

A Biography of and Interview about Marie Koenig Olson, DVM

Class of 1937, College of Veterinary Medicine, Cornell University

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

Veterinary Matriarch

A practicing veterinarian, dog breeder, and Zonta mother, Dr. Marie Koenig Olson was Cornell's seventh woman veterinary graduate. Bitten by a rabid dog in 1944, she just scrubbed the flesh and poured nitric acid into the wounds. *"She couldn't die with a daughter and a father in declining health, and a husband who was overseas"*, reported her son, also a veterinarian.



New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph

Marie A. Koenig Olson, 1937



Photo provided by Dr. James Olson

Marie was born into a Cornell family in Ithaca, N.Y. on December 4, 1913. Her father, Frederick F. Koenig '09, taught equine and ambulatory medicine at Cornell. He was a popular teacher

and a dynamic community leader. After the end of the First World War, Dr. Koenig, whose practice at Cornell had been largely equine, moved his family to Jamestown, New York, and established a general practice.

Dr. F.F. Koenig and Marie circa 1921

Marie's mother, a friend and campaigner for Eleanor Roosevelt, was an engaging woman, and politics were always an active topic of discussion at the dinner table when Marie was growing up. Mrs. Koenig wanted her daughter to become a dancer. However, Marie had other interests and gradually moved from ballet to horseback riding, eschewing dance to enter her father's world of veterinary medicine. She was a dynamic person of unlimited energy, receiving both her undergraduate and professional education at Cornell.



Photo provided by Dr. James Olson

Mrs. Koenig and Marie circa 1921

Though Marie was the only woman to graduate from Cornell in 1937, she did not let gender constrain her learning. Nor did she allow her affliction with a chronic neurological condition—a Parkinsonian-type sequel to the influenza virus that had struck her as a child—to limit her active lifestyle as a student. “*She just loved Cornell,*” reported her son. “*She had good camaraderie with the guys and had a very happy existence at Cornell.*”

After a year working for a small animal clinic in Rochester, Marie joined her father's Jamestown practice. In addition to expanding the business to include small animal patients, she also performed regulatory tuberculosis and brucellosis testing for the State.

Marie met her future husband, Raymond Olson, while treating his English setter for canine distemper. According to family lore, the dog pulled through, and owner and veterinarian became an *item*. After they married, Ray went off to World War II, while Marie stayed behind to care for a newborn daughter and tend the veterinary business. After the war and now with two children, the Olsons decided that Ray should go to veterinary college. In 1948, he began coursework at Jamestown Community College, then continued his education at Alfred University. He eventually completed his pre-veterinary requirements and matriculated at Cornell in 1953.



*Dr. Raymond and Dr. Marie Olson,
circa 1964*

Photo provided by Dr. James Olson

Marie had to shoulder the entire responsibility for both her family and the veterinary business. She raised two children, cared for her aging father with congestive heart failure while fighting her own health challenges. She ran the small animal veterinary clinic, performed state regulatory work, and put her husband through college. She accepted her responsibilities without complaint. It was *just expected*.

After Ray graduated as the *old guy* of the Class of 1957, the Olsons built a modern small animal veterinary hospital. The clinic had skylights in every part of the building, radiant hot water-heated floors, and epoxy-painted walls for easy clean-up. They had a modern surgery suite with prep and treatment areas, a well-equipped laboratory, a modern anesthesia machine, and the first computer cash register in the area.

Dr. Olson was a community leader and activist. She was a charter member of Zonta International, an organization of executives in business and the professions working together to advance the status of women worldwide. She was also fiercely independent. When the National Organization for Women approached her for leadership support, she said, “*Why would I ever want to join an organization of wannabees when I have it all? To join NOW would be a step down!*”

A loyal Cornellian who extolled the value of a great education, Marie gave her children free access to anything scientific, practical, and/or mechanical. She encouraged her daughter to go to Cornell, where she received a baccalaureate and two master's degrees. Her son, Jim, a member of the Cornell Veterinary Class of 1973, is now a feline specialist in Castle Rock, Colorado.

