

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

The Personal Story of a Columbia Veterinary College Graduate

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
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History comes alive and is not forgotten when it is told in stories. Rudyard Kipling convinced us of that.¹ So when two proud sisters wrote to me last week with news that they had discovered records and detailed personal diaries of a relative who had attended Columbia Veterinary College in the mid-1880s and thereafter became a prominent veterinarian in Ohio, I could barely contain my excitement.²

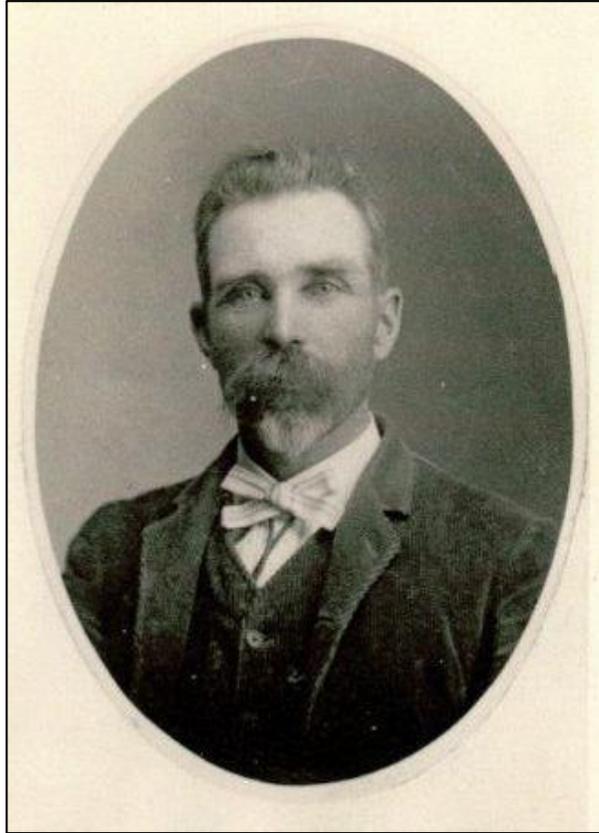
There is credible information on a few other graduates from the New York City colleges, but most were students two or three decades later, in the 1910s and 1920s, and commonly studied at New York University on East 26th Street.

The Columbia Veterinary College on E. 34th Street, on the other hand, was one of the earlier New York City colleges and it functioned for just seven years (producing 80 graduates) before internal turmoil subsumed it and it merged with the older and more stable American Veterinary College (AVC). The AVC had about 600 graduates before it closed in 1899.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Columbia³ was its commitment to comparative medicine. Like the contemporary veterinary college at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, Columbia referred to itself as a School of Comparative Medicine.⁴ Dean Erskine Bates, who was both a physician and a veterinarian, summarized his commitment to comparative medicine,

It is desired to have graduate not only a horse-doctor or a cow-doctor, but a man qualified to give medical advice upon the diseases of all domestic animals; to make him, in fact, a doctor of comparative medicine.

William Henry Gribble was born in England and in 1869, at age 12, immigrated to the US where he settled in the Churchville area of New York State where he had relatives. Journal entries from 1878 describe his jobs (many of which were farm-related), and the money he earned, spent and loaned. He worked for a short time for a physician, even considering attending medical school.



Dr. William Henry Gribble (1857-1944)
Student at Columbia Veterinary College (1882-1884), graduate of American Veterinary College (1884)
Photo provided by June Varner and Janet Ward, 2013

Why, one might ask, would a bright young man who lived in New York not attend Cornell University where he could have received a tuition-free education (assuming he was still a resident when he matriculated)? Perhaps we will learn that as the diaries are read in detail. Until we are able to understand his situation with more certainty, I wonder if it might be related to the rigorous entrance requirements that Professor James Law required of students to study veterinary medicine at Cornell.

So stringent were Professor Law's academic requirements for admission, and so rigorous were his course requirements for completion of the four-year veterinary degree, that Cornell graduated only four veterinary students between Law's arrival in 1868 and the founding of the New York State Veterinary College in 1894. Meanwhile, most aspiring veterinarians from New York State could not hope to qualify for Cornell, and instead went north to Toronto or east to New York City to receive a veterinary diploma.

Though Gribble started at Columbia in 1882, he received his diploma from the American Veterinary College in 1884. That is perhaps because Columbia closed before he could graduate, in which case he presumably transferred to the rival college to complete his studies.

After Dr. Gribble graduated at the age of 27, he travelled in Colorado and Indiana before he married (1889) and settled in Ohio. His granddaughter, the mother of the two sisters who have been corresponding with me, wrote that “Grandpa was a well-known expert on horses. He was secretary of the Ohio Veterinary Association for many years.” She referred to him as a gentle and kind man, though with the “stubborn streak of an Englishman.”⁵

As the diaries are read and other materials reviewed, I am hopeful that through the story of Dr. William Henry Gribble we shall learn a great deal about the era when medical and veterinary colleges worked more closely with each other.

¹ Rudyard Kipling, [“If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten.”](#)

² June Varner and Janet Ward are the great granddaughters of Dr. William Henry Gribble.

³ Columbia Veterinary College should not be confused with Columbia University. To the best of my knowledge, they were two distinctly separate institutions.

⁴ McGill’s institution was called a Faculty of Comparative Medicine.

⁵ Ruth Gribble Varner (1917-2012), granddaughter of Dr. William Henry Gribble.

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.