

Kenneth Leroy Turk, 1908–1990: A Brief Biography¹

J. M. Elliot

Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853



Kenneth L. (Ken) Turk, a major player in the history and development of animal science in this century, was born on July 14, 1908, in Mt. Vernon, Missouri. Raised on a general livestock farm, he graduated from the University of Missouri with a B.S. degree in agriculture in 1930. During his undergraduate years, he earned part of his college expenses by working as a student assistant in the dairy depart-

ment. Among his other student activities, he was a member of the judging teams for Missouri livestock, meats, and dairy cattle, the latter of which won sweepstakes honors at the National Dairy Show in 1929. As a consequence of this, the Holstein-Friesian Association awarded him a scholarship for graduate work. Ken chose Cornell University for his graduate studies and, thus, began an almost continuous association with Cornell, which, with one early 6-yr interruption, was to extend to his death (December 16, 1990) 60 yr later. During his first year as a graduate student, he met Bernice Stockler, a graduate student in French history and English. They were married in 1934, initiating a 54-year partnership that was to have a special impact on several generations of graduate students and other associates around the globe.

Upon completion of his studies for the M.S. (1931) and Ph.D. (1934) degrees, under the direction of Frank B. Morrison, Ken was appointed instructor and later assistant professor of animal husbandry at Cornell. In 1938, he accepted a position as professor of dairy husbandry at the University of Maryland and 2 yr later became head of the department there. Returning to Cornell in 1944 as professor of animal husbandry, he became head of the department in 1945, following Professor Morrison's decision to step down from that position. The next 18 yr proved to be a period of remarkable growth in the department under his outstanding leadership. In 1963, he was asked to be the first director of the new International Agricultural Development program at Cornell, a position he held until his compulsory retirement in 1974. This was the first such position established by a land-grant university to focus on agricultural development in third-world countries, an effort that was referred to as the "fourth dimension of the College of Agriculture." Again, Ken Turk's vigorous leadership and determination were evident as this program was launched.

During his 40-yr career, Professor Turk spent 33 to 34 yr as an administrator. As head of the Department of Animal Husbandry, he must be given credit for building his Cornell unit into one of the outstanding departments in the country and world. He was once cited (*J. Anim. Sci.* 49:1685) as "the epitomist of *avant garde* thought in animal science teaching, extension, and research and in international agriculture." At the time of his retirement in 1974, the Department of Animal Science consisted of 34 faculty members, 17 of whom were full professors and 6 of

¹The author had access to and freely used, without attribution, information from appointment, award nomination, and other anonymous forms as well as from vitae and other material found in department files. He also acknowledges the helpful comments and suggestions of D. E. Hogue, A. W. Bell, R. H. Foote, and R. G. Warner, who reviewed drafts of the manuscript.

Received December 17, 1998.

Accepted December 18, 1998.

whom were associate professors he had hired. His skill in selecting faculty and graduate students is perhaps reflected in the fact that, by 1979, 29 national awards sponsored by the three most pertinent scientific societies had been received by "his" faculty and 26 had been received by former graduate students who had begun their graduate work during his term. Many of these went on to hold department chairs or other important administrative positions.

As an administrator, Ken ran a tight ship. Coat and tie were the order of the day for faculty as well as graduate students who were assisting with classes. He was always aware of who attended the department seminar, and a graduate student who missed more than one meeting was apt to be reminded that regular attendance was expected. He did not take coffee breaks himself, and, even though he condoned them for others, everyone was aware that the privilege was not to be abused. Despite his stern departmental discipline (or perhaps because of it), he was widely respected as a department head, and those who have followed him in that position at Cornell are often evaluated in direct comparison by those who knew Ken. In their minds, he has always been the gold standard. He had a phenomenal memory of people, places, and activities, which sometimes surprised a casual Cornell visitor whom he might have encountered at some meeting years before, especially if Ken inquired about the individual's wife by name. He involved his faculty in department decisions, but always took responsibility for the consequences. He strongly encouraged them in their work by providing both moral and financial support, and effectively stimulated interaction and liaisons among them that led to new research, teaching, and extension programs. He was a talented and proud leader and one whose voice was always heard on matters involving department programs and activities.

Ken and his wife, Bernice, who had no children, treated the department members, both faculty and graduate students, as family. They were gracious hosts at innumerable dinners and picnics at their home, where they entertained visitors, colleagues, students, and friends.

Even though Ken spent much of his time on administration, he continued an active involvement in research, teaching, and extension throughout most of his career. His Ph.D. thesis research, which produced early evidence that, for sheep, the biological value of protein provided by various feeds is approximately the same regardless of source, probably stimulated his long-term interest in forages. His thesis was noted not only for the landmark concept it reported, but for the clarity and conciseness with which the results were written in 30 double-spaced pages!

