

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Becoming a Veterinary Student During the Great Depression, Part I

Editor's Note: This is the first in a series of stories describing veterinary life during the Great Depression. They are based on personal interviews I started in 2007, with veterinarians who attended college during the 1930s. The full collection of stories, most of which include audio, can be found at *An Enduring Veterinary Legacy* (<https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/11807>). Though every attempt has been made to preserve the integrity of the interviewees' remarks, words are sometimes changed to make the comment clearer to the reader. The unabridged version can be read and/or heard by referring to the website above.

Donald F. Smith

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

November 16, 2013

John Murray was born in 1912 on a farm near the Pennsylvania–New York border. “I always wanted to be a doctor,” he told me during my 2008 interview at his home, but his parents couldn’t afford the cost of medical school, so he went to Alfred University on an athletic scholarship and studied ceramics.¹

After the first year, he realized that ceramics weren’t his forte, so he switched to liberal arts. That didn’t amount to anything for him either, and he realized he was wandering without any direction to his life. Disappointed with his lack of academic focus and despondent over his mother’s recent death, he returned home and went to work as a laborer at the Elkland tannery.²

I worked nine hours a day, six days a week, for \$18.00 a week. Though I had a pretty fair job as a shipping clerk, I’d look around and see men in their 70s still working there, with their weekly checks being taken out at the company store. They had nothing, and I realized that wasn’t for me.

I got to thinking along the lines of veterinary medicine. I couldn’t be a doctor, so maybe veterinary medicine would be the next best thing. I told my dad, and he just shook his head.³ But, nevertheless, I pursued it and made applications to Cornell in the fall of 1934.



John D. Murray, DVM 1939
(New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph)

Murray heard nothing and eventually drove to Ithaca on a Saturday. He found the veterinary dean in his office and willing to see him.⁴ John recalled that they had a very nice conversation, but then the dean left to go to a ball game with his young son without giving him a definitive answer as to what his veterinary college prospects might be.

Time went on and I had given up hope of being admitted when, along in July, I saw my Dad coming to the tannery. He was holding a letter, and I knew right then that this was it—it was either yes or no. I looked up in the left-hand corner: New York State Veterinary College, Ithaca, N.Y.⁵ My fingers were trembling when I opened the letter and I can't tell you how I felt when I read that opening line, 'We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted.' That letter changed my life, forever.⁶

Mark Crandall was one of six children. His older brother⁷ had become a veterinarian before the Depression, but when it came time for Mark to go to school, his father had no money to send him to college.⁸

I stayed on the farm—milked cows, drove a team of horses, on a wagon or on the sleighs in winter, to haul wood. I had a garden and peddled vegetables in Mechanicville. By the end of the year, I had \$65.00.

Late in the summer, I went over in the meadow where my father was breeding the cows and told him I was going to take the bus to Syracuse the next day to enroll in college. He couldn't believe it, but I did. I joined the football team and one day all of my money was stolen from my locker. I had to quit the team and instead worked

mowing lawns, washing windows and doing chores for everybody on my street. They had meals for poor folks, and I ate for \$2.50 a week.



Mark R. Crandall, DVM 1939
(New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph)

After three years at Syracuse University, Crandall applied to veterinary college and was granted an interview. He borrowed his girlfriend's car and drove the 60 miles to Ithaca in what he described as "one of the worst rainstorms of the decade." When he stopped for gas south of Syracuse, he was told that the bridges were all out and no one was getting through to Ithaca. He continued on anyway, determined to have that interview. At one point, a creek had broken through its banks, and water was flowing over the road. His borrowed car sputtered and almost stalled in the brook, but he kept on going. His was the last car to make it through.

When Crandall arrived on campus, he said the admissions committee faculty were all in a dither because the lake had overflowed and flooded downtown Ithaca, but they proceeded with the interview nonetheless.

Dr. Crandall said he made the best speech of his life, telling the faculty that he wanted "to attain that degree of security which well becomes any young man." They told him that if he went to summer school and successfully passed the remaining requirements, he would be admitted. He went to summer school, got married, and that fall matriculated in the Class of 1939.⁹

Because of the emphasis on land grant priorities, students from urban areas were less likely to be considered for veterinary college. Robert Ferber grew up in New York City, the son of Jewish parents from Eastern Europe who operated a series of grocery stores. As a child, Robert loved the milk delivery horses that were stabled a short distance from his house. He would spend hours with his face pressed against the screen door to the barn, watching the horses being

groomed. “There was something about the odor of a barn, and something about the horses, that just got to me and I loved it.”¹⁰



Robert Ferber, DVM 1939
(New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph)

Ferber attended City College (which had free tuition at the time) and received a degree in chemistry and biology. Despite having a degree when only one year of undergraduate education was required, his application to Cornell was rejected. He did get accepted at Michigan State University, however, and returned to New York State and Cornell as a transfer student the following year.

Dr. Ferber enjoyed a successful career as a small animal veterinarian on Long Island, New York. As of this date, he is in his 100th year of life and one of only 12 known living US veterinarians who received their degrees in the 1930s.

¹ Smith, Donald F. Quintessentially Cornell. A Biography of and Interview with John D. Murray, DVM, based upon interview with Donald F. Smith, Cornell University, December 3, 2007. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/12302> (Select “Murray, John D. ’39 BioInt.pdf “ in the lower left on the page.)

² Ibid.

³ Dr. Murray occasionally told me that his father considered veterinarians quacks and charlatans, and often inebriated.

⁴ The dean was William A. Hagan.

⁵ The College’s name was later changed to New York State College of Veterinary Medicine.

⁶ Ibid. Dr. Murray became a general practitioner and prominent leader in the New York State Veterinary Medical Society and also a major benefactor of Cornell University. He died February 25, 2011 in his 99th year.

⁷ James Crandall DVM, Cornell 1931. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/13350>

⁸ Smith, Donald F. The Best Speech I Ever Made. A Biography of and Interview with Mark. R. Crandall, DVM, based upon interview with Donald F. Smith, Cornell University, May 28, 2008. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/13350>

(Select "Crandall, Mark R. '39 BioInt.pdf" in the lower left on the page.)

⁹ Ibid. Dr. Crandall became a general practitioner in Gloversville, NY. He died on March 21, 2012, just nine months before his 100th birthday.

¹⁰ Smith, Donald F. Establishing a Long Island Legacy. A Biography of and Interview with Robert Ferber, DVM, based upon interview with Donald F. Smith, Cornell University, November 7, 2007.

<http://hdl.handle.net/1813/12878> (Select "Ferber, Robert '39 BioInt.pdf" in the lower left on the page.) Dr. Ferber's son and grandson are also veterinarians.

KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine
American Veterinary Medical Association
Cornell University
The Great Depression
Robert Ferber
Mark R. Crandall
John D. Murray

TOPIC:

The Great Depression

LEADING QUESTION:

How difficult was it to get accepted to veterinary college during The Great Depression?
Being accepted to veterinary college during The Great Depression.

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.