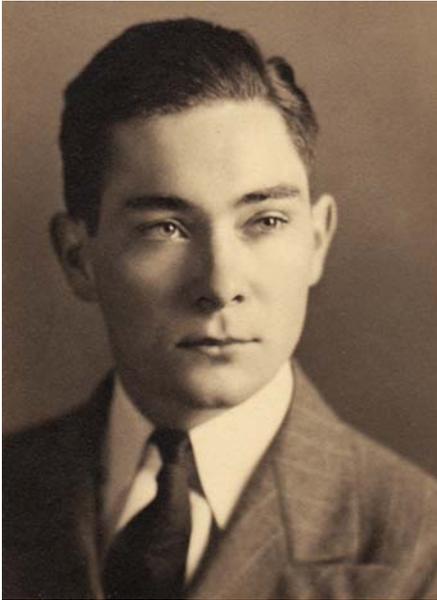


**A Biography of and Interview with
John P. Ayres, DVM**

Class of 1939, College of Veterinary Medicine, Cornell University

Author and Interviewer: Dr. Donald F. Smith, *Austin O. Hooey Dean Emeritus*

New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph



John P. Ayres, 1939

A Grateful Heart and a Penchant for Justice

“God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb”, were the encouraging words of John Ayres’ mother when life was especially difficult during the Depression. John drew strength from her inspired support and never ceased giving credit for the wisdom and instruction he received from her, as well as from the professors and other veterinarians who provided guidance for his professional career.

Born December 22, 1915, on a small farm in southern New York, Dr. Ayres aspired to become a veterinarian after accompanying his Cornell-educated mentor, Dr. Miles Markham, on farm calls:

“More than anyone else, he was instrumental in my thinking about veterinary medicine. He never ceased to amaze me with his awareness and knowledge in every situation.”¹

After one year of undergraduate work at Cornell and a particularly persuasive admissions interview, John matriculated in 1935 as one of approximately 40 members of the Cornell veterinary class of 1939. He studied with a remarkably diverse group of students, including three women, an African-American, students from China and Canada, eight Jews and several Irish-Catholics, and older-than-average students aspiring to a second career in veterinary medicine. Faced with the daunting challenges of the Depression, they eschewed their personal differences and united in mutual support of a shared goal to successfully complete their education in veterinary medicine and attain meaningful employment.

With his father incapacitated from a debilitating stroke the summer before he began his veterinary studies, John worked assiduously so not to add financial burden to his family. His surrender of personal living space when he moved into the free room provided in the college’s veterinary clinic during his junior and senior years not only gave him additional experience looking after the clinic animals, but also fostered a close and perpetual relationship with the faculty whom he grew to respect and admire.

John was often the only person inhabiting the old James Law Hall during academic breaks at Christmas and other times when he stayed behind to pick up jobs made available by departed classmates. It was during these breaks that he had free access to the library. The magnitude

¹ Dr. John P. Ayres, interview 2007.

and impact of the collection gave him a respect and love for books that he retained throughout his life.

John's commitment to fairness and justice was ingrained through his Catholic faith and reinforced by his family, but it was also shaped by his life experiences. Morally, he struggled when his classmates were occasionally subjected to anti-Semitic comments because he, too, had felt the sting of prejudice. But this was the Depression, and though he and others may have wanted to leap to their defense, personal survival often took precedence. John never forgot these scars, and he has tried to "give back" through service and kindness to others, especially to those from less-privileged backgrounds.

Dr. Ayres served in the US Army Veterinary Corps during World War II, and remained in the reserve for an additional three decades. Before and after the war, he spent time in small animal work in the New York City area, then returned to Binghamton, N.Y. in 1947 to work for the city health department. He spent evenings and weekends tending to the veterinary needs of local pets.

After 15 years, he joined the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets as a state regulatory veterinarian. He continued to practice part time through 1990, but also pursued a second career in real estate investment, financing, and development.

Despite a serious brush with cancer in 2003 and 2006, John and his wife, Anne, live in Binghamton in the house in which they have resided for over five decades. They have two children: Christine, a businesswoman who lives in Binghamton; and John, an orthopedic surgeon in Bradenton, Florida.

