

A Biography of and Interview with Joseph J. Merenda, DVM

Class of 1934, 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



Joseph J. Merenda 1934

Unpretentious Manhattan Veterinarian

Joe Merenda did not aspire to become a small animal veterinarian in a legendary New York City practice. Born in 1912, he grew up on a Long Island estate where his parents were employed as laborers.¹ There he developed an appreciation for his landlord's kennel of cocker spaniels and a variety of livestock. His interest in veterinary medicine was kindled through an opportune interaction with a Cornellian named Jack Sloan. On seeing young Merenda's interest in animals and being mindful of the opportunities available to a professional, he challenged the teenager to think beyond a local agricultural education:

Be a veterinarian, go to veterinary college! You go for one year. If you like it, you continue. If you don't like it, you quit, and you've had a year of college.²

Joe wrote to Cornell and was accepted without inquiry or interview. His first foray into a wider world began with a train trip to distant Ithaca, where he matriculated as a member of the veterinary class of 1934. Arriving at Cornell with throngs of other students, he experienced independent living for the first time. Though full-tuition scholarships were provided to New York residents, the impact of the Depression required that students live modestly and seek employment to pay for their fees, and their room and food.

Merenda's class was exposed to challenges common to that era. From the faculty, the new students were advised to look to the classmate on their left and on their right, because one of them would not be expected to successfully meet the rigorous academic standards of veterinary medicine at Cornell. From the upperclassmen, he and his classmates endured the ritualistic hazing meant to intimidate and toughen the fledgling veterinary students. Barely eighteen years old, away from home for the first time and without the extensive university student support services that we now take for granted, the transition to independent college living was a challenging experience:

You didn't know whether you're going or coming; you are overwhelmed. You're a kid away from home... You go to class, and nobody seems to give a darn about what you're doing. It was all new to me, it was just a whole new way of life.³

¹ In Glenhead, NY, Nassau County.

² Dr. Joseph J. Merenda, personal interview, 2007.

³ Ibid.

Though 20 of the 60 students who matriculated with him failed to complete the four-year academic program on schedule, Dr. Merenda was successful and sought an employment opportunity from veterinary practitioners who visited Cornell during their senior year. He anticipated that he would work in a rural farm animal practice like the majority of this class. However, he had an unanticipated meeting with a prominent Manhattan veterinarian named C. P. Zepp⁴ and accepted his offer of a position as his associate. Dr. Zepp, an innovative and accomplished small animal veterinarian with a clinic on West 53rd Street, and also a leading political force in veterinary medicine, was a great mentor for the young Dr. Merenda.

Because Cornell's land-grant culture focused primarily on agriculture, little attention was paid to instruction on health care for dogs and cats. Dr. Merenda and his small animal colleagues were progressive, however, and sometimes developed procedures that were more innovative than those used by their former instructors. They were pioneers, and they shared their discoveries freely with their colleagues through visits to the Zepp practice and through professional meetings.

Dr. Merenda's legacy helps us appreciate the challenges associated with the fledgling field of small animal practice in an era when medical and surgical challenges were often unique, and proven treatment protocols sparse. Antibiotics were yet to be discovered, surgical techniques for even routine intervention were not commonly performed, and the financial challenges of the Depression were especially taxing.

Small animal veterinarians in the first half of the 20th century also worked without fully realizing the environmental hazards inherent to their practice. As a result of direct exposure to X-rays, Drs. Merenda and Zepp, and another colleague, suffered permanent radiation damage to their hands.

As he had during his college days, Dr. Merenda continued to live modestly during the Depression, saving much of his weekly \$25 salary so he could get married (which he did three years after graduation). He was called into military service in 1941 and served in the Veterinary Corps throughout the war, inspecting meat and other food for military personnel in various cities throughout the United States.

He remained in the Zepp practice through the transition of ownership to C. P. Zepp, Jr., a 1944 graduate of Cornell University. Dr. Merenda retired in the 1970s, bowing to the exponential growth of small animal practices in New York and the establishment of the Animal Medical Center's referral specialty practice on the Upper East Side.⁵ The sole surviving member of the Class of 1934, he lives an active life, and returns to Cornell annually for Reunion.

One of Cornell's most senior alumni, Dr. Merenda anticipates returning to campus for his 75th reunion. "God willing", he quipped, "I'll be there in '09!"⁶

⁴ Clarence Peter Zepp, Sr.'19

⁵ Animal Medical Center, 510 E. 62nd Street, New York, N.Y.

⁶ Dr. Joseph J. Merenda, personal communication, 2009.

