

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Dr. Clarence R. Roberts: Corporate Veterinarian and CEO

Author's Note: *The 2013 U.S. Veterinary Workforce Study published by the AVMA reports that 3.5% of the approximately 90,000 active veterinarians are engaged in industry/commercial employment, the major fields of which are pharmaceutical companies (for human health), animal health companies, and animal feed companies.¹*

An example of an industry veterinarian from the early days of the profession is Dr. Clarence R. Roberts, who after just three years in general practice, joined a milk supply company. During the acme of his career, he was CEO of a milk supply conglomerate that had 20,000 employees.

Donald F. Smith

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

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Clarence Roberts' father was so upset that his son insisted on going to college to become a veterinarian that he warned him he would have to return home to the farm if he failed out. One of his siblings had already died during the influenza epidemic while in the service during WWI, and his only remaining brother was paralyzed in a farm accident shortly after he had been discharged from the army.

Realizing how privileged he was to attend college, Clarence threw himself into all that Cornell had to offer, joining the veterinary fraternity and playing in the Cornell band at a time when Ivy League football drew large and boisterous crowds. To make ends meet, he worked as a waiter in one of the residence halls, and lived in a small low-rent room in Collegetown. He studied hard and was one of just 16 students who received veterinary degrees from Cornell in 1922, one of the lowest points in veterinary history.²

After graduation and with the assistance of his by then widowed mother, Dr. Roberts started a general practice in Morrisville, New York. His Model-T Ford was of no use during the long and harsh winters because rural roads were never plowed. Instead, he made farm calls through the heavy snow by horse and cutter.

"It was not at all unusual to get as much as three feet of snow at one fall. It was quite an ordeal to receive a call at nine or ten o'clock at night and drive six or eight miles in a horse and cutter and then go into a cold barn with the wind blowing and

do some bare-armed obstetrics, removing a calf. And no more did you get home than someone else called and wanted you out again.

“The cutter would tip over and you would have to retrieve your instruments from the deep snow. I had a fur coat and fur gloves and fur hat, and we even had a cutter with side curtains on it. But even so, it was pretty rough going.”³



Dr. Clarence R. Roberts, 1922, Cornell University
(©Cornell University)

Roberts treated cattle, horses, pigs and the occasional farm dog. In addition to bovine tuberculosis, the most important cattle diseases were mastitis and postpartum paresis. Though he practiced long before the advent of antibiotics, he even occasionally performed abdominal surgery on cattle

“When I started, there were still a lot of the uneducated veterinarians or quacks. Some of the farmers still swore by them but they were gradually losing their hold on the area and were not any problem from the standpoint of my finding enough work to do. My problem was mainly economic. There was too much being paid off in chickens and turkeys and potatoes. I have many records of calls that I made driving four or five miles and being at a farm half or three-quarters of an hour and charging \$2.00.”⁴

After Roberts married in late 1922, he began to consider whether this hand-to-mouth veterinary life would be suitable for raising a family. His wife, soon to be pregnant with their first child, insisted that Clarence rely on monetary income and not be so heavily dependent on

bartering. After three years of private practice, Roberts accepted a position in industry for \$45.00 per week and his life was transformed.

Sheffield Farms was a rapidly-expanding New York-based milk company and the lead member of a cluster of a 17 subsidiaries that had just been acquired by National Dairy Corporation. They hired veterinarians to assure quality control of milk and milk products. Milk quality was a critical issue and the sanitation department of Sheffield Farms was an important component of the company. It was ideally suited for a veterinarian knowledgeable about public health issues.

Roberts was responsible for examining dairy cattle and milking facilities over a wide area of New York, and as far south as Maryland.

"I would leave home on a Monday morning and come back generally on Friday night or Saturday noon, having been examining cattle all week. A few months later, they asked me to supervise a group of barn inspectors, people who went around to the farms, examined the cleanliness of the barn, the milk cows, and the toilet if it was outside."⁵

In 1929, Sheffield Farms promoted Roberts to management and he moved his family to Leonia, New Jersey, and ferried across the Hudson River daily to Manhattan until the George Washington Bridge was constructed. Roberts' department was responsible for dealing with all the health departments in New York City and surrounding suburbs serviced by the company.

The company operated almost 2,000 retail routes in the metropolitan New York City area where milk was delivered in bottles door-to-door. They also had 32 wholesale routes, making "loose milk" available in 40-quart cans to neighborhood stores, where the store owner would use a large ladle to stir in the risen cream and then fill up the home-maker's container. Almost one million quarts of milk and other dairy products were transported daily by 3,000 horses maintained in massive stables in strategic locations throughout Manhattan.

In 1945, Roberts completed the transition from rural veterinarian to corporate executive when he became president of Sheffield Farms. Ten years later, he was appointed CEO of Sealtest Foods, the milk and ice cream division of National Dairy Corporation. Now responsible for over 20,000 employees, Roberts' first priority was to improve the deteriorating human resources practices that he had inherited. In addition, to address growing competition, his predecessor had gradually lowered milk prices to an unprofitable level. By re-establishing the confidence of the milk dealers in the city, Roberts was able to reverse that trend and he turned an inherited deficit into a \$4,000,000 profit in just one year.

Though he was a very successful corporate executive, Sealtest policy required that employees retire at age 65. Roberts' son describes the impact of the abrupt change in pace: "I think it just about killed my father to have to stop working because of mandatory retirement. He was just getting going good, just getting wound up."

Dr. Roberts was exemplary of how veterinarians with an education in comparative medicine and multifold practice skills, could rise to the highest levels in corporate leadership. After an active and lengthy retirement, he died at his home on December 1, 1999, in his 100th year. His wife died in July 2009, at age 104.

¹ HIS Healthcare & Phara and CHWS (The Center for Health Workforce Studies). 2013 U.S. Veterinary Workforce Study: Modeling Capacity Utilization. <https://www.avma.org/KB/Resources/Reports/Documents/Veterinarian-Workforce-Final-Report-LowRes.pdf>.

² There were only approximately 200 veterinary graduates in the U.S. per year in the early 1920s and the number decreased even further during the remainder of the decade as the country adjusted to the replacement of the horse by the internal combustion engine, as well as the closure of the proprietary veterinary colleges. Smithcors J.F. *The Veterinarian in America, 1625-1975*. American Veterinary Publications, Inc, 1975; p129.

³ Roberts, Clarence R DVM (deceased), from the transcript of a 1998 interview provided by Kent Roberts DVM (retired veterinarian in Williamsburg, VA, and the son of Dr. Clarence Roberts) during an interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) 2008 Jan 20. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/14196>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

KEYWORDS:

Dr. Clarence R. Roberts
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TOPIC:

Corporate 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.