

## Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

# Dr. Sylvia Burg Salk '46 Salutes the Students Involved in Women's Leadership

By Dr. Donald F. Smith  
October 8, 2014

I recently received a hand-written, two-page letter from a veterinarian who graduated from Cornell in 1946. It was my first communication from Dr. Sylvia Burg Salk since she returned to Cornell for her class reunion eight years ago. That reunion, the only one she ever attended, had been a partial reconciliation visit for Dr. Salk as the memories of her student days at Cornell were not pleasant.



*Dr. Sylvia Burg Salk, front row, center. Dr. Donald Smith (author) second row, extreme right. Mrs. Doris Smith, second row, second from right.*

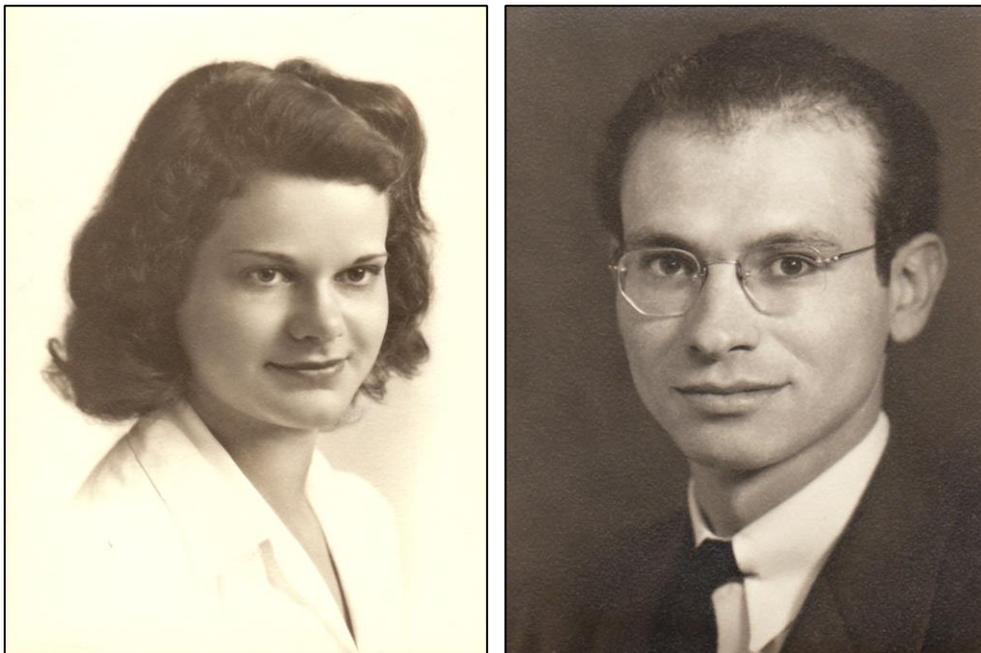
*Class of 1946 Reunion, 2006*

*(© Cornell University)*

Sylvia Burg was a bright, young Jewish woman who grew up in the small town of Hunter, deep in the Catskill area, 125 miles north of New York City. Though Cornell had accepted its first woman veterinary student in 1905, and by 1940 had graduated many more women than any other US veterinary college (15), Burg's first application was denied.

She applied the following year, and was again denied. Frustrated and angry, Sylvia's mother traveled to Cornell and met with the dean, Dr. William Arthur Hagan. "I know neither the substance nor the tenor of the conversation," Dr. Salk told me when I visited her in California in 1999, "but it must have been interesting because I was admitted the following fall on my third attempt."<sup>1</sup>

Sylvia met her future husband "over a horse carcass during dissection lab." Herman Salk had been a veterinary student at Middlesex College in Massachusetts, the college established in the mid-1930s, primarily to accommodate Jewish students, but forced to close by the AVMA a few years later because it was alleged to have been substandard. At the time, the feeling of many close to the situation was that the closure of both the Middlesex medical and veterinary colleges was related to anti-Semitism.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the circumstances that sealed their fate, Herman was one of the few students admitted to Cornell as a transfer student to complete his education.



