March is Women’s History Month. For veterinarians, it provides an opportunity to pause and reflect on the struggles women faced in gaining access to the profession before the mid-1970s; and the challenges they face even to the present to be involved in many leadership aspects of the profession.

For the past year, I (and others) have written here and elsewhere on the subject of women veterinarians in general, and more specifically, women’s leadership. This is part 1 of a listing and brief overview of some of these stories in the hope that this compendium will serve as a resource and an inspiration for women and men alike.

Stories of Individual Women in the Early Years of the Profession through the 1960s

One of the first women to receive a veterinary degree from a recognized university was Joanna Asmus, Cornell class of 1929. She was the daughter of the university’s farrier, a post that was held in high distinction during that period. This story was researched and written three years ago by Dr. Michelle Pesce while she was a veterinary student at Cornell.¹


Cornell admitted an unprecedented number of women (three) in 1935.² Though there was reluctance on the part of some faculty to admit females, feeling that they were taking the place of a man who could be a family breadwinner, most of their male classmates considered them valued members of the class.

² Cornell admitted an unprecedented number of women (three) in 1935.
Each of these three women had careers in clinical practice. Two also developed alternative career pathways, one (Halloran) in zoo animal medicine and the other (von Decken-Luers) in regulatory work in the Virgin Islands. Here are their stories.

- Smith, Donald F. Women in Veterinary Medicine: Dr. Patricia O’Connor [Halloran], Cornell 1939. Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine. August 7, 2013.

Additional descriptions about life during the Depression can be found in a series of four stories at Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine posted November 13, 14, 16 and 17, 2013.3,4,5,6 Though none of these stories are about women, per se, they give the reader a sense of how challenging life was during that period and how precious a commodity a veterinary degree was for young people of either gender.

The University of Pennsylvania didn’t admit a woman until 1934, but Dr. Josephine Deubler (VMD, PhD), their first woman veterinary graduate, led a remarkable career in teaching and research. An avid dog breeder and judge, the capstone of her career (in her view) was having the privilege to judge Best in Show at the 1998 Westminster Kennel Club show in Madison Square Garden.


During the 1950s and 1960s, it was common for veterinary classes to hold two seats per year for women. Admission committees would review all of the male candidates, and then select a
small group of women candidates for interview. Occasionally, a college would admit three or four women, as was the case for the Cornell class that started in 1956 of which Dr. Carolyn Comans was a member. Five years later at Cornell, Dr. Linda Reeve Peddie was the only women in her class.


**Stories of Women in Senior Academic Positions in Veterinary Medicine**

Though our student population has been over 50% female for almost three decades and now exceeds 80% at many colleges of veterinary medicine—the national average is 78%—there are only six women deans in the US (20%, similar to the percentage of women members of Congress).


One of the joys of writing about leaders is interviewing them and discovering what makes them so successful, recognizing that they are often ordinary people doing impressive things in an extraordinary way. The women deans are inspiring role models, as the following two stories of Dean Sheila Allen (Georgia) and Dean Eleanor Green (Texas) indicate.

![Dr. Eleanor M. Green](Photo provided by Dr. Green)

![Dr. Sheila Allen](© University of Georgia, 2013)

- Smith, Donald F. Dr. Sheila W. Allen, University of Georgia: Veterinary Dean with a Passion for Education. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. September 10, 2013.
Not surprisingly, the deans credit mentors as one of the significant reasons for their success as veterinarians and as academic leaders.

Part 2 of this article is dated March 14, 2014.

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1 Dr. Michelle Pesce graduated from Cornell University in 2012 and is a veterinarian at [Bolton Veterinary Hospital](http://www.boltonvethospital.com) in Bolton, Connecticut.
2 Cornell admitted four women the following year. They all graduated in 1940.
3 Smith, Donald F. Becoming a Veterinary Student During the Great Depression. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. November 13, 2013.
4 Smith, Donald F. Veterinary Student Life During the Great Depression. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. November 14, 2013.

**KEYWORDS:**
- Women Veterinarians
- Women’s History Month
- History of Veterinary Medicine
- Women’s Veterinary Leadership
- Women Veterinary Deans
- American Veterinary Medical Association
- Dr. Joanna Asmus
- Dr. Patricia O’Connor Halloran
- Dr. Rikki von Decken-Luers
- Dr. Elizabeth Beckley [Gundlach]
- Dr. Josephine Deubler
- Dr. Carolyn Comans
- Dr. Linda Reeve Peddie
- Dr. Sheila Allen
- Dr. Eleanor Green
- Cornell University
- University of Pennsylvania
- The Great Depression

**TOPIC:**
Women in Veterinary Medicine

LEADING QUESTION:
When did discrimination end for women to be admitted into veterinary colleges in the United States?

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.