

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Dr. Jack Walther – Cowboy, Veterinarian, AVMA President

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

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First inspired as a young boy by a pin-stripe suited veterinarian who drove out to his Nevada ranch to attend to his lame Pinto mare, Jack Walther grew up to become the president of the AVMA.

“Dr. Bamburger was my hero,” Jack recalls. At that time in the mid-1940s, there were only about 30 veterinarians in the entire state to serve 40,000 horses and mules, 400,000 cattle, and a half million sheep, in addition to pets and wildlife. Like Dr. Bamberger, who graduated from the Chicago Veterinary College in 1909, about one-quarter of Nevada’s veterinarians had received their veterinary medical training from colleges that no longer existed.¹

Dr. Walther completed his undergraduate studies as an out-of-state student at the University of California, Davis, and continued on to their veterinary college, receiving his DVM in 1963. He established an equine practice in Reno but, like many other veterinary graduates of the early 1960s, he was drafted during the Vietnam War and spent two years in the Army Veterinary Corps. Returning to Nevada after his discharge, Jack entered the companion animal field, establishing three small animal hospitals in the Reno area over the next 35 years.

During the 1970s, Dr. Walther became actively involved in the Nevada Veterinary Medical Association and in 1992 was selected as Nevada’s delegate to the AVMA. From that position, he was elected as a regional representative to the AVMA’s executive board.

In September 2001, while serving as AVMA vice president, during a meeting with students in one of the colleges he was visiting, Dr. Walther received a phone call from a colleague encouraging him to run for the position of president-elect. Though the position of vice president had not been used as a springboard to the presidency for almost 100 years, Jack entered the race and was elected by the House of Delegates. At the July 2003 AVMA Annual Convention in Denver, Colorado, he succeeded Dr. Joe M. Howell to become the AVMA’s 140th president.

Dr. Walther served as president during a year in which serious diseases of food-producing animals, most notably, highly pathogenic avian influenza and bovine spongiform encephalopathy, emerged as threats to the nation’s food animals and to international trade.



Dr. Walther testifying before Congress in 2004, encouraging improved surveillance for Chronic Wasting Disease that threatened deer and elk populations.
(AVMA photo provided by Dr. Walther)

In what he considers one of his most important initiatives, Dr. Walther energized and expanded the public relations programs of the AVMA, redirecting that department in ways that were long overdue. He fundamentally improved the way in which legislative issues in various states were monitored by the AVMA so that relevant and timely information would be shared among veterinary associations across the country. Dr. Walther also facilitated the establishment of a privately-managed testing service for veterinary graduates of foreign and non-accredited colleges that helped reduce a two-to-three year backlog of new veterinarians awaiting examination for licensure to practice.



Dr. Walther plays his role as working cowboy on his ranch in Lamoille, NV in 2010
(Photo provided by Dr. Walther)

In addition to Dr. Walther's outstanding service to his chosen profession, he has also taken a leadership role in service to his community. He promoted major expansion of passenger and commercial air service in the Reno/Sparks area while a leader of the Washoe County Airport

Authority. In the 1990s, he was chair of the board of the National Championship Air Races. An avid cowboy himself, Dr. Walther also served as chair of the small and financially-fragile Reno Rodeo, guiding its transformation into one of the top rodeos in North America.

Apart from AVMA leadership, one of Dr. Walther's crowning contributions to the veterinary profession has been his long-standing commitment to the Western Veterinary Conference, which held its 85th meeting in Las Vegas in mid-February 2013. Typically attracting nearly 15,000 attendees, including over 6,000 veterinarians, this is one of the premier veterinary professional meetings in the world. Dr. Walther has served on its board for many years, including as president in 2005. Last year, and only the sixth time since its founding, the board voted to name the 2013 conference in his honor, proclaiming it to be the "Dr. Jack Walther 85th Western Veterinary Conference. As an expression of gratitude to an innovative pacesetter in the profession, it would be difficult to find a more fitting tribute.

¹ In addition to two veterinary colleges in Chicago, other schools that were prominent in the early decades of the 20th century but closed before 1926 were the San Francisco Veterinary College, St. Joseph's Veterinary College (Kansas City, Kansas) and George Washington University (Washington, DC).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.