

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Monuments to Veterinary Medicine, Part II

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
July 9, 2014

The oral interview is an effective way to capture the history of veterinary medicine and also honor those whose impact on the profession might otherwise have been lost. This is the second part in a five-part series on oral interviews I conducted starting in 2007.¹

One of my challenges in conducting and preserving these interviews is determining the boundaries for reporting where accuracy and comprehensiveness clash with confidentiality and good taste. Sometimes the lines were clear, such as when a nonagenarian alumnus in the midst of telling me about student life in the 1930s, shared a disgusting anti-Semitic quote that had been made by one of the instructors while he and a Jewish student had been on clinical duty together 70 years earlier. As he told me the story, seemingly reliving it for the first time in decades, he turned his head and gazed across the room from his seat on the living room sofa. His voice, which had been soft and sensitive, turned abrasive and discordant as he blurted out the offensive remark. Almost involuntarily, he snapped his head back, looked straight into my eyes and, with a trembling voice demanded, "You won't write that, will you?" I assured him that I would delete that segment from the tape (which I did), and we proceeded with the interview. For me, that was a responsible way to handle that situation, and I have not repeated the remark either orally or in writing even though the interviewee passed several years ago.

Other situations have been more difficult to handle, such as when the historical record has been revised (perhaps unknowingly) by the surviving members of the family. I am aware of two occasions in which that happened, and they presented difficult dilemmas. In both cases, I ultimately chose the route of non-disclosure, though it meant failing to recount the complete story as evidenced by examination of the institution's period faculty minutes.

Neither the surviving spouse, in one instance, nor the surviving daughter, in the other, told of their family member's dismissal from Cornell, which in both cases was for academic reasons. One man failed at Cornell, then proceeded to another veterinary college a year later (following a brief stint in the military) and successfully completed the veterinary curriculum at that institution. The other man was alleged by family members to have left Cornell because of financial hardship, but in fact had been dismissed for academic reasons. He later returned to Cornell and successfully completed his DVM degree.

During a few occasions, highly personal information was disclosed in the course of the interview. Sometimes this was unintentional, such as information relating to a sexual

relationship or a description of a wayward member of the family, and the interviewee later requested that I not share it (and I have not).

In the first installment of summaries of the oral interviews in *Enduring Veterinary Legacy*,² I shared the abstract of the interview with **Dr. Tevis Goldhaft**, who had entered Cornell in 1931 as one of 17 Jewish students in this class. To thwart the establishment of a new veterinary college on Long Island, Cornell increased its enrollment of Jewish students to approximately 20% throughout the 1930s. Many of these students were from urban areas, especially New York City and the surrounding areas, and did not have extensive farm backgrounds.



Dr. Harry J. Fallon, 1938, Graduation Photo
(© New York State Veterinary College, Cornell University)

In addition to Dr. Goldhaft, I interviewed two of these veterinarians who also graduated in the 1930s, and the surviving spouses of two others. **Dr. Harry Fallon** and Dr. Henry Grossman graduated in 1938.

Fallon began his educational career under his given name, Henry Feldman, but changed his surname thinking it was too “Jewish-sounding”. He was concerned it might limit his opportunities for employment. As it turned out, his Jewish heritage was the strongest factor in his getting an exceptional starting job in a good practice.

The owners of a practice in Akron, Ohio, included a veterinarian of the Quaker faith who had graduated from the Ohio State University, and a Catholic man from Cornell. According to Dr. Fallon, the two could never resolve between themselves whether to hire entry-level associates who were either Quaker or Catholic, and so they ended the stalemate by agreeing to hire

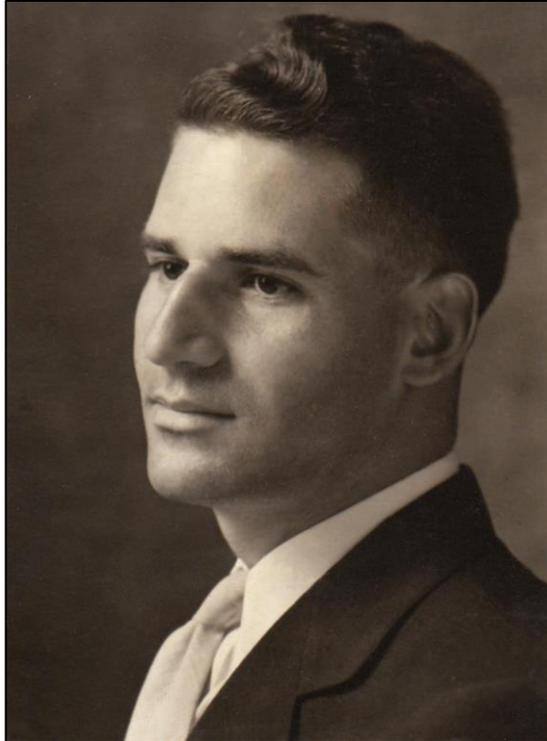
Jewish graduates. They continued this practice for several years, usually recruiting the top academic Jewish student from Cornell every two years, and then sending them on to start their own practices.

