

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON**

**ON THE DEATH OF ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR EMERITUS LAVERN FELTS**

Lavern Felts was born on May 10, 1918 on a dairy farm in the Town of Seneca in Shawano County, Wisconsin. He married his college sweetheart, Helene Gass, in 1943, and died on January 12, 2003 after a six-year struggle with the effects of a debilitating stroke. He is survived by his daughter, Edie Felts-Podoll, who has served since 1977 as the family living educator and department head for the Adams County University Extension office in Adams, Wisconsin. The fact that his daughter chose to follow his career path in UW-Extension was a source of great pride for him.

His love for animals and the outdoors determined his career choice. Lavern received his B.S. degree in animal husbandry at the University of Wisconsin in 1948, and the M.S. degree in genetics in 1949. His graduate studies continued during 1949-52. Due to his becoming a staff member in the Animal Husbandry Department in 1952, his joint program in genetics and animal husbandry was completed in 1958. He was a member of UW boxing and baseball teams, and earned memberships in Alpha Zeta and Sigma Xi. As an extension specialist, he became a member of Epsilon Sigma Phi.

Dr. Felts' staff appointment as an extension specialist in livestock selection and breeding was the first such appointment by a university. Vern set out to improve the genetic base of livestock populations in terms of reducing the cost of production and increasing the percentage and quality of desirable meat products. His approach was to design effective methods of evaluating genetic differences between animals by using procedures that would be considered practical and used by purebred, seedstock breeders. Emphasis was placed on the selection of males that demonstrated a genetic basis for superior performance, and associated auction sales and "performance trophies" were the incentive to gain participation of purebred breeders.

Vern maintained existing within-herd, on-farm performance testing programs in sheep and swine selection, added central testing stations for these species and built the program to include four performance-testing stations for swine. He organized the first performance-tested sale of swine in the nation. In addition, he started the on-farm and central station performance-testing of beef cattle in Wisconsin. Wisconsin became the only state which had active on-farm performance testing programs coordinated with central testing stations for beef cattle, sheep and swine. Dr. Felts disseminated the animal selection basis for these programs as well as the practical application of results. Sales associated with these activities were financially beneficial to many Wisconsin farmers and artificial insemination organizations.

Vern was perhaps the first in the nation to attempt to apply specific mating systems on a broad scale. This effort resulted in the formation of the "Swine Breeding Research Cooperative" in 1958 as a method of developing and supplying specific female and male lines to Wisconsin feeder pig producers. This would have made it possible to assemble and market feeder pigs from thousands of farms with all having the same superior genetic background. Disease problems in the foundation herd and the slow development of techniques for using frozen semen precluded widespread implementation of the plan, but it was the forerunner of the mating systems used by large companies in the swine breeding industry today.

Dr. Felts was a member of the National Sheep Improvement Committee and the Subcommittee on Baby Pig Losses for the National Academy of Science, and an influential participant in organizing the National Beef Improvement Federation.

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Because Wisconsin performance testing programs were in the forefront, people working with these programs at times received criticism from the livestock industry. This changed as selection based on performance and the concepts of quantitative and population genetics became better understood and more acceptable. The old concepts and methods of evaluation of breeding stock were in the midst of drastic changes and Wisconsin, because of Dr. Felts' leadership, was in the forefront of these new procedures.

Vern enjoyed the outdoors and, after his retirement in 1977, spent time hunting and fishing with his family and friends. Also, he turned to his second interest – growing Christmas trees. He planted his first Christmas trees on the family farm in 1947 and built his Christmas tree sales into a business that continued for many years. The Felts Farm Forest promoted “real Christmas trees” and, for many years, Vern donated a balsam fir to the lobby of the Animal Sciences Building on the UW-Madison campus.

Dr. Lavern Felts took up the challenge to teach a system of livestock selection based on objective measures of heritable traits of value to the production of food. He was considered by his peers to be one of the outstanding extension men in Animal Breeding and Genetics. His programs for livestock improvement were unique because they were among the earliest to be put into effect in the nation, and considered to be the most sound.

It was difficult to change the thinking of a clientele that had been taught visual appraisal methods. Yet Professor Felts was a persistent advocate of population genetic principles and displayed an impressive ability to share his knowledge of the genetic basis for livestock selection and improvement in a manner that farmers accepted and adopted.

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