Interview

Listen to the Interview

Subject: Joseph J. Merenda, DVM
Accompanied By: Ms. Rae Lazare
Interview Date: August 2, 2007
Location: New York, N.Y.



Photograph by Donald F. Smith

Dr. Joseph Merenda, 8/2/07



Photograph by Donald F. Smith

Dr. Merenda and Ms. Rae Lazare, 8/2/07

Interviewer's Note:

My wife and I first met Dr. Merenda during his 65th reunion in 1990. The only member of the Class of 1934 attending reunion that year, Dr. Merenda and his friend, Rae Lazare, joined the several members of the Class of 1939 for dinner in our home. During the past decade, they have returned frequently to Cornell, making the journey by bus from New York City and arriving unheralded on the Ithaca campus. A man with charming wit and humor, his interview captures unique aspects of veterinary practice in the early days of urban small animal practice when you, in his words, "flew by the seat of your pants". (Dr. Donald F. Smith)

Dr. Merenda:

I lived on an estate owned by Judge Scutter. He had other men living there, and he sent them to agricultural college in Farmingdale. And he had the idea that I should go to agricultural college too, and he wanted to send me to Farmingdale. But he also had a kennel of cocker spaniels. As a kid in high school, one of the men who used to come up to see the kennel—he was interested in cockers, too—was Jack Sloan.

His uncle was [the owner of] Sloan General Motors, and he had been to Cornell. And he said, “What are you going to do?” [I said] “I am supposed to go to agricultural college.” He said, “Why the hell do you want to do that? Be a veterinarian, go to veterinary college! You can go to Cornell; it’s a land-grant college. There’s no tuition.⁷ You’ll go for one year. If you like it, you continue. If you don’t like it, you quit, and you’ve had a year of college.”

Dr. Smith:

How old were you?

Dr. Merenda:

I was 18. I was in high school. Back in those days, that was the end of the [era of the] horse, and there were no small animal [practices], and you didn’t have any trouble getting into vet college.⁸ All you had to do was have your high school requirements.⁹ You had to have three years of a language or two years of two languages—the basic things. And that’s all you needed; you just wrote, and you were in.

Dr. Smith:

Did you have an interview, or did anybody call you?

Dr. Merenda:

No!¹⁰

Dr. Smith:

They just sent you a letter and said, “You’re in.”

Dr. Merenda:

I’m in! I didn’t know anything about it. I’d never been to Cornell. I never knew anything about Cornell, and I’m in the vet college.

Dr. Smith:

Did you like animals, or did you like science, or both?

⁷ Free tuition for New York State residents because of land grant status; fees were charged, however.

⁸ The number of student applications to veterinary colleges in the U.S., including Cornell, declined during WWI and remained low for several years after because of the decline of the horse as the principal species requiring veterinary attention. Starting in the late 1920s, the number of applicants to Cornell increased to pre WWI levels.

⁹ Beginning in September 1932 (Class of 1936), one year of college education was required.

¹⁰ A faculty committee on admissions at Cornell was established in 1933-34 and interviews were conducted thereafter with greater regularity. Interviews for admissions were continued until the late 1980s.

Dr. Merenda:

Well, I liked animals. We had a horse, two mules, about four cows, a kennel of cocker spaniels; we had chickens. As a kid, I churned butter, did all those things that you did on a farm. My mother used to cook and bake bread. This estate was run like a farm.

Dr. Smith:

Tell me how you got to Ithaca in 1930. Was it by train?

Dr. Merenda:

By train, from New York. All of a sudden I am supposed to go to Cornell. So I go over to get the train, land up in Cornell. Now *that was an experience!* You get a kid, never away from home, and you're on the train, and you land up in Ithaca at the railroad station, and there are plenty of other kids coming there, too.

You're met up there [by a Cornell student] and he has a laundry bag—a big khaki laundry bag with a big red “C”—and *you're not going to be able to go through college unless you've got one of those big “C” laundry bags.* So they sell you a laundry bag; I think it was for 50 cents.¹¹

And then another fellow says, “You got a room?” and I said, “No.” And he says, “Wait here”. And they'd get two or three other fellows who didn't have a room. And they take us up with a car to a little office place that they had up on the hill in Collegetown. And you'd sit there and they'd say, “What kind of room do you want? You want a room on your own, or with one, or two people?” And then he'd take one or two of us out and he'd go to one of the houses up there up in Collegetown, just down the hill from Cascadilla,¹² and they had a house there and a room and you looked at the room there and said, “Alright,” and then you would go up to the office to pick up your bag, and you were set.

The first house I saw there, I took. I didn't know what I wanted. They had a single room and they had another, larger room with two other fellows in the ag college.¹³ So there were three of us in the house.

