

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

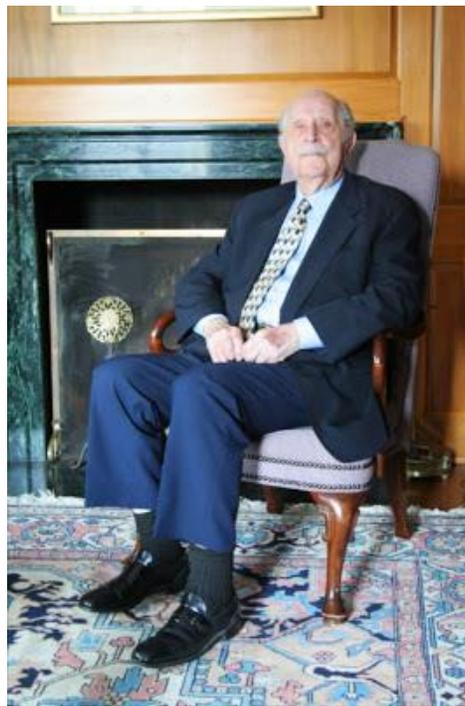
An Explanation for the Increase in Jewish Enrollment at Cornell during the 1930s

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

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During my research on Cornell veterinary students during the Great Depression, I observed that there was a large increase in the number of Jewish students starting in 1931 and continuing through the decade. This was happening at the same time as Cornell's medical school and many elite undergraduate colleges were quietly limiting the number of Jews to about 10% of their enrollments.

It wasn't until I interviewed then 93-year-old Dr. Tevis Goldhaft in 2007 that the pieces of the veterinary college enrollment aberration started to fall into place.¹



Dr. Tevis Goldhaft, Cornell Class of 1935, Haverford, PA.

(Photo by the Author, 2007)

Dr. Goldhaft, whose sister, Helen (later Helen Goldhaft Wernicoff), had entered the veterinary college in 1929, told me that everything changed the year he matriculated (1931). "Prior to our

class,” he said, “enrollment was limited to five percent. They had this quota arrangement, but it was very silent.”

However, in Dr. Goldhaft’s class there were 17 Jewish students, over 20% of the class, and many of them were from the greater New York City region. He explained that the politicians and lobbyists in New York and on Long Island were concerned that qualified Jewish students were not able to get into Cornell, and they were making plans to open a new veterinary college at the Farmingdale campus on Long Island.

To avoid new competition similar to what that had happened in the early 1920s,² the enrollment of New York City students (many of who were Jewish) was increased. So in the fall of 1931, 86 DVM students matriculated at Cornell, the largest class ever admitted to that date and for many decades thereafter. It was also the last class to be admitted without requiring one year of undergraduate education before matriculating into veterinary college so more students took advantage of that last opportunity to complete all of their pre-veterinary and veterinary education in four, instead of five years.

Towards the end of the first week of classes, Dr. Earl Sunderville, professor of anatomy and one of the three interim deans,³ addressed the assembled class. According to Dr. Goldhaft,⁴ he told them that the class was too large for the facilities and that by Christmas the class would be reduced by seventeen. “We [the Jewish students] all knew that were 17 of us. We met that night in the upper room, we were so scared.”⁵ After a long pause, Goldhaft looked me squarely in the eye and continued, “By Christmas, 17 were gone, but all of the Jewish students were still there.”⁶

Dr. Goldhaft and I were in occasional contact for the remainder of his life as I studied this issue along with life for Jewish students in general. I was fascinated that he could remember each of the Jewish students in his first-year class, including Esther Teich from Huntington, NY, who left the college after her second year when she married; and Henry Grossman, who left for financial reasons and returned to complete his education with the Class of 1938.⁷ Though I have never been able to find written documentation of the nascent veterinary college on Long Island, Dr. Goldhaft remained confident in his recollection of contemporary oral reports at the time.⁸

The number of Jewish students enrolled in veterinary medicine at Cornell continued at approximately 20% for ten years. After graduation, many of these students returned to the New York City area and established small animal practices to help meet the growing demand for veterinary care of companion animals.

¹ Goldhaft, Tevis (Retired veterinarian living in Haverford, PA), recorded interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) 2007 Sept 26. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/22013>

²Over Cornell's strong opposition, the veterinary college at New York University had briefly become a state-supported institution in the early 1920s.

³ Dr. Sunderville was one of three faculty serving on the interim dean committee administering the affairs of the college between the death of Dean P.A. Fish (February 1931) and the appointment of Dr. W. A. Hagan as dean in July 1932.

⁴ Interview with Dr. Goldhaft, see Ref ¹, above.

⁵ Reference by Goldhaft to "upper room" perhaps invoked the New Testament (Mark 14:15 and Luke 22:12) reference to Upper Room as "anogion" (Greek, Upper Chamber).

⁶ During my interview with Dr. Goldhaft, he incorrectly said that there were 67 students in the first-year class and that Dr. Sunderville told them that they would be reduced to 50 by Christmas. College records confirm that there were 86 students who matriculated that year, but the 17 who were Jewish would not seem to be in dispute.

⁷ On one occasion, I send him a copy of the first-year class roster and he identified 16 of the 17 Jewish students with confidence, and the 17th with a reasonable degree of certainty.

⁸ My final visit with Dr. Goldhaft was in 2009 when I was invited by members of his family to join them as they celebrated his 95th birthday. As he rested in his bed, I had a substantive conversation with him and he again affirmed the story of the planned new college on Long Island and that this was the reason for the spike in Jewish enrollment at Cornell. He died less than two weeks later on July 20.

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.