In the spring of 1938, the offer went to a student who had an identical twin in the same class. But the young man (and, in turn, his brother) declined, as they had decided to work together and open a practice in the New York City area. The offer next fell to Fallon who excitedly accepted the invitation. It proved to be an outstanding job with great mentors, and he eventually moving to West Virginia where he became a prominent veterinarian, even writing articles while in clinical practice. He rose to become president of the state's Veterinary Medical Association.



Dr. Henry E. Grossman, 1938, Graduation Photo
(© New York State Veterinary College, Cornell University)

Dr. Henry Grossman also graduated in 1938. Though I had known him as a prominent member of the New York City veterinary community and former president of the state's Veterinary Medical Society, he had passed in 2000 and my interview was with his wife and one of his daughters. The Grossman story describes what it was like to develop a veterinary practice from its beginning, by initially transforming a few rooms in their mother's home in Brooklyn, then moving the practice into a rented corner building and hanging a neon sign in the shape of a Scottie dog, made popular because of President Roosevelt's dog named Fala. Dr. Grossman's practice was very successful, and he maintained it for 60 years until health problems forced his retirement.



Dr. Isidor I. Sprecker, 1939, Graduation Photo
(© New York State Veterinary College, Cornell University)

Eight members of the graduating class of 1939 were also Jewish. I knew **Dr. Isidor Sprecker** (formerly Sprecher) very well as he was a frequent visitor to Cornell and, with his wife, had become a major benefactor to the college. The veterinary library and also the comparative cancer program bear the Sprecher³ name in recognition of their many contributions.

I never conducted a recorded interview with Dr. Sprecker during this lifetime, but Mrs. Sylvia Sprecker granted an interview at her Delray Beach home in 2008. She described her husband's experiences as an officer in the Army Veterinary Corps during World War II. He was stationed in the British West Indies where he was the chief food inspector but also took care of the dogs and other pets of the officers on the base. She and Isidor were married in July 1945 with, in Mrs. Sprecker's words, "a honeymoon on Barbados, courtesy of Uncle Sam."

Dr. Sprecker had a strong passion for education and a deep admiration for Ezra Cornell, the institution's co-founder and first benefactor. Shortly after presenting a speech to alumni in January 2004 honoring the birthday of Mr. Cornell, I received a telephone call informing me that Isidor had just died. I felt a warm rush go through my body as I realized how these two men of such different backgrounds had been so similar in their core values of learning and giving.

My 2008 visit with **Dr. Robert Ferber** in Syosset on Long Island remains one of my favorites. Ferber was a warm and robust gentleman, and was so well-prepared for the interview that I

hardly had to prompt him as he progressed into a long, interesting and articulate description of his life, starting from childhood through his days at Cornell.



Dr. Robert Ferber, 1939, Graduation Photo
(© New York State Veterinary College, Cornell University)

The child of Russian immigrants, Ferber was raised in Brooklyn and Queens. He applied to Cornell with an undergraduate degree (rare at that time when the pre-veterinary requirements were for one year of college education) but was denied admission and went to Michigan State University and was accepted as a transfer student after his first year. Though he had been bitterly disappointed not to have been accepted initially at Cornell despite his stellar academic record, Ferber chose to speak about the positive aspects of his student life, and the many students of all backgrounds who would become lifelong friends and colleagues.

Ferber started a small animal practice in Bayside, New York, in a period when there were only four established practices in the area. He became the patriarch of a family of veterinarians that would eventually include not only his younger brother, but his son and grandson. He was one of the longest surviving members of the Class of 1939, passing last December (2013), nine months before his 100th birthday.

Veterinary medicine in the pre-World War II era was largely defined by agricultural priorities and admission of students from rural areas. The period stories of Jewish veterinarians who were the children of Russian and East European immigrants coming from an urban background

provides what you might first imagine to be a grating juxtaposition of religious, cultural and professional differences.

Rather than differences, however, these interviews consistently tell of how students from widely different backgrounds formed a common bond during the harsh Depression years. Along with veterinarians with similar values from across the country, these men and an occasional woman, shaped the growth and development of veterinary medicine in ways that set the stage for the next half century.

¹ Smith, Donald F. Monuments to Veterinary Medicine, Part I. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, June 23, 2014.

² Smith, Donald F. An Enduring Veterinary Legacy, Bringing History to Life.

<https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/11807>

³ In the named tributes to Dr. and Mrs. Sprecker, the former spelling (Sprecher) is used.

KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine
Jewish veterinarians
The Great Depression
World War II
Cornell University
Oral History
Isidor Sprecker
Robert Ferber
Harry Fallon
Henry Grossman

TOPICS:

Jewish Veterinarians
Oral History

LEADING QUESTION:

What impact did 1930s-educated Jewish veterinarians have on veterinary medicine?

META-SUMMARY:

Continuing the series on oral history, this story describes the lives of four Jewish veterinarians educated during the 1930s.

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.