned programs to move from self-feeders to bunks and fenceline models. He never realized how keenly station managers across the Outback were watching until planes and trucks brought more than 1,000 people to a field day there.

When the family returned in 1970, it was to an Extension livestock post in Roseau, Minn. The Corahs were not ready to settle for such limits, however, and the next year all five of them, including baby Chad, moved to Laramie, Wyo. There the well-travelled young animal scientist earned a doctorate in ruminant reproductive physiology.

In 1974 he became extension beef feedlot specialist at Kansas State University (K-State) and moved to the town that would become home to this day: Manhattan, Kan., where third son Mark was born a few years later.

Corah’s education and experience had created a broad foundation. If that Dakota farm had been his first laboratory, the Kansas beef cattle industry was his new one, a proving ground made possible by quickly forged relationships.

Legendary department head Don Good hired him, and staff set up whirlwind tours of “people you need to meet.” It wasn’t long after the first handshake that most of those became friends. Corah saw something of his father in every one who engaged their curiosity to discover how to adopt new ideas.

Of course, there were stories

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— Bill Miller

written up. The plot thickened as Corah built up a student internship program for undergraduates and then lined up cooperative projects for the 30 graduate students he mentored across three decades.

“Students really learned from these people,” he says. “You had some of the most innovative minds out there teaching them beyond what they could pick up in our classrooms. It became obvious that not only could we get a lot of research done across the state, but we could use those settings as a training ground.”

Feedlots were a big part of the internship program because they had structure and fit a summer schedule, and, after all, Corah was a feedlot specialist. He got into journalism with *Focus on the Feedlot* in 1975, still a monthly newsletter that shows his communication style.

Bill Miller, first editor of *Beef Today* and later vice president of communications for U.S. Premium Beef, started as a K-State Extension writer. Corah was a valued source

and sounding board, and Miller credits early brainstorming sessions with launching his career.

“Larry understood the importance of making sure the reporter understood, not just the article any of us were working on at the time, but to help make us become better reporters on the beef industry throughout our careers,” Miller says. “If we listened to him, I think his efforts served us and the beef industry well.”

Applying the science

Darrell Busby, retired Extension beef specialist at Iowa State University and manager of the Tri-County Steer Carcass Futurity, was one of Corah’s first master’s students in 1979. The mentor could easily identify with his protégé and young family, and the caring interest was appreciated. So were the details.

“The projects, the exposure to every aspect of the industry — he let me see and do a lot of different things. Every opportunity was there for me,” Busby says. “He was always good at solving problems, taking everything into account; we might think some idea would work, but he’d say, ‘No, because look what happens to the next link in the supply chain.’”

Already known nationwide, Corah came to southwest Iowa to present a couple of times in the early 1980s.

“We talked about similarities in soil, topography and other things, and the next year the Four State Beef Conference was born,” Busby says. “Everyone who has worked with him could come up with another program he started.”

Corah built relationships in other states as

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► “The fun part is to build something and to see it succeed,” says Corah.

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his grad students began their careers and his own reputation grew.

"I always tried to learn from what others were doing," he says. Texas meetings at auction markets stood out for great attendance in the 1970s, so the idea came to Kansas, which had a vibrant network of sale barns that became home to hundreds of K-State Extension meetings, each hosting five or six times more than a meeting on campus could pull.

"You could demonstrate things with cattle to people who were sitting right where they were used to thinking about cattle," Corah says. "It was an instant link to their turf, their community, their home."

David Patterson, Missouri Extension beef specialist, had completed a master's degree in his native Montana before starting on a doctorate in West Virginia. He switched to K-State in 1982 because Corah was there.

"I knew I wanted the applied side rather than basic science," he says.

The reproductive physiologist widely known today for timing in heat synchronization started with field trials for one of the most promising new products focused on timed AI.

"Larry was so good at placing you where you would learn," Patterson says. "He was always there for guidance, support and mentoring, but a lot of it was on you, as it should be for a Ph.D. candidate — and I couldn't have been in a better place."

Raised and schooled only in the cow-calf side, the K-State program provided context.

