

**A Biography of and Interview with
Morris L. Povar, DVM**

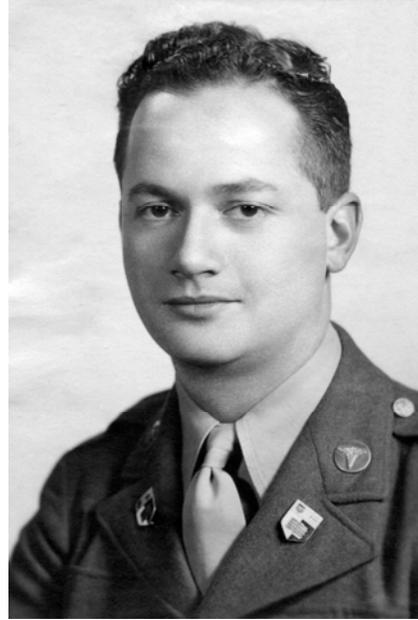
Class of 1944, College of Veterinary Medicine, Cornell University

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

A Dream Fulfilled

Like many Jewish veterinarians from his era, Morris Povar followed his brother to veterinary college at Cornell. After completing his World War II service, he was preparing to embark on a research career when his brother became debilitated by Brucellosis. Morris responded to Ralph's plea for assistance, and together they built a mixed animal practice—and later, a progressive small animal practice—in East Providence, Rhode Island.

The opportunity for an academic career returned for Morris 25 years later, when he was appointed tenured professor in Psychology and Medical Science in the School of Medicine at Brown University. For the final two decades of his career, he served as the university's only laboratory animal veterinarian, involved in both animal care and housing, as well as experimental surgery and research.



New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph

Morris L. Povar 1944

Morris Povar was born in 1920, the son of a Russian immigrant who had immigrated to America in about 1902 to avoid being drafted into the Russian army. While working in New York's textile industry, Max Povar met his future wife (also an immigrant from Russia). He enjoyed considerable success in the textile business until the Depression, when the family sustained terrible losses, including their home.

With the lure of free tuition, Morris' brother, Ralph, entered Cornell University's veterinary college in 1934 and graduated five years later. By the time Morris finished high school in 1937, he could not afford the \$150 required for fees and books at Cornell. His excellent academic record, however, qualified him for Brooklyn College, and he attended there for one year until he had earned enough cash to allow him to transfer to Cornell. During his undergraduate program in the College of Agriculture, he developed research interest and skills in the emerging field of poultry genetics.

Morris was accepted into the veterinary college in 1941, just as the college was adopting a compressed, year-round curriculum in response to World War II. The students progressed from semester to semester with only a weekend break, and suffered through the stifling

summer heat in poorly-ventilated classrooms. The male students were in the ASTP,¹ taking their meals together and wearing uniforms to class. Following their last examination in May 1944, they graduated, had their commissioning ceremony as 1st Lieutenants and were immediately loaded on a darkened train at night—“*we didn’t know where they were taking us*”²—and transported to Fort Dix Army Base in New Jersey.

Because of his experience in microbiology and familiarity with poultry, Dr. Povar was assigned to a poultry diagnostic laboratory in Vineland, N.J. that was operated by Rutgers University. He was assisted by the Goldhaft family, an accomplished team of veterinarians who had established a private poultry diagnostic and vaccine company.³ In early 1945, Morris and his new wife, Lotte, were transferred to Kimber Farms, a poultry facility near Berkeley, California. He spent the duration of the war developing vaccines designed to protect American agriculture from the anticipated threat of biological attack.

After the war, Dr. Povar was planning to pursue a PhD at UC-Berkeley, but instead moved back east to assist his brother who was suffering from undulant fever.⁴ His career was interrupted again six years later, when he was called into government service during the Korean War. Working as adjutant for the colonel, Captain Povar was in charge of a group of 50 reserve officers and enlisted men stationed in New York City, providing meat and food inspection for the domestic and overseas war effort.

