Long Island Entrepreneur

It may be hard to imagine the circumstances in which a Cornell veterinary student during the Depression was able to achieve a higher standard of living than he had while growing up—so much so, that he could send money home from college to assist his family. Yet, that is what Albert Pontick was able to do because of his ultra-frugal life style coupled with his uncanny ability to secure numerous jobs in Ithaca. His entrepreneurial skills would stay with him throughout his professional life as he became a foundational veterinary practitioner in the area of the Hamptons on Long Island.

Al was born in rural Pennsylvania on October 10, 1913, the third of four children. His mother and step-father struggled with great difficulty to raise their conjoined eight-child family during the Depression:

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My father died at the age of 38, with four children. My mother remarried to a farmer who lost his little farm, so he ended up as a laborer. They were hard times—1929, ‘30, ’31. We had very little food when we were kids. We managed to have a cow, raised chickens and rabbits. Once I got into college, I was able to give the family some money because they needed help”

Before coming at Cornell, Al had matriculated at Temple University in Philadelphia on a baseball scholarship, aspiring to become a journalist. When an injury to his pitching arm ended his athletic career, he decided to apply to Cornell because of its land grant tuition-free status. After a year undergraduate education in agriculture, Pontick entered the veterinary college’s Class of 1939. He lived in the home of Dr. Forrest Lee of Ithaca, helping Mrs. Lee with the housekeeping and cooking in exchange for room and board.

Though Pontick was the brother-in-law of the veterinary anatomist Malcolm Miller, he received no special academic privileges. “The worst thing about the college” he said, citing Miller as the most flagrant abuser of the provocative technique, “was the unannounced Monday morning quiz on the previous week’s anatomy”. Nonetheless, Pontick remembers

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1 Albert P. Pontick ’39, personal interview, 2008.
his professors with deep respect, acknowledging their keen intellect, their interest in teaching, and their kindness to students.

The Depression, for all its heaviness, imbued the class with a unified purpose, “We knew we had a common interest and that was to get through college, and we aided and abetted each other as much as we could”. Despite their religious, ethnic, gender and racial diversity, “There was no friction to speak of, so we all got along pretty well.”

Though he enjoyed his college years immensely, Al later opined that his grades were not as good as they could have been because of all the time he spent juggling part-time jobs and courting his future wife. He graduated as one of 40 members of his class and spent his first nine months in a small animal practice in Rochester, New York, then returned with his wife to eastern Long Island where he practiced for the rest of his career.

Dr. Pontick developed two landmark veterinary practices in the Hamptons. The first, a practice that he purchased in 1941 from the widow of a recently-deceased veterinarian, was the East Hampton Animal Hospital, which served the spectrum of livestock, equine and small animal species. As more people moved into the area, the cattle and pig populations dwindled and practice growth was almost entirely dog and cats. Three other veterinarians—all Cornell graduates—joined the practice during the next two decades, adding depth and more extensive surgical expertise.

When an opportunity opened in nearby Southampton, Dr. Pontick and a colleague constructed a large, modern facility that became known as the Olde Town Animal Hospital. Their clients included many of the rich and famous from New York City who took refuge in the Hamptons on weekends and during summers. Dr. Pontick muses about the fascinating stories of important people and their pets, including Rachel Carpenter, the heiress of the A&P fortune; and Edith Bouvier Beale, the socialite and cabaret dancer, cousin of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy.

Dr. and Mrs. Pontick were blessed with two daughters and a son. After retiring, they moved to Boynton Beach, Florida, but returned to Long Island in 2000. His wife now deceased, Dr. Pontick lives semi-independently with his daughter, Joan, in Hampton Bays. An energetic man with a youthful ebullience belying his 95 years, Dr. Pontick still enjoys cooking, as well as the hobbies of painting and sketching that he developed after he retired from veterinary medicine.

Three graduates of Cornell’s Class of 1939 deserve special tribute in the development of veterinary practice in this region of New York. In addition to Dr. Pontick, Dr. Richard Bridgeman practiced in Huntington on the north shore of Long Island, and Dr. Robert Ferber founded the Bayside practice in Queens, near the border with Nassau County.

