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Pioneers recognized for industry contributions

EVERY year we take time to honor those who have been pioneers within our industry. A true pioneer not only ventures to places unknown, they also leave their stamp on an industry and improve it for future generations. This year, the National Dairy Shrine has the privilege to honor five individuals who have done just that. Each recipient was selected by an anonymous committee, and their portraits will be on display at the National Dairy Museum in Fort Atkinson, Wis.

First extension specialist

The university extension system is a critical support network to many producers across the country. The dairy extension agent provides valuable information from feeding systems to housing design to support beyond their job descriptions. **Alton Block**, Middleton, Wis., served as Wisconsin's very first dairy extension specialist. As a result of Block's success, this position has been replicated throughout the university system and plays a critical role in the dairy industry to this very day.



Block

His impact on the industry was not limited to this impressive accomplishment alone. Block played an important role in shaping the A.I. industry. He was critical in the revitalization of Badger Breeders Cooperative, East Central Breeders Cooperative and later the Tri-State Breeders Cooperative. He was a driving force during a period that saw dramatic herd improvement and gains in milk production.

While at Badger Breeders Cooperative, Block developed the use of a mating program that is now the industry standard. Again, he transformed the industry while serving as a farm personnel management specialist, acting as a recruiter for various positions in the dairy industry. His accomplishments are still felt far and wide throughout the A.I. industry.

Progressed Ayrshire breed

David Gibson has a long and storied career in the dairy industry but is most recognized for his accomplishments as executive secretary for the American Ayrshire Association. Under his leadership, the breed became one of the first to recognize the importance of young sire sampling. Although not always popular, he had the courage to stand up and promote the importance of continual genetic progress.



Gibson

As a result, the young sire sampling

program was a resounding success. Gibson also convinced the breeders of the more widespread use of A.I. and to move away from herd bulls. The growth of the Ayrshire breed during his tenure as executive secretary was, without a doubt, a result of his leadership and guidance.

Another one of Gibson's passions, that is not to be overlooked, was his devotion to the development of youth in the industry. He worked to establish a junior show at the national shows and initiated the Ayrshire Outstanding Youth Program that honored young men and women for their work within the breed.

Gibson was also an engaged member of his community in Brandon, Vt. He was selected as Citizen of the Year, served as chairman of the school board and was president of his Rotary Club.

Took a chance on robots

While **Charles "Pete" Knigge** most likely identifies himself as a dairy farmer and father first, many others believe terms such as life-long learner, industry leader and advocate are also defining characteristics of this Wisconsin dairyman.

Knigge took a leap of faith in 2001 by installing the first robots in the United States after seeing them on a farm tour in the Netherlands. The farm he started with his wife in Omro, Wis. had to expand to accommodate the next generation, and he saw robots as a viable option. While there were many challenges, Knigge persisted and eventually got a pilot program approved on his farm. Today, he runs a successful midsize farm that has laid the groundwork for robots across the country.



Knigge

While bringing robot technology to the United States could be the pinnacle of Knigge's career, he also has contributed to state and national policy. He has given his time on the National Commission on Agriculture Policy serving as chair and vice chair and on the State Agriculture Board in Wisconsin, as a delegate to the Council for Agriculture, Research, Extension and Teaching (CARET), founding sponsor to Professional Dairy Producers of Wisconsin, guest lecturer at UW-Oshkosh, and as a model farm example by Texas A&M that is used by Congress to evaluate the nation's farm economics.

Built international bridges

Today, everyone understands the importance of a global marketplace for dairy products. One could say **Marlowe Nelson**, Viroqua, Wis., was building international dairy bridges before it was commonplace to do so. Back in the 1950s, Nelson developed a training program for Japanese men to work on dairy

farms and learn about the U.S. dairy industry. This was no small task given that it was shortly after World War II. Still, he developed a very successful training program. Some say this groundwork made it possible for the growth in dairy markets in the Asian Pacific Rim.

A grateful Emperor of Japan awarded Nelson the Grand Cordon of the Order of the Rising Sun Gold Rays. Not only did he do significant work with Japan, the program became a model for other countries like Germany and Holland.



Nelson

His work in the A.I. field is also impressive. The relationships he built through the training program directly led to developing A.I. programs in Japan, Germany, Holland and other foreign countries. As a result, American genetics became available across the globe. Nelson did not just focus on the international aspect of the dairy industry; he has a storied career with the United States A.I. industry as well. He co-founded International Protein Sires which still thrives in a highly competitive A.I. industry. His fingerprints can be found all over the global marketplace.

Multi-breed leader

Russell Wirt, Rochester, Minn., is not only a farmer who can boast three generations supported by the operation he started, he also has a legacy that spans across breed associations. And above all else, he has a leadership style and personal integrity that is a model for the younger generation and more seasoned dairy professionals alike around the country.



Wirt

Wirt is well known in the Guernsey breed. He served as the president and director of the association as well as a classifier and has judged shows from coast to coast and internationally. Wirt is also well-established in the Holstein Association. His herd transitioned from Guernseys to Holsteins when he saw greater profitability prospects which were necessary when his three sons joined the operation. This transition, while not an easy decision, has been made with great success. His Holstein herd now averages over 30,000 pounds of milk.

In addition, Wirt also served his state in various capacities: president and director of the Minnesota Board of Animal Health, adviser for the University of Minnesota, director of Minnesota DHIA, delegate for the Minnesota Purebred Dairy Cattle Association, 4-H and FFA leader, and Farm Bureau member. ■