

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

80 Years Ago: AAHA versus the AVMA

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
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Veterinarians attending the annual convention of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) this month in Chicago are reminded that the 80th meeting (also in Chicago) was the site of one of the most important advances in small animal practice. Beginning at that August 1933 meeting and concluding later in October, the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) was formed.

The association was not borne without contention and controversy, however. “The ‘dog doctors’ are taking over the profession,” some protested, as the few organizing members met on August 17th, with an even larger number of onlookers (about 100).¹

It was a difficult period for the young veterinary profession trying to find its way amid enormous upheaval and economic ruin. Not only was the country in the grip of the Great Depression, with rural veterinarians struggling to make a living, but the advent of the internal combustion engine a few years earlier eliminated the livelihood of thousands of veterinarians in large cities who were exclusively equine practitioners. What may have seemed like progress to many was the single greatest assault on veterinary medicine in the 70-year history of the profession in the United States.

Beginning in the aftermath of WWI, however, increasing numbers of urban dwellers began to own dogs and cats and, despite the tight household budgets of the Depression and the difficulty of putting food on the family table, some were willing to spend a few dollars to treat a sick pet.²

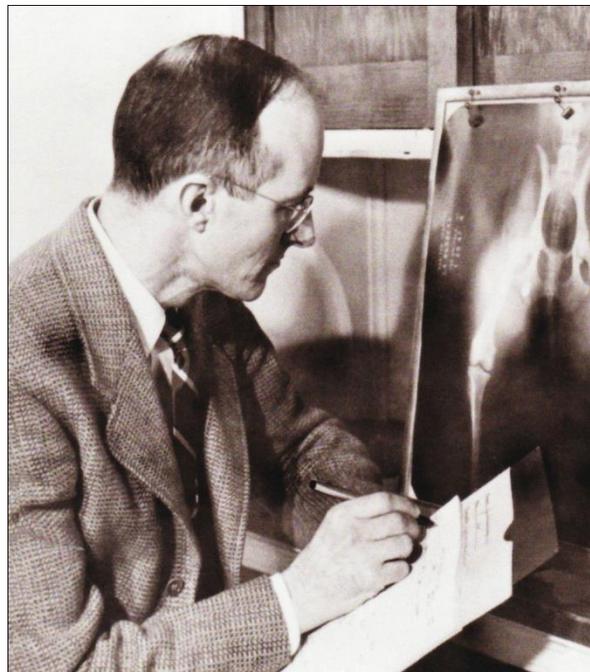
About that time, a handful of pet-oriented veterinary clinics began to appear in the metropolitan New York area,³ as well as in New Jersey and Buffalo, New York. For example, the Miller-Clark Animal Hospital, the practice that originated at 118 West 53rd Street in New York City,⁴ celebrated its 110th year of continuous operation just last month,⁵ though it moved from Manhattan to Westchester County almost nine decades ago.⁶ Other small animal practices emerged in Missouri, Michigan, Illinois, Ohio and California.

Education of the small animal practitioner was a principal driving force behind the development of the AAHA. Very little medical information was available to dog and cat practitioners either from their educational background, which was overwhelmingly oriented towards agricultural species as dictated by the land grant culture, or as provided during AVMA conferences and by colleges’ annual meetings. Veterinarians also needed guidance and support in constructing, equipping, administering and managing hospitals.⁷

The organizational meeting of the AAHA was contentious because the veterinary establishment thought it represented a major shift in the direction of the profession away from large animals. Some saw it as a looming schism in the unity of the AVMA.

However, the momentum of the summer meeting and its October follow-up, also in Chicago, birthed the AAHA Charter, Constitution and By-laws. Mark L. Morris, Sr., owner of Raritan Hospital for Animals in New Jersey, was installed as the first president. He served for two years, followed in 1935 by Frank E. McClelland (Buffalo, NY), and a year later by J. V. Lacroix (Evanston, IL). Other charter members of the organization spanned the country from east to west:

Donald Eastman, Moline, MO
Arthur Theobald, Cincinnati, OH
Louis H. LaFond, Detroit, MI
John F. McKenna, Hollywood, CA
S. W. Hagler, St. Louis, MO



*Dr. Mark L. Morris, Sr., the first president of the AAHA (1933-35)
at the Raritan Hospital for Animals in New Jersey.
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Eighty years after this humble but determined beginning, the AAHA is an international association of small animal veterinarians with approximately 3,200 companion animal hospitals voluntarily participating in a hospital evaluation program that ensures minimum standards and compliance for services and facilities.⁸

The takeover of the AVMA by the small animal veterinary organization, as feared by the veterinary establishment in the 1930s, never materialized. Despite the accelerated development of small animal practice, agriculture maintained its grip on the profession.⁹

¹ AAHA. Fifty Years of Educational Excellence and Practice Improvement. Produced by AAHA 50th Anniversary Committee (John McCarthy and others), 1983.

² *Ibid.*

³ Danielson, Nina (daughter of small animal veterinarian, Louis J. Camuti, DVM). Interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University), Hightstown, NJ, 2007 Dec 7. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/14197>

⁴ It's Still House Calls and Paw Holding. Barbara Whitaker. *New York Times*, September 21, 2003.

⁵ The practice that was started in Manhattan at the turn of the century, moved to Westchester County (Mamaroneck, NY) in the mid-1920s.

⁶ Many Dog Days in Mamaroneck: Animal Hospital Celebrates 110 Years. Polly Kreisman. The Loop, June 12, 2013.

⁷ AAHA, *Ibid.*

⁸ AAHA Importance to You and Your Pet. HealthyPet.com.

⁹ Smith, Donald F. Prologue. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. April 9, 2013. See comments about the grip of the land grant system on veterinary medicine in Prologue to this series of storie.

KEYWORDS:

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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.