

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Going to Veterinary College in 1930

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
September 19, 2013

Joe Merenda attended veterinary college during the Great Depression when money was scarce and the availability of jobs upon graduation was almost non-existent. Born in 1912, Merenda grew up on a Long Island estate where his parents were employed as laborers. As he was finishing high school, a frequent visitor to the estate by the name of Jack Sloan observed that Joe had an affinity for animals. “Go to veterinary college,” Sloan told the teenager. “You go for one year and if you like it, you continue. If you don’t like it, you quit, but you will have had a year of college.”¹



Joseph Merenda, DVM and friend Ms. Rae Lazare, 2007
Photo by Author

Joe accepted the challenge and, following high school, boarded a train in New York City and headed for the little Upstate town of Ithaca where Cornell University was located. Barely 18 years of age, he arrived at the train station with throngs of other students in the fall of 1930 and prepared to experience independent living for the first time.²

Now that was an experience! You are met up there by a Cornell student and he has a laundry bag—a big khaki laundry bag with a big red C—and you’re not going to be able to go through college unless you’ve got one of those big C laundry bags. So they sell you a laundry bag for 50 cents. Then another fellow says, “You got a room?” and I said, “No.” He then assembled two or three other fellows who didn’t

*have a room and took us up by car to a little office in Collegetown. And you'd sit there and they'd say, "What kind of room do you want? You want a room on your own, or with one or two people?" I didn't know what I wanted so I took the first house that I saw. There were three of us in that house, sharing two rooms.*³

Veterinary classes were also a new experience. The faculty taunted the new students. "Look at the guy to your left and the one to your right," they would say, "because by the end of the term, one of you won't be here."^{4,5}

*It wasn't going to be easy. You didn't know whether you were going or coming; you were overwhelmed. You're a kid away from home, you're up there, you're living in a house, you take your meals when you feel like it. You go to class, and nobody seems to give a darn about what you're doing. It was just a whole new way of life.*⁶

Of the 60 students who started in the fall of 1930, Joe was one of 40 to graduate on schedule four years later. Two of his classmates ultimately became professors at Cornell: Dr. Ellis P. Leonard (surgeon) and Dr. Malcolm E. Miller (anatomist).

Joe had intended to go into a general (large animal) practice in New York State. However, none was available in the middle of the Depression so, like many others, he had to find work in the city treating small animals. Fortunately for him, he was hired by one of the most famous and accomplished small animal veterinarians of the era, Dr. C.P. Zepp, who was one of the early members of the American Animal Hospital Association and served as president of the American Veterinary Medical Association (1949-50).

Zepp had a practice on West 53rd Street in New York City where he welcomed practitioners from all over the city and beyond. It was an exciting time for dog and cat veterinarians and Dr. Merenda and his small animal colleagues were pioneers in every sense of the word. They often developed procedures that were more innovative than those used by their former Cornell instructors whose activities were still largely oriented towards farm animals in keeping the priorities of the dominant land-grant mission.

As he had during his college days, Dr. Merenda continued to live modestly through the Depression, saving much of his weekly \$25 salary so he could get married. Like many of his generation, he was called into military service in 1941, later returning to his small animal practice for an additional 30 years.

Dr. Merenda lived in Brooklyn during his retirement. A widower in later life, he befriended Rae Lazare who lived on the Upper West Side. Though he was legally blind, Joe and Rae met twice each week, sometimes more often, for dancing and other social activities. "She is my eyes," he would often tell me with a chuckle. Together they attended many Cornell alumni reunions, including his 75th in 2009.



*Current Site of the former C.P. Zepp Practice on West 53rd St, New York City,
just east of the Sheraton hotel.*

Photo by the Author, 2010

When his health deteriorated so that he could no longer live alone, Dr. Merenda moved to Las Vegas to be with his daughter. He died there on July 13, 2011, in his 99th year of age.

¹ Merenda, Joseph J. (Retired veterinarian in New York City). Interview with Smith, Donald F. (Cornell University), August 7, 2007. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/12877>

² Cornell's DVM curriculum was four years at the time, with no requirement for pre-veterinary college education.

³ Merenda, Joseph J. *Ibid.* (see reference 1).

⁴ See Smith, Donald F. "Advice to the Class of 2017. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. August 11, 2013.

⁵ Merenda, Joseph J. *Ibid.* (see reference 1).

⁶ *Ibid.*

KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine
Joseph Merenda
Class of 1934
Small Animal Practice
C.P. Zepp
AVMA
AAHA
Ellis P. Leonard
Malcolm E Miller
Cornell University
World War II
Land-grant Act
American Veterinary Medical Association

TOPIC:

Small Animal Practice

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.