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4 Founded by William W. Bennett; continues today as the East Hampton Veterinary Group.
5 See biography and interview elsewhere in this collection.
Interview

Subject: Albert P. Pontick, DVM
Interviewer: Dr. Donald F. Smith
Interview Date: April 2, 2008
Location: Hampton Bays, N.Y.

Interviewer’s Note:
I had several interesting telephone conversations with Dr. Pontick before the visit that produced this interview. His enthusiasm for the profession, his fond remembrances of his classmates and experiences as a student, and his relationship (through marriage) with the anatomist Dr. Malcolm Miller, all made me curious to meet the man behind the animated voice. At the end of a lovely spring drive to the Hamptons in April 2008, Dr. Pontick welcomed me with a gracious smile as we recorded his life experiences. I sat with him for some time afterwards, as he proudly showed me the eclectic array of paintings and sketches that had occupied his days over the preceding few years. Like many other veterinarians, his life after performing his last spay had been fulfilling and creative. (Dr. Donald F. Smith)

Dr. Smith:
This is Donald Smith from Cornell University and I am in the home of Dr. Al Pontick, Class of 1939. It is April 2, 2008. We are talking about Dr. Pontick’s time at Cornell, and his career following graduation. It is good to see you, Dr. Pontick. Please speak about your growing up and how you became interested in veterinary college.
Dr. Pontick:
I was born in Frackville, Pennsylvania\(^1\), and moved from there at the age of two to East Setauket, on the north shore of Long Island\(^2\) where I spent my childhood and went to grammar school and high school. The first year of college I had a baseball scholarship at [Temple University] in Philadelphia, but I didn’t make the team because I threw my arm out. I transferred the following January to Cornell because my wife-to-be was at Cornell. I didn’t have the money to finish out at the college in Philadelphia, so I went to Cornell, without any money, and started my second semester, broke.

That’s when I met Dr. Miller\(^3\). He had just married my [future] wife’s sister, Mary\(^4\). From that point on, I easily got jobs and at one time, I had three or four jobs to maintain myself. In the morning, I used to go to one of the big halls and serve breakfast or wash the dishes for my breakfast. I’d go to classes, then at noon, I’d go to the hotel school and serve lunches, then go back to lab. In the afternoon, I started a little business that Mac Miller gave us; it was called the “Food Shop”, selling sandwiches to the fraternities. From 4:00-5:30, I would make about 50-60 sandwiches and Dr. Rice would go to the fraternity houses that night and sell the sandwiches.\(^5\) I did that for one semester and made a lot of money. Dr. Miller made so much money selling sandwiches that he ended up with a bride and a brand new car, a convertible Chevy. They were classy.

Alvin Rice continued the business and I got into other things. I was semi-adopted by Dr. Forrest Lee, an MD in Ithaca, to live as a houseboy for them. They had a room and bath off the house and I helped Mrs. Lee maintain the service of the house—serving dinners, washing dishes, doing the floors, vacuuming. I was considered a member of the family. They had a young boy, Bill, who was one year younger than me. We became close and got into a lot of mischief at the Lee house. It was a wonderful home. It was the first time in my life that I really had good meals, having come from a very poor family—the first time I ever learned what lamb chops were and things like that. I helped Mrs. Lee cooking; she was not a good cook and needed help. My wife (wife-to-be), Hadder,\(^6\) who went to home economics school, was an excellent cook and between the two girls I learned how to cook. I ended up out-cooking both of them. The last 20 years of Mrs. Pontick’s life, I was the chef and she liked my taste buds better than her own.

Dr. Smith:
Why did you apply to veterinary college?

