

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Established by a Grass Roots Movement: Minnesota's College of Veterinary Medicine

By Dr. Donald F. Smith, with research assistance by Nathan Watson
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It's the most remarkable story imaginable: how a group of returning World War II veterans, concerned that their state of Minnesota did not have a program to teach veterinary medicine, formed a political lobby so effective as to overcome resistance of the very university that would eventually grant them their DVM degrees. If there ever was an example of the impact and power of students to effect meaningful change, this is it.

After World War II, thousands of battle-weary veterans returned home, clutching in their hands and hearts the desire to get a university education. Many who aspired to become veterinarians, like Glen Nelson of Minnesota, were married and impatiently ready to get on with their lives.

After he was discharged in 1945, Glen and his wife, Mary, motored in their 1940 Buick to Fort Collins, Colorado, home to one of the ten existing veterinary colleges. Glen was in the process of submitting his application when the dean called him into his office.

You know, Glen, I've got to be honest with you, if you stay here for five years [as an undergraduate] and get straight 'A's, I can't assure you that you'll get into vet school because we have to take residents first, then residents of adjoining states, and it will be more than five years down the road regardless of what you do.¹

The Nelsons returned home, dejected but not beaten. Glen enrolled in Animal Husbandry at the University of Minnesota College of Agriculture, and there met Ithel Schipper, a graduate student in Dairy Bacteriology who was also interested in becoming a veterinarian. They started to meet at the student center to discuss a plan, and soon they and other aspiring veterinarians formed a pre-vet club that grew to over 80, mostly veterans.

The group lobbied state legislators, the Farm Bureau, the Farmers Union, the Grange and the American Legion. With the encouragement of one state senator (Anchor Nelsen), Glen Nelson rounded up 70-80 students who donned their ribbons from the war and assembled on the Rotunda of the Capital.²

Despite the support they received from many organizations, the university was opposed. The administration was concerned that a new veterinary college would siphon off resources from what they feared to be a zero-sum appropriation from the Legislature. However, like in so many

Midwestern states, the power in the legislature was agriculture and the battle came down to a struggle between the university's board of regents (of which only two strongly supported the new veterinary school), and the legislature.

The political issues between the university and some members of the legislature became so heated that one state senator (Oscar Swenson) expressed the opinion that the College of Agriculture (which would be home to the nascent veterinary program) be "divorced" from the rest of the university so that the legislature could exercise more control over funds appropriate to agriculture.³

There was even opposition within the agricultural college as current veterinary college dean, Dr. Trevor Ames, reported on his understanding of the mood of Nelson and other veterans at the time.⁴

There is a great story of Glen being called to the dean's office of the College of Agriculture and being told that he and the rest of the pre-vet club needed to stop their political lobbying for a new veterinary school. The story goes that Glen boldly informed the dean that he had just spent four years in Europe as a tank commander and certainly wasn't going to be intimidated by a university administrator.

During that same session of the legislature, a bill was advanced to lay the groundwork for establishing a veterinary college at 'university farm,' part of the agricultural college on the St. Paul campus.⁵

The justification for veterinary medicine was buttressed by the assertion of the sponsor of the veterinary bill that Minnesota "faces a 'critical' shortage of veterinarians and a total lack of school facilities. As a result, many ex-servicemen who desire to follow the profession are denied training opportunities."⁶ The fact that Minnesota's 409 veterinarians were an average of 51 years, and that Minnesota (the third ranked state in livestock production) was unable to enroll students in other state schools because of the backlog of competition from their own residents, strengthened the arguments.⁷ These were the very arguments that Nelson, Schipper, and their colleagues had been making for months as well pressing the need for veterinarians familiar with such public health issues as tuberculosis and brucellosis.



Original Veterinary Anatomy Building

(Photo courtesy of University of Minnesota, College of Veterinary Medicine, 2014)

The 1947 legislature appropriated money to start the school⁸ and 24 students matriculated that fall. For the college's first ten years, it was administratively part of the College of Agriculture, Forestry and Economics.



Original Veterinary Hospital Building

(Photo courtesy of University of Minnesota, College of Veterinary Medicine, 2014)

Glen Nelson graduated with the first class in 1951. He served in the Army Veterinary Corps in Korea and became a faculty member at the University of Minnesota from which he received the Distinguished Service Award in 1990 and a similar citation from the Minnesota Veterinary Medical Associate the following year.⁹ In his waning years, Dr. Nelson reflected about the composition of the first class, of which he was a member.

Most of us were veterans. We had a B17 pilot who was shot down over France and escaped back to England with the French Underground. We had a B29 pilot that flew over Nagasaki the day after THE Bomb. I was a tank officer under Patton in North Africa and Italy. We had a prisoner of war in our class, an ex-POW from the Germans, and one that was shot up pretty bad on Saipan. Going to the student center was like sitting around the American Legion Club.¹⁰



Glen Nelson, DVM (U Minn Class of 1951)

(Photo courtesy of University of Minnesota, College of Veterinary Medicine, 2014)

In the history course I teach to veterinary students at Cornell, I always take time to describe this story as a case study of the impact that veterinary students can have on the outcome of the profession. Surely there is no better example.

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¹ Nelson, Glen H. [Give Us a Veterinary College](#). In *Their Words: The Stories of Minnesota's Greatest Generation*, Minnesota Historical Society (2007).

² Ibid.

³ Johnson, Adolph. *Separate State Agricultural College Sought*. *Winona Republican Herald*, Feb 4, 1947.

⁴ Ames, Trevor (Dean, University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine). Email to Donald F. Smith (Cornell University), June 20, 2014.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Veterinary College for "U" Approved*. Brainerd Daily Dispatch, March 3, 1947.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *24 Enroll in First U. of M. Veterinary School*. The Winona Republican Herald, Sept 27, 1947.

⁹ Nelson, Glen H. [Obituaries](#). JAVMA News, February 15, 2011.

¹⁰ Nelson, Glen H. [Give Us a Veterinary College](#). Ibid.

KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine

University of Minnesota

Glen H. Nelson

Ithel Schipper

World War II

Korean War

Army Veterinary Corps

Trevor Ames

TOPIC:

World War II

LEADING QUESTION:

What veterinary college was established by aspiring veterinary students?

META-SUMMARY:

Following World War II, Glen Nelson and other returning GIs successfully lobbied to establish a veterinary college at the University of Minnesota.

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.