On November 23, 1970, Dr. Marie Koenig Olson succumbed to a stroke. Just 56 years old, she practiced to the day she died, slipping away in her chair at the end of the day with her little dog by her side. Jim learned of her death from the dean while taking his second-year veterinary examinations. "*She died at full steam,*" he mused, "*doing what she loved.*" The practice started by her father and developed by her and her husband, still operates in Jamestown as a living testament to her limitless energy and audacity.

Dr. Koenig Olson's life influenced the careers paths of three future veterinarians in her own family, including her granddaughter, Jennifer Olson, who graduated exactly 100 years after the family's original veterinarian (Marie's father). She was also a matriarch in the institutional sense. In the three years following her graduation, eight women received their doctor of veterinary medicine degrees at Cornell, bringing the total to fifteen, more than twice the number for any other veterinary college in the United States.

Interview

[Listen to the Interview](#)

Subject: Marie Koenig Olson, DVM
Interviewees: Dr. James Olson '73, son
Ms. Ann Marie Olson AB'67, MS '67, daughter
Interviewer: Dr. Donald F. Smith
Interview Date: November 30, 2007
Location: Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine

Interviewer's Note:

This interview of the two children of Dr. Marie Koenig Olson '37, is unique because she was also the second in a line of five veterinarians spanning exactly 100 years. Marie Olson's father, Dr. Frederick F. Koenig, graduated in 1909 and served as a faculty member at Cornell for 10 years. Twenty years after Marie graduated in 1937, her husband, Ray Olson, graduated from Cornell. Their son, James Olson, received his DVM in 1973 and Jim's daughter, Jennifer, graduated in 2009. The date for this interview coincided with Cornell's "White Coat Ceremony", during which Jennifer was honored as a member of the third-year class as they prepared to enter the clinical part of the veterinary curriculum. (Dr. Donald F. Smith)

A Centennial Veterinary Family

Father



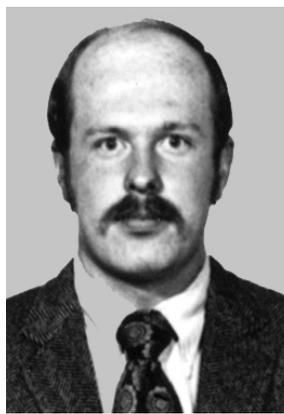
Dr. Frederick F. Koenig 1909

Herself



Dr. Marie Koenig Olson '37

Son



Dr. James Koenig Olson '73

Granddaughter



Dr. Jennifer C. Olson '09

Dr. Donald Smith:

This is Dr. Donald Smith at Cornell University. We are conducting this interview at the College of Veterinary Medicine. We have the privilege today to have with us two members of the Olson family. We're here to discuss Dr. Marie Koenig Olson who graduated in 1937. To put this interview in context, she represents the second of four generations of veterinarians, the

fourth generation represented by Jen Olson, Jim’s daughter, who will receive her “white coat” tomorrow, on December 1, 2007.¹

It’s a great privilege to have both of you here today. Ann Marie, would you please introduce yourself?

Ms. Ann Marie Olson:

I’m Ann Marie Olson and I was born at the beginning of World War II when my mother was practicing veterinary medicine in Jamestown, New York,² and my Dad went off to war. From a very early age, I had the enjoyment of growing up in a household with lots of animals.

Dr. James Olson:

I’m James Koenig Olson—the family name was put as my middle name. I’m sure they were thinking that maybe I would want to become a veterinarian at one point and it certainly did happen. For the longest time, I kept on saying, “*I don’t think I want to become a veterinarian because my parents are veterinarians.*” Finally, I sat down and said, “*What do I like?*” And I said, “*I think I really like veterinary medicine*”, and so I took that on.

But I also took that same idea with my daughter, “*Jenny, you can break the chain at any time. If you really like veterinary medicine, go for it, but if you want to do something else, fine*”. And so she was exposed to many things before she finally just said, “*I want to become a veterinarian*”.

She went around the block a little bit, living in Colorado and going to UC-Davis³ and then saying, “*I want to go back and see what Cornell is like.*” After the Cornell visit, she announced, “*Dad, this is where I want to go to school*”.

Dr. Smith:

Let’s start back in 1909 with your grandfather.

