

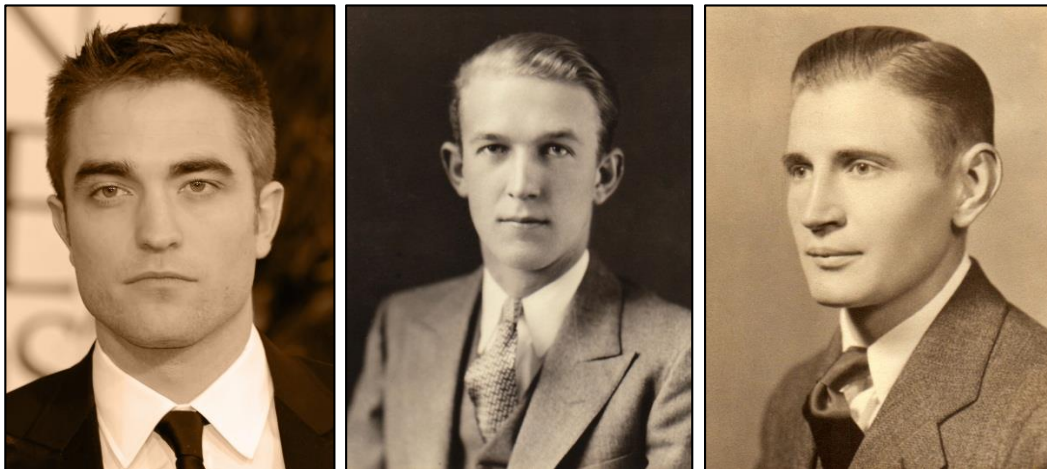
Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Beyond Water for Elephants: The Real Graduates of the Class of 1931

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
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The 2011 movie, *Water for Elephants*,¹ turned the veterinarian played by Robert Pattinson into the darling of all animal doctors. Portraying the fictional Jacob Jankowski whose parents were killed in a car accident that left him destitute as he was about to graduate from Cornell, Pattinson joined the circus and became the veterinarian for a host of animals, most notably Rosie, the elephant.

However, the REAL Class of 1931 was just as interesting and contributed to the veterinary profession in a multitude of ways. Here is the story of two of them.



Rob Pattinson

Dr. Lawrence T. Waitz

Dr. Elmer A. Woelffer

Graduates of Cornell's veterinary Class of 1931 (L to R)

Rob Pattinson, who plays the fictional Jacob Jankowitz in "Water for Elephants"

Lawrence T. Waitz, Elmer A. Woelffer

(Rob Pattinson photo available from www.breakingdawnmovie.org.)

(Lawrence Waitz and Elmer Woelffer photos ©Cornell University)

Sixteen-year old Larry Waitz arrived at the train depot in Ithaca in the fall of 1927. Growing up in Queens, New York, at a time when there were still horses and cows throughout the city, young Waitz's career interest had been stoked by veterinarian, Dr. Corwin;² "I went with him on

calls and we went to a stable where they kept milk delivery horses. I was fascinated, and in just that one day, I got hooked on becoming a veterinarian.”³ Starting veterinary college right out of high school, Larry was the youngest member of the class that graduated 36 students.⁴

Also arriving by train, but from the West, was 29-year-old Elmer Woelffer, a baccalaureate graduate of the University of Wisconsin’s agricultural program.⁵ Though the experienced Woelffer, who had been the master herdsman for some of the most prestigious dairies in Wisconsin, could not have been more different than the young lad from New York almost half his age, the adult man and the teenager became good friends.

Waitz graduated at the age of 20, too young to take the New York licensing examination.⁶ He worked for veterinarians in New York City and Long Island, then got his license and settled in the town of Hempstead in Nassau County where he established a successful large animal practice during the lean 1930s.

