

Retiring professors end an era

They went to college on G.I. bills. Farm boys, home from World War II. They didn't go back to their farms. They traded rural life for academia.

The agriculture professors are retiring now. Some will write; some will travel. Some may go back to the farm.

And the ag college deans are getting nervous. These professors will be hard to replace.

In the 1980s and 1990s, hundreds of professors will retire from U.S. agriculture colleges, T.E. Hartung, dean of the UNL College of Agriculture, said. And there probably won't be enough new professors to take their places, he said.

Twenty members of the UNL ag college faculty now are between 65 and 70 years old, Hartung said. Another 30 are between 60 and 65. That means 50 professors will reach the mandatory retirement age of 70 within the next 10 years. And many will retire younger than that, Hartung said.

Fewer and fewer people are seeking advanced degrees in agriculture. It was an attractive field after WW II, Hartung said, because of an explosion of research and technology. Students at college on G.I. bills went for advanced degrees and took professorships.

The number of PhD's awarded in agriculture peaked about 15 years ago, Hartung said. With a changing ag economy, more people move away from their farms. This leaves fewer people with rural backgrounds to enter college ag programs, he said.

Since 1975, the number of doctoral degrees has dropped 3 percent, Hartung said. But the number of new ag professors has declined even more, he said.

'The situation is going to get worse before it gets better for Nebraska if we can't respond and become more competitive.'

Ten years ago, foreign students received about 10 percent of the PhD's in agriculture, Hartung said. Today, about 38 percent of the doctoral degrees are going to foreign students. Rather than staying to teach in U.S. colleges, most of these students return to their native countries, he said.

Industry also lures agricultural scientists away from teaching, Hartung said. Specialists in ag engineering, veterinary science and agronomy often can make more money in private businesses than they would at universities.

But agricultural educators are in high demand, Hartung said. The UNL ag college competes with about 45 other institutions that also are losing professors, said Darrell Nelson, professor and chairman of the UNL agronomy department. Low faculty salaries could put UNL behind its competitors, he said. Average starting

salaries are about the same as those at peer institutions, he said, but many dip about \$4,000 below average at the associate professor level.

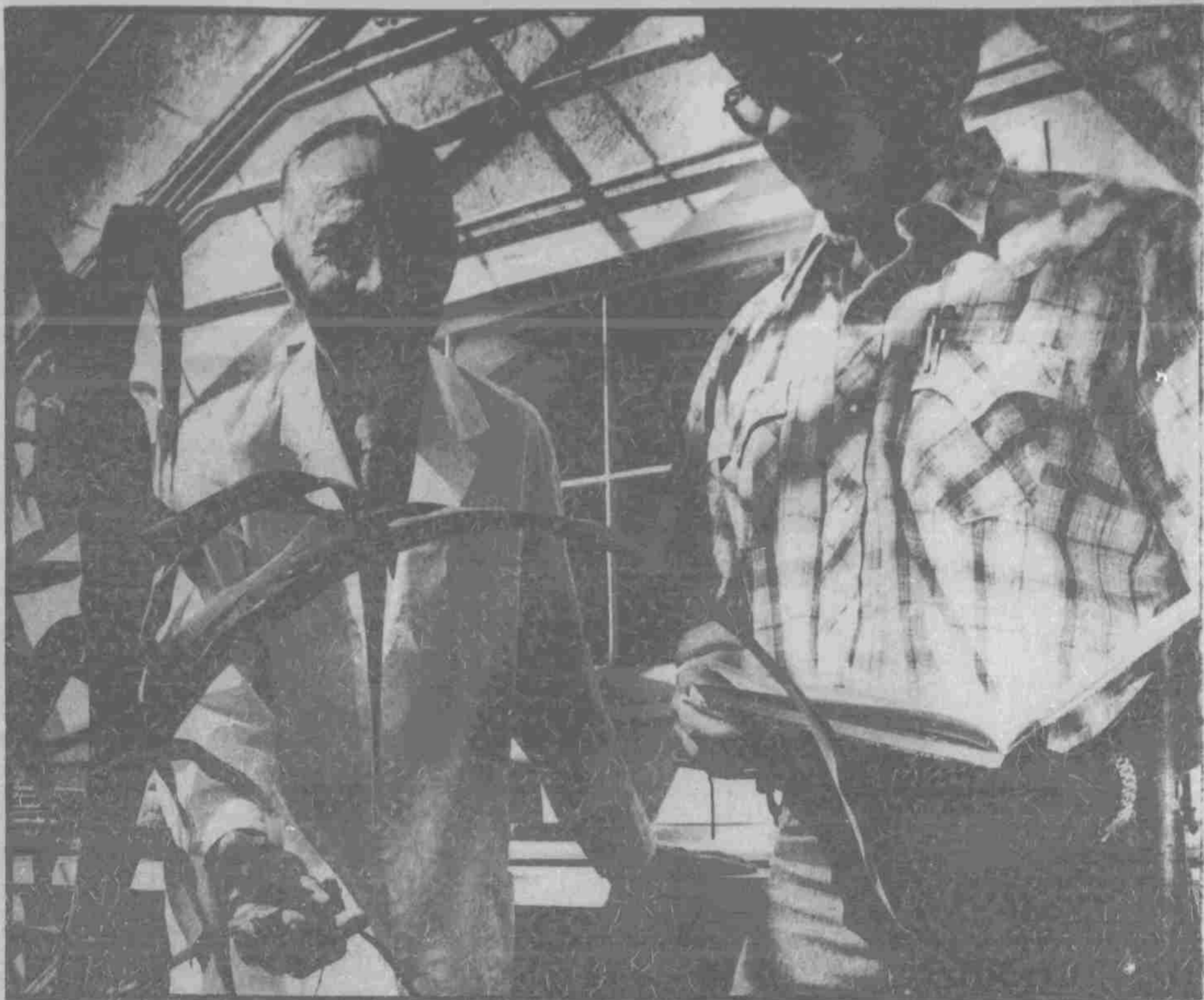
The UNL ag college has a "good reputation" that attracts young scientists, Hartung said. But UNL lacks money to keep the "rising stars that are seen by other institutions." Many professors leave after a few years at UNL, taking better salaries and fringe benefits at other schools, he said.