Dr. Ayres has a clear recollection of his experiences at Cornell, including nuanced observations of his professors. He also has followed the professional activities of his classmates and proudly recounts their service to the wartime effort, regardless of their specific field of endeavor. Ever a champion for the underdog, Dr. Ayres has been faithful throughout his long life in his commitment to support, defend and protect the *shorn lamb*.

Interview

Listen to the Interview

Subject: John P. Ayres, DVM
Accompanied by: Ms. Christine Ayres, daughter
Interviewer: Dr. Donald F. Smith
Interview Date: December 11, 2007
Location: Binghamton, NY



Photograph by Donald F. Smith

*Ms. Christine Ayres, Dr. John and Mrs. Ayres.
12/11/07*

Interviewer's Note:

I met Dr. Ayres in 1997 when he attended a regional alumni event that I hosted soon after becoming dean. He subsequently communicated with me periodically, passionately encouraging me to find ways for Cornell to honor the service and sacrifice of the many alumni who served in WWII and other conflicts. I particularly looked forward to interviewing Dr. Ayres for this Legacy project as he was uniquely familiar with the faculty when he was a student, having lived at the college for his junior and senior years at Cornell. Ms. Chris Ayres joined her father during the interview. (Dr. Donald F. Smith)

Dr. Ayres' editorial comments are noted in italics.

Dr. Smith:

This is December 11, 2007. I am Dr. Donald Smith from Cornell University. I'm in Binghamton, New York with Dr. John Ayres, Class of 1939, and his daughter, Chris Ayres. We're conducting this interview as part of the Legacy Research Project to document the historical legacies of some of the great Cornellians.

Dr. Ayres, it's a pleasure to be here. I would like you to talk about your life growing up, where your parents came from, how you decided to become a veterinarian, and how you came to Cornell.

Dr. Ayres:

I was born in Corbettsville, New York,¹ the youngest of five children. My father and mother operated a dairy farm but did not own it. They also raised two orphans and cared for my father's [disabled] brother, making us ten at the table. *Our home was typical of farm houses at that time: no electricity, central heat, running water, nor telephone, but filled with much love and loyalty.*²

When my parents were unable to buy the farm, we moved to another town where my father operated a small feed mill. Eventually, he was able to buy the farm, so we moved back when I was about [15] years old. He ran the farm and still managed a feed business.

The veterinarians visiting our farm always impressed me and, in those days, I could ride with them during their farm calls. Dr. Miles Markham³ was the outstanding one, and he became an advisor and a close [and respected] friend. More than anyone else, he was instrumental in my thinking about veterinary medicine. *He taught me to view the "big picture" on farm visits before zeroing in on the patient: the general layout, the owner, his helpers, and the entire herd. He never ceased to amaze me with his awareness and knowledge in every situation.*

My older brother wrote to Cornell and acquired information on veterinary medicine that I kept reviewing. *I became hooked on the information about the veterinary college, and assumed care of our chickens and pigs, sometimes even performing minor operations.*

My mother had been a school teacher before her marriage and she strongly encouraged me to attend Cornell for at least one year. I applied to the College of Agriculture and entered in the fall of 1934. I made it a practice to visit the veterinary college routinely and confirmed my desire to transfer after one year of pre-veterinary preparation.⁴ My parents paid \$3.00 per week for my room at 201 College Avenue.

After I decided to become a veterinarian, I learned that only one of eight applicants would be selected for admission. Still, I was determined to be one. In the spring of 1935, I was admitted to the veterinary college and returned to work on our farm for my summer vacation. That summer, my father suffered a massive stroke and neither walked nor talked again.

¹ Rural community approximately 10 miles south of Binghamton, N.Y.

² This, and subsequent additions to the transcript by Dr. Ayres, are designated in italics.

³ Miles Capron Markham '18, originally from Constableville, N.Y.

⁴ Minimum requirement for admission to veterinary medicine at Cornell.

Whatever business he had developed, went down the tubes. *When I went back to Cornell that fall, I was determined to be self supporting and work my way through veterinary college.*

Ms. Ayres:

Dad, tell him about your interview to get into veterinary school.

