

**A Biography of and interview with
Clarence F. Bent, DVM**

Class of 1939, College of Veterinary Medicine, Cornell University

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

New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph



Clarence F. Bent 1939

From Poultry to Pets

Clarence Bent's interest in poultry diseases inspired him to pursue a veterinary education. However, while working summers in the small animal hospital at Cornell, he was inspired by the challenges and rewards of the growing interest in pet medicine. He also realized that companion animal practitioners were better compensated for their professional efforts than farm animal veterinarians. His subsequent career in small animal practice was punctuated, as was the norm for his generation, by four years of service in World War II.

Clarence was born in Rye, New York, on April 29, 1915. Soon afterwards, his parents moved to nearby Pleasantville, where his father was a minister in the local church. After a family breakup, Clarence and his mother moved to

Schenectady and then—at age 12—to Hudson, New Hampshire, where he was raised on a poultry farm aptly named *Leghorn Acres*.

With the support and encouragement of a family friend from the University of New Hampshire who also had an interest in poultry, Clarence began an undergraduate education in agriculture starting in 1932. He spent three years at Cornell and the University of New Hampshire before being admitted into the New York State Veterinary College. Though he was fortunate to be awarded an out-of-state tuition scholarship, Clarence claims to have been one of the last students to be accepted in the class that matriculated in fall 1935.

The Class of 1939 graduated an eclectic assemblage of 40 men and women. In addition to Clarence, five were from outside New York, including a Black man from Tennessee and a Chinese national. At a time when Cornell generally pursued a policy that restricted student enrollment of Jews to about ten percent, Clarence's class—as had been the practice in the veterinary college through most of the 1930s—had twenty percent Jews. There were also three women, more than any other veterinary class in the country.

Though many non-Jewish men in the class were members of *Alpha Psi*, Clarence was accepted into the *Acacia* fraternity. While a student, he married his high school girlfriend, Ruth Sudsbury, and they lived in downtown Ithaca.

Dr. Bent's first employment after graduation was at the Springfield hospital of the MSPCA-Angell. The Springfield branch and its parent facility in Boston, the Angell Memorial Animal Hospital, were among the most progressive small animal hospitals in the country.¹ In this environment, Clarence honed his small animal medicine and surgery skills. Though he only stayed for a few weeks, he later opined that he developed more clinical skills at Springfield than he had during his entire time at Cornell. Fortified with self-confidence, he established his own veterinary practice in New Hampshire.

Dr. Bent was deployed as a commissioned officer of the U.S. Army Veterinary Corps shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. He was stationed initially in Massachusetts as a food inspector, and later sent to Papua New Guinea and the Philippines where he served for the final two years of the war. While his veterinary clinic was closed, Mrs. Bent worked at the Angell Memorial Animal Hospital and became immersed in hospital operations acquiring skills and knowledge that would serve them well in future years.

Following the war, Dr. Bent returned to his small animal clinic in Nashua² and Ruth worked as his administrative assistant. Though he serviced a few local cattle farms during the late 1940s, he gradually became an exclusive companion animal practitioner. There was one notable exception, however, as recalled by his daughter, Diana:

“Being the daughter of a veterinarian was awesome! My most interesting experiences were accompanying my father to Benson’s Wild Animal Farm, a private zoo and amusement park in Hudson where he was the veterinarian and I was his assistant. Dad was a great diagnostician for all animals—large cats, primates, birds and other species—and we examined and treated whatever needed his help.”³

Dr. Bent was active in veterinary governance. While serving as president of the N.H. Veterinary Medical Association, he visited all of the animal clinics in the State. For many years, he also taught Sunday School in the local Congregational Church. He stayed in contact with his classmates, and returned regularly to Ithaca for conferences and reunions.

In 1974, at the age of 59, Dr. Bent sold his practice⁴ and moved to Clearwater Florida where he and Ruth enjoyed an active retirement. For health reasons, they returned to New Hampshire in 2004 to live with Diana and her husband, Kirby Turcotte. Mrs. Bent died on March 31, 2006.

Now in his 95th year, Clarence Bent reflects on his life as a veterinarian and active member of his community. With the help of an ever-present dictionary, he challenges his mind with a daily crossword. Diana's five small poodles often climb into his loving arms, where they spend tranquil hours cuddling on the lap and lounge chair of the small animal veterinarian who initially attended college to become a poultry disease specialist.

¹ Massachusetts Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (MSPCA)-Angell opened a veterinary hospital in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1929 as an extension of its primary hospital in Boston (that dates to 1915). The hospital, which was rededicated as Rowley Memorial Animal Hospital in 1948, is no longer in operation.

² State Line Veterinary Hospital, Nashua, N.H.

³ Diana Turcotte, personal communication 2009. Diana's brother, Peter F. Bent, lives in Nashua.

⁴ Purchased by Dr. Roland Huston, MSU '73.