"Nebraska has been the training ground for the Big 10 for the last 15 years," Hartung said. UNL has "twice the turnover" of ag professors, compared to institutions with higher salaries and retirement and insurance benefits, he said.



Hartung

Mark Davis/The Sower



David Creamer/The Sower

Olson, left, and student Alan Haack check results in the East Campus Greenhouse, where Olson teaches his soils lab.

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The loss of professors may lead to changes in the agricultural program, Hartung said. At least three positions left open this year are being held and may not be filled, he said.

The agronomy department is losing at least five faculty members in 1985, Nelson said. He said he feels confident about finding replacements. If new professors are not found, the department may have to sacrifice some community service and research projects and increase the teaching load of remaining instructors, he said.

"We wouldn't let our teaching mission slip," he said.

Nelson said he can't start looking for new professors until faculty members give notice of retirement. He said he has asked some professors over 65 to stay a few extra years.

"I encourage them to consider it," he said. "But they have other things they'd like to do."

Robert Olson, 68, is one professor who has other plans. He has taught agronomy at UNL for 35 of the last 38 years. He will retire Sept. 1.

Olson said he "never actually finished" his PhD. He was a soil conservationist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture before the war. He decided he liked teaching as a navigation instructor for the Navy. So after the war, he went back to school and eventually became a professor.

The professor said he has enjoyed his years at UNL. He's already stayed on a couple more years than he planned.

"My wife has said she wants me to hang it up," he said.

Olson said he won't disappear from UNL after his retirement. He'll still be around to write some research papers. But he won't teach anymore. He looks forward to traveling and spending time on his acreage, growing walnut and Christmas trees.

Olson and his contemporaries have heard of the problem of finding people to take their places.

"We hope the job will get done all right," he said. "Agriculture has been somewhat depressed. It doesn't look so promising to young people anymore."

Some scholars worry about the loss of 30-plus years of expertise as the professors retire. Olson predicts a new kind of expertise will develop.

Agriculture has changed a lot since Olson started teaching. He has had to learn to "keep up with the equipment," like computers and modern instruments.

"Every year, there's been something new to keep abreast of," he said. "The youngsters now are starting out with the concepts of modern instrumentation."

"We old-timers, yes, we've got the expertise the young folks will be lacking for awhile," Olson said. "But those young folks will turn out just as good or better." — Ann Lowe