Dr. Pontick:
Mac Miller. I was going to be a journalist, but we sat down one day when I first came from Philadelphia and he said to me, “Al, you haven’t had any experience in journalism and you haven’t had very good training in English. Your grades weren’t that high in English, so you

\(^1\) Small borough midway between Wilkes-Barre and Harrisburg, PA.
\(^2\) Between Stony Brook and Port Jefferson, in Suffolk County, NY.
\(^3\) Malcolm Eugene Miller ’34, Instructor in Anatomy; commonly referred to as “Mac Miller”.
\(^4\) Mary Wells; there were four sisters in her family.
\(^6\) Henrietta Wells, BS ’37 (Home Economics), deceased Oct 30, 2001; sister to the wife of Dr. Miller. Dr. Pontick referred to her as “Hannah” or “Hadder”.

A Biography of and Interview with Albert P. Pontick, DVM
really don’t have a good start. And, you don’t have any money. Why don’t you become a veterinarian? You get your education for free.7 You have a place to stay at the Lee’s. And if you want to write, good God, in veterinary medicine there are many options. You can teach; you can write. With your gift of gab, you’d make a good practitioner.”

So he talked me into it and I started. I didn’t like it at first, not having ever thought of being a veterinarian. I helped Mac prepare the anatomy specimens for dissection, using formaldehyde intravenously.8 It didn’t leave a good taste in my mouth. But I learned to like it and graduated in 1939. I did fairly well as a student, but I had so many jobs and I was in love with my first-grade girl, Hannah Wells. So between courting her and the jobs, I didn’t have much time for studying and my grades didn’t show my potential.

When I graduated, I went to Long Island9 and started a practice there. I came back home. I first started at Riverhead.10 I knew that the area would be growing—Riverhead and all—the Island was growing. Dr. William Bennett died in East Hampton, about 25 miles from Riverhead, and he had a very nice mixed practice that was lending itself towards small animals. He had a nice small animal hospital. I went over to his widow, who was being badgered by people trying to buy out the place for little or nothing. She was well into her 70s and was confused, and didn’t know which way to go. For the first two weeks [after her husband’s death] nothing was happening, and the animals had to be taken care of. Well, in October 1940, I drove up in an old car with Mrs. Pontick pregnant (delivery was in January 1941) and spoke to Mrs. Bennett. She said, “Dr. Pontick, you have made no offer”. I said, “Well I can’t; I don’t have any money”. She said, “Well, do you have a goal?”

I said, “I do. I have a plan. These people [who have been visiting you] are not offering you what it is worth.” She said, “Anything that will get me out of this mess would be fine. What is your plan?” She looked at Hadder and [seeing her pregnant] said, “I like her”.

I said, “My plan is this: I will lease the place from you for one year and bring it up in shape as it needs some work. Whatever we decide on the lease money, I’ll see to it that you get it every month. At the end of the year, I will sit down with your son and daughter, and we will decide on its value.” She said, “Thank God, you can have it”. And that’s how it started.

I did a little bit of everything, from pigs on. There were quite a few pigs because the farmers all cured the meat. There were about 100 small dairies in the Hamptons and on Shelter Island.11

I made history when I first came [back to Long Island]. I did very careful tuberculosis testing, which was long overdue. Astonishingly, I found that almost ten or twelve percent of the cows had TB. [The regulatory veterinarians] were astounded, and the State sent men down. Right away, they isolated the cows. I wasn’t popular with the farmers. The State sent

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7 Cornell’s land grant status provided free tuition (referred to as scholarships) to residents of New York State.
8 Horses were the primary species for dissection for anatomy instruction.
9 Following a nine-month employment in a small animal hospital in Rochester, NY.
10 Dr. Pontick’s first practice on Long Island was in Calverton, just west of Riverhead, in Suffolk County.
11 Shelter Island is located near the eastern tip of Long Island, north of the Hamptons.
me a letter stating that I had the power to test anytime I wanted to and [if] any new cases came up, they wanted a post mortem. We got it under control in about two years.

*Dr. Smith:*  
What other things did your treat cows for?

*Dr. Pontick:*  
Mastitis and digestive diseases. The farmers often had only one cow and they didn’t take very good care of them. They’d often get out and get into clover.\(^{12}\) There was a lot of indigestion, bloat, horses with lameness, cows with hardware disease.\(^{13}\)

*Dr. Smith:*  
Did you operate on those [cows with ‘hardware’]?