"You knew why you were in the cow-calf business, like all the pieces of a puzzle were there and you were part of it," Patterson says.

Along with developing AI protocols, he specialized in developing heifers, taking that expertise to Kentucky and then Missouri's Show Me Select Replacement Heifer Program.

Patsy Houghton worked with Corah in the mid-1980s to develop student internships in AI technologies, placing them with a wide range of ranches and programs, breeding 2,500 heifers per year for a time.

Twenty-six years later, her Heartland Cattle Co. at McCook, Neb., has Aled more than 105,000 heifers from 31 states "... all a result of that internship program," Houghton says. "Large-scale heifer development and AI had never been considered until then, but the experience taught me it was not only possible,



► Corah captures crowds through wide knowledge, unique delivery, humor and resonant voice.

but a much needed service."

That's just another example of Corah's impact on the industry, she says, "No one has done a better job of introducing game-changer ideas into the production sector."

The mentor and scientist always liked to laugh, too, says Busby, recalling advice he heard about judging shows.

"Corah said I should get out of town as soon as possible afterwards — and of course he had a story. He was judging the Russell (Kan.) County Fair and brought the family so they could go on to Colorado for a weekend getaway," the story goes. "He was just about to name the grand champion, but his son Tom was frantically beckoning."

Busby, channeling Corah channeling his son: "Dad, there's a lot of people really mad — I think we need to get out of here!"

Today, Tom is a technical services specialist with Zoetis in Colorado and remembers a father always busy with his career, but who always found time for his family. Younger brother Chad, a golf course manager in Montana, agrees. What he thinks about when it comes to that career are the people.

"Just about any town we would stop in," Chad says, "we'd always bump into somebody. We could never go anywhere with him in Kansas without him knowing somebody there or along the way."

Mark Gardiner, Ashland, Kan., Angus breeder, met Corah as a 10-year-old with his father, Henry.

"For the 35 years since, I always knew everything would be all right whenever we had a discussion with 'Uncle Larry.' We'd talk things out, look at the issues, develop a plan, see how to solve the problem and commence doing so."

Gardiner's family kept working on

research projects after the son graduated from K-State in 1983.

"Larry would dream up something that nearly everyone dismissed, but pursue it with passion and leadership asking, 'Why can't we do it?'" Gardiner says, noting those he "inspired to new heights."

Corah enjoyed helping people more than exerting leadership skills, but his mentor Good "pushed" him to get more involved in the American Society of Animal Science (ASAS).

Doing so helped bring honor to K-State when Corah was the university's first winner of the ASAS Distinguished Service Award in 1987. Seventeen years later, long after he left the academic world, the Society again recognized Corah with a national award for his body of work.

He retired as a professor in 1997 to help lead producer education for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, where he built Cattlemen's College® from a review of Beef Checkoff projects to a full curriculum that attracts many times more producers.

Another organization also hoped to tap into Corah's skills.

CAB influence

Mick Colvin, executive director of the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) program, flew to Manhattan in early 1998 for a daylong private meeting.

"My plan was to stay with NCBA, and I had absolutely zero intention of going to work for *Certified Angus Beef*," Corah recalls. The fact that Colvin was planning to retire and looking for someone to lead the program was no temptation.

"One, I did not want to move to Ohio, and two, by nature I don't get up in the morning and want to be president of anything," he says. "What did interest me was everything they planned to do in their expanded Supply Development Division. I said OK when Mick asked if I would 'come to Ohio for a visit' and consider helping find the person who could lead CAB."

"Larry's ability to see the big picture and communicate so well initiated meaningful dialogue across all segments of our industry and brand."

— John Stika

He admits today, “That visit was just out of curiosity, but the culture got to me — not just the people, but a uniquely caring culture that you sensed when you walked in.”

Kendal Frazier, NCBA communications director at the time and current CEO, says Corah “brought immediate respect to our producer education program and laid a lasting foundation. We were sorry to see him go, but our loss was CAB’s gain.”

Colvin says he found common ground early when it turned out he and Corah liked the same Angus bulls, but adds it was never a disadvantage that the incoming vice president had no Angus background.

