

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

In the 70th Year Since its Founding, a Tuskegee Alumnus will become AVMA President

Editor's Note: Continuing my episodic series on AVMA presidents, I present a story of Dr. Ted Cohn, who will be installed as the 2014-15 AVMA president on July 29th. In response to a tribute to Tuskegee University posted last January,¹ Ted told me how proud he was to have been a graduate of that college, and how especially honored he was that I had cited him as an alumnus. This led to more substantive communications with both Ted and his wife, Becky. This is the story of their Tuskegee years (1971-75).²

Donald F. Smith

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
July 21, 2014

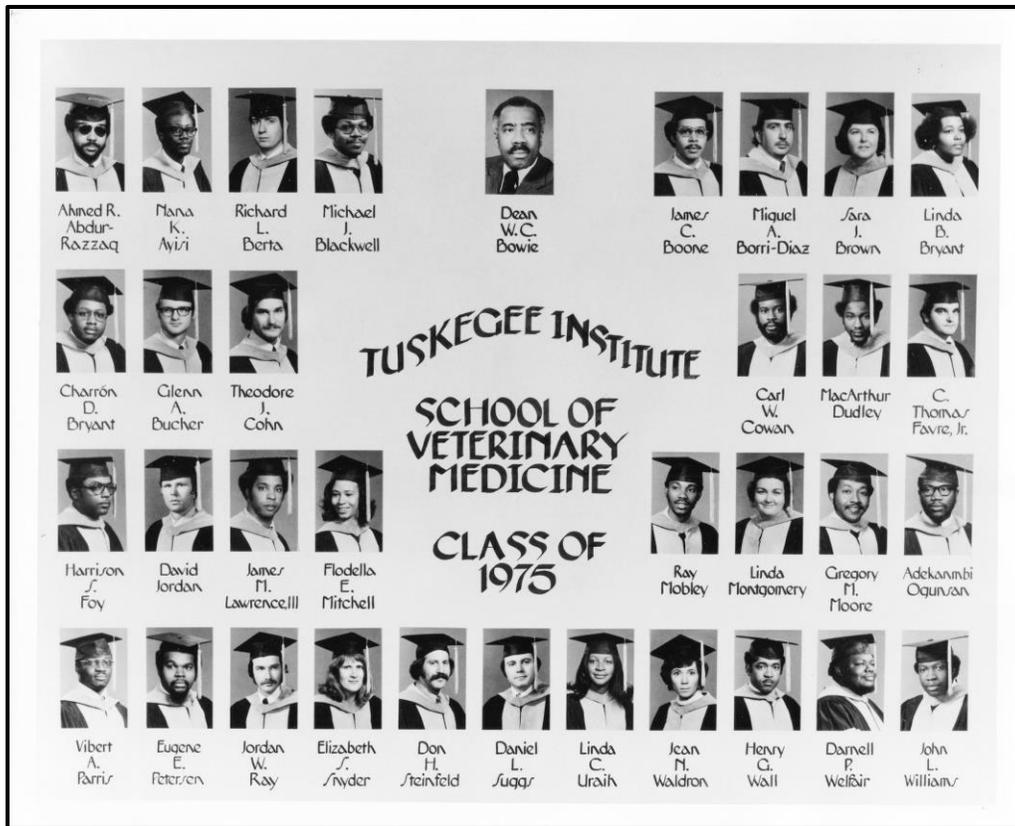
Dr. Cohn was but one of several white students in the 1971 entering class at Tuskegee. Six years earlier, the School had matriculated its first white male student and the following year, the first white woman was admitted. In his book, *The Legacy*, Dr. Eugene Adams summarized the feelings of the era.

*There was an uneventful acceptance of these students by their classmates and teachers. No special arrangements were made for these first non-black students and no media publicity was accorded their entrance or graduation.*³

Ted was unaware of this demographic change because the advertising brochure that the school provided did not contain any photos of white students so he really wasn't sure that he would not be the only white student present.

Ted's decision to attend Tuskegee was partly pragmatic, because his home state of Arkansas had just established a new *regional plan* to allocate two positions to the university. But his decision was also based upon his core values of social justice:

While in Jr. High, I had a read a biography of George Washington Carver—[born into slavery, he later became the first head of Tuskegee's agricultural department]—and I was inspired by Carver's life and accomplishments. At the time I actually told my mother, who had been active in the civil rights movement in Arkansas a decade earlier, that I wanted to go to college at Tuskegee.



Tuskegee University DVM Class of 1975 Photo, with Dean W.C. Bowie. One of Dr. Cohn's classmates (Dr. Michael I. Blackwell, top row) would later become dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Tennessee (Photo provided by Dr. Ted Cohn, 2014)

Dr. Cohn found Tuskegee to be a “great place with a wonderful family atmosphere, caring faculty and administration.” The town was quiet and there was not a lot to do except to study, so that helped unite the class from almost the first day. Ted said the classmates got along well and treated each other with respect, understanding, and good humor, despite the occasional friction that is present among any group of students. Pig roasts, hosted by many classmates but especially inspired by the Caribbean students, were among the most popular extracurricular events and everyone gladly participated.