For many years, Ken was part of research teams at Cornell that conducted studies related to forage quality and other nutritional matters. He authored or co-authored more than 70 scholarly papers or research

bulletins, published numerous semitechnical and popular articles related to livestock production, and wrote or edited several books. Until he left the department to assume his responsibilities as director, he regularly taught a course in dairy cattle production. His interest in undergraduate teaching, however, went far beyond his own course. As head of a department in a university that at that time had a reputation for emphasizing research and graduate training, Ken had a commitment to undergraduate teaching that was unusual; and he put his money where his mouth was. The author is particularly familiar with one good example of this, because he was a beneficiary of one of Ken's attempts to modernize and improve a freshman course. As described by Turk himself, "Professor Elliot was appointed assistant professor with the definite understanding that his promotions in rank and salary would depend primarily on his performance in teaching the elementary course. He would be free to conduct research in areas of interest in animal nutrition in accordance with resources available or that might be obtained (Kenneth L. Turk. 1988. *Animal Husbandry at Cornell University: A History and Record of Development from 1868 to 1963*. p 120. Media Services at Cornell University). What is more, Elliot was given a year to prepare the new course!

Throughout his career, Professor Turk was in close touch with livestock producers and industry leaders. A frequent speaker at producer events, he enlisted and cultivated support for department programs and sought producer input through a departmental advisory council composed of leading livestock producers and representatives of agribusiness. It was largely through their support as an informal lobby group in the state capitol that he was able to get state funding for a state-of-the-art office, laboratory, and classroom building (Morrison Hall) toward the end of his tenure as department head.

A former dean of agriculture once recalled that Ken accepted the appointment as director of international agriculture with the written understanding that if he didn't like it after 1 yr he would return to Morrison Hall to an office that he had already furnished for that purpose. In fact he did return, but only in retirement 11 yr later. During that interval, he led the new international program with imagination and energy. Early in its development, he obtained state support for the addition of nine "core" professorships, which were distributed among several departments. These contributed significantly to the visibility of the total international effort, which, with these new additions, was equivalent to about 30 full-time professors. His dynamic leadership of the University of the Philippines-Cornell Graduate Education Program from 1963 to 1972 was certainly among his greatest international achievements. This early investment in the development of people has had a lasting impact on agricultural research and education in Southeast Asia.

Another international contribution for which he is remembered is the concept of having interested graduate students conduct their thesis research under the supervision of an international program, where the results might find local application in a developing country. This idea has since been widely adopted by other institutions with international programs. Still another legacy is the organization of the Directors of International Agriculture Programs in U.S. Land-Grant Universities, which was conceived by Turk and resulted in an organization that has advised deans and national entities, including the U.S. Department of State. He served as its president in 1971–1972.

As an internationally recognized leader in animal science, Professor Turk was invited as a consultant to many parts of the world. In 1951, he examined methods of production of dairy cattle and other livestock in Europe and the U.K. Later he served as a visiting professor of animal husbandry in the College of Agriculture, University of the Philippines. For 5 yr he was a member of the Rockefeller Foundation Board of Consultants for Agriculture, working mostly in Central and South America. He devoted a sabbatical leave in 1959–1960 to planning livestock research programs in several Latin American countries. Later he was a consultant to Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in its Mexican program and a member of the following advisory groups: Latin American Science Board of the National Academy of Sciences; Expert Panel on Dairy Education of the FAO; Advisory Group on United States-Mexican Educational Relations, Education and World Affairs; United States-Philippines Workshop on Scientific and Technological Cooperation and Development Board (Philippines); Expert Panel on Animal Husbandry Education of the FAO; Technical Advisory Committee of the Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama; and Working Group on Agricultural Research of the US/USSR Joint Commission on Science and Technical Cooperation. In addition, at various times Turk served as a consultant to the Ford Foundation, the Asian Development Bank, the University of the West Indies, the University of Hawaii, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the International Agriculture Development Service. In 1983, the impact of his leadership in international agriculture was recognized when he was the recipient of the Distinguished Service Award of the Association of U.S. Directors of International Agricultural Programs.

Professor Turk was an active member and strong supporter of several professional organizations, including the American Society of Animal Science (ASAS), the American Dairy Science Association (ADSA), the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), and the Association of U.S. University Directors of International Agricultural Programs. He encouraged both faculty and graduate students to attend professional meetings and often provided transportation and financial support to ensure that they could do so. He served as president of ADSA in 1959 and received the Award of Honor in 1967. In recognition of his contributions to the animal industry and to the American Society of Animal Science, he was presented with the ASAS Honorary Fellow Award in 1979.

Following his retirement, until his death in 1990, Ken usually spent part of his time in his office in Morrison Hall. He seemed to relish the opportunity to again attend seminars and be a part of the department to which he had devoted much of his professional life. In 1986, the seminar room in Morrison Hall was named the Kenneth L. Turk Seminar Room in his honor. This recognition especially pleased him, because he had personally designed this room to include a kitchen and other amenities that enhanced its suitability and ambiance as a venue for department business and social events, as well as for seminars. For several years he worked on a history, "Animal Husbandry at Cornell University: A History and Record of Development from 1868 to 1963." This 292-page volume was published in 1988 by Media Services at Cornell University and has been widely distributed to former students and other interested readers. Just a few days before his death, Ken was still attending athletic events (including hockey games) and other campus activities. In a final tribute to Cornell and to the department they loved, he and Bernice, who had died in 1988, left most of their estate to endow the Kenneth L. and Bernice F. Turk Assistantship Fund, which now provides stipends for department graduate students interested in becoming involved in developing countries. At his death, one of Ken's colleagues commented that this marked the end of an era. Even though that is true in one sense, it is equally true that many of his principles and accomplishments are a part of the foundation on which modern animal science stands and will, thus, live on to benefit future generations of students.