“I started during the Depression when men were selling apples on the street. I was so fortunate to be a veterinarian and have work that was needed. I took care of about 18 commercial dairies, many stables of horses, and many private horses on estates and riding academies and made a good living.”⁷

Unfortunately, Dr. Waitz was afflicted with such debilitating asthma as a result of his constant exposure to stables and hay that he was forced to give up large animal work. He purchased a partnership in the Sunrise Animal Hospital in Rockville Center in 1948, and shifted his professional career to caring for the health needs of dogs and cats. He later moved farther east on Long Island and built a new small animal hospital in Southold that later came to be known as the North Fork Animal Hospital. He retired in 1968.⁸

For the first 16 years of his veterinary career, Woelffer lived in the Boston area where he was manager and veterinarian for H.P. Hood and Sons, the largest milk producer in New England. He then returned to the Midwest at the request of cattle owner Fred Pabst of the Milwaukee brewing family, and entered private practice in the city of Oconomowoc near Milwaukee.⁹ He became one of the most distinguished bovine experts of the time, integrating sound scientific principles into reproductive programs. Clark Vilter of the internationally-recognized Four Winds Guernsey Farm in Hartland, Wisconsin, Woelffer’s client for 27 years, observed that the level of touch and sensitivity with which he examined the reproductive organs of cows 40 – 50 years ago allowed diagnostic accuracy similar to what the ultrasound machine provides in the hands of today’s veterinarian. “He was way beyond any other veterinarian I knew.”¹⁰

Woelffer served as veterinary editor of Hoard’s Dairyman for 30 years and authored a regular herd-health column in that widely-read magazine. When he received the prestigious Amstutz-Williams Award, one of the foremost honors for bovine veterinarians, he was hailed by his peers as “the father of bovine reproductive programs.”

Actively engaged in veterinary associations throughout his life, Dr. Woelffer served a six-year term on the Executive Board of the AVMA. His wife held Veterinary Auxiliary leadership posts at the state, national and even international levels. Dr. Woelffer is reported to have held some sort of record for attending the most consecutive AVMA meetings.

My personal encounter with Dr. Woelffer was in 1985 while I was on the faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and he asked me to meet him at one of the farms he served to consult on a cow that he thought might need surgery. As a boy growing up in Ontario pouring over his columns in Hoard's Dairyman, I never dreamed of one day meeting the legend himself, moreover as a consultant to him.



*Dr. Elmer and Mrs. Marian Woelffer in a memorial painting by their daughter, Mrs. Linda Thomas
The Woelffers were killed in a car accident in Kentucky in 1995. He was 97; she was 85.*

(Photo provided by Mrs. Thomas, 2013)

Unlike Woelffer, who continued his practice throughout his long life, Waitz retired before he was 50 years old. He developed nascent artistic skills and established an association of like-minded painters in the "Tuesday Morning Group" that lasted two decades. His wife taught him to sail, and they bought a 30-foot sailboat, which they used for racing and cruising. He sailed all over the East Coast and was known locally as a "crackerjack" sailor, very skilled and highly respected. Living comfortably in a 200-year-old farmhouse on a spacious lot, Larry and Ann Waitz remained close to Peconic Bay, which they had come to love and enjoy so deeply. Dr. Waitz died at age 99, just a month after his wife.



Dr. Lawrence and Mrs. Ann Waitz with their dog in their home in Cutchogue, New York, 2007
(Photo by Dr. Donald Smith)

In the movie, *Water for Elephants*, we first meet the fictional Jacob Jankowski as he escapes from a retirement home and flees to the circus for one last hurrah. He is 90, or perhaps 93 (he's not quite sure), but the memories of the elephant, Rosie, and the young woman whom he romanced and married, come alive on the big screen. Like Waitz, who treated animals big and small, and even Woelffer, who treated dogs and cats in a small clinic in his house, the fictional Jankowski was as comfortable treating a circus horse and a pet dog as he was with the elephant and the big cats.

That's just what veterinarians did in those days.

¹ <http://waterforelephantsfilm.com/>

² Tom E. Corwin, graduate of the American Veterinary College in New York City (prior to 1899).

³ Waitz LT (Cutchogue, NY). Personal interview at his home with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University). 2007 Oct 7.
<http://hdl.handle.net/1813/12879>

⁴ Announcement of the New York State Veterinary College for 1931-32, Published by Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1931. p33.

⁵ Thomas L (daughter of Dr. Woelffer, WI). Emails to Donald F. Smith (Cornell University). 2013 April 19, 21.

⁶ The age requirement was 21 years.

⁷ Waitz LT. See reference 2 above.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Thomas L. See reference 3 above; also his obituary

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1683&dat=19950510&id=MqUcAAAAIAAJ&sjid=4SwEAAAAIAAJ&pg=6842,9454719>.

¹⁰ Thomas L. See reference 3 above.

KEYWORDS:

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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.