Dr. Povar returned to Rhode Island following his discharge and the brothers expanded their small animal practice. In 1948, they built the Povar Animal Hospital that—with necessary modifications—survives to this day.⁵

During the 1960s, Morris worked with Brown University faculty involved in primate and other animal experimentation. His early consultation services grew into a major assignment assisting in the design and deployment of Brown’s first major animal care facility for the new medical school. In 1970, he accepted a tenured position as professor of psychology and medical science and worked for the final 20 years of his career as a laboratory animal veterinarian and collaborating research scientist. He assisted faculty in the psychology department and the medical school in various surgical and medical procedures and developed a surgery course for experimental biologists. These were the “*happiest years of my life*”, he recalls.⁶

Morris and Lotte have two children, Gail Povar AB ’72 and Tedd Povar. They retired to Boca Raton, Florida, in 1985, where they lead an active and fulfilled life.

¹ The Army Specialized Training Program was established by the United States Army in December 1942 to identify, train and educate academically-talented enlisted men as a specialized corp of Army officers during World War II. See also interview with Dr. Charles Robinson ’44 in this collection.

² Personal communication (interview), 2010.

³ Helen Goldhaft Wernicoff ’33 and Tevis Goldhaft ’35 were two members of the family-owned company called Vineland Laboratories.

⁴ Also called Brucellosis.

⁵ VCA Povar Animal Hospital, East Providence, Rhode Island. One of the staff veterinarians, Mark Povar (MSU ’67), is the son of Ralph Povar, and nephew of Morris.

⁶ Personal communication (interview), 2010.

Interview

Listen to the Interview

Subject: Morris L. Povar, DVM
Accompanied by: Mrs. Lotte Povar
Interviewer: Dr. Donald F. Smith
Interview Date: April 28, 2010
Location: Boca Raton, FL



Photograph by Donald F. Smith, 2010

Interviewer's Note:

I had a lovely early summer day for my 300-mile drive from Gainesville to south Florida to meet the Povars at their Boca Raton home. Morris and his deceased brother, Ralph, had graduated from Cornell's veterinary college in 1944 and 1939, respectively. Mrs. Lotte Povar, whose parents had barely escaped Hitler's Germany, had gone to school in Holland for two years before immigrating to the United States in 1939. I was greatly inspired to learn the story of Morris's eclectic career which spanned biomedical research, clinical practice, regulatory medicine and laboratory animal care. (Dr. Donald F. Smith).

Dr. Donald Smith:

This is April 28, 2010. We're in Boca Raton with Dr. Povar.

Dr. Povar, start by talking about your parents, how they came to this country and how you grew up, and your brother.

Dr. Morris Povar:

My Mom and Dad came over as Russian immigrants. My Dad was about 16- or 17-years-old; my mother was about 16. My Dad's history was much more dramatic because he was due to be drafted into the Russian army.

Dad walked from Moscow to Hamburg, Germany. They were poor as church mice. He had this ticket for steerage passage to America that had been provided to him by a cousin in New York. We had relatives in Hamburg that were engineers and well-to-do. He was given their address so he would be able to wait for the ship. It took him three months to get to Hamburg on foot. He was bedraggled and miserable-looking. He had a note written for him in German, introducing who he was. He went to the house and offered the note to the lady of the house. She looked up and down the street and slammed the door in his face, which he never forgot.

He managed to hang around until the ship left, got to New York and was very successful. Almost immediately, he earned a living, went to night school, learned English. He had two jobs: he worked in textiles during the day and also worked in an umbrella factory, cutting fabric for the umbrellas. My mother worked as a sewer and that's where they met and they married. My father continued to do very well, earned an excellent living and brought all his eight brothers and sisters to the States, plus his mother and father, over a period of years. My mother always said that, while he was bringing them over, she was scrubbing floors on her hands and knees because they couldn't afford anything—all of the money went for that purpose. But he did really well through the 20s and 30s.

Dad was the godfather of the entire family, he controlled everyone's lives. I was scheduled to go to Lowell Textile to become a textile person.¹ My brother² was in sales at several of the men's wear firms but he hated it and left to work on a farm. We spent our summers on a poultry and dairy farm that belonged to Globus family.³

Both of us had this rural background that influenced our lives a great deal. He eventually went to Cornell. Ralph was a very good surgeon and good diagnostician. When we worked together, I tended to see more of the people and he worked more in the back.

Ralph was an agricultural student and then went on to veterinary school. I knew that he was graduating [in 1939] and I was very anxious to get up to Cornell while he was still there because I knew he would pave the way for me to earn some money while I was there. And it turned out exactly that way.