*Dr. Pontick:*  
No. I almost did, but I didn’t have enough help, and I knew that I could mess up the job. I never did a caesarian. I think Dr. French did after he came.\(^{14}\)

Dr. French was a Rochester boy and Dr. Miller said to him, “I think you’d do well with Dr. Pontick”. We got together, I interviewed him, and we spent the next 30 years together. He was a good doctor. He was a good surgeon, very good hands, and I turned over all the surgery to him.

Then I became busy managing, as I had another veterinarian, Dr. Tarr\(^{15}\), and my practice was growing and it needed management as well as veterinary medicine. I took selected cases in veterinary medicine that they thought I could do better than them. But basically they did the practicing. And that gave me extra time to do things and that’s when I started to branch out into the stock market, land market and things like that.

*Dr. Smith:*  
What was the name of your practice?

*Dr. Pontick:*  
East Hampton Animal Hospital. I sold it to Dr. French in the 1960s. But I wasn’t satisfied with just one hospital. When Dr. Halsey died in Southampton—12 miles west and a larger town without a veterinarian—Dr. Gould, a protégée of mine, decided he would come back and practice in Southampton.\(^{16}\) But he didn’t have any money either. We looked around and I said to him, “Charlie, this is a very sophisticated place; there is a lot of money here if you want to go into practice, but we have to build a real nice hospital”, which we did.

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\(^{12}\) This occasionally caused a digestive abnormality referred to as “bloat”.

\(^{13}\) Infection of the cow’s stomach (sometimes accompanied by congestive heart failure) after inadvertently consuming a nail or piece of wire.

\(^{14}\) Herbert R. French ’54, deceased.

\(^{15}\) B. Dale Tarr ’66, deceased Jan 21, 2005.

\(^{16}\) Charles N. Gould ’69, resides in Water Mill, NY.
We built a hospital for $400,000. We couldn’t get the money from the bank, because I would not put up the East Hampton hospital as collateral. I had a client, Rachel Carpenter, who was very wealthy. She was heiress to the A&P business and a very good friend of mine. She had four poodles and I took care of them. She had once told me, “Al, don’t ever come to me for money. I just cannot lend my friends money. I don’t want to take their houses away. I don’t do it”.

Well, about ten years after she told me this, I reached out to her and told the story. She said, “Oh, goddammit, alright, I’ll give you the quarter of a million dollars”, which she gave me for two percent. What a break! So we built the hospital and paid it off within seven years. That was a nice modern hospital, Old Towne Animal Hospital17, doing very well there with three or four veterinarians. I stayed there about two years: in the morning I practiced in East Hampton and in the afternoon, in Southampton. It eventually got too much for me so I sold the practice to Dr. Gould. I retired over 30 years ago, maybe 40 now.

When I was on the verge of retiring, I was only working half time, so I went to Florida and found a place in Boynton Beach. We spent about seven years going back and forth from East Hampton in the summer to Boynton Beach in the winter. Eventually, we moved to Boynton Beach year-round. I sold the home in Boynton Beach about ten years ago and in East Hampton about five years ago.

Dr. Smith:
You said earlier that you grew up in a very modest home. What did your father do?

Dr. Pontick:
My father died at the age of 38, with four children. My mother remarried to a farmer who lost his little farm, so he ended up as a laborer. They were hard times—1929, ’30, ’31. We had very little food when we were kids. We managed to have a cow, raised chickens and rabbits. Once I got into college, I was able to give the family some money because they needed help.

Dr. Smith:
Tell me about your brother-in-law, Dr. Miller.

Dr. Pontick:
He came to Cornell, having just married Mary, my sister-in-law. I lived part of the time at his home in Danby.18 He had built the home and he did everything (he was a remarkable man). I went out one day and he was in the cellar and all over the floor were parts, iron parts. He said it was a furnace that had just come from Sears-Roebuck. It was an oil furnace and within two weeks he had the whole thing put together and it worked fine. He later built a fireplace and chimney, and it worked beautifully.

