A Cortland County Veterinarian

Carleton Potter was born on June 14, 1918, just a month after his father, Wilburn Potter, received his veterinary degree from Cornell University. In addition to serving local farmers as their veterinarian, Dr. Potter, Sr. operated a dairy farm of his own at his home near Truxton in upstate New York.

Carleton loved cattle and rural living, and was a good student who aspired to a career in veterinary medicine like his father. Because he grew up understanding both the production aspects as well as the health issues associated with dairy cattle management, he was naturally drawn to pursue a career in general practice. He applied to Cornell in 1935 at a time when one year of university education was required to be considered for admission to the four-year veterinary curriculum.

A Cornell professor had provided money to establish the “Endorus C. Kinney Scholarship” for students from Truxton, and that amounted to $250 per year for the recipient. There was no formal tuition in the veterinary college—that was a State-operated college, as was the Agricultural College—so it was pretty simple to go to Cornell if you could get in and take advantage of the free tuition and get $250 besides for the year.

I completed my one-year prerequisites in the Agricultural College at Cornell. When it came time to apply for veterinary college, there were about 240-250 applicants for the class of forty.

The first year, I had a room at 140 College Avenue, about two blocks down from Collegetown. I had a job working in the kitchen at Balch Hall. You were supposed to be there at 7.00 in the morning, so from Collegetown to Balch, that’s a good little stretch to walk every morning. For noon meals, you had to be there at noon to work in the kitchen, and then I returned again in the evening. I worked at Balch all five years while I was in college.

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1 Personal interview with Dr. Potter at his home in Homer, N.Y., March 19, 2010.
2 Wilburn Potter (born 1892) had been employed by Borden Farms before entering Cornell at age 23 as a married student. After graduating in 1918, he managed a dairy farm in Avon, N.Y., then moved his family to Truxton, where he purchased a farm of his own and started a general veterinary practice.
I had some pretty good teachers at Cornell. Dr. Fincher\(^3\) was sharp and was able to tell you what to do. He was the leader, and his partner—Dr. Gibbons\(^4\)—was easier going. The Ambulatory clinic at that time used cars; this was before pickup trucks with special veterinary boxes.

Dr. Udall\(^5\), who had written the textbook, had a very peculiar habit of clearing his throat with a soft cough when he was speaking or lecturing. One day, a classmate kept track of this and counted 80 times in the course of a 50-minute session in which he coughed to clear his throat. That was typical of Denny’s delivery.

I admired Dr. Hagan\(^6\). He not only taught the course and wrote the book, but he also designed the new vet school. I went to visit my sister and brother-in-law in Minnesota shortly after I came to Homer. On the way back, I made a special trip to Ames from St. Paul just to visit with Dean Hagan. I think he was a wonderful fellow.

I never got that well-acquainted with Mr. Asmus\(^7\). At the time, the draft horses were on their way out, and the sport and riding horses were not coming in yet. In New York State, large animal practice was primarily dairy practice—that was the tops.

We had four women in our class, and they would link them up as pairs for lab partners\(^8\). As I remember there was no discretion given to the women, or any hard feelings. They were pretty much treated like everyone else.

Two or three of my classmates changed their names: Jerry Patashnik became Jerry Payton, Harold Grotenstein became Harold Groten, and Ralph Gangarosa changed his name to Ralph Ganis. At that time, they thought that a shorter and more ‘Americanized’ name would be better-received and simpler.

Through 1939, most of the veterinary graduates received a reserve commission in the Veterinary Corps. But for some reason, that was stopped in 1940. At one point, I was due to be drafted, but got out of it because I was employed as a food animal veterinarian. If I’d gone in, it would be as a private.

I went to work for a University of Pennsylvania graduate, Dr. Leonard Haubrich, in Claremont, New Hampshire. I felt I was a very good veterinarian, but all I got to do was TB testing most of the time. That didn’t suit me very well because I thought I was more valuable than pricking cows!