Dr. Ayres:

When I went for my interview, Dr. Frost, the professor of large animal medicine,⁵ advised me that he heard I was spending more time working than in class at the agricultural college. I told him I was doing all I could do to be self sufficient because of an illness at home. He said, “You can’t do that in the veterinary college, so what will you do [if you’re admitted to the college]?” “I’ll do it,” I replied as he repeated his question. Dr. Frost became one of my most respected professors. Years later, he told me of my words and said he told his colleagues on the interview committee, “He’ll do it!”

One day, I learned that Dr. Frost had a job for a student. When he arrived the next morning, he found me asleep across his office doorway. He awakened me, gave me an interview, and asked me the amount that I expected to be paid. I suggested that I work for a week and then he reach a determination. That employment lasted for my four years in the college, paying me about \$15.00 per month: 40 cents-, then 45 cents-, then 50 cents-per-hour.

Dr. Winfield Stone,⁶ another of my mentors, was an instructor with Dr. Birch⁷ and was also from the Binghamton area. He suggested that I join *Alpha Psi*, the veterinary fraternity, and I moved into its house on Elmwood Avenue. There were about 20 students living there at the time. Many students in this fraternity worked for their meals at other fraternities, sororities, and restaurants. Soon, I was working at the *Kappa Alpha Theta* Sorority House with other veterinary students: Walter Dennis,⁸ Philip Close⁹ and William Reese.¹⁰

My first year there, I roomed with George Burch,¹¹ an upper classman, who was most helpful. (He later was assistant director of BAI in Albany.¹²) The second year, I roomed with two classmates, Walter Fallon¹³ and John Holmes.¹⁴ These fellows were truly a credit to their chosen profession. Both of their fathers were designated “Master Farmers” by the governor of New York State, so they were correctly motivated.

⁵ James Nathan Frost '07, professor of veterinary surgery and director of the surgical clinic.

⁶ Winfield Scott Stone '35, originally from Binghamton, N.Y.

⁷ Raymond Russell Birch '12, PhD '16, professor and superintendent of the Veterinary Experimental Station; father of Frank M. Birch '39.

⁸ Walter Roland Dennis '38, originally from Earlville, N.Y.

⁹ Philip Cashman Close '35, originally from Earlville, N.Y.

¹⁰ William Clifford Reese '36, originally from Earlville, N.Y.

¹¹ George Edward Burch '36, originally from Granville, N.Y.

¹² Bureau of Animal Industry, established by the United States Department of Agriculture in 1884; abolished in 1953 when the Agricultural Research Service was formed.

¹³ Walter Joseph Fallon '39, originally from Constable, N.Y.

¹⁴ John Mansfield Holmes '39, originally from Lawyersville, N.Y.

That work helped me financially, but I was still short as my rent was about three dollars a week. I became aware of a loan fund in the veterinary college for upper classmen. By the end of my freshman year, I had done well enough that I became a sophomore and could borrow from that fund. It carried me pretty much through my sophomore year.

That summer, I worked for Dr. James Howard in Endicott¹⁵. He had just started his own practice, following his employment with Dr. Miles Markham in Binghamton. *He encouraged me to seek work in the small animal clinic with Dr. Milks¹⁶ and Dr. Stevenson.¹⁷ In my junior and senior years, I became their student instructor in pharmacology. Payment was fifty cents per hour for setting up the classroom.*

In June of 1937 [junior year], I got a room in the basement of the James Law Building.¹⁸ I roomed with Bob Johnson for those next two years. He did not become a veterinary student, but rather went to work in the Diagnostic Laboratory. His girlfriend and future wife lived in Ithaca, so he would go to her home many evenings, leaving me alone with my studies.

Christmas was probably the loneliest time for me because I never went home for the holidays after I was admitted to veterinary college, even though it was only fifty miles away. I reasoned it this way: “The others who did go home were leaving their part time jobs and I would fill them. My pockets were empty at the beginning of the Christmas season, but when they came back when school resumed, my pockets would be filled.” That carried me from the financial standpoint—along with living in the college basement and paying no rent. In exchange for the room, I cleaned stables on weekends and helped the regular employees care for the horses and cattle. I also worked for the pathology department, running blood tests for brucellosis.