Interview

Listen to the Interview

Subject: Clarence F. Bent, DVM
Interviewer: Donald F. Smith, DVM
Interview Date: July 1, 2008
Location: Derry, New Hampshire



Clarence F. Bent July 1, 2008

Interviewer's Notes:

I first became acquainted with Dr. Bent shortly after the passing of his wife, when he shared by telephone his reflections of a long and fulfilling life in veterinary medicine. Though we continued to speak occasionally, we did not personally meet until July 2008 when I drove to New Hampshire, where he was living with his daughter and son-in-law. We had a delightful visit as Dr. Bent reminisced about the challenges of his youth, and the opportunities that he attained through his Cornell education. Though he admired his professors and understood the priorities of Cornell's agriculturally-oriented land grant mission, he regretted the overwhelming large animal curriculum during an era when small companion animals were becoming very important with the public. When I asked him what it was like serving in Papua New Guinea during the war, his enigmatic answer was charged with unspoken emotions. "Hot", he said. (Dr. Donald F. Smith)

Dr. Donald Smith:

This is July 1, 2008. We're in Derry, New Hampshire and I am Donald Smith from Cornell University, with Dr. Clarence Bent from the class of 1939. We are here to talk about your growing up as a young man, where you came from and how you got to Cornell; and what your experience was like at Cornell. Thank you, Dr. Bent.

Dr. Clarence Bent:

You're welcome. I was born in Rye, NY. We moved to Pleasantville [when I was two] where my father was a minister in the church there. Later [at age eight], my mother and I moved to Schenectady, N.Y. and she was a boys' matron in a children's home. We were there four years and she got interested somehow in the poultry business. We came up to New Hampshire and ended up with a poultry farm on our hands.

I was in a one-room school house after being in a big junior high school in Schenectady with a swimming pool and all that. We had one young woman teaching everything. I guess all of us boys fell in love with her—we all thought the world of her. Then I went over to Nashua to high school and from there I went to [University of] New Hampshire and Cornell, altogether seven years of college.

Why did I go into vet school? Well, I got interested in poultry diseases, which nobody else in the class probably was. I got there through a gentleman at the University of New Hampshire who had a fraternity at Cornell—Acacia. Of course he wanted me to go, and he got me a scholarship.¹ He wanted me to join the fraternity. So I joined the Acacia fraternity and was in that all the time I was there.

My girlfriend, whom I started going with at 15—her name was Ruth Sudsbury—she and I married my third year of veterinary college and we lived downtown in Ithaca in several places.

I stayed at the Clinic two different years in the summertime.² And that's where I really got sold on small animal [medicine]. When I came out to practice in '39, I went first to the Springfield branch of the Angell Memorial Hospital. I was there for five weeks on that occasion.

I went into the army reserve and ended up, of course, in the armed forces. Half of my four years were right there near Boston in Springfield. The rest was in the southwest Pacific, more specifically, New Guinea and near Manila in the Philippines. I was a food inspector.

Dr. Smith:

[What did you do after you graduated in 1939?]

Dr. Bent:

I went to Hudson, my home—started my practice, which you couldn't do now, in a half a double garage. I had a preference for small animal practice. My wife ran the hospital office and hired and fired, and so forth. We used a lot of high school people as help.

Dr. Smith:

You left the service in 1946 and came back to run the practice.

Dr. Bent:

Yes, I came right back. The boat landed New Year's Eve. I took the train to Camp Devens³ where we were discharged.

¹ Full tuition scholarships were usually provided only for residents of New York State.

² A summer intern while the other students were away from Cornell during the semester break.

I went back to the Springfield hospital again. I had three more months there. And incidentally—I don't think it's like that now—but I probably learned more the first five weeks that I spent down there [in 1939] than I did in the whole clinic I had in school. Of course, they were Angell-coordinated. My wife acted as a nurse at Angell for a couple of years during the war, so we were quite connected to them. I [consulted with] them for all of my problems.

Dr. Smith:

So you came back to Nashua to practice. [Yes.] And did you practice just small animal? [Yes.] So that was from [April 1946, after working in Springfield]. You practiced how many years in Nashua?

Dr. Bent:

About 30. I retired in '74.

Dr. Smith:

Did you run the practice with one or two extra veterinarians?

Dr. Bent:

We had another veterinarian with us just a short time. He worked for me for a little while, then I had to tell him, "This is it". [He left the practice]. By that time, we had a two-veterinarian load so I was a little busy for a few years.

Dr. Smith:

And your wife worked in the practice with you?

Dr. Bent:

Yes, she ran the hospital part of it. She ran the office, hired and fired, and so forth.

Dr. Smith:

The education you got at Cornell in small animal would be from Dr. Milks and Dr. Stevenson.⁴ Was that right? [Right.] What did you learn from them? What were they like?

Dr. Bent:

Well, they were very knowledgeable and nice. I liked them both.

Dr. Smith:

Did you find that going into small animal work was unusual in 1939?

Dr. Bent:

Most of my instruction was in small animal, partly because I went to the clinics in the summer a couple of times (a couple of years). I just fell in love with it.

³ Near Boston

⁴ Howard J. Milks '04, professor of therapeutics and director of the small animal clinic; Hadley Carruthers Stephenson '20, assistant professor of material medica and small animal diseases.