Dr. Smith:

Tell me about class. You started class in the fall of 1930.

Dr. Merenda:

It's hard to remember, but it seems to me that we started with about 80.¹⁴ I think the class ended up with about 40,¹⁵ but I think we started off with a lot more, because I remember they kept warning you, “You look, and the fellow on this side and the fellow on that side, maybe both of those won't be here by the time the class has ended.” It wasn't going to be easy.

¹¹ See interview with Dr. Lawrence T. Waitz '31, for his description of a similar experience upon arriving in Ithaca at the beginning of his freshman year in 1927.

¹² Residence hall at Cornell University.

¹³ New York State College of Agriculture, later changed to College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

¹⁴ The names of 60 freshman students in the Class of 1934 are recorded in the *Announcement of the New York State Veterinary College* for the 1930-31 academic year.

¹⁵ The names of 45 senior students in the Class of 1934 are recorded in the *Announcement of the New York State Veterinary College* for the 1933-34 academic year.

You had no electives. You had a book, and it told you exactly what you took each term. It was four years; there was no pre-vet. In four years, you went from high school and you had a DVM.

You didn't know whether you were going or coming; you were overwhelmed. You're a kid away from home, you're up there, you're living in a house, you take your meals when you feel like it, you eat when you want to eat, you do what you want to do. You go to class, and nobody seems to give a darn about what you're doing. It was all new to me, it was just a whole new way of life.

Dr. Smith:

Tell me about Dr. Fish who taught you physiology.¹⁶

Dr. Merenda:

I don't remember much about him. I just remember that he was an old, old man. And we didn't have him too long.¹⁷ And then Dukes took over.¹⁸

Dr. Smith:

Do you remember Dukes?

Dr. Merenda:

Better than Fish.

Dr. Smith:

Who taught you anatomy?

Dr. Merenda:

Dr. Hopkins.¹⁹ And he was a character, too. He apologized to the class. We were the last class that had hazing at the vet college, as far as I know.

Dr. Smith:

Who taught you surgery—Dr. Frost?²⁰

Dr. Merenda:

I guess Frost. I remember he was short and fat, heavy, very heavy. But I don't remember him much. We didn't have much surgery, a lot of our [courses were] anatomy.

Oh, that was murder. I mean, I smoked a little bit, but not much. But when you went up there and you did all this anatomy; it was all cows.²¹ And you'd get this formaldehyde and grease under your fingernails, and you can't get rid of it. And when you go to eat you bring your hand up to [your face], you smell that, and you lose your appetite. Everybody smoked or

¹⁶ Pierre Augustine Fish, DSc, DVM 1899, professor of veterinary physiology and dean of the college (1929-31); one of the founding faculty of the college in 1896.

¹⁷ Dr. Fish died February 19, 1931.

¹⁸ Henry Hugh Dukes, BS, MS, DVM, professor of veterinary physiology.

¹⁹ Grant Sherman Hopkins, DSc, DVM 1900, professor of veterinary anatomy and anatomical methods; like Dr. Fish, he was one of the founding faculty of the college in 1896.

²⁰ James Nathan Frost '07, professor of veterinary surgery.

²¹ The primary dissection animals were the horse and cow.

chewed, or did something. And that was what separated the men from the boys. If you stuck through the first year of anatomy, you could take anything.

Dr. Smith:

Did you learn pathology from Dr. Olafson?²²

Dr. Merenda:

Olafson, yes. Now, he was something. He would come into class, he wouldn't say a word. He would put his watch down on the table and he would start talking, and all of a sudden he would pick up his watch, put it in his pocket and walk out. That's my recollection of him. He was very brusque.

And I remember we went over in the quadrangle and we had the microscopes over there. I think that's the only place where they had a bunch of them. Then we went for chemistry at Baker²³. The rest of [our classes were] all in our vet college.

It was nice, because Sage Chapel was for girls,²⁴ and they were mostly agriculture or home ec [students].²⁵ They would come around the side of the vet college. We had a fellow in our class named Hallett,²⁶ and he could play anything on the piano. We would sit up there before class and he's playing the piano, and we're sitting up in the window watching all the girls from Sage go to Home Ec. That was the life, I'll tell you.

Dr. Smith:

How often did you come home?

Dr. Merenda:

Rarely. Freddy [Richardson] was my buddy and he was from Ogdensburg. He had a Model T Ford so during vacation time we would drive up to his place and pick up somebody, maybe charge them five dollars to pay for the gas.