Dr. Smith:

Why did you go to Brooklyn College initially, instead of going right to Cornell?

¹ In Lowell, Massachusetts.

² Ralph Povar '39, born 1913, attended Brooklyn College for two years before entering Cornell. Received DVM 1939, practiced in East Providence, RI, mostly small animals (1939-1975). Deceased 1998.

³ Robert Globus, DVM.

Dr. Povar:

We were in the depths of the Depression in the 30s and we lost our home. I didn't have the \$150 I needed to buy my books and pay my fees at Cornell, so I stayed and went one year to Brooklyn College and worked and saved. Then I worked as a children's waiter at a hotel and earned enough money so I had an adequate amount of money to go to up Cornell that fall. But I took courses at Brooklyn College and got full credit [at Cornell] for all of the courses I took.

When I came up to Cornell, Ralph had a job for me stoking the furnace in the house [where we jointly rented a room], and this paid for my room rent. He also had a job for me in Alpha Chi Rho [fraternity] working as a second cook, making salads and things like that. That entitled me for three meals a day, but I could only get down there for one meal at night.

I had a NYA—National Youth Administration⁴—job that paid me \$15.00 a month and with that, we were able to get by because there was no tuition, so we just had to pay lab fees and books. That amounted to between \$75 and \$150 a year that you had to have in cash. We were able to get used books sometimes that helped reduce the cost.

Once the military came in while I was in veterinary college, they supplied all of our books. For the kids who were poor, that was the biggest lift that we ever had, because they picked up the cost of all the books and they fed us. I still worked to get some cash, but I didn't really have to anymore during the last couple of years.

Dr. Smith:

Talk about your experience in the Army as an undergraduate student when you were in the agricultural college.

Dr. Povar:

At Cornell, all of the male students were in the ROTC unit. We had a mounted cavalry unit. We had a strange phenomenon that your rank in the unit was determined by your previous grades. By freak of fate, I happened to have the best grades in our unit of several hundred students, and therefore, I became the commander of the unit.

When we were in parade formation, we had a regular army officer in charge and it was very important to have the height of the soldiers lined up evenly. Since I was one of the shortest people in the unit, I had to have the tallest horse in the unit so that my head was even with everyone else. That caused all kinds of problems of getting the halters on the horses and harnessed so you could ride them. My horse sized me up immediately and the minute he would see me going into the stalls, he'd raise his head up to the ceiling. Then I'd have to scramble through the manger and the water dish to get up there to get up there to grab his halter and pull his head down. Once I had his halter, I had no problem, but this became a weekly episode where all the kids used to stand and watch me catching my horse. It was embarrassing, but I could do nothing about it.

⁴ National Youth Administration (1935) established grants to high schools and colleges to employ youths and develop marketable skills.

Dr. Smith:

You wanted to become a veterinarian but your brother had an incident that precluded that, at least initially.

Dr. Povar:

Yes. I was working with Drs. Hutt and Cole⁵ and we were working on the genetics of disease resistance. In our conversations and work we were doing together, it was decided that it would be wonderful if I—having the inclination towards veterinary medicine—would get a veterinary degree and then join the team. That would add credibility to the pathology that they were doing.

That got me thinking about veterinary medicine. I applied my junior year and was refused. There was a political problem. My brother had behaved incorrectly with Dr. Frost⁶ and Dr. Frost was furious with him.

The problem that Ralph (my brother) had gotten himself into was during the junior or senior year. He was in charge of a small group that was caring for this patient—a horse, that was lame. It was customary in those years for any lameness to be demonstrated to Dr. Frost so he could diagnose it and educate the students in the class as to what was going on.

The whole class was lined up to watch this horse limp through the stable and out onto the patio, turn around, and come back. Dr. Frost felt he knew what was wrong with the horse's lameness but he didn't really know. My brother had found that the horse had a large shard of wood stuck into the fetlock. After Dr. Frost had gone through his diagnosis without examining the horse—just through the action of the horse—my brother reached down and removed the piece of wood and the horse walked off perfectly normally. Dr. Frost made it very clear that there would never be another Povar in the veterinary school.

When we learned that, we gave up on Cornell. [However, some time later] Dean Hagan⁷ called me when I was up at the poultry department and he informed me that Dr. Frost was going to be on sabbatical and he thought it would be wise if I was going to consider application, to put it through, which I did immediately, and it went through uneventfully.