“I just immediately got the feeling we needed to hire this person,” Colvin recalls of that Holiday Inn meeting. “With all he has done and the many good people he has hired for us, what a positive impact he has made since that time!”

Among those he helped bring to CAB was Jim Riemann, former K-State meat scientist and Cargill executive, who signed on as president.

“Larry’s handprints are all over the beef industry,” Riemann says. “I don’t think it is possible to count the number of cattle producers and feeders that have benefited from Larry’s counsel and insight on opportunities to improve production and product quality.”

Among dozens of other notables Corah hired, John Stika and Bryce Schumann began as assistant directors of the new Feeder-Packer Relations Division in 1999. The latter went on to leadership at the American Angus Association while Stika worked his way up to succeed Riemann in 2006.

“Larry’s ability to see the big picture and communicate so well initiated meaningful dialogue across all segments of our industry and brand,” Stika says. “He knows it takes engaged people to move a program forward, but few others know as many stakeholders from ranchers to consumers, and can talk to them all about challenges and opportunities.”

He credits Corah with much of the fact “that CAB has a meaningful voice in helping the beef industry increase awareness of consumer expectations, and producers better understand how to meet those expectations profitably.”

They’ve moved from something like student-professor to more like close family, he says.

“I respect him. I trust him. He’s always shared an honest and informed perspective,

whether I wanted to hear it or not, and for that I am forever grateful,” Stika says.

Past graduate students say the relationships remain strong.

“I never stop leaning on him as a mentor to this day,” Patterson says. “If he doesn’t know the answer, he knows who does.”

“And he’s a friend. So unassuming, so approachable. That’s his style and what makes him so effective to all of us who were his grad

students. That ability to connect to people at every level is just universal and remarkable,” he continues.

Busby says when Corah calls, “He always has a reason, but first he asks about family and knows all the names and situations — he cares about people more than anything, but after all these years, I still rely on his advice. If I can’t figure something out, he’s the one I call, and he always has time.”

Jerry Bohn, recently retired CEO of Pratt (Kan.) Feeders, met Corah when he was part of a group of K-State professors feeding with him, but friendship grew as Pratt became a CAB partner feedyard.

“Larry helped us really do a paradigm shift as we developed a focus to feed high-quality cattle and meet the demand for CAB,” Bohn says. “He has the rare combination of scientist, producer, promoter and public speaker that helped move CAB forward to be the dominant brand of beef in the country. I consider Larry a good friend, confidant and industry partner.”

Dozens of colleagues at K-State stay close, especially now that Corah offices there again, even teaching as emeritus professor.

Fellow emeritus Danny Simms says Corah — “essentially my boss for 18 years” — stands out for his easy-going personality, ability to

boil down complex concepts, and as a great judge of people and situations.

“As I developed my Extension program, Larry’s counsel was extremely valuable, his friendship deeply appreciated. Many leaders in academia and industry value his counsel as well, and the students he trained went on to make significant contributions,” Simms notes. “The opportunity to work with him was a highlight in my career.”

Current K-State animal scientist David Nichols says, “Larry has been a true leader for all of us in the beef business, and he never stops learning,” but the personal side outweighs that.

“I have always considered myself lucky to have him as a dear, close friend. He’s one of the few people I know who makes everyone feel better after a visit — I kid him about sending me a bill for psychiatric help,” Nichols says. “I think that comes down to his positive attitude, a true sense of caring for others and a healthy sense of humor. He takes his work seriously, but also enjoys life.”

Nichols gives an appreciative nod to Mary for all the years of “keeping things together at home so Larry can do so many of the things he does best.”

Life with Larry has had its moments, like choosing between a kid’s ballgame or a rancher’s AI schedule. But the bride of 52 years says her man is taking more time now to smell the roses.

“Actually he’s doing a good job of slowing it down and enjoying life here a little more, which I honestly didn’t think would happen,” she says.

Yet, those who see Corah at an industry meeting or anywhere else know he’s still learning and sharing. After all, life took Corah out of North Dakota, but it didn’t take the Leonard Corah out of him.

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Editor’s Note: Steve Suther is director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.

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