Dr. Smith:

How did you link up with Dr. Zepp?²⁷

Dr. Merenda:

Well, that was an accident that I was very lucky, because when you were a senior—or before that—they would have this period where vets would come and interview the students. Well, I don't think I had met anybody, but I was apparently assigned to large animal [interest]. But at that time, I didn't know what I wanted to do. I just took veterinary medicine. I wouldn't say I was a small animal man or anything. You just wanted to get a job.

²² Peter Olafson '26, assistant professor of pathology.

²³ Baker Laboratory of Chemistry

²⁴ Sage College for Women dates to the 1870s and was the first dedicated women's dormitory and educational building at Cornell.

²⁵ Home Economics, established as a separate college in 1925.

²⁶ Charles Sherwood Hallett '34, originally from Riverhead, N.Y.

²⁷ Clarence P. Zepp '19, for whom Dr. Merenda worked in New York City.

Mike Cerosaletti²⁸ [was expecting to be employed by] Zepp, and then something happened and somebody was released and it was a job that Cerosaletti wanted so he took that, and that freed Zepp. So that's how I got Zepp; it was just a lucky fluke.

Dr. Smith:

Did everybody know about Zepp?²⁹

Dr. Merenda:

No. I didn't know anything about Zepp, because he was a small animal man. He was in New York City at 136 West 53rd Street between 6th and 7th Avenues.

Dr. Smith:

Did you do surgery? What sort of diseases did you see in the dogs and cats?

Dr. Merenda:

I guess mostly spaying. We did small animal [medicine] the way they learned to fly—by the seat of your pants. You had certain drugs that you knew did a certain thing and you used your common sense.

I can remember when I was up at Cornell [as a student], and they wanted to get a sample of urine from a bitch. They had a frying pan on the end of a stick, and one would go and lead the dog around. Another person would go behind her with the frying pan, and when the dog would squat [to urinate], he'd stick the frying pan under the dog. He'd touch the dog, the dog would jump, and he'd start all over again. And that's the way they got urine when I graduated from Cornell.

So I got a clear plastic funnel and I cut the bottom out so I could put the funnel up into the vulva, and I could see the urethra in there. I had a headlight on, somebody held the dog, and I put it in there. And that's what I learned, by myself.

Dr. Merenda:

I started with \$25 a week, and in those days that was good money. And not only that, but I saved religiously \$15 a week, and every so often—every month—I'd go down on the subway to 14th Street and deposit that money. I mean, in those days, you wanted to get married and you needed money.³⁰ You saved your money. I got \$25 a week. I lived on \$10 a week. But in those days, you go to the cafeteria on 6th Avenue and you could get a dinner, a complete dinner, for 75 cents—that was soup or juice, meat, two vegetables, a beverage, and dessert. Seventy-five cents!

Dr. Smith:

How about fractures?

²⁸ Mario Joseph Cerosaletti '34, originally from Laurens, N.Y.

²⁹ Dr. Zepp had already become established as a prominent small animal veterinarian in New York.

³⁰ Married to Dorothy Antoinette Tedtsen in Brooklyn, NY on Aug. 1, 1937; two children (Dorothy and Joseph, Jr.) born while on service, during World War II.

Dr. Merenda:

Sure you had fractures. You set legs. We had an X-ray, and you took X-ray pictures and so forth, and you set [the fractured bones]. But we had other things, too. We had Stader splints.³¹ Stader did the original thing in Zepp's [practice].

Any veterinarian who visited New York City came to see Zepp. It was an ideal place. And Zepp was smart; he was a good veterinarian. He had a good brain and he was a good politician, too. I was lucky. I mean, I got with the right man at the right place.

You talk about Zepp. Okay, I get there, and the first spay, I assisted him. The second spay, he assisted me; the third spay, I was on my own.

Dr. Smith:

What anesthesia did you use—ether?

Dr. Merenda:

Ether or Nembutal® [thiopental sodium]. And that was a pain in the neck, because with the ether, they were out of it in no time [they woke up too rapidly], or the Nembutal [because it was injectable], they were out so long. And we were lucky, because Zepp knew the head of Abbott Laboratory. So we got pentothal sodium when it was in the experimental stage.

Dr. Smith:

Were there other good practices in New York City at the time?

Dr. Merenda:

There was Dr. MacKellar down in the village,³² and MacKellar, Sr., was large animal [practitioner].³³ Bob McKellar was small animal [practitioner] down here in the village.