So that's how I got into veterinary school. It was a strange evolution. The interest in veterinary medicine came, not under the influence of any veterinarian as far as I was concerned, but more from the work I was doing.

[During the war, the classes were accelerated so that we progressed from one semester to the next without a break, and we also went to class throughout the summer]. Going to veterinary school at a time when there was no air conditioning and going in the summer time was a hideous experience. I had a little dog, a cocker spaniel, Taffy, who went to college with me.

⁵ Professors Frederick Bruce Hutt and Randal Knight Cole, distinguished poultry geneticists at Cornell University.

⁶ James Nathan Frost '07, professor of veterinary surgery and director of the surgical clinic.

⁷ William Arthur Hagan. DVM, MS, DSc, professor of bacteriology and dean of the college, 1932-59.

She was absolutely perfectly behaved and she would get under my seat and you wouldn't hear a peep from her until you went on to the next class. Everybody knew her and she was a delightful dog.

In one of the classes, Dr. Zeissig⁸ was lecturing to us about meat inspection. He was actually reading to us the USDA textbook. It was boring, it was hot. The room must have been 90 degrees. No air. At one point, Taffy got out from under my seat, sat right in the middle of the lecture hall and let out the most earth-shattering yawn you could imagine. Dr. Zeissig looked up and said, "Well, if Taffy can't stand it, none of us can; go home!" She saved our lives that day! It was awful.

From school we were put in a blacked-out train and sent from Cornell overnight. That was in 1944. We went right from graduation onto the train, the whole class. And we were shipped—we didn't know where. But we ended up at Fort Dix. We went to the barracks and they immediately started inoculating us with everything under the sun. Some of the kids were sick as hell and most of us didn't feel well.

We were supposed to be there a couple of weeks after the initial shots were done, and then shipped out, but we didn't know where. One morning after we'd been there about a week, they called my name and said to report to headquarters. I ran as fast as I could to headquarters. I got there and the sergeant handed me a slip of paper and said, "You've got to go to Rutgers tomorrow morning; here's your bus ticket."

The name on the stub was Dr. Beaudette⁹ but nobody could tell me what it was about. I found Dr. Beaudette. He was very charming and said he was glad he had a qualified person. I said, "*Qualified for what!*" He said, "*You're going to run a laboratory. You're qualified. You worked with poultry, you majored in microbiology, you are a veterinarian. Your card is the only one that came up; I've been looking for a veterinarian since Dr. Black (the man how ran the laboratory in Vineland) had a heart attack. I had to have a veterinarian to replace him so the Army agreed to identify somebody and you were identified.*"

So I went down there to Vineland and there were three employees and they trained me in one month how to run a laboratory. It was really remarkable. I knew enough about poultry pathology from my work at Cornell and I could do the autopsies. I knew enough microbiology to get my cultures done. The Goldhaft's were right next door and they taught me virology.¹⁰ I stayed there until Dr. Black recovered. I was there for seven months. Then I was shipped off to California.

I had met Lotte in the meantime—she was a student at Rutgers—and I called her and said, "*Lotte, they're sending me to California. Wanna go?*" She said, "*Sure*". And that was my wedding proposal.

⁸ Alexander Zeissig '26, MS, PhD, associate professor of veterinary bacteriology.

⁹ Fred Robert Beaudette, DVM (1897-1957), professor at Rutgers University, poultry pathologist at the N.J. Agricultural Experimental Station.

¹⁰ Helen Goldhaft Wernicoff '33 and Tevis Goldhaft '35 were two members of the family-owned company called Vineland Laboratories.

At the end of the war, I was involved in some biological warfare work on the west coast in Kimber Farms?¹¹ There was the absolute perception that there would be a biological attack on the United States and we were making vaccines against everything that we could conceive of.

I had applied to the University of California at Berkeley to go on for my PhD. Then I got a letter from my brother asking me to come to Rhode Island because he had Brucellosis and was very ill. He had been in the army and had Brucellosis at that time. He had collapsed in California and was discharged summarily due to that. He had undulant fever attacks every two-to-four weeks. He had two children at the time and it was not possible for him to practice under those circumstances. So he asked me to come and help him.

