

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Women in Veterinary Medicine: Dr. Rikki von Decken-Luers, Cornell 1939

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

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Born in 1903 in New York City, Rikki von Decken-Luers was the second oldest member of the Cornell Veterinary Class of 1939. Though popular with her classmates, her habit of taking her dog to class, sitting in the front row and asking many questions was also the source of annoyance to some in the class.¹

Dr. Albert Pontick wasn't one of the veterinarians who remembered her like that, however, as he recalled his interaction and friendship with Rikki 70 years earlier.

She was an outspoken person. She was one of the boys She always did the things that we did, practically chewing tobacco but not quite. She loved veterinary medicine and voiced her opinions about certain things. We argued with her. She was one of us in a way.²



Rikki von Decken-Leurs, graduation photo New York State Veterinary College, 1939
(© Cornell University)

Though women were not allowed to go on farm calls in that era, another classmate, Dr. Clarence Bent, recalled that Rikki broke the rules and went anyway. She was “enough male-oriented that 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].”³

After graduation, Dr. Decken-Luers had a small animal hospital in Westport, Connecticut. She then moved to the Virgin Islands, where she worked for 16 years as a practicing veterinarian. For five of those years, she was Veterinarian-in-Charge under the Department of the Interior, with a “practice on the side.” It was “rugged but challenging,” she wrote to her classmates at the time of their 30th reunion in 1969. Sadly, Dr. Decken-Luers was forced to give up practice due to severe arthritis in her hands and arms and a visual impairment. “Miss it like the devil, but there it is,” she wrote.⁴

She moved to Hobe Sound, Florida, in 1962 and built what she described as a large, deluxe boarding and grooming kennel. Her partner was “the best poodle groomer in these parts and does beautiful plucking and stripping,” she wrote.⁵ Despite her physical ailments, she reported that she was still working 10-12 hours per day.

At the time of her 30th reunion, she would have been in her mid 60s. In a warm gesture of friendship to the class, her letter to them included this message.⁶

[I] see Jim McCarthy from time to time.⁷ He has a very successful practice in West Palm Beach—sends me boarders—I send him patients. Wish I could make it up there [Ithaca] for Reunion but this is my busiest season. It’s a long way to go and I just can’t get away.

Stop in and say “hello” if you ever come this way, Classmates. Patricia ought to come down and “vet” the Safari outfit!!!⁸ Best regards to everyone and here is \$6.00 to see to it that the OLD Guard of slave-driving professors get enough to eat—and drink.

Faithfully and nostalgically, Rikki

I have heard many stories about how poorly women were treated in some colleges, and in some periods at Cornell. However, the Depression years seemed to draw students together rather than separate them. The Class of 1939 had a particularly diverse profile with three women, eight Jewish students, several Irish-Catholics, an African-American, a Chinese man, several older students, and a Canadian who ran away from home and somehow made it to New York as a teenager. With the exception of the oldest student in the class whose study habits were challenging to those in his orbit, my perception is that these students grew fond of each other, with friendship and camaraderie crossing racial, ethnic and gender barriers in ways that would be considered the ideal model in today’s world.

When an occasional faculty member expressed bias or acted with disdain or contempt towards a student, it had the effect of uniting the others in support of their harried classmate. Jobs were scarce during the Depression, but never did I hear anyone say they had competed unfairly with their peers for employment opportunities.

If there was a class at Cornell that succeeded and thrived under pressures that most of us never experience in today's world it would be, without question, the Class of 1939. To have known personally 15 of the 40 who graduated in that class is one of the most inspiring aspects of my career.

¹ Murray, John D (DVM, Cornell 1939, (deceased general practitioner), unrecorded conversation with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University), 2007 Dec 3.

² Pontick, Albert (DVM Cornell 1939, (deceased small animal veterinarian), interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) 2008 April 2. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/12794>

³ Bent, Clarence F (DVM, Cornell 1939, deceased small animal veterinarian), interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University), 2008 July 1. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/14195>

⁴ Von Decken-Luers, Rikki, Alumni form completed in advance of the 1969 class reunion, Archives of the College of Veterinary Medicine, Cornell University.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ James McCarthy '39 was a large animal oriented veterinarian who was stationed in Florida during World War II. After the war, he opened a small animal practice South Florida.

⁸ She refers to Patricia O'Connor [Halloran] '39, who was the veterinarian for the Staten Island Zoo in New York City.

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Women in Veterinary Medicine

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.