He drilled a well, he built a barn and had several cows and a horse for the kids, also some geese and chickens. He had a nice garden—Mary was a very good gardener so they canned

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17 Olde Town Veterinary Hospital, founded in 1965 by Drs. Pontick and Charles Gould.
18 Small community southeast of Ithaca, NY.
as much as they could. Mac continued teaching and soon became assistant professor and then, professor; and then, of course, he became sick.

He came from Penn State.\(^{19}\) He liked teaching and he helped his anatomy teacher, Sunderville.\(^{20}\) Sunderville took a shine to Mac and they were very close. Sunderville was not feeling well and even as a student, Mac took over some teaching for him. Mac loved anatomy; he just loved it.

**Dr. Smith:**
I have always wondered how Dr. Miller became a dog anatomist during a time when large animals were considered important [at Cornell].

**Dr. Pontick:**
Well, it was partly because of me. My practice was turning so fast towards small animal,\(^{21}\) and so it was with a lot of the graduates of 1939—people in Bayshore\(^ {22}\) and so on. Mac saw the way the wind was blowing and there was not a good book out [on canine anatomy].

**Dr. Smith:**
So he saw what you and other people were doing in small animals.

**Dr. Pontick:**
That’s right, the questions of the [graduates] were about dogs—diseases, muscles and so on—and he could not turn anywhere and show them the background. So that’s how he went into small animals.

**Dr. Smith:**
How did his brain tumor develop?

**Dr. Pontick:**
They don’t know where it came from. It was a benign tumor but the size and position made it so difficult that they couldn’t remove it in its entirety the first time. He lived four or five years after the first operation. They operated the second time and it had grown, but also was deeper. Years later, in Boynton Beach, I met the surgeon from Cornell Medical Center who did the operation on Mac. He said that if he had had, at that time, the electronic and hand instruments available later in his career, he could have reached deeper into the brain to remove the tumor. He would have been crippled, but would have lived. But they didn’t have the equipment at the time and the tumor just outgrew his brain.\(^ {23}\)

\(^{19}\) Dr. Miller had attended Penn State University from 1928-30, majoring in dairy husbandry, before matriculating in the DVM program at Cornell in 1930.

\(^{20}\) Earl Sunderville ’08, professor of veterinary anatomy; his son, Edwin, was a classmate of Dr. Pontick.

\(^{21}\) During the 1940s and 1950s, the East Hampton practice grew at 12% per year, with dog and cat patients accounting for most of this growth (reference East Hampton Vet Group web site, 2009)

\(^{22}\) Perhaps refers to his classmate Dr. Robert Ferber ’39. See interview with Dr. Ferber in this collection.

\(^{23}\) Dr. Miller succumbed on April 18, 1960 at age 50. His book, *Anatomy of the Dog*, was nearly finished when he died, and was completed by his colleagues, Drs. Howard Evans , PhD ’50 and George Christensen ’49.
Dr. Smith:
Could you talk to me about your class and your classmates? For example, you had a man from China, Francis Kwong.24

Dr. Pontick:
Yes, he was a nice person, very quiet and very learned. He asked more questions than he answered. He let the Americans do the answering, but he was very smart. We all liked him. He was a very nice, easy-to-get-along-with person.

While he was part of us, he always seemed to be a little outside of us, by choice. Perhaps he was told not to mingle—that was the time of the change of the rule in China. But we all like him and he did very well.

He must have had money from China because everything he needed, he had. He went back to China and he wrote to some of us. I got some letters from him but I was told by a learned person not to answer any of his letters. China was going through a revolution and if you were communicating with Kwong and he was in the middle of China, people would start investigating, so I just stopped responding.

Dr. Smith:
Dr. Ferber also came from Long Island.25

Dr. Pontick:
He and I would take turns taking each other home to Long Island. I had a car while I was in college (that’s why I needed money) and he had a car. So he would drive back Thanksgiving and I would drive Christmas, and we’d take a couple of people with us to pay for the gas and oil. We both had touring cars. I got to know Bob well. He was a very funny person, very jovial, very intelligent, nice guy.

Dr. Smith:
The other person from Long Island.