There were other jobs too. I was hired by Dr. Frost in the large animal facility to do a variety of work and met many [veterinarians] in private practice. Someone told me about a medical supply company looking for a student to sell instruments and medical bags. I got that job as a salesman to graduating students who wanted to go directly into private practice. Walter Fallon, my former roommate at *Alpha Psi*, got the Jensen-Salsbury salesman position. He and I merged forces quite successfully.

Between my junior and senior years, I paid off my interest-bearing loans, which I borrowed in my underclass years. When I graduated from Cornell, I came home and gave my mother \$300 saved from those 40-, 45- and 50 cents-per-hour jobs.

I think one of the best things I remember—other than graduating and becoming a veterinarian—was the privilege of being in the library. In the winter season, especially when the students were away on vacation, I had free access to the library. I think it was the first

¹⁵ James Henry Howard '32, originally from Watkins Glen, N.Y.

¹⁶ Howard Jay Milks '04, professor of therapeutics and director of the small animal clinic.

¹⁷ Hadley Carruthers Stevenson '20, assistant professor of materia medica and small animal diseases.

¹⁸ The principal veterinary college building at that time, named in honor of James Law, the inaugural veterinary professor and founding principal (dean).

time in my life I ever saw more books than I could ever possibly read, and it gave me a love for book reading that I've never forgotten.

In vacation periods, most of the students would go home, but there were exceptions. One was Dr. Lyman Hoy,¹⁹ who lived in the large animal building. He was born in Canada, worked on various farms in the North Country, and decided to become a veterinarian. There was one room in the large animal clinic building between the first and second floors. Hoy got that vacancy, so he and I would share a meal together when all the rest of the students were home.

I say that with no pity for myself because plenty of others had much more difficult times. I can think of Vincent Boldt,²⁰ living in the basement of a sorority house over on Triphammer Road, and Jim McCarthy,²¹ another classmate, who lived and worked in the city hospital of Ithaca. There was a couple who lived and worked as volunteer firemen in the station that was on College Avenue. We were coming out of the Depression, and most of the students I was associated with were waiting on tables or washing dishes in fraternities, sororities, or restaurants that catered to students.

As I was getting more and more work from the professors in the veterinary college, I gave up my job as a waiter at the *Kappa Alpha Theta* sorority, but I would serve as a substitute when I had the time. Some would come by and say, "Can you take my place tonight"? So I worked that job part-time afterwards. It all accrued, so I came out of Cornell with my diploma, my commission as first lieutenant—that I stuck away and forgot in 1939—and *over three hundred dollars in cash.*

I recall the cooks at some units would place bowls of surplus fruit near the back doors. That fruit would disappear beneath our leather jackets as we departed. The brothers were so grateful for our acquisitions.

Chris Ayres:

Do you want to talk about your first living conditions at Cornell, how you were eating and surviving at the apple orchard? Those were great stories.

Dr. Ayres:

I moved into the basement of the James Law Building, I was in debt to the college fund. In the fall, I would pick up fallen apples at the Cornell orchard. I also had a job milking cows that were confined in the large animal clinic. I was astounded to learn that they would milk the cows and pour the milk down the drain. So I asked them if it would be all right if I would take a pail home to my unit. They didn't mind, so I made more than one meal out of apples, bread and milk.²²

¹⁹ Lyman Lester Hoy '39, originally from Canada, but came to Cornell from Deer River, N.Y.

²⁰ Vincent Leo Boldt '39, originally from Marilla, N.Y.

²¹ James Joseph McCarthy '39, originally from Lowville, N.Y.

²² This milk, of course, was not pasteurized.

The post-mortem room occasionally had a healthy horse with a broken leg that was [embalmed and prepared for student] dissection in anatomy. During vacation time, I'd be the one putting the bullet in it, skinning it, and putting it on hooks. But it didn't take me long to figure out that I could slice a few steaks from those horses and put them in the freezer in James Law Hall. I would put my name on the package, and the professors didn't remove it, thinking it was probably a specimen from the Diagnostic Laboratory.

When *Alpha Psi* would have parties, they would ask me to get grain alcohol from the basement. We all thought it was pretty good that I had that job. So it was my mission to sequester four ounces of grain alcohol and slip it into the punch at the parties. It wasn't until I graduated that Dr. Olafson said to me,²³ "Well, we'll see now if we can get the record balanced for the alcohol in the basement now." The professors had been on to me the whole time!

