

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

The Robinsons: Father and Son African-American Veterinarians

Celebrating Black History Month 2014

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

January 29, 2014

Cornell's New York State Veterinary College¹ graduated six African-American men between 1912 and 1918, an unprecedented number for that decade.² Only three more black veterinarians received Cornell DVMs in the next 25 years; two of them were father and son (Aubrey Robinson in 1920, and Charles Robinson in 1944). This is their story.³

Aubrey Eugene Robinson Sr. grew up in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in the first decades of the 20th century. He worked summers on the New York Central Railroad and established residency in Ithaca, New York, matriculating in the veterinary college in the fall of 1916.⁴



Dr. Aubrey E. Robinson, 1920, Graduation Photo
(© New York State Veterinary College, Cornell University)

After graduating, he established a large animal practice in New Jersey, about 25 miles from New York City. His clientele was mostly dairy farmers who produced milk for the New York City market (to be delivered to customers' doorsteps each morning), and hog farmers, who were fed garbage trucked from the city. "The farmers were a very good clientele," Charles reminisced.

My father also had a good equine practice, with weekend riders and fox hunters. It was a very profitable practice.⁵

He was able to raise a family of four children there in New Jersey: my two brothers and a sister. Through his guidance, all four of us graduated from college. My two brothers⁶ and I went to Cornell; my sister went upstate to William Smith College. My own son went to Cornell and my two brothers married girls from Cornell, so we're pretty much a Cornell family.

Charles was a four-star athlete in high school. Entering Cornell in 1940, as a student in the College of Agriculture, he aspired to play football at a time when the Ivy League was at its peak and competition to make the team was tough.

There were only two black students on the freshman junior varsity squad. Though both young men were accepted by players and coaches on their Cornell team, they faced harsh discrimination by opposing teams in the form of verbal and physical abuse. During their first game as freshmen, a particularly aggressive opposing player had already injured Cornell's other black player and was now bragging loudly to his teammates that he was going to "take out the other one."⁷

Robinson settled the score in a dramatic fashion by physically outmaneuvering his bigoted adversary during a punt return for a touchdown in West Point. From that point on, although his skin color may not have been accepted by all opposing players, he was to be taken seriously as a hard-nosed and talented athlete. One of the Cornell records he set playing football has never been matched to this day.⁸

Charles was admitted to veterinary college in 1941, in a class that matriculated 40 men and two women. Because of the war, there were no breaks between semesters and the four-year curriculum was compressed into three years, including summers. Though he was in the Army Specialized Training Program during his last two years, "the day before graduation, I was discharged from the Army, so I graduated as a civilian not as an officer."⁹

Dr. Robinson was drafted back into the Army a few months later. After serving a tour of duty he joined his father's practice. Though most of his clients were white, he told me that the only discrimination he felt was from some of the veterinarians in the area who kept their distance despite his attempts to become part of the professional community.¹⁰

After contracting undulant fever (Brucellosis), he was unable to carry on the rigors of the practice, so he joined the faculty at Tuskegee. The invitation to teach at the newly-opened African-American veterinary school had originally been offered to Charles when he was still a second-year student at Cornell during a visit by the Institute's president, Frederick Douglass Patterson. At the time, Patterson was assembling a faculty for his college, drawing from the African-American veterinarians who numbered only about 70 in the entire country.¹¹



Dr. Charles R. Robinson, 1944, Graduation Photo
(©New York State Veterinary College, Cornell University)

The whole idea of a establishing a black veterinary school was rather ethereal to me. Due to the fact that there were then only about 12 veterinary colleges in the whole country, it was, to me, kind of a stretch. A little bit of a far-fetched idea. But Patterson was very much of a visionary. And he and his cohort there were dead serious about this veterinary school thing.