Dr. Smith:

Tell me about the professors that you remember. Do you remember Dr. Olafson?⁵

Dr. Bent:

Yes, couldn't forget him; and Fincher.⁶

Dr. Smith:

Tell me about your classmates. You had three women in your class. [Yes.] You mentioned Pat a few minutes ago.⁷ [Yes.] And who were the other two?

Dr. Bent:

Rikki von Decken-Luers⁸ and Betty Beckley;⁹ they were nice people.

Von Decken-Luers was a little different. She was enough male-oriented so when she went on a farm, a lot of farmers thought she was a boy, and they talked about things they wouldn't have talked about if they had known [that she was a woman].

Dr. Smith:

And Dan Skelton was an African-American man, a black man.¹⁰

Dr. Bent:

Yes. He was a nice kid, pretty quiet. I don't know if he belonged to one of the fraternities or not. I don't think so.¹¹

Dr. Smith:

When you went to college, did you have difficulty paying the rent and that sort of thing?

Dr. Bent:

[No; I had enough money.]

Dr. Smith:

[Was this the case] when you were a student, before you went into the service?¹²

Dr. Bent:

I was in the reserve. I went on active duty a little bit. There were times when they were paying us and times that they weren't, which they didn't for quite some time. But we got along all right with the practice we had.

⁵ Peter Olafson '26, MS '27, professor of pathology.

⁶ Myron Gustin Fincher '19, MS, assistant professor of medicine and obstetrics.

⁷ Patricia O'Connor '39, originally from Buffalo, NY (deceased).

⁸ Rikki von Decken-Luers '39, originally from New York City (deceased).

⁹ Elizabeth Beckley '39, originally from Buffalo, NY (deceased).

¹⁰ Daniel Skelton '39, originally from Tennessee, but moved to New York City before applying to Cornell; currently in Wichita, Kans.

¹¹ Blacks and Jews were not normally invited to join the veterinary fraternities at that time.

¹² Bent was in ROTC at both UNH and Cornell.

As a matter of fact, when I went to Springfield Hospital, the SPCA Hospital, with that income and my army income continuing, I had 109 days pay coming. I was probably paid—up to that time—the best I had ever been, so we got a good start.

Dr. Smith:

Your father was a minister when you moved to New Hampshire...

Dr. Bent:

Yes, he left my mother, sorry to say. I used to see him about once a year. I used to go down to Northampton, Massachusetts to meet him.

Dr. Smith:

So your mother then ran the poultry business.

Dr. Bent:

No. She started [the business] with another man. He walked out and left her with no feed for the chickens, and of course, not much idea of what she was doing. But mother was a positive person. As she put it, you either sink or swim, and I'm not going to sink. So she ran it real well and had a pretty big business after she had been there a few years.

Another poultry farmer had helped her financially. She, of course, paid him off. But I liked that old place on the Hudson. It was nice. Out in the country, of course, woods behind. We used to find a patch of ice out there and skate sometimes.

Dr. Smith:

Was there anyone in your class who was difficult for you? [No.] Everybody got along well.

Dr. Bent:

I never had any trouble with anybody. Johnny Ayres, that crazy guy, he was a lot of fun.¹³ We went to a little diner, called a greasy spoon. We used to sit there and relax and carry on. He was a pretty good friend in those days.

I returned to Cornell a lot and my wife went with me to the conferences. We used to drive out almost every year and enjoyed that very much. They were instructive, too. But you learn as much talking together with classmates and other vets in school than you did in the conference almost.

Dr. Smith:

What were the main diseases and conditions you learning about in small animal medicine?

Dr. Bent:

Well, of course you knew about cat disease and feline peritonitis [also distemper in dogs, and parasitic and skin diseases]. There are some new diseases that came along after I got out of school.

¹³ John Ayres '39 originally from Corbettsville, NY; currently resides in Binghamton, NY. See biography and interview in this collection.

I was crazy about surgery and spent most of my excess time operating. This was a feat in those days. I spayed seven animals while I was in school. Some poor guys in some schools didn't get a chance to do any. A fellow from Nashua went to Canada.¹⁴ They had to go out and catch stray cats [so they could develop surgical skills]. So they were lucky if they managed to spay one animal while they were in school.

Dr. Smith:

Well, thank you for the interview. Is there anything else?

Dr. Bent:

When I was president of the New Hampshire Association, I went to every practice in the state and saw everybody. I was the only one that ever did that. One of them after me went to some of them.

Dr. Smith:

When you retired, did you sell your practice to somebody else?

Dr. Bent:

Yes. He still has it, still practicing; [His name is] Bud Huston.¹⁵ He took over our practice and he's still there.

My two children, incidentally, are adopted.¹⁶ And there aren't many kids who are closer to their parents than those kids were (and are) to both of us. I keep telling Diana, with a twinkle in my eye, "You know, you are the best investment I ever made."

¹⁴ During the late 19th and early 20th century, many Americans from New England and New York received their DVM education at the Ontario Veterinary College, which was located in Toronto until 1922 (then moved to Guelph).

¹⁵ Roland Huston, MSU '73.

¹⁶ Diana B. Turcotte (currently resides in Derry, New Hampshire), and Peter F. Bent, living in nearby Nashua.