

Dreams of PhD bear fruit at last

The University of Chicago's oldest doctoral graduate made a career of growing strawberries; with his degree the cream has risen to the top

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August 20, 2006

Not every day does a student bring a crate of fruit to the oral defense of his dissertation.

But there sat a panel of University of Chicago economists last month, including Nobel laureate James Heckman, in their button-down shirts, munching on some of the sweetest, juiciest strawberries on the market.

Across from them stood their student, Herbert Baum, just shy of 80 years old, whose life's work had been aptly distilled into the title of his thesis: "The Quest for the Perfect Strawberry."

This week, Baum will become the oldest candidate ever awarded a doctoral degree from the university. His work was blessed by a department credited with more Nobel Prize winners in economics than any place in the world.

In fact, three of the four faculty members on Baum's dissertation committee are Nobel winners, including legendary free-marketeer Milton Friedman, who hadn't served on a dissertation committee in about 25 years, Heckman said.

It's a strange and sweet turn of events for Baum, who left the U. of C. about 55 years ago as a graduate student in economics who was "ABD"--all but dissertation, one step shy of his doctorate.

He went on to spend nearly his entire career in strawberries, helping transform California's sleepy localized market into an industry in which different players acted in concert, using the best research available, to move toward a year-round business that could put berries on the table in the dead of a Chicago winter.

He kept a storage room of boxes full of data and reports on the fruit business as it changed, and he always wondered whether one day he could turn his specialized

knowledge into something worthy of the highest academic degree.

"I always had in my mind that this was something I wanted to do," said Baum, whose once dark hair turned gray long ago.

Finally, he did, defying naysayers to write a book that became his dissertation. In it, Baum offers an economic model for evaluating the effectiveness of a policy under which strawberry growers, shippers and producers pay mandatory assessments to fund research and marketing.

His book isn't full of complicated economic equations; rather, it's a story about an industry. It is a dissertation typical of the 1950s, when Baum was a student, using economic theory to explain a problem.

Some faculty members grumbled that it wasn't up to today's standards, but Heckman dismissed their complaints as petty. He pointed to a student thesis approved last year that analyzed factors contributing to diarrhea in the Union Army.

"Strawberries are probably more interesting than the diarrhea study," said Heckman, a 2000 Nobel Prize winner for his work using economics to solve public policy problems. "This is not a joke or any compromise. It is a high-quality piece of work."

He said Baum's work contributes to the study of agriculture policy and regulation.

"You can think of this as a very well-executed case study," he said. "We know now more about a certain industry than we ever did before."

Baum, born into a family of wholesale produce merchants, graduated from high school in Ft. Wayne, Ind.

After serving in the military during World War II, he got a bachelor's degree from Ohio State University and a master's degree in economics from the U. of C. in 1951.

One of his professors was Friedman, who is credited with transforming the U. of C.'s economics department into the powerhouse it is today.

Inspired by Friedman's work on free markets, Baum decided to leave a government job as an agricultural economist and switch to the private sector. He moved to California and became a leader in the state's strawberry industry, spending most of his career at Naturipe Berry Growers in San Jose.

Baum also served as chairman of what is now the California Strawberry Commission, using his economics background to evaluate the effectiveness of the mandatory assessments for research and marketing on growers' profitability.

After retiring as chief executive officer of Naturipe in 1991, Baum asked faculty

members at the U. of C. what it would take to complete his degree.

He worked with U. of C. agricultural economist D. Gale Johnson, who challenged Baum's ideas and helped him develop a thesis proposal.

But Johnson died in 2003, without having approved Baum's proposal.

Baum spent several years expanding the thesis proposal into a book and self-published it late last year. An editor called it tedious. A friend said he couldn't get through it.

Undeterred, Baum sent an e-mail flier in December announcing the publication to several economists.

Heckman, who had read Baum's thesis proposal years ago, responded.

"Did you get your PhD?" Heckman asked.

Baum said he hadn't. "Perhaps this will suffice," Baum replied.

Heckman thought it would. He appointed himself chair of Baum's dissertation committee and set in motion the steps to get Baum readmitted as a student. He recruited Gary Becker, who was a Nobel Prize winner in 1992, and Friedman to serve on the committee.

A condensed version of the book was circulated among the economics faculty, and none objected.

On July 10, with strawberries in hand, Baum answered tough questions during the oral defense. He passed.

"I don't like to talk about miracles, but I do really believe this is a miracle. I don't know what other word to use," Baum said.

He wears bifocals and a hearing aid, and looks more grandfather than grad student. But after paying about \$3,000 in tuition and fees for the summer session, he now carries a student ID in his wallet.

He moved with his wife, Gloria, from their home in Depoe Bay, Ore., to a furnished, two-bedroom apartment in Hyde Park, where his coffee table books include "Microeconomics: The Easy Way," and U. of C. professor Steven Levitt's best-seller "Freakonomics."

The apartment is decorated with graduation cards from neighbors in Oregon and California, colleagues from the strawberry business and proud relatives.

"What's next? Emmy? Oscar?" wrote one friend.

Prior to Baum, the oldest U. of C. doctoral graduate was Frank Bourgin, who was 77 when he was awarded the degree in 1988, 44 years after his dissertation was initially rejected by a faculty committee.

Baum, meanwhile, still seems a bit amused by the lofty academic circles in which he now travels.

During a drink with Heckman at the Quadrangle Club last week, the Nobel winner paged through his own book on education policy.

"As an economist, you will enjoy this," Heckman said to Baum, turning to a chart in his book.

"You called me an economist!" Baum said, turning to his wife. "Did you hear that? He called me an economist!"

Some of the other students living in his apartment building are just as amazed when they hear Baum's story.

"They all open their mouths in disbelief," he said. "Some of them wonder if it's an honorary thing. Oh no, it's an earned one."

His coworkers in the California strawberry business are not surprised.

"He was always on the cutting edge and always wanted to develop marketing programs and strategies on how to get the best price," said Roger Hamamura, who grows strawberry plants. "Everyone's bottom line improved."

P.J. Mecozzi, president of Del Mar Food Products Corp., credited Baum with organizing the strawberry industry to benefit all the players.

"Other than this innate drive that he has, his understanding of economics served him in a special way," he said. "He is very analytical and was always pushing and seeking to further improve the system."

On Friday, Baum will put on a cap and gown and walk in summer graduation ceremonies at Rockefeller Chapel. His wife will be there snapping pictures, and they'll celebrate over dinner at a Chicago restaurant.

Then they'll return to their apartment with some friends. For dessert, Dr. Baum will serve a big bowl of strawberries.

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