WISCONSIN MEAT INDUSTRY HALL OF FAME

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The meat industry has long benefited from food microbiologist Edwin M. “Mike” Foster’s work. Results from his early studies on vacuum-packaging and plastic films allowed meat processors to extend the shelf life of refrigerated ready-to-eat meat products from two weeks to eight weeks. Foster was an authority on the role of sodium nitrite in meat preservation, and wrote or co-authored many scientific publications, several of which dealt with meat products.

Under Foster’s leadership, the Food Research Institute (FRI) at the University of Chicago was moved to the University of Wisconsin. It grew from a small microbiological research group into a world leader in food safety and food borne disease research and service. FRI specialties include the microbiology of food pathogens, food and cancer, food allergies, and the toxicology of food additives and toxicants.

Two new research groups, the food and cancer group and the food allergy group, formed under Foster’s directorship. The food and cancer group has discovered conjugated linoleic acid, a naturally occurring anti carcinogen in the fat of meat and milk. Continuing research has shown that CLA has antioxidant properties and is a potent simulator of the immune function.

Foster enlisted help from many of the University of Wisconsin’s departments for FRI projects, establishing a multi disciplinary approach to problem-solving that remains a hallmark of the FRI today. Currently FRI is designated as the Department of Food Microbiology & Toxicology in the College of Agricultural & Life Sciences.

Foster has been active in professional and scientific societies throughout his career. He served as secretary and president of the American Society for Microbiology, and is a Charter Fellow of the American Academy of Microbiology and the Institute of Food Technologists. He has served on food-safety advisory committees to the National Academy of Sciences/National Research Council, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the World Health Organization. Much of his work on these committees dealt with food microbiology and safety, botulism hazards, meat and poultry inspection, and regulatory programs.

Foster was born on January 1, 1917 at Alba, TX. He came to the University of Wisconsin-Madison and earned a doctorate in bacteriology in 1940. He married Winona Lively of Corsicana, Texas in 1941, and they are the parents of Michael Stewart Foster. He joined the faculty of the University in 1945, and retired in 1987.