I look back and think how very fortunate I was to live in the college and have access to the professors and the instructors there, and the guidance they had. I never knew one of them that I didn't think had the principles of veterinary medicine and charity, pointing out to me my debt as a student who benefited from the Land Grant Act, eliminating tuition for me.

I thank God for all the things that were made available to me at Cornell, including free access to the library. I always remembered the things my mother told me, her little expressions like, "*God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb.*"

Dr. Smith:

Let me ask you about several professors, and just in a word or two, describe what you remember of them. Let's start with Dr. Sunderville.²⁴

Dr. Ayres:

I had little contact with him, or with Dr. Birch. My main contacts were with Dr. Milks and Dr. Stephenson in the small animal clinic, as I became a student instructor during my junior and senior years under them. I remember Dr. Frost and then Dr. Danks,²⁵ who succeeded him in the large animal clinic.

I was so fortunate that I had access to professors and instructors that few others had because of my living in the veterinary college. I'd be in the basement of James Law Hall, and I'd often go upstairs where I'd sit down and talk to professors who would tell me their theory about veterinary medicine and my obligations. I look back and think I was the most fortunate fellow in my class, but I didn't know it then.

One guiding light after graduation was Dr. Olafson. He would ask me occasionally to come in and address his class, telling them my responsibilities in Binghamton as city veterinarian. My lasting impression with him was while I was cleaning desks in his classroom at the end

²³ Peter Olafson '26, MS '27, professor of pathology.

²⁴ Earl Sunderville '08, professor of veterinary anatomy; his son (Edwin Sunderville) was a member of the Class of 1939.

²⁵ Arthur Gordon Danks '33, PhD, instructor in surgery.

of a lecture. A fellow, who I thought was most fortunate having his brother sending him a check twice a month, came to see the professor, and I couldn't help but hear their conversation. No matter what the student would say, Dr. Olafson would remark, "You're in the wrong profession, you ought to look into another field." I watched the student walk out and thought, "That will never happen to me." Looking back today, he was the funniest fellow in the class until he busted out. [I never saw him again.]

Dr. Hagan.²⁶ The last time I saw Dr. Hagan, he asked me for a ride to the airport. En route, he asked my opinion of his teaching. I told him that his best lecture was his first. He told each one to look at the student on our left and the student on our right. Then he said that records indicated one of three would be going home in the first year. The faculty did not make the decision, we did. He added that classes started when he left the platform and did not stop for the next four years. It was the best one for me because in looking at the others, I thought if one is going home, it isn't going to be me.

Dr. Smith:
How many started in your class?

Dr. Ayres:
I would say over forty.

Dr. Smith:
Then there weren't very many that left your class, as I understand it.

Dr. Ayres:
No, I can think of only one of them, George Meredith.²⁷ His brother was Burgess Meredith, the actor in California. He'd send George a check on the first and the fifteenth [of each month]. It was probably the worst thing to happen to him.

Dr. Smith:
Were there very many people in your class who had wealth, money?

Dr. Ayres:
Well, if they did, they were in *OTS*,²⁸ up on Dryden Road. There were segments in our class like any other. Was there bigotry there? There was still some.

Dr. Smith:
Was it related to people who came from the City, New York?

Dr. Ayres:
Yes, I think that we knew that they had better marks, they were better schooled in many cases, better trained in studying, than we were. Whether they had the money or not, they had access to it. I'm not saying they displayed it.

²⁶ William Arthur Hagan, DVM, MS, professor of bacteriology and dean of the college.

²⁷ There were a few other students who matriculated in 1935, but did not attain a D.V.M.

²⁸ Omega Tau Sigma, veterinary fraternity

Cars were very infrequent then. It wasn't until my sophomore or junior year that I knew students who acquired automobiles: John Holmes, Roy Badgley,²⁹ Walt Fallon. For some reason, all three had cars. I was living at the college, they were still living in *Alpha Psi*, and I remember those three, because we'd travel a little together. When we would go anywhere and they'd stop for gas, I'd come right out and give a dollar. In those days, gasoline was eight cents a gallon, and they thought it was great that I would chip in and fill up their tank. I had a great relationship with those three in particular. We kept in touch for the rest of our lives.