We cancelled our plans to go to the University of California-Davis and went to Providence instead and worked with him. It took until 1952 before he was treated successfully.

I had Brucellosis myself in 1951 and was treated with aureomycin.¹² It had just come out. Our family physician had been at a conference at Johns Hopkins. We got a gift from Lederle¹³ and I was put on aureomycin. After the treatment, I was absolutely free of it (Brucellosis); I had no titer. But, I developed a fungal infection for which I had to be hospitalized for three weeks afterwards—it almost killed me. Aureomycin was dangerous that way; it killed everything except the molds.

They wouldn't treat Ralph with aureomycin because of my horrible experience, but when Terramycin®¹⁴ came out, they put him on a regime when he had an attack, and he reverted to negative despite the fact that he had had a titer all that time. He was cured and never had any further trouble after that. But it took about nine years after I joined him before he was really cleared of the problem.

Dr. Smith:

Could you describe the practice?

Dr. Povar:

At the time I joined Ralph in 1946, we had a general practice. We had a lot of swine, horses, a lot of dairy cattle, and about 30% was with small animals. We took over a practice that belonged to a man named Dr. Armstrong who had had a stroke and died. His wife owned the buildings. The practice was on 1st Street in East Providence which was a livery stable street. The practice was in a wooden barn. There were horse stalls and we converted those horse stalls into runs for the few dogs that we had in the practice. We built an examining room and a waiting room in the barn.

¹¹ Poultry farm in Niles, CA, started by John E. Kimber in 1925.

¹² The first tetracycline drug, discovered in 1948.

¹³ Aureomycin was produced by Lederle Laboratories Division, American Cyanamid Company.

¹⁴ Terramycin® is brand name for oxytetracycline,

I had come to Rhode Island [from California] in the summers and built a bedroom and a sitting room and a kitchen on the opposite side of the barn and we parked the car in between. When I joined the practice, those were the facilities that we had.

We started putting cages into some of the horse stalls and my Dad helped us out of the Depression. He gave us a gift by which we were able to get a mortgage and we built a new hospital in front of the old one. That became the Povar Animal Hospital and it is still there.

Dr. Smith:

How did you transition into small animal work completely?

Dr. Povar:

I was called back in 1952 into military service for the Korean War and at that time my brother felt that he could not do large animal and small animal anymore. Also, the large animal work had decreased very markedly. Horses were out but we still had dairy cattle work and swine work. He continued to do a little bit of that.

When I came back from the service in 1954, we contracted with the island of Martha's Vineyard to do the large animal work there. We would fly over there once a month and do pregnancy work and any other veterinary work that the small animal clinic on the island would not do. So we took care of the cows and pigs, and the sheep and goats, and so on, as well as horses.

We loved to do that. It was a flat rate. It was utopian. The amount of work you did was dependent upon what piled up during the month, but you never had to consider the cost. They just paid for any medication that you used and you got a flat rate for the day—and transportation and being in a wonderful place. We both enjoyed that and did it for over ten years.

Dr. Smith:

Could you describe your experience during the Korean War, '52-'54?

Dr. Povar:

The Korean War. I had done laboratory work in WW II, so they sent me to Chicago initially. We were trained on meat inspection—and food inspection in general—for three months. Then I was sent in a unit to New York City which was replacing a unit that had gotten into trouble with a bribery scandal in New Jersey. They dispersed the entire unit. Ours was a unit made up of reserve officers. Our colonel was a reserve officer, all the majors were reserve officers; I was a reserve officer.

In those days, you could not resign your medical commissions. It was only after the law was changed during the Eisenhower administration that you could resign. But up to that time, if you had a medical commission, it stayed with you and you could be called up at any time.

I became adjutant to the colonel and, as such, I ran the office and took care of 50 officers and enlisted men under me in the office. I did that for two years. I worked hard in my life, but

never worked that hard, ever. It was a very grueling thing because we were under constant stress of having the previous unit disbanded due to fraud and bribery. We were all reserve officers and we all wanted to get out without being jailed in the process. It was very stressful.

Dr. Smith:

Could you describe what an average week would be like?