Ms. Olson:

I knew him for a few years; he died when I was nine-years old. But I remember him as a very compassionate and wonderful [man]. He’d take me to the circus; he’d like to deal with the circus animals. He’d take me to the rodeo and we’d have a very good time. He got congestive heart failure and I only knew him for those few brief years.

Dr. Smith:

He died in 1952. [Yes.] But he was a veterinarian.

¹ The White Coat Ceremony, held in early December each year, signifies the beginning of the clinical experience for third-year veterinary medical students at Cornell University.

² Small city in western New York, in Chautauqua County.

³ Jennifer received her undergraduate (pre-veterinary) education at University of California-Davis, which she attended on a basketball scholarship.

Ms. Olson:

He was. He practiced large animal. I remember him saying that he used to make calls using the trolley train system around Lake Chautauqua because the farmers would come and meet him at the various stops and he could go off to their particular [farm] and deal with whatever problem they might have.⁴

Dr. Smith:

Jim, he started here at Cornell as a faculty member?

Dr. Olson:

No, he did his agricultural [education] at the University of Connecticut and actually won a number of large animal judging medals and was pretty renowned down there. He came to Cornell and graduated in 1909 and then joined the faculty. He was one of the people who started the ambulatory clinic where they had what they called the “GOP cars” (Get Out and Push).

He was very, very popular and I got to read a lot of the newspaper clippings that my parents had saved and he was quite a socialite with his wife. The vibrancy they had and the vibrancy that James Law⁵ had with the early faculty and students was remarkable. By the time my grandfather went through school, James Law had become an administrator. He was sort of the “kick-ass” guy, too. He was the one who really ignited veterinary medicine, if you read the early history of Cornell he was the ‘father’ of modern veterinary medicine in the United States.

My grandfather picked up a lot of that and was well-liked. The students liked him, everyone liked him. One of the things that was very interesting, [in addition to] the demise of the horse at the end of World War I, was one of the things that Ann related to me, [and that] was the anti-German sentiment. I have no idea but I bet it had something to do with his leaving Cornell—but [it was also due to] the demise of the horse, because he was a horse doctor.

He left Cornell in 1919, went to Jamestown and bought out a practice there—Jamestown Veterinary Hospital in downtown Jamestown—and shortly thereafter, moved the practice about four miles away in a more rural setting. He bought an older house with a big barn. He kept the same name until Marie came out of school, when it was renamed Koenig’s Dog and Cat Hospital.

Dr. Smith:

Your mother was born and raised in Ithaca.

Ms. Olson:

We had extended family in Ithaca, and it was always so much fun to come and visit. To come to Ithaca from Jamestown (a six-hour drive in those days), it seemed like a little expedition but it was always a joy to come and visit the relatives.

⁴ A series of land trolleys and lake steamers provided transportation around and on Lake Chautauqua.

⁵ James Law, Cornell’s original veterinary professor (1868); founding principal (dean) of the New York State Veterinary College (1894-1908).

Dr. Smith:

How did she develop her interest in veterinary medicine?

Dr. Olson:

I think it was just being around her father but her mother wanted her to be a dancer.

Ms. Olson:

But she was in ballet and quite a few theatrical-type things. I think that Grandma Koenig was a little bit of a stage mother and got her into a lot of those things. They had had a son, but he died, so Marie was an only child. I think there was the influence of Grandpa Koenig to get Marie [to think about veterinary medicine]. She had a horse, rode English—she was very much into animals all the time. I think he took her under his wing and just moved her from dance into the veterinary sphere.

Dr. Smith:

She was one of the earliest women students in the veterinary college here. Could you talk about her experience? Did she do her undergraduate studies here?

Dr. Olson:

Yes, and from all the pictures and everything I know about that, she just had a ball here. With the family in Ithaca, she certainly could leave the vet school and go into a family situation and then come back and relieve stress. Growing up here in Ithaca originally and then moving away and then coming back... Every time she came back it was like old home week.

Ms. Olson:

She could continue her riding here. She had a horse here and she used to ride with some of the folks in the area. She played polo with the guys at practice. She really enjoyed that.

Dr. Smith:

Were there any issues with her being admitted [to the veterinary college]?