*Dr. Sylvia Burg Salk and Dr. Herman Maurice Salk, 1946, Graduation Photos*  
(© New York State Veterinary College, Cornell University)

The Salks moved to Vermont following graduation and Sylvia became the state's first female veterinarian. They joined with a classmate named George Brightenback, with Sylvia doing the small animal work while the two men looked after the large animals in the practice. After a brief period in which Herman worked in the virology department of Parke-Davis labs, the Salks moved to a farm in western Pennsylvania where Herman raised laboratory mice for \$100 a month. They supplemented their income by operating a small animal practice out of their home using the kitchen table as an operating table.

Those were also the days when Herman's brother, Jonas Salk, was feverishly working at the nearby University of Pittsburgh to develop the polio vaccine that bears his name. The children

of the two families grew up together during this period in the early 50s when the vaccine was being developed and tested.

In 1954, Herman and Sylvia left the East, moving to the desert region of California, where they opened a small animal practice.

For a substantial part of their adult lives, however, the Salks did humanitarian and veterinary work in developing cultures. Their international involvement began in the late '60s when they hosted African exchange students in their home. A decade later, their son, Steven (a veterinary graduate from UC, Davis) worked with the Masai tribe through the USAID program. Sylvia visited him in 1975, and was so moved by the need amongst the Masai that she convinced her husband to make their ultimate career move.

Answering an advertisement in the AVMA journal to work with Heifer Project International, the Salks sold their practice and started a new chapter of their life. They spent the next several years on a series of tours of duty, working in Africa (Cameroon and Egypt) and in the Far East (Thailand, China and Laos). When they returned to the US, they worked in the Southwest with the Navajo and Hopi nations.

Their experiences were remarkable, Dr. Sylvia Salk told me.

*We lived under challenging conditions, but our work was satisfying. We taught vaccination strategies, production medicine, nutrition and management. We tried to leave places better than we found them.*

In 1990, four and a half decades after she left Cornell, Dr. Sylvia Salk enrolled in a MS program in international public health at Loma Linda University. As the only veterinarian in the class—and certainly having the most abundant world experience—she was able to bring a broad perspective to the program, especially in the area of zoonotic diseases. For example, she reminded faculty and students alike to check cattle for scabies while visiting villagers for the same condition. She also described the efficiency of management opportunities, describing techniques for raising ducks and pigs over the village fish pond.

One of the Salks' many legacies is a scholarship program they established in the late '70s that provided funding for African students to come to the US for college education in the health sciences, education or agriculture. Dozens of students benefitted from the program, including a young Masai woman who became the first woman from her tribe to pursue an advanced degree.

Returning to that letter I received from Dr. Salk on September 9<sup>th</sup>, she said how happy she was to read the current issue of *'Scopes*, the college's news magazine in which she learned of the Cornell students establishing a chapter of the Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative.

She was excited that things had changed from when she had been a student. I could sense her pride in being one of the survivors from very challenging era in our history, and contrasting her experiences with the changes that we see today.<sup>3</sup>

*Reading about the student chapter of the Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative restored a feeling of pride in Cornell that I had lost many years ago when I was a student in the early '40s. Both my husband, Herman, and I felt disenfranchised. As the years went by ... we never truly reconciled with our Alma mater....*

*Now that I'm in my 91<sup>st</sup> year, I fully admire what you and Cornell are doing. Thank you for your dedication to a long-neglected phase of Cornell history.*

One of the challenges we face in researching and teaching the history of veterinary medicine is that we tend to see the profession in the context of our own times. How soon we forget what it was like only two or three generations ago. Viewing the transformation of the profession across decades of time is important, however, and we must not too easily dismiss the experiences of those whose persistence and success despite tough odds have helped shape the opportunities we have today.

Especially for the women such as Dr. Sylvia Burg Salk, to whom we owe so much.

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<sup>1</sup> Salk, Sylvia Burg (DVM 1946). Interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) in Palm Springs, California, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, Donald F. Middlesex