Dr. Pontick:
Roy Badgley.26 Roy was a very quiet, reserved person, laid back, well-liked by the students. A good student. I didn’t have much to do with Roy, except classes.

The Class of ’39 was a very convivial class; we all seemed to enjoy each other. We minded our own business. There were very few fights, if any, and we all helped wherever we could. We did some group studying and that seemed to help a lot of us because you could get facts and figures in a hurry rather than studying for it. You rode on the backs of the people who did a lot of reading—in one sentence, they could give you an hour of thought. So it paid off

24 Kwong, Francis Jung-lu ’39, originally from Taisun, Kwangtung, China; became a legendary veterinary pioneer in China; deceased.
25 Robert Ferber ’39, originally from Flushing, NY (see interview with Dr. Ferber, elsewhere in this collection).
26 Francis Roy Badgley ’39, originally from Farmingdale, NY; deceased.
to have these groups of six or eight people studying at night. We would work together from 8:00 to 12:00 once or twice a week, especially when exams came along.

**Dr. Smith:**
You had the sons of two faculty members in your class: Sunderville\(^{27}\) and Birch.\(^{28}\)

**Dr. Pontick:**
Birch was in and out. I think he was a semester ahead of us. A very nice man, very laid back, very quiet. We all liked him. Both of them (Birch and Sunderville), they were much like their fathers. There was no friction of any kind and they were good students, well thought of. I can’t tell you much more about them.

**Dr. Smith:**
Dr. Bell was in your class?\(^{29}\)

**Dr. Pontick:**
Yes, he was an older person. He was a former teacher and he would guide us and show us how to do things a little more easily. He was well-liked by all of us. A southerner, he had an accent and we kidded him about that. He would take part only occasionally in our studies. He didn’t seem to have to study an awful lot because he seemed to know the answers. He did very well.

**Dr. Smith:**
You had another older man in your class who was a pharmacist, Mort Spiegel.\(^{30}\)

**Dr. Pontick:**
Yes, he was, unfortunately, a very nervous person. All of us were youthful and he was about 20 years older and when he came back to study, he found it very difficult. There may have been a little friction here and there because we would kid him and he took kidding very seriously; he didn’t like it. He said he was doing the best he could. He would occasionally have us to his home for study periods. He was struggling, not because he wasn’t bright enough, but because he was older and couldn’t grasp things as fast. Sometimes we got impatient with him, but later on, we learned to love him and we respected him and we got along well with him then.

**Dr. Smith:**
Do you know what happened to him?

**Dr. Pontick:**
He died within maybe ten or fifteen years after getting out. I think he had a State job of some kind but he didn’t go into practice.\(^{31}\) He didn’t have confidence; that was the trouble. We tried to build that up but he’d say, “Well I’m older and if I make a mistake they will criticize me”.

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\(^{27}\) Edwin Joseph Sunderville ’39, originally from Ithaca, NY; deceased.
\(^{28}\) Frank McKeeman Birch ’39, originally from Ithaca, NY; deceased.
\(^{29}\) Wilson Bryan Bell ’39, originally from Iver, VA; deceased.
\(^{30}\) Milton Spiegel ’39, originally from Ithaca, NY; born in 1897, deceased July 1, 1952.
Dr. Smith:
John Ayres?32

Dr. Pontick:
John Ayres was a happy-go-lucky person. I knew him very well. We had a lot of fun together, told our little dirty stories and went to classes together.

Dr. Smith:
John Murray?33

Dr. Pontick:
John and I were very close. We’d talk to each other by phone. I tried to call him the other night. He was very interested in Cornell even back then and later on, he had his own program to which he gave all of his money to Cornell.34 But he was a nice person, a very well-thought-of person, way back then. A good student, a little older than us, maybe a year. I was older than a lot of them, too.

Dr. Smith:
Did you have an interview [before you were accepted in the college]?35

Dr. Pontick:
Oh yes, but I don’t remember who interviewed me. There was a group of about four [faculty] and one of them was the anatomy professor, Sunderville.