Dr. Olson:

No I don't think there were. My grandfather Koenig was well-connected here at the school. A lot of people really did like him and it carried on. Having Marie in Ithaca, she went to the vet school often and people got to know her and I suspect that that was the inside track to get her in because it certainly was not a popular thing at the time—to let women come in to the vet school.

Ms. Olson:

They made special accommodations for her in some of her exams because of her Parkinson [disease]. She was slow at writing—had difficulty writing—and I think they allowed her to type or to do dictation. It wasn't conventional Parkinson's disease [Jim: it was Parkinsonian in nature] but it had to have been a basal ganglia destruction that was a sequel to the flu that she had had as a baby. It was static, not progressive. That was fortunate. She did have a certain amount of disability which got worse in her later life (50s) as her balance became

more affected. But she was amazingly active, athletic, she loved to swim. She couldn't horseback ride when we were riding as kids. That was behind her, but she walked, she gardened, she painted, she did whatever needed doing.

Dr. Olson:

She didn't seem to be bothered by the fact that she was a woman veterinarian.

Dr. Smith:

But going back to her student days, do you recall any stories that she told about her life as a student?

Ms. Olson:

There was a young president's wife with whom she would get together and ride.⁶ She enjoyed riding.

Dr. Olson:

She went to football games. She had good camaraderie with the guys and just seemed to have a fairly happy existence at Cornell. When we were coming down in the fifties, Mom got us Cornell t-shirts and hats—ra-ra-Cornell—“You kids **will** go to Cornell!”

She did go to a lot of the dances, went tobogganing out on Beebe Lake where they had the chutes⁷. . . . I don't remember her talking too much about the surgery, the rounds, and things like that.

Dr. Smith:

Did the Depression have any impact on the family?

Dr. Olson:

Oh, yes, sort of like *Water for Elephants*.⁸ They got a lot of garden turnips and farm produce/services for barter. The only thing that saved the family practice at that time was the State work for TB and Brucellosis. They did a lot of townships. This was started by her father and then she took it over. She graduated in 1937, then worked a year for Weber Brothers up in Rochester.

Then she came back in 1938 and that's when they started the Koenig's Dog and Cat Hospital. For its time, they had some very innovative things that were light-years ahead: V-trough positioning tables, some of the guillotine openings from cage to runs. They have those things now, but I never saw practices that had that innovation at that period of time.

Ms. Olson:

Raymond was always trying to make fiberglass cages so he could clean them easier.

⁶ Perhaps the wife of Dr. Livingston Ferrand (president 1921-1937, a physician).

⁷ There was a toboggan slide near Beebe Lake on Cornell's campus.

⁸ *Water for Elephants*, by Sara Gruen, a fictitious Depression-era story of a veterinary student who leaves Cornell after losing his father, a veterinarian, and his mother, in a car accident. He joins the Benzini Brothers' circus.

Dr. Olson:

He was a tool and die maker and then became a veterinarian.

Ms. Olson:

He was quite innovative. He made all kinds of external fixation splints, intra-medullary pins. He was really quite a machinist.

Dr. Smith:

Talk about your father and how they met?

Ms. Olson:

As far as I know, it was over a dog, because Dad had English Setters, beautiful Setters (he was from the Jamestown area). He was an upland bird hunter so he always had a good gun dog. Apparently, his dog needed veterinary attention.

Dr. Olson:

My father's prize hunting companion came down with canine distemper. Apparently it was a mild case, because the dog pulled through, and they became an item.

Ms. Olson:

They were married just before the war ('41 or '42). Dad hadn't gone overseas yet because Mother took me down to Aberdeen Proving Ground where he was still training. He was in ordnance (guns)—he was a tool and die maker—his stationing was a little unclear but he was in the India-China-Burma campaign for a while, he was in North Africa for a while, he was sort of detached. We were not always sure what he was doing all the time, but he had some good stories and brought home a lot of souvenirs.

Dr. Smith:

What happened to the practice then? Her father was still alive until 1952. Was he still practicing through that period?

