Kenneth Nobe, 2010

Dr. Kenneth Nobe’s life was extraordinary, in part because he rarely said no to a new research project or study about the way that humans across the globe use their natural resources. As a water use expert, he helped nations like Pakistan develop their own natural resource programs and brought his expertise to bear as chair of the Agricultural Economics department.

Born on October 26, 1930, Ken grew up in Southern Illinois during the Great Depression, working on his father’s farm and tending to a small dairy herd and growing corn, soybeans, and hay. He spoke Plattdeutsch at home and didn’t learn English until he started school at age 5. He remembers his grandmother’s generosity despite the tough economic times. She would always have food on the table for a family that needed it. After graduating from high school in 1948, he went into what is now the Air Force as an aerial photographer. During his two years in the military, he got married, without permission, and then transferred to a different base, where he was soon after discharged on medical leave because of a serious car accident that collapsed his nostrils. He was only home for a few days before his vocational agriculture teacher “came over and he said, you ready to go to college now? And I said, well, as soon as I can operate.” The teacher pulled some strings at Southern Illinois University, and starting in 1950, Nobe studied general agriculture there with a full scholarship.

While in school, he stayed busy studying and working various jobs to support his growing family. He was a night guard at Prairie Farms Creamery, a book stocker in the library, and a foreman for a fence building crew. He graduated in 1953 and went straight on to a Master’s program at Cornell, studying Agricultural Economics. He continued studying for his PhD and was hired as an instructor after he finished that program, teaching Introduction to Natural Resource Economics, a course he would also teach for many years at Colorado State University. His dissertation was a “land classification map” that analyzed the soils of different areas to determine how productive a farm could be on those lands. It was important to him that the map be simple, “the stoplight map. Red, green, and yellow. And every damn fool can understand what red means.”

In 1958, after mostly finishing his PhD, he was hired by the USDA and moved to Washington for three years, analyzing soil damage caused by floods in the Potomac River Basin. After that study finished, he studied the effects of a uranium spill on the Ute Indian Reservation in Colorado and spent time in Pakistan setting up a division of agriculture economics and agronomy at a university in Lahore, before the Pakistan-India War forced him to leave. Thanks to his many connections, he had a job as an assistant professor of Agricultural Economics at Colorado State University lined up before he left.

Even though he was stateside again, Nobe continued to run a project in Mona, Pakistan. The project involved developing a research station at the university that would do integrated research and extension. He taught the introductory course every term he was at CSU, along with an economic development course and all of the graduate courses. He had 13 graduate students during his time, including the first five CSU graduates from the Ag Econ department. In 1969, after a few years teaching and somewhat reluctantly, he became the acting chair of the department and then a few months later, the official chair, a position he held until 1987. As chair of the Ag Econ Department, he took great joy in hiring “good people,” which in part meant that he didn’t “want to hire people who got their degrees here. I want some new blood.” His enduring philosophy of “new blood” has helped keep the department fresh and relevant.