Dr. Smith:
Was Hagan on the board?36

Dr. Pontick:
Hagan rarely did that. I didn’t see much of Hagan; none of us did. He spoke well and he did a lot of speech-making throughout the country and even Europe. He would come back and talk to us about different things, events, and so on. He ran his ship well, but in classes we didn’t have much to do with him.

Dr. Smith:
Tell me about Pat Halloran [O’Connor].37

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31 Dr. Spiegel initially worked for the Bureau of Animal Industry, later for a laboratory at Farmingdale; then moved to Minnesota (perhaps to continue regulatory work).
32 John Patrick Ayres ’39, originally from Corbettsville, NY; currently resides in Binghamton, NY.
33 John Delaney Murray ’39, originally from Elkland, PA; currently resides in Keuka Park, NY. See interview elsewhere in this collection.
34 Dr. Murray was designated Foremost Benefactor to Cornell in 1980.
35 The “Announcement of the New York State Veterinary College for 1935-36” stated that the Committee on Admissions required a personal interview, whenever feasible.
36 William Arthur Hagan, DVM, MS, DSc, professor of bacteriology and dean of the college, 1932-59.
37 Patricia Gwendolyn O’Connor ’39, originally from Buffalo, NY; deceased July 8, 2003.
Dr. Pontick:
Well, Pat Halloran took a lot of kidding from us, being a girl there. Pat was loved by all of us, and she was fun. She always told us that our neck needed to be washed or our shirt was dirty. She was a mother to us all. We hated her for that and told her we were working but she would say, “Well, you don’t come to class looking like that!”

She was a good student; she worked hard for her marks. She chided us for not working as hard and we all loved her. She did very well when she got out.

Dr. Smith:
How did you tease her?

Dr. Pontick:
Oh, the fact that she was the only girl\(^{38}\) and she could have any of the boys.

Dr. Smith:
Did she love that?

Dr. Pontick:
Hard to tell. She got hooked up with Halloran, so the teasing stopped.\(^{39}\)

Dr. Smith:
You also had Elizabeth Beckley.\(^{40}\)

Dr. Pontick:
I didn’t know her too well. She was quiet and not very outgoing. She was there, and that’s about all I can say. Is she still alive?

Dr. Smith:
No, she went back to Buffalo and was in a practice there.

Dr. Pontick:
She was very quiet.

Dr. Smith:
What about Rikki?\(^{41}\)

Dr. Pontick:
She was an outspoken person. She was one of the boys in a way. She always did the things that we did, practically chewing tobacco but not quite. She loved veterinary medicine and voiced her opinions about certain things. We argued with her. She was one of us in a way.

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\(^{38}\) There were three women in the class.


\(^{41}\) Rikki von Decken-Luers ’39, originally from New York City, deceased.
Dr. Smith:
You had three women in your class and the class after you had four women, which was unusual. Did the professors make any distinction between the women and the men?

Dr. Pontick:
No, they treated everyone the same.

Dr. Smith:
Tell me about Dan Skelton, from Memphis.

Dr. Pontick:
Dan was a nice person, he was a lot of fun. We kidded him a lot and he kidded us. He was an average student, worked hard. He always dressed well. He was fun to be around. He was a little offish with us, I don’t know why. But he was well thought-of.

Dr. Smith:
Are there any other of your classmates that you would like to talk about? Dan Sasmore, what was he like?

Dr. Pontick:
I didn’t know him too well. He was the one who Mac questioned his report on an anatomy test because it was almost a verbatim report of Sisson. They checked with Sasmore and he said, “I didn’t copy that”. But he could remember—he had that type of mind—he could remember whole paragraphs just like it was written. Mac said, “I have to apologize to him”, and he was okay with that.

We haven’t talked about Syd Martin. Syd was a pal of mine. He was from Massachusetts and he and I were going to go into practice together. He was a tall guy and I was a short guy. We spent a lot of time studying together, then we split and he went to Chateauguay on the border of Canada. He loved large animals and I loved small and we just didn’t gel going into practice together. We tried looking for a place in Massachusetts and we semi-found one. But then I said, “I didn’t take Mass exams and you didn’t and they won’t be offered until next year.” So it was dropped. I really wanted to go back to my hometown. It really was a lush area where you could do whatever you wanted. So Syd found what he wanted—large animal—and he was very good at it. He maintained good rapport with Cornell on testing and meetings and so on. He was my friend.

