COWS HAVE NO IDEA HOW MUCH HUMANS THINK ABOUT THEM. EVERYTHING THAT AFFECTS THE HEALTH AND PRODUCTIVITY OF AMERICAN DAIRY AND BEEF COWS — THEIR LIVING SPACE, THEIR FEED, THEIR RANGE OF MOVEMENT, THEIR INTESTINAL TRACTS — HAS BEEN EXTENSIVELY STUDIED. ONE PLACE WHERE SUCH SERIOUS THOUGHT ABOUT BOVINES HAPPENS IS THE WKU UNIVERSITY FARM, WHICH IS OVERSEEN BY THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE. FORMER AGRICULTURE DEPARTMENT HEAD, DR. JENKS BRITT, IS A LONG-TIME VETERINARY SCIENCE RESEARCHER. BRITT HAS BEEN THINKING ABOUT COWS FOR MOST OF HIS LIFE. AS A BOY GROWING UP ON A DAIRY FARM NEAR BOWLING GREEN, HE PARTICIPATED FULLY IN THE RAISING, TENDING, AND MILKING OF HIS FAMILY’S HERD.

On 400 acres supporting over 100 dairy cows, Britt got to see every stage in the life cycle of cows, both healthy and sick. “We had a mechanical milking operation,” he says. “I also did 4-H projects involving dairy cows.” He participated in Future Farmers of America as well, but ended his involvement with both groups when he finished high school.

One aspect of cow management that particularly struck him during his youth, says Britt, was the role of the veterinarian. “I got to watch him treat sick animals, deliver calves, give vaccinations,” he says. “I decided at age ten or eleven what I wanted to do.” When it was time for him to enter college, he stuck to his plan and double-majored in agriculture and biology. After graduating from WKU in 1966, he headed to Auburn University in Alabama for a graduate degree in veterinary medicine, which he completed in four years.

For the next twenty-three years, Britt practiced veterinary medicine in Russellville, Kentucky, specializing in animal health management and reproductive technologies such as embryo transfer.

But in 1993, he decided to quit private practice and move into academia. At the University of Wisconsin - Madison, he took the position of clinical assistant professor in the College of Veterinary Medicine, and five years later joined the WKU Department of Agriculture. “I started doing research as part of the tenure process,” he says, “and I’ve been doing it ever since.”

At the university farm, Britt oversees three distinct types of projects involving bovines: applied research, applied field trials, and
in-depth disease research. Only the smaller projects can be done using
the university’s herd of 150 beef cows and 40 dairy cows. “If it takes 30 or
fewer animals to do a trial, we can
do it at Western,” he says. “If we need
400 animals, then we do the project
using private, family-owned herds.”
Some of the funding for new research
comes from feed and pharmaceutical
companies, who contact the
researchers to set up trials.

The university farm sits on
783 acres just south of the Natcher
Parkway, and is run by the Department
of Agriculture. The farm currently has
four staff members and about thirty
students who work there raising crops
(corn, wheat, alfalfa, pasture, and
soybeans) and tending the livestock (in
addition to bovines, there are horses,
pigs, and goats). All of these animals
are potential subjects of research
studies and trials, but are also used for
teaching within the department. WKU
graduate students usually participate
in the disease studies.

One focus of Britt’s research has
been on bovine nutrition. “I’ve done
quite a bit of research looking at
specific additives such as yeast culture
in bovine feed,” he says, “to see what
effect it would have on health and milk
production.”

His research on bovine diseases,
says Britt, focuses on two in particular:
Johne’s disease and bovine viral
diarrhea (BVD), both gastrointestinal
illnesses. The former malady, which
was identified in cows more than one
hundred years ago, resembles Crohn’s
disease in humans. The organism that
causes Johne’s disease is in the same
family as tuberculosis and leprosy.
Like those two sicknesses, Johne’s is
slow to develop. “A calf could have
exposure and infection at two months
old, but not show any sign of illness
until seven or eight years of age,” Britt
notes. The disease, which is spread
through fecal contamination, is not
curable yet. “A lot more research needs
to be done,” Britt says.

In addition to overseeing an
extensive array of research projects
and trials, Britt also teaches courses
in the science of agriculture, livestock
management, and animal pathology,
among others. And when he is not
supervising trials and teaching, he is
writing (he has authored or co-authored
227 articles), giving presentations (he
has given 222 in the U.S. and abroad),
and participating in professional
organizations (the American Dairy
Science Association and the American
Association of Bovine Practitioners,
among many others). He is also on
the editorial board of the Journal of the
American Veterinary Medical Association.

Some of the numerous awards Britt
has earned in his long career include
Veterinarian of the Year (1993, Kentucky
Medical Association), Practitioner of
the Year (1992, American Association of
Bovine Practitioners) and Alumni of the
Year (1992, WKU). Starting in January
2011, he will shift from full-time teaching
to part-time, and continue to oversee
research projects at the farm. “I’d like
to think our work with bovines has led
to real improvement in the health and
profitability of herds,” he says.

So even in partial retirement, Britt
will go on thinking about cows, just as
he has done all his life. ■