Though some students—both white and black—chose to live in Auburn which was 20 miles away, Ted and his wife, Becky, found an apartment in Tuskegee, close to campus. He had grown up in Little Rock, which at the time did not have a huge population (130,000), but living in this small, rural southern town provided a new environment for the Cohn’s.

The towns of Tuskegee and Tuskegee Institute were contiguous and had a population of about 12,000 people, and the students, faculty, and administration probably accounted for about half of them. There were just two grocery stores and a couple of small mom- and pop-type convenience stores. The only fast food was the “Dairy King” and perhaps the “Chicken Coop.”



Apartment rented by Ted and Becky Cohn in Tuskegee (1971-75)
(This photo, provided by Dr. Cohn, was taken in 2014)

Although Tuskegee was over 80% African-American when he arrived, Ted remembers there was a white mayor, and that the first black mayor since reconstruction was elected the following year. The area was part of a still thriving “southern cotton culture” in which the vast majority of the land, businesses, and ensuing wealth was white-owned. Ted also recalled a monument commemorating the civil war with a statue of a confederate soldier in the town square.

With few exceptions, the community accepted the Cohn’s. Becky found a job as a dental assistant and later a hygienist at the VA hospital, just down the street from the veterinary school. As a “long hair,” Ted drew some attention,

I did raise some eyebrows and engender some concerns with a few of the white folks, particularly at the barbershop and once at a hardware store. Subsequently, Becky learned to cut my hair, and did so for the next eight years. I found another hardware store to meet my needs.

By virtue of Dr. Cohn's ability to secure financial aid through a work study program, he was able to have substantive exposure to the clinics during evening, weekends, and over holiday and summer breaks from the time he was a first-year student. Though he spent a great deal of time cleaning kennels and horse stalls, and exercising and restraining patients, he also had frequent exposure to faculty, staff, and upper class students throughout his educational experience.

During the summer between his third and fourth years, Cohn worked for the United States Department of Agriculture in their nearby Auburn laboratory. He made friends with several Auburn veterinary students and even attended a few of their classes. That experience opened his eyes to some of the differences between the two schools (and towns), which at that time—unlike today—had minimal collaboration.

Dr. Cohn's summary of life as one of the early white veterinary students at Tuskegee, 40 years ago, is a warm and encouraging testament to both the university and town, and also to Becky and himself.

Overall, living and going to school in Tuskegee was a unique and educational experience from many different aspects—one that certainly has helped to shape Becky and me into the people we are today. Admittedly, while compared to some of the other veterinary colleges, Tuskegee may have had some shortcomings in their facilities, the culture of the school—the caring personal touch of the faculty—ultimately made up for any deficiencies. Amongst the many lessons Tuskegee taught me, perhaps one of the most important, is that the effort you put into your education is much more important than where you go to school. With almost 39 years of veterinary experience behind me, I believe that even more today.

Classmate Dr. Michael Blackwell, whose father was a faculty member at Tuskegee, was one of Ted's classmates. He later became Assistant Surgeon General and was Dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Tennessee (2000-2008). "You will appreciate that our time as veterinary students was during the turbulent period of civil rights reform", he told me. "It was clear that Ted wanted to be there [at Tuskegee] and seemed very comfortable with Black people or anyone else who appeared different."⁴

Dr. Douglas Aspros, AVMA president in 2012-13, who has known Dr. Cohn for years, and also served with him on the Executive Board, had this to say about his friend and colleague, "Ted's experiences as a student at Tuskegee are the foundation of who he is as a person as well as a veterinarian. It's clear why he's been the most determined advocate for diversity at AVMA, and throughout the profession, that I've known."⁵



Dr. Theodore Cohn, AVMA President (2014-15)
(Photo provided by Dr. Cohn)

Dr. Cohn will become the first Tuskegee DVM graduate to receive the AVMA's gavel of the presidency. What a fitting tribute for this, the 70th anniversary of the founding of the veterinary school at that institution.

¹ Smith, Donald F. A Tribute to Tuskegee. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. Jan 17, 2014.

² Cohn, Theodore, DVM (President-elect, AVMA). Emails to Donald F. Smith (Cornell University), Feb 23, July 11, July 13, 2014. Unless otherwise noted, all of the quotations attributed to Dr. Cohn, as well as the information about his time in Tuskegee is contained in these email communications.

³ Adams, Eugene W. *The Legacy. A History of the Tuskegee University School of Veterinary Medicine*. (Tuskegee: Media Center Press, 1995), 80.

⁴ Blackwell, Michael J., DVM, MPH (Assistant Surgeon General, USPHS (Ret.), Dean Emeritus (Univ Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine). Email to Donald F. Smith (Cornell University), July 16, 2014.

⁵ Aspros, Douglas G., DVM (AVMA president, 2012-13). E-mail to Donald F. Smith (Cornell University), July 12, 2014.

KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine
American Veterinary Medical Association
AVMA President

African-American Veterinarians
Tuskegee University
Douglas Aspros
Theodore Cohn
Becky Cohn
Segregation
Walter C. Bowie
Michael Blackwell
Civil Rights Era

TOPIC:

American Veterinary Medical Association

LEADING QUESTION:

Who will become AVMA president from Tuskegee?

META-SUMMARY:

After 70 years, Tuskegee University will have its first AVMA president

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.