Dr. Povar:

I was in the office at around 8:00 in the morning. We worked until 5:00, 6:00 at night. As adjutant, my services were different from other inspectors because, in a sense, I was acting for the colonel all the time. I ran the office and I did all of the special inspections. Whenever somebody wanted a contract to supply [provisions, such as meat or canned produce] to the government, I had to do the inspection for the colonel. That ran into all kinds of problems.

There were huge contracts for specialized items, for example, chicken chopped suey, which I'll never forget. It was made by Dorset Packing Company. It was a multimillion dollar contract. It was a wonderful product. Everything they had in there was fresh and good, and the product looked beautiful.

When it was all packed for overseas shipment, there were strapped cartons all dipped in wax at tremendous cost. I had to do the inspection before it got the veterinary stamp on it. Unfortunately, the boxes were atrocious.

The military specifications allowed only so much space between the flaps, and the spaces were about twice as far apart as they should have been. So I had to reject it.

There was chaos, millions of dollars floating on this thing. I got a call from an admiral—the vendor had an admiral call me—who ordered me to stamp those boxes. I said I'd be happy to do it if you would just send me a telegram ordering me to do so. He thought that was impertinent and called my colonel and reported that I was insubordinate.

The colonel had a favorite saying that went on for years: "Povar, you'd better be right!" Of course, when he came down, there was no question about it. If it wasn't for overseas shipment, it wouldn't have been a catastrophe. But those boxes had to be right or they would sink if the ship was hit and these would not float.

I had any number of instances where I had to do inspections of plants. I had one I'll never forget where there was a small butcher who was going to bid on packaging stuff for the submarine service, which is the highest level of difficulty that anybody could have. I had to go down and look at his place and approve it first before he could get a contract.

I walked in and I knew immediately by the condition of the place that it was not going to pass. I asked my driver to wait. I said, "*Driver, I'll only be here 15 minutes.*"

I walked in and this place smelled bad. I walked into the cooler, the temperature was too high. The owner saw me reading the thermometer and he took out a wad of money and said,

“Captain, it’s worth a lot to me to” I tore out of that room as fast as I could, running for my driver, went down the street, got to a phone—of course, that was before cell phones—and called the colonel. I knew there was going to be trouble, and the colonel said, *“You’re too late. He already called and said that you demanded a bribe in order to get him passed.”* I said, *“Well, colonel, you go down and see that place and you’ll know that it would take more than a bribe to pass that place.”* He came down and it turned out alright. Those were the kinds of things that added spice to your life.

After the two-year service in the Korean War, I was finally discharged. During that time, I had correspondence with Dr. Bill Montagne, who had been a professor of mine at Cornell in histology and now was a professor of biology at Brown. He was doing a comparative study on glandular development in primates and needed somebody to do biopsies for him on different primates. I had been working with primates in the military because we were buying monkeys for the trajectory flights of the rockets. So I had more than the usual exposure to them.

We set aside an area of the hospital where we just did the monkey work. All of these were survival surgeries to take out a little piece of the lymph gland and some skin. After they recovered they were sent back to wherever they were donated from.

We went from prosimians all the way up to apes. This took several years, but during that time, I was up and back at Brown a lot. Dr. Allan Schrier¹⁵ wanted to start a primate colony for the psychology department for his own work. He was told that I was around the campus and he consulted with me, and we started working very closely together. We did have a successful breeding colony of stump-tailed macaques and we had a large colony of Rhesus monkeys. He used all of these animals in his behavioral work.

I was spending so much time at Brown in these various affairs—I started giving a course in surgical techniques in primates for the psychology department, mostly electrode implants and things like that—that they gave me an adjunct appointment to cover the work I was doing.

At the same time, the medical school in the late 60s was being considered. We had architects working on a central animal facility for the whole campus and it was suggested that I be available to them to discuss any animal problems and give any suggestions that I would have. This was a very fruitful arrangement for all of us.

The animal center was almost as big as the whole medical school because it was supposed to serve more than just the medical school but also the biology campus. Since I had been so involved in getting it planned, they wanted to see if I could make it work. We accepted the challenge and the marked reduction in salary, and spent the next 20 years, really the happiest years of our life. We enjoyed every moment of it.

The building did work well. And when I retired three veterinarians replaced me. That’s what happens when you grow with a job.

¹⁵ Allan M. Schrier developed the primate behavior colony at Brown University in 1964.

Dr. Smith:

Thank you. This has been marvelous.