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\(^3\) Myron Gustin Fincher, professor of medicine and obstetrics
\(^4\) Walter J. Gibbons, professor of medicine and obstetrics
\(^5\) Dennie Hammond Udall, professor of veterinary medicine and hygiene
\(^6\) William Arthur Hagan, professor of bacteriology and dean of the college
\(^7\) Henry Asmus, assistant professor of horseshoeing
\(^8\) The class of 1939 had three women, and the class of 1940 had four. This represented a substantial increase from previous years, as only eight women had graduated with DVM between 1910 and 1938.
I stayed there in Claremont until February, 1941. Then I came out here to the Cornell Conference and happened to meet up with a veterinarian from Lawrence, Massachusetts, about 30 miles north of Boston. His partner had been called up to serve in the war, so I joined the practice.

They had a small animal hospital in Lawrence, but I worked mainly on the large animal side of the practice. It was a mill town and a lot of immigrants would have one or two, three or four cows, and these cows were often treated as part of the family. There was more individual animal practice for these farms than there was in a 50-cow herd.

I was in Lawrence about three years, then returned to central New York in 1943 after my first son was born. Dr. Kenneth Tice, the Cortland City veterinarian, was called up into the Army so there was an opening here in Cortland County for someone to take care of the TB records and the TB testing. I managed to do some practice as well as the regulatory work, and that’s how I got started here in Homer.

In contrast to the practice in Lawrence, the average dairy in Cortland County in 1943 had 25-30 head of cattle. We did a lot of pregnancy and sterility work. I did some TB testing but most of the reactors would come up NVL (no visible lesions); TB was virtually gone by then. However, Brucellosis testing and vaccination came in about that time.

Dr. Potter practiced in Cortland County for almost 60 years. His practice was 80% large animals, 90% of which was dairy work. Though he built a clinic in Homer for small animal work, he took most of his large animal calls from his home as was common in that time period.

He had two associates, then hired Dr. William Cadwallader ’62, who eventually took over the clinic in Homer.

The Potter family abounds with Cornell graduates. In addition to his father, three of Carleton’s siblings were graduates of Cornell (one brother, Bernard, was a university Trustee). In 1943, Carleton married Marian Wightman, a 1940 Cornell home economics graduate. They had six children, three of whom graduated from Cornell. Following Marian’s death, Carleton married Esther Forbes who, like her father before her, had also attended Cornell.

The only other veterinarian in the family, however, is Dr. Potter’s granddaughter, Megan Potter. She is a Purdue University graduate (Class of 2007) and is currently enrolled in a graduate program in pathobiology at Kansas State University. She shares the following thoughts about her grandfather.

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9 Wilbur Jameson Forbes, BS ’22.
10 E-mail correspondence, May 2010.
I recall traveling to Homer as a young child to visit my grandfather. I would excitedly await visits from his clients since vacation at Grandpa’s house was never without some animal arriving. No matter what the concern was, Grandpa could fix it.

Grandpa also knew how to put me to work—recognizing and nurturing my early enthusiasm for veterinary medicine. Whether it was providing a trip to the animal shelter to vaccinate animals or having me pass instruments to assist during a surgery, Grandpa always found a way to involve me. My grandfather found great joy in his work, seeming to enjoy every patient and problem that arrived. With “Doc” as my grandfather, I recognized how a veterinarian could positively impact the lives of people.

I credit my grandfather with my love of veterinary medicine today. Although my veterinary career may lead me down a different path than his, with each step, I am thankful and proud to have him as a role model.

Drs. Carleton Potter and Megan Potter after attending the 2007 veterinary graduation ceremony at Purdue University.

Dr. Potter, an active 92-years-old, and his equally-youthful wife, live in the home that he built and which served as his practice. They plan to return to Cornell for his 70th reunion in June, to be joined by Dr. Moe Kopp of Sun Lakes, Arizona, another of the four surviving members of his Class of 1940.
Dr. Potter holding the original sign that he used for his clinic practice in 1943.

Dr. Potter surrounded by his family on his 90th birthday, June 2008