Dr. Smith:
Were there any professors that you particularly liked?

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42 There had been only eight women Cornell DVM graduates prior to the Class of 1939.
43 Daniel Skelton ’39, originally from New York City; currently resides in Wichita, KS; only African-American student in the class.
44 Daniel Paul Sasmore ’39, originally from New York City, deceased.
45 Sisson authored a classic textbook on anatomy of the domestic animals.
46 Sydney Matthew Martin ’39, originally from Chateauguay, NY; deceased.
47 In northeastern New York, near Lake Champlain.
**Dr. Pontick:**
I liked them all. They were really good to all of us. There was not one who was objectionable. There were tougher ones. Of course Mac was loved by everybody. The professor of small animals, [Howard Milks], was laid-back—a roly-polly guy.⁴⁸ “Oh, if you can’t get that, Al, look it up another way—approach it another way—and you’ll find the answer. He never gave up on you. He always said, “Well, you didn’t have a good test then, but you’ll do better the next time”. We all liked him—he gave us all the chances he could. The chances for spaying, for example, were limited and we were allowed once or twice.⁴⁹ That’s not enough to go into practice, but that’s all they had.

Stevenson was Milk’s assistant.⁵⁰ He was more like one of us, younger.

**Dr. Smith:**
You had a class with people from different backgrounds, and yet you just said that you all got along very well. What created that character?

**Dr. Pontick:**
I think we knew we had a common interest and that was to get through college. And we aided and abetted each other as much as we could. There was no friction to speak of, no one was a better dresser and there was no showoff (except Ferber and he was not a showoff but a comedian—he made us laugh and we loved to have him around). So we all got along pretty well.

We had little ball games on the square beside the veterinary building. Mac would come out and bunt balls for us, so the whole class would join in. We all loved the girls. There was no friction there at all, except fun. No arguments that weren’t settled right then and there. I’d say we a very well-conjoined class.

**Dr. Smith:**
By the middle 40s, there was a lot of anti-Jewish sentiment amongst the students.

**Dr. Pontick:**
No, [not in our class]. Ferber was well-liked; and Sprecher, quiet, very Jewish. I liked him, no problems. Spiegel was loved by everyone. Sasmore. I never heard anybody say anything about a Jewish person.

The worst thing about the college—and Miller was the worst one to do it—it was a provocative, insane system of teaching. Monday morning, an unannounced quiz—oh, my God—an unannounced quiz on last week’s anatomy. What would you remember from last week? Mac would gleefully pass around the paper and it would come back as 50s and 60s, and so on. They later cut back on it because one or two guys actually collapsed because of it (not in our class, but others). It was a frightening experience because you were just not

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⁴⁸ Howard Jay Milks ’04, professor of therapeutics and director of the small animal clinic.
⁴⁹ Opportunities for gaining practical surgical experience were limited.
⁵⁰ Hadley Carruthers Stevenson ’20, assistant professor of materia medica and small animal diseases.
prepared for it. It would just be once a month and—suddenly—out of the blue, they took gleeful joy in unannounced quizzes.

*Dr. Smith:*
A couple of your classmates have told me that the very first day of class in the first year, Dr. Sunderville would get all of the people together and the first thing that they would do would be to go into the anatomy lab where all the horses were strung up. I heard that you had one or two of your classmates who just walked out and left that day. Do you recall that?

*Dr. Pontick:*
No, I don’t remember that. But I can sympathize with them. It was gruesome, muscles exposed and blood—talking abstractly about things and there they were right there in front of you. The smell was terrible, something that you had never experienced in your life. You came from New York City, for example, and saw something like that and you just couldn’t take it at first.

*Dr. Smith:*
Dr. Pontick, I want to thank you. Your memory is incredible, really incredible and I appreciate it.