Ms. Olson:

He was in declining health and Marie was really strong, both physically and emotionally. [For example], they had a real roaring rabies epidemic in dogs and she ran the town pound (what we would now call the Humane Society—there wasn't one then) and all of the stray dogs were brought to her facility. She had an isolation ward where they would have to be isolated. There were 48 confirmed rabies cases in 1948.

Dr. Olson:

And she was bitten by a rabid dog!

Ms. Olson:

I remember the long rabies pole with the rope because the officers who brought in the animals had to be very careful. She had to be very careful in dealing with all of this. She had to be incredibly courageous to be dealing with such a difficult situation as a rabies epidemic all by herself with my father away. My grandmother was there helping out, raising me. I

think it had to be a very hard time, keeping the practice going apart from the epidemic, just administering to the normal everyday operation.

Dr. Olson:

She was told by her physician that she could not go through rabies treatment when the whole epidemic started. So, when she got bitten by [that rabid] dog, she cleaned it out and poured nitric acid in the wounds. Marie understood the implications and took the dog bite very seriously. She had some scars on her arm that she had shown me. [She told me], “*That was from the nitric acid that I poured into the wounds. I didn’t have any idea of what else to do, but I certainly couldn’t come down with rabies and die with a daughter and a father in declining health, and a husband that’s overseas.*” She was the one to keep things together.

Dr. Smith:

By that time, was the practice all small animal?

Dr. Olson:

No, she was doing large animal, too.

Ms. Olson:

Yeah, she would take me along. We would go and draw the blood for the tuberculosis and the calfhood vaccinations. Sometimes those calves were pretty darn big. They would push her around some. She would try to get the farmers to help, but she could hold her own.

Dr. Olson:

Sort of the Dr. Mary Smith of her time.

Dr. Smith:

When did your father decide to become a veterinarian?

Dr. Olson:

Probably when he got out of the service.

Ms. Olson:

The GI Bill did a lot for people. He had never had the opportunity to go to college. With a young family, the reasonable way to do it was to start in a community college and then transfer. That’s what he did, he started at Jamestown Community College (JCC), then transferred to Alfred [University] for a year to get more advanced course work because JCC was just starting. Then he came to Cornell. [It was a seven-year sequence] and he did get the support from the GI Bill that was so crucial for so many peoples’ education. He graduated 20 years after Marie. Isn’t that amazing: Marie was Cornell Vet 1937 and Raymond was Cornell Vet 1957?

Dr. Smith:

That’s a great story. Are there things about your mother that you would like to share? Could you talk more about the physical challenges that she had?

Dr. Olson:

She had physical challenges but they never seemed to affect what she wanted to do.

Ms. Olson:

One of the things that she and I did together which I thought was great fun, she always raised puppies. From the time I was tiny until I was in college, we always had puppies at home, starting with cockers. She ordered a really swell Boston Terrier, a really good one. We would take it down to Eldridge, Pennsylvania to be bred and we had litters of Boston Terrier puppies. She was scrupulous because it was a young breed and there were a lot of defective puppies. And she was very careful about the ones that she kept and the ones that she would breed, and the ones that she would sell for pets (spayed or neutered); and the ones that she would have to euthanize because they were not healthy puppies.

For decades, we raised Boston Terriers. Then I had a poodle. He was quite a popular stud dog in the area so we always had puppies at home. She was very “into” animals—she just really loved to have the animals around, to have the little ones, to see them grow up and go to good homes.

Dr. Smith:

You and I talked about her five or six years ago, and you talked about her mother being a friend and campaigner of Eleanor Roosevelt .

Ms. Olson:

I never knew Grandma Koenig because she died when I was very young. But I heard the stories about her. Apparently she was a lovely woman and very sociable—very politically- and socially-minded.

Dr. Olson:

Through the Democratic Party, she met Eleanor Roosevelt. They drove around New York State whipping up discord, I’m sure. Or, if you want to say, progressive thinking. She definitely was one of those people that was sort of a suffragette. Especially being a professor’s wife here at Cornell. The whole movement started just up the lake in Seneca Falls.⁹

Dr. Smith:

So was that fitting in with the Zonta international group?¹⁰

Dr. Olson:

Oh, that was a very wild group.

