

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

The 150th Anniversary of the AVMA

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

July 14, 2013

Seven years ago, on the first day of the AVMA Convention meeting in Honolulu, my wife, Doris, and I were walking into the convention hall to register. Hanging outside the entrance was a banner proclaiming, "Welcome to the 143rd Annual Meeting of the American Veterinary Medical Association."

"Look at that", I said with excitement characteristic of the third-generation amateur philatelist that I was, "It's only seven years to the Sesquicentennial". Philatelists (postage stamp collectors) have a special awe of a sesquicentennial. It may be the word itself, full of expressive consonants and swathed with intrigue; or it may just be that there are so many beautiful historically-important American postage stamps honoring 150 years, like the Constitution stamp of 1937 or the Admiral Farragut USS Hartford issue of the same year. Beyond that, there's something magical about 150 years, midway between the centennial concept that everyone honors, and the 200th anniversary that is generally ignored.

What happened in 1863 to merit this benchmark date?¹

On June 9-10 of that year, a small group of veterinarians, mostly foreign graduates and self-educated horse doctors answered a call from a local organizing committee and also mentioned in a five-line notice in the *New York Times*, to attend a meeting at the Astor House in New York City. A committee was selected to draft a constitution and bylaws and it was presented and adopted on the second day of the meeting. Graduates of London (England) and Toulouse (France) colleges were elected president and secretary, and one of the self-educated practitioners² was elected treasurer.

The name of the organization was the United States Veterinary Medical Association, and that remained until 1898 when the name, at least in part to recognize the important role that Canada was playing in the development of the profession, was changed to American Veterinary Medical Association.

Rules were adopted for becoming members and the criteria were enforced by a committee charged with ensuring that appropriate qualification standards were met. This was in an age when many so-called horse doctors were nothing more than quacks and charlatans and when there were almost no credible veterinary courses being offered yet in the US or Canada.³

Subsequent annual meetings were held in New York City and occasionally in Boston (and once in Cincinnati), until Chicago was chosen as the site of the 1890 meeting. From that point on, meetings were held in major cities across the country, returning rarely to New York.

Though this is the organization's 150th year, there have been only about 135 presidents because officers often held multi-year terms in the first 34 years (before the organization officially became the AVMA) and also during the two world wars.

This year's Convention will feature several historical reminders of the value of knowing and respecting history as a platform upon which to understand and build the future. Few leaders are as cognizant of that as Douglas Aspros, who has the historical distinction of being AVMA president during this 150th year. In an interesting coincidence of timing, Dr. Aspros is also the first New York State veterinarian to hold the office of the president in over three decades. He grew up in New York City and his current home and small animal practices in Westchester County⁴ are just a short distance from where the first meeting was held in Manhattan 150 years ago last month.

In a press release on January 10st, 2013, Dr. Aspros identified many of the important roles that veterinarians play in promoting animal and human health, and in "[saving lives and in making] the lives of innumerable animals and people far better." He concluded by signifying his personal gratitude to his colleagues, "Our 150th Anniversary is an opportunity to remember these accomplishments and to thank our members for everything that they do."⁵

This week, Dr. Aspros will undoubtedly thank many veterinarians personally, but he will also remind veterinarians of our responsibilities and opportunities as we face our future as members of the American Veterinary Medical Association.

¹Readers are encouraged to consider the purchase of the AVMA's sesquicentennial tribute, "The AVMA: 150 Years of Education, Science and Service", AVMA 2013, from which some of this story's information is drawn.

² The 39 charter members of the new organization were from seven states, New York (13), New Jersey (10), Massachusetts (8), Pennsylvania (5), Maine (1), Ohio (1) and Delaware (1).

³ The Ontario Veterinary College identifies 1862 as its starting date in Toronto, but founder Andrew Smith had just recently arrived from Scotland and his courses were yet to be fully developed.

⁴ Dr. Aspros is a partner at Bond Animal Hospital in White Plains, NY and Pound Ridge Veterinary Center in White Plains, NY; and the managing partner of the Veterinary Emergency Group in White Plains.

⁵ [AVMA Celebrates 150 Years](#). AVMA News, www.AVMA.org/news/. Tom McPherson. January 10, 2013.

KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine
History of the American Veterinary Medical Association
United States Veterinary Medical Association
Presidents of the AVMA
Dr. Doug Aspros
150th Anniversary of the AVMA
Sesquicentennial

TOPIC:

American Veterinary Medical Association

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.