

Bernie Havlovic: A Career of Leadership and Service to Iowa's Agricultural Research

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In October 2015 Bernie Havlovic retired after 40 years with Iowa State University Research and Demonstration Farms. He completed an unparalleled career of leadership and service with Iowa State's agricultural research system of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

Bernie's career has been remarkable and unprecedented. No one opened, organized, and led more research farms than he did. He supervised five research farms, organizing and inaugurating four of them.

He started in 1975 with the ISU Agronomy Department serving field research plots around Ames. In 1980 Bernie and his wife, Maureen, moved to Kanawha where he became superintendent of the ISU Northern Research Farm, the oldest farm in the outlying research farm network. There he led the replacement of old facilities with a new shop and office building.

In 1987 Bernie and Maureen moved to southeast Iowa and he became the first superintendent of the new ISU Southeast Research Farm near Crawfordsville, where he created a new set of research facilities and field plots from a tenant farm.

In 1993 Bernie and Maureen moved again, this time to Lewis. He became the first superintendent of a series of new farms managed by ISU and owned by the Wallace Foundation for Rural Research and Development—the Armstrong Research Farm

at Lewis in 1993, the Neely-Kinyon Research Farm at Greenfield in 1994 (a satellite research site of the Armstrong Farm), and the Lauren Christian Swine Farm at Atlantic from 1996 to 2003. He also was an integral part of developing the Wallace Learning Center in 1997, which was an office/meeting room complex located at the Armstrong Research Farm.

According to John Pesek, former head of the ISU agronomy department and distinguished professor emeritus, "Havlovic was tapped for the far more complicated task of organization and operation of the three-farm southwest Iowa research farms complex. Because they are spatially as well as technologically separated, they have required superior organizational and management skills to achieve complete harmony, effectiveness, and efficiency."

Opening a new research farm on a limited budget is challenging. The conversion of farmland to research plots is a complex task. Soils must be carefully mapped on a grid basis. Water movement must be considered, field drainage tiles installed, and waterways established. Fields, sub-fields, and plots must be laid out. Bernie achieved all of this in the era before GPS, so it was done with steel measuring tapes, stakes, benchmarks, and transits.

Further, he was responsible for a wide and diverse array of agricultural research projects, particularly corn, soybeans, soils, water quality, and horticultural crops (grapes, vegetables, flowers, fruit trees, small fruit). But he also oversaw projects involving organic crops, forages, oats, wheat, bioenergy crops, trees, swine, and beef cattle. Farmers,

gardeners, researchers, agribusinesses, extension staff, and visitors all trusted Bernie and the data that came from the farms he managed.

Field research is about attention to detail and hard work. Bernie kept detailed daily notebooks and worked long hours to get it all done.

According to Paul Domoto, professor emeritus of horticulture, “For a faculty member, one of the biggest challenges for conducting research at a distant site is not being able to see and respond to changes occurring with the crop. Havlovic takes the extra step to become more knowledgeable about the crops, spends time in the plots, and is very observant.”

Bernie took serving field research to a new level. Antonio Mallarino, professor of agronomy, stated, “Without Bernie’s initiative and direct participation, I could not have developed several very complicated research studies, which included tillage, fertilizer placement, and manure management.”

Perhaps his keenest interest was horticulture. He expanded the demonstration home gardens to include All-American Variety Selections testing, as well as perennial fruits, flowers, and shrubs. Based in part on Bernie’s work, many Iowa fruit and vegetable growers invested in high tunnels to extend their marketing season.

Part of the credibility of a research farm is its appearance. Bernie’s farms always looked impeccable. The roadways, road ditches, and

grass alleys mown. The gardens stunning. The buildings painted. The farms sparkled because of his meticulous care.

Field days were exceptional at the farms he led. It is estimated that over his career, he hosted more than 75,000 people at about 700 events and supervised more than 1,500 projects.

Engaging with people and the communications aspects of a research farm also was a strong suit of Bernie’s. According to Garren Benson, former extension agronomist (now deceased), “Bernie is one of those rare people who combines exceptional technical and people skills. An outstanding representative for Iowa State University with the public. He relates well with people in both group and one-on-one situations.” Each of the farms were owned by regional associations of farmers and agribusinesses that provide advice to the farm and Bernie was their first contact.

In Bernie’s own words: “My favorite part (of being a research farm superintendent) is meeting people, visiting with them and hopefully answering their questions. It’s all about touching people’s lives. This job affords you the chance to touch people.”

Bernie received the ISU Superior Service Award in 1996. In 2011, he received the Spencer Award for Sustainable Agriculture from ISU’s Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, which recognizes those who have made significant contributions to the environmental and economic stability of the Iowa farming community.