Dr. Smith:

So you were in the service from 1941—

Dr. Merenda:

1941 to about '48, I guess. At Cornell, it's a land-grant college, so for the first two years we had compulsory ROTC. The second two years were elective. Now, if you took the elective, you got an enlisted man's pay for one day per week. About every two or three months, you got a check for about \$12. And in those days, nobody had money. They were mostly farm boys, and a buck went a long way. So most of them took the advanced ROTC and they got a check. We got out as second lieutenants. And then they raised us to a first lieutenant, equal to the medical corps. So I was first lieutenant in the reserve. I was in the reserve when I was at Zepp's and I kept up my reserve status.

All of a sudden, around April 14th of '41, Colonel Seeley calls me and says they're going to put me on active duty. So I'm assigned to Fort Slocum in New Rochelle.³⁴

³¹ Stader splint was an external series of pins and a stabilizing device that held a fracture in place while healing could occur; developed by veterinarian Dr. Otto Stader of Ardmore, PA, published in 1942. The technique was adopted for use in humans and was used in WWII trauma cases.

³² Robert S. MacKellar, Jr. '28.

³³ Robert S. MacKellar, Sr. 1894, New York College of Veterinary Surgeons, a private veterinary college in New York City,

I'm in the Army—we have had no training in food inspection or anything like that. I'm assigned to Fort Slocum, which is an old Army post. I'm a food inspector. All food of animal origin is inspected by the Veterinary Corps. And they throw in a few extra things—we did fruits and vegetables, too. Some of it we inspected at the dock, some of it we went into the city.

I'm a new inspector. I don't know the ropes, and everybody is out to get you. I mean, they got a contract for a certain grade of meat, and at a certain price. If they can give you a lower grade of meat at a higher price they're making a little bit, so they're out to slip [by] everything they can. What I went through learning, I would have all these specifications, and when I took the train up to New Rochelle [I was] reading specifications on eggs—the air space in an egg, how much a crate of eggs weigh, and so forth.

And you learned by inspecting potatoes. They get a bag of potatoes, dump it on the dock, take the big fat ones, cut them in half. If the center was rotten then they'd reject the potatoes. We would take a crate of eggs, open it up; we had to candle eggs. I learned to candle eggs in the Army. Now, I went to Fort Slocum, and I think I was there for about three months. And I learned the hard way, and then the Army sends me to Chicago to school for awhile to learn something about food inspection.³⁵

Dr. Smith:

After the war, you came back and worked for Zepp. Tell me about your love of Cornell.

Dr. Merenda:

Love of Cornell. You know, it's something that grows with the years. When you look back, you were on your own, you were a youngster there. Freddy Richardson was my buddy there. We had single rooms there for the first two years. [During the] second two years we stayed at Alpha Psi.³⁶ He took care of the furnace. We did our own cooking, and in those days you could get a cup of coffee and two donuts for 10 cents. And down there at Collegetown, you got a card [valued at] \$5.75 for five dollars. And you ate your meals there.

And some of the boys worked; sometimes you pitched in as a waiter. You waited on a table, you worked in the kitchen. You augmented your food that way, too. But you were on your own.

Freddy and I, neither of us had ever been drunk, so we decided we were gonna get drunk to see what it's like, but we're not gonna leave the fraternity house. One of the boys had a formula for making gin. I don't remember exactly how, but you had alcohol and you add water and syrup and juniper and glycerin. We made a quart bottle of gin, and of course it looked like water. Nobody knew it was gin in there. Freddy and I were sipping gin, and the only thing I remember was that the picture on the wall started to go [lopsided] and that was the end of that. I passed out and then, I guess, Freddy passed out.

³⁴ In Westchester County.

³⁵ Dr. Merenda remained at Fort Slocum for six months, then was assigned to Rome, N.Y.; then to Beltsville, MD where, as 1st Lt K-9 Corps, he was assigned to war dog reception and training center; finally to Fort Robinson, Neb., also working in war dog reception and training center.

³⁶ Veterinary fraternity.

Dr. Smith:

You keep coming back to Cornell every year for Reunion.

Dr. Merenda:

Only recently. I came back there in '04, and that was my 70th. That's the first time that I think I came back.³⁷ You wanna know what keeps me coming back—the Savage Club. I live for their jazz music. I live for it. When the saints come marching in, I'm marching in, too. They don't know it, but I have tapes from '05, '06, '07, with the jazz on there and so forth. And any time that I want, the saints can come marching in.

Dr. Smith:

And you keep coming up to the veterinary college on Saturday afternoons.

Dr. Merenda:

Well, I come up and pay my respects. The 2009 reunion will be my 75th, and then I shall go to the veterinary college. But I don't feel that it's fair to the other classes if I come in on them [when it is not my reunion class]. I'm thinking of '09 now. I'll be there.

³⁷ Dr. Merenda also attended his 65th class reunion in 1999, accompanied by Ms. Lazare.