

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Finding Veterinary Work During the Great Depression, Part II

Editor's Note: This is the fourth 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 17, 2013

Despite the devastating loss of veterinary employment during the 1920s, as the horse was replaced by the automobile, the closing years of the decade provided encouragement for veterinarians as they became involved in rural and livestock practice, and in regulatory medicine.



Arthur Gordon Danks, DVM 1933
(New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph)

Veterinary student Gordon Danks recalled the optimism of the time: "When my class started in 1929, the economic conditions of the country were very good."¹

Within weeks, however, the stock market crash was beginning to ravage the economy. Danks recalled the impact on employment prospects as his class received their veterinary degrees in 1933:

By the time we graduated, the country was in a tailspin! Of the 23 people who graduated with me, only three had jobs. And those three went to work for just \$20–25 a week.²

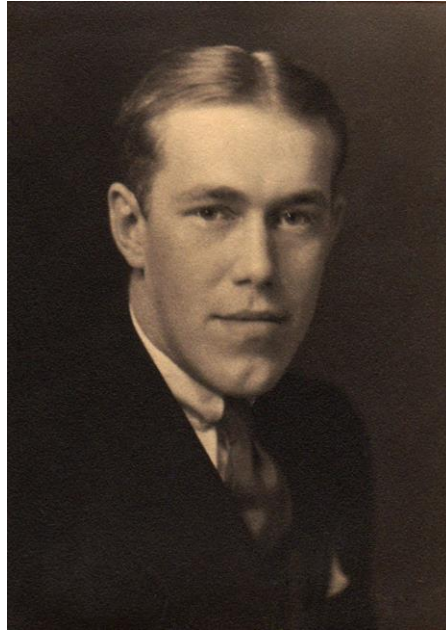
Despite the emphasis on agriculturally-related employment and the desire of most students to work in rural areas, the agricultural economy was in ruin. The Agricultural Adjustment bill of 1933,³ designed to improve commodity prices by balancing production and demand, had little impact on the price of livestock and milk. Sick cows were more often salvaged for family consumption than treated by a veterinarian.



Clifford H. Hoppenstedt, DVM 1935
(New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph)

When Clifford Hoppenstedt graduated from Cornell in 1935, the proportion of farmers in the workforce had decreased to 21 percent.⁴ He found part-time work in New Paltz, in upstate New York, but without enough work, the practitioner eventually told him to go elsewhere.

Hoppenstedt returned to Cornell to see if they could help him locate work and was able to find an opening at the Humane Society in New York City. He had never imagined working in the city, but ended up treating dogs and cats there for over a year. Finally able to return to rural New York, Hoppenstedt entered a mixed practice⁵, where he stayed for the remainder of his career.⁶



Joseph J. Merenda, DVM 1934
(New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph)

Joseph Merenda was another large-animal-oriented veterinary student unable to find a job in his preferred area of interest. He also found a job in a small animal practice in 1934, and for him it became a permanent career move.⁷

It was just a fluke that I found employment when I graduated. My classmate, Mario Cerasaletti, was expecting to be employed by C.P. Zepp, but something happened to stall the hiring and I took his place. I was a large animal man and Zepp was a small animal man on 53rd Street in New York.⁸

I started for \$25 a week, but that was good money because could live on \$10 a week. In those days, you could go to the cafeteria on 6th Avenue and get a complete dinner soup or juice, meat, two vegetables, a beverage and dessert for 75 cents. Seventy-five cents! I saved religiously the other \$15 each week and took the subway to 14th Street every month to deposit that money. I wanted to get married and I needed money.

Dr. Merenda and his colleagues were pioneers, working in the fledgling field of small animal practice in an era when medical and surgical challenges were often unique and proven treatment protocols sparse. Antibiotic therapy was yet to be developed, and surgical techniques for even routine intervention were not commonly performed.



Tevis M. Goldhaft, DVM 1935



Helen Goldhaft Wernicoff, DVM 1933

(New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photographs)

Not all Depression-era graduates had a difficult time finding employment. Tevis Goldhaft's father was a veterinarian who already had an established diagnostic and vaccine company for poultry in Vineland, New Jersey. Goldhaft was hired by his father right out of veterinary college and over the next few years, the company became a thriving family business as his sister, her husband, and two cousins—all veterinarians—joined the enterprise. Fifteen years after graduating from veterinary college, Tevis assumed leadership of the company and named it Vineland Laboratories.⁹

As for Gordon Danks from the Class of 1933 that had only three students employed upon graduation, he was appointed as an instructor at Kansas State University's College of Veterinary Medicine following a short period in general practice. This propelled him to a distinguished academic career as a large animal surgeon, teaching at the University of Illinois, followed by the University of Pennsylvania, before finishing his career at Cornell.¹⁰

Danks, like virtually all of the veterinary graduates of The Greatest Generation, found work and contributed in important ways, even if was not in the area where they originally would have expected to be employed.

¹ Danks, A. Gordon (retired Cornell professor), interview with Dr. Ellis P. Leonard (Cornell University, deceased). Circa 1980. Available from Cornell University Archives.

² Ibid

³ McElvaine, Robert S. *The Great Depression. America 1929-1941*. Three Rivers Press, 1993. Page 149.

⁴ [Historical Timeline – 1930](#). *Growing a Nation. The Story of American Agriculture*.

⁵ Mixed practice was commonly referred to as “general practice” in that era.

⁶ Smith, Donald F. *Ivy League Brothers. A Biography and Interview with Clifford H. Hoppenstedt, DVM, and Gilbert F. Hoppenstedt, DVM*, based upon interview with Donald F. Smith, Cornell University, February 9, 2009.

<http://hdl.handle.net/1813/13386>

⁷ Smith, Donald F. Unpretentious Manhattan Veterinarian. A Biography of and Interview with Joseph J. Merenda, DVM, based upon interview with Donald F. Smith, Cornell University, August 2, 2007. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/12877>

⁸ C.P. Zepp Sr, DVM Cornell 1919, was one of the most prominent small animal practitioners of the era.

⁹ Smith, Donald F. Poultry Veterinarian. A Biography of and Interview with Tevis M. Goldhaft, DVM based upon interview with Donald F. Smith, Cornell University, September 26, 2007. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/22013>

¹⁰ Fox, Francis H, *et al.* Danks, Arthur Gordon. Memorial Statement. Cornell University, Office of the Dean of the University Faculty. 1989. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/19302> (Select "Danks Arthur Gordon 1989" in the lower left on the page.)

KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine
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Tevis M. Goldhaft
Helen Goldhaft Wernicoff
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Joseph J. Merenda
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Clifford F. Hoppenstedt
Oral history

TOPIC:

The Great Depression

LEADING QUESTION:

How Veterinarians made Lemonade from Lemons during The Great Depression
If we think the job market is tough for graduating veterinarians today, consider 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.