Dr. Smith:

Let me ask you about some other people. I think it was Milton Spiegel who had a pharmacy degree and was an older student.³⁰

Dr. Ayres:

He definitely was. He was in World War I, he was that much older. He had a family and those of Jewish faith—it seemed to me—hung together. [There was bigotry.] I was a farm boy and most of us farm boys just kept our mouths shut, we didn't say anything.

In my case, I was a bit sensitive to it because in 1928, Al Smith, an Irish Catholic, ran for president,³¹ As a Catholic, I was beaten up at my country school for that. [My mother often said that] "*time heals the wound, but leaves a scar.*" My nature is such that that if it was today, I wouldn't permit those anti-Semitic remarks. I would say something, but I didn't at that time. I've tried to make it up since.

Dr. Smith:

Isidor Sprecher. Did you know Izzi well?³²

Dr. Ayres:

Not well, I didn't know any of the Jewish boys well, I'm sorry to say. I met up with him after graduation, he was at Westover Army Air Base in Massachusetts, and I was at Bradley Air Base in Connecticut. We had a few meals together at the Officers' Club.

Dr. Smith:

Tell me about [Ed Sunderville],³³ the son of Dr. Sunderville.

Dr. Ayres:

Ed Sunderville. I saw very little of Ed Sunderville. For some reason Frank Birch³⁴ would come over and stop at his father's office, which was right above me, and I guess I cleaned his

²⁹ Francis Roy Badgely '39, originally from Farmingdale, N.Y.

³⁰ Milton Spiegel, originally from Ithaca, N.Y. Born in 1897, he was the oldest student in the class.

³¹ Alfred E. Smith, the first Catholic to run for president of the United States.

³² Isidor Israel Sprecher '39, originally from Brooklyn, N.Y.; he later changed the spelling of his name to 'Sprecker'.

³³ Edwin Joseph Sunderville '39, originally from Ithaca, N.Y.

³⁴ Frank McKeeman Birch, originally from Ithaca, N.Y.

office. Frank got married in Sage Chapel while we were students, and I was in the wedding party, the first time I had ever been in a wedding.

The last time I saw him [Birch], he was working for Carnation Milk Company. His airplane had to make an emergency landing in Broome County. He phoned me from his motel room, and we got together. I told him about some of our classmates, but I didn't hear from him again.

Dr. Smith:
Francis Kwong.³⁵

Dr. Ayres:
I would get a letter from him now and again. I think that he was a victim, beaten up, in China when they had the "Great Leap Forward". He said things were okay, but I could read between the lines, and he did suffer.

Dr. Smith:
Do you know how a man from China became a Cornell student?

Dr. Ayres:
Only in the sense that the foreign governments were trying to get Western knowledge indirectly [by sending over their brightest and best students to bring it back for others.] Years later, I understood this better when I was stationed in Fort Sam Houston and met an officer from Vietnam. He told me that some would come over here for an education, marry an American girl, then stay in the United States. He told me how impoverished the countries were and the total financial effort it took to fund these young fellows who were sent over to get an education, only to find that once they'd get over here, they married and didn't go back to their native country. It strained him badly as he told me that, and I realized that I had never considered that aspect. Countries were trying to send their people to the United States for years for higher education, but in many cases, they never returned.

Along that line, I was at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and observed a Black officer in a blue uniform. He was Head [Commanding Officer] of the Ethiopian Army. I put out my hand to him and said, "You're the second Ethiopian I've ever met." And he said, "Oh, that's unusual for you to have met anyone here who is Ethiopian." I told him that I went to the veterinary college at Cornell and, ahead of me—I think he was a senior when I was a freshman—was Engueda Yohannes.³⁶ *Tears came to his eyes, and he told me that they were from the same village. When the Italian Army invaded Ethiopia, he had escaped, but Engueda was killed.*

Premature end of interview due to technical difficulties. Readers are encouraged to review the biography at the beginning of the interview for a more complete story of Dr. Ayres' professional career following graduation from Cornell.

³⁵ Francis Jung-lu Kwong '39, originally from Taisun, Kwangtung, China.

³⁶ Engueda Yohannes '35, originally from Addis-Abeba, Abyssinia.