

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Challenging the Land-Grant Mission: Cornell's Class of 1939, Part I

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

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The veterinarians who graduated in 1939 from Cornell University provide an insight into one of the great transition periods in veterinary medicine. Admitted in 1935 at the height of the Depression, when the scarcity of personal resources made going to college very difficult, the new DVMs were also faced with enormous challenges as they struggled to find work.

The economic difficulties facing agriculture forced many veterinarians to forgo their interest in farm animals and migrate to urban areas where some found work in caring for the health of family pets. The entry of the US into World War II in 1941 caused an additional disruption. Many newly-minted veterinarians spent the war years in service to their country, only to return to their home communities three or four years later to find their practices disrupted or completely gone. Those who had to start again were now in competition with veterinarians who had graduated in the mid-1940s during the time they were away from home serving in the Veterinary Corps.

With this in mind, I began a project in 2007 to interview as many of the living members of the Class of 1939 as possible. At that time, there were 10 living alumni from the 40 who had graduated. Over the next four years, I interviewed nine of these individuals, mostly in person and with a recorded transcript. What emerged was a compilation of stories of challenge and triumph chronicled in the four-part series posted November 13 to November 17, 2013.^{1,2,3,4} But the series was more than a compilation of stories, because they also portrayed a period in veterinary history during which the land-grant system was severely challenged for the first time since its inception in the nine veterinary colleges established between 1879 and 1916.⁵

The central tenet of land grant veterinary medicine was to educate young men from rural areas in species of agricultural interest, and to have them develop a career working with farm animals.⁶ Admission policies in land grant colleges strongly favored applicants from farm backgrounds.

The faculty at Cornell even gave priority to those students who had the minimum one year of pre-veterinary education over those with two or three years, or even a four-year degree. Their rationale was that applicants with more than the minimum requirement were *misfits* in other lines of work and were only turning to veterinary medicine with the hope that they would find *golden opportunities in the new field*.⁷



New York State Veterinary College, Cornell University, Class of 1939
 (©New York State Veterinary College)

This admission criterion disadvantaged Jewish applicants from large urban centers, notably New York City, many of whom had more than one year pre-veterinary education. In addition to the above policy guidelines favoring *farm-reared boys*, Cornell also began to evaluate applicants for subjective personal qualities such as character, seriousness of purpose, and fitness of the work.⁸ At the time, use of this type of language was common in higher education as a means to limit the number of Jewish students.

The current story and the one that follows document what can be considered a case study in how university policies and expectations at Cornell, however well-intentioned and carefully implemented, were partially overturned by the realities of life and times of the Class of 1939.

Thirty-five of the veterinarians who graduated in 1939 were from New York State. The nonresidents were from the eastern states, (New Hampshire, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Virginia), and from China. Three were the sons of veterinarians, two of whom were members of the Cornell faculty. The other second-generation veterinarian was the son of a graduate from the Chicago Veterinary School, a private and popular institution that had closed in the early 1920s.

Contrary to college policy that emanated from the land-grant policies, 40% of the graduates were from communities with populations greater than 10,000. Thirteen were from large cities with populations greater than 100,000 (11 from New York City), and nine were from cities or towns with populations between 10,000 and 99,000.

Also at variance with college policy, the members of the class were older than in previous years, and many students had more than one year of pre-veterinary college experience. For example, most students would have graduated from high school at age 17 or 18, and thus entered veterinary college one year later after completing a year of undergraduate work by age 18 or 19. However, the mean age upon matriculation was 22 years. As shown in Table 1 below, 40% of the students had more undergraduate education and five had baccalaureate degrees. The oldest members of the class were a second-career 38-year-old man who had been a pharmacist, and a 32-year-old woman. Both were from New York City.

Table 1. Age and Pre-Veterinary College Education for Students in the Class of 1939.

Age	Number of Students with Various Years of Pre-veterinary College Education				total
	1 Yr	2-3 y	4 or more	unknown	
18-19	7	0	0	0	7
20	5	4	2	0	11
21-22	7	2	4	1	14
23-29	3	2	1	0	6
30-39	0	0	0	2	2
Total	22	8	7	3	40

Twenty percent of the class was comprised of Jewish students, similar to other classes that entered in the 1930s. This increase in Jewish enrollment was probably due to Cornell's reaction to the threat that a new college might be established on Long Island to accommodate the growing, well-educated Jewish population in New York City and surrounding areas.⁹ Contrary to written university policy, five of the eight Jewish students who graduated in 1939 had more than one year of college education before entering the DVM program. Three of these even held undergraduate degrees from colleges in New York City.¹⁰

Despite graduating only eight women veterinarians in prior years,¹¹ there were three women in the Class of 1939. This would also seem to be at variance with the practice of limiting the number of women because they were generally not considered to be as likely to work on large animals as their male colleagues.

In short, the college graduated a class that was older, better educated, and more urban than would have been consistent with established policies and practices that reflected land-grant policies and practices. In addition, it was more diverse than ever before, having eight Jewish students, three women, an African-American man, and a Chinese man.

The second story in this series will describe how the initial employment opportunities for the graduates also challenged the land-grant mission.

¹ Smith, Donald F. Becoming a Veterinary Student during the Great Depression. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. November 13, 2013.

² Smith, Donald F. Veterinary Student Life during the Great Depression. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. November 14, 2013.

³ Smith, Donald F. Teaching and Learning Veterinary Medicine during the Great Depression. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. November 16, 2013.

⁴ Smith, Donald F. Finding Veterinary Work during the Great Depression. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. November 17, 2013.

⁵ Smith, Donald F. Suggested Categories for US Veterinary Colleges. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. August 13, 2013.

⁶ General practice at that time generally referred to farm animals, primarily cattle, farm horses, swine, sheep and goats, and poultry. Dogs and cats were included to the extent that their value was considered sufficient to be treated by a veterinarian, but they were not generally considered a priority for either the veterinarian or the client.

⁷ Report of the New York State Veterinary College at Cornell University for the Year 1935-36, submitted January 2, 1937. J.B. Lyon Company. P 14.

⁸ Announcement of the New York State Veterinary College for 1934-35. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University; 1934. P 10.

⁹ Smith, Donald F. An Explanation for the Increase in Jewish Enrollment at Cornell during the 1930s. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. June 6, 2013.

¹⁰ New York University, City College of New York, Columbia University

¹¹ Cornell had women DVM graduates in the years 1910, 1925, 1927, 1929, 1933, 1936, 1937 and 1938. There were two additional women, one who entered in 1905 and the other who entered in 1931 who left the college for personal reasons and did not graduate.

KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine

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Class of 1939

Diversity

Women in Veterinary Medicine

Jews in Veterinary Medicine

TOPIC:

The Land-Grant Act
The Great Depression

LEADING QUESTION:

How did the Great Depression challenge the Land-Grant priorities 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.