Robinson taught a course in pathology one year, adding large animal medicine the next year. He then took over the ambulatory clinic and saw it grow from one or two calls a week to a full time practice.¹²

The post-war South was changing from cotton growing to cattle growing. The farmers were laboriously learning how to raise cattle. Their local dairy cattle were scrubby, mixed-breed Jerseys and Guernseys, and they were buying Hereford and Angus bulls and breeding them to these little scrawny dairy cows. The dystocia rate was very high and I practically made a career of doing Caesarian sections but it was a wonderful teaching experience for my students and me. It was very gratifying to see the growth of the veterinary school there.

When his father became seriously ill in the early 1950s, Charles left teaching and took over the New Jersey practice. He returned to the north with his wife, Yolanda (whom he had met at Tuskegee where she was the secretary in the president's office), and their young daughter. He enjoyed getting back into dairy cattle work in New Jersey because the scale was much greater than it had been in Alabama.

By this period, however, large numbers of people, mostly WWII veterans, were coming into the area to live, and dairy farmers were selling their farms and moving into Pennsylvania. Robinson reluctantly gave up his large animal practice and “established a veterinary clinic to treat small animals.”¹³

Pets and the quality of pet medicine were on the rise, Robinson told me, almost triumphantly.¹⁴

Very fortunately at that time, the veterinary research laboratory at Cornell was getting the upper hand on distemper, hepatitis and infectious enteritis, and other plagues of the small animal population.¹⁵ With the teaching aids that came along and the assistance we were getting from Cornell and other research places, we were able to offer efficient, competent services to the small animal clients.

During practice days in New Jersey and continuing after his retirement in 1986, Dr. Robinson maintained close associations with many of his classmates from veterinary college.¹⁶

In later years, George Reed and Dave Lawrence, Jeanne Logue and I would get together regularly and go to dinner somewhere in one another’s community or home or whatever. We used to get together at reunion time every year and we’d see each other at the veterinary convention in January and they became dear friends. [As with my other classmates], we never had a minute’s bad thing happen at any time along the way. It was just an enjoyable life long experience to have known all of them.



Dr. Charles and Mrs. Yolanda Robinson, 2010
(Photo by the author)

As his health deteriorated in later life, Dr. and Mrs. Robinson moved to Arizona to live in proximity to one of his children. He passed on December 12, 2010.

¹ Now called the College of Veterinary Medicine.

² Smith, Donald F., Black History Month: African-American Veterinarians at Cornell 1910-1920. *Veterinary Legacy*. Feb 2, 2011. <http://veterinarylegacy.blogspot.com/>

³ Robinson, Charles (Cornell 1944; deceased 2010). Interview at his Scottsdale, Arizona, home with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University). May 29, 2010.

⁴ Announcement of the New York State Veterinary College 1917-18. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, 1917; 31.

⁵ Robinson, Interview with Donald Smith, May 29, 2010.

⁶ One of Charles's brothers, Aubrey Eugene Robinson Jr. (1922-2000), became a prominent US federal judge. See [New York Times obituary](#), March 1, 2000.

⁷ Robinson, Interview with Donald Smith, May 29, 2010.

⁸ The record is the most number of punts during a single game (27 punts against Penn State University).

⁹ Some of the Jewish students in the class were also not commissioned as officers. Though this has never been formally investigated, it is thought by some to have been related to a decision of the dean to not submit their names for commissioning.

¹⁰ Robinson, Interview with Donald Smith, May 29, 2010.

¹¹ Smith, Donald F. A Tribute to Tuskegee. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*.. Jan 17, 2014.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ The veterinary virus disease program at Cornell, established in the early 1950s, is now known as the [Baker Institute for Animal Health](#).

¹⁶ Robinson, Interview with Donald Smith, May 29, 2010.

KEYWORDS:

Aubrey Eugene Robinson
Charles Richard Robinson
George Reed
Jeanne Neubecker Logue
David Lawrence
Cornell University
African-American Veterinarians
Racial discrimination
Tuskegee University
Frederick Douglass Patterson

TOPIC:

African-American Veterinarians

LEADING QUESTION;

Did African-American veterinarians have many white clients in middle decades of the 20th century?

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.