Ms. Olson:

Mother was very into Zonta and I was a Zonta baby. They did a lot of very interesting and useful things. They had scholarships—all kinds of scholarships—for women. The most progressive and interesting women in our town were into Zonta. It was the equivalent of

⁹ Seneca Falls is now the site of the National Women’s Hall of Fame.

¹⁰ Zonta Organization for advancement of women internationally was formed in 1919 in Buffalo, New York.

Rotary or Optimist, but women weren't in those service organizations at the time. Zonta was the only women's professional club available, so obviously you had all of the movers and the shakers that were female in a given town in Zonta. I remember a lot of the get-togethers; they did a lot of good.

Dr. Olson:

They were dynamo women and I think they just got together and did a lot of things. With her mother and Eleanor Roosevelt and her father being dynamic and having a good relationship with Cornell, just spurred her on.

Dr. Smith:

Could you talk about your experience as adults that reflect on your parents?

Dr. Olson:

I have a lot of empathy for my mother, being able to do all of the things: raising kids and making them successful, keeping the family together, taking care of her father, her mother's dying of cancer.

She has a new baby on the way. Then her husband comes home and they have to figure out what their life is going to be like. He decides that he's going back to college—be away from the family. She has to hold it together.

Ms. Olson:

Later when we were growing up, I think what was impressive is that they had no free time. We had no vacation because you are so tied down—at least they were in those days—to a veterinary practice. There were no relief vets. There was pretty much universal coverage. We had a lake cottage, but even there, they had to check back on Saturday's or Sunday's. They never had Saturday's off. Evenings, it didn't close until eight or nine o'clock at night. When I wanted to go to the movies, I used to go down and put little signs on the tree that said: "CLOSED". But nobody ever paid any attention to it.

It was a very unusual lifestyle because we were there with our parents—it wasn't as though they weren't there, but we didn't have the enclosed family situation where we could eat meals and do things without interruption because the practice was continuous. It was a family practice and everybody had to pitch in because there was a lot to do.

Dr. Smith:

There were no other veterinarians involved, just your grandfather, mother, and father.

Dr. Olson:

Then there was me.

Dr. Smith:

Jim, you graduated in 1973 and your mother had died during your second year as a veterinary student.

Dr. Olson:

You take a lot of things for granted. I get into veterinary school. I do well in my first year—it was a real change coming back from Colorado State University to Cornell. Even Sandy deLahunta said that Cornell is no country day school, and I believed that after the first week.¹¹

My mother was practicing. In fact, she practiced up to the day she died. That Sunday she had seen an animal that morning and she must have had a stroke that night and just slipped away in her chair with her little dog. She was as active then as she had been. She died at full steam.

At that point, I was going through finals and can remember going down to the dean's office and he told me I had to go home.

Dr. Smith:

What happened to the practice then?

Dr. Olson:

My father took it over and he ran it for the next two years. He had suffered from a dissecting aortic aneurysm and a mitral valve problem because he was affected by the flu or something similar to that and got rheumatic fever. Most rheumatic fever patients have to have a mitral valve replaced later in life. I kept coming home and helping during the summers. During the summer of 1972, he had the aneurysm. I got a number of the local veterinarians to come in and take some of the case load and I did everything else behind the scenes.

In '73, I graduated and came back to Jamestown and stayed there until 1978 when I sold the practice and went to California and then to Colorado.

Dr. Smith:

So you picked up the practice then so really it was a three-generation practice with four members of the family.

Dr. Olson:

We hired another veterinarian for two years, when I got out of vet school: Dr. Doug Woody, from Kansas State.¹² [The practice was later sold to Dr. Bill Seleen¹³].

Dr. Smith:

Thank you very much.

Ms. Olson:

This certainly stirs up memories and it is a wonderful project that you are doing.

Dr. Olson:

Yes. It does amaze me when I look at the giddy-up-and-go that my mother had.

¹¹ Alexander deLahunta '58; professor of neurology and neuroanatomy.

¹² Dr. James (Douglas) Woody, now lives in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

¹³ Dr. William A. Seleen, Jr. '74

Dr. Smith:

Congratulations. Tomorrow is your big day (Jenny's White Coat ceremony) and I want to both to enjoy the event.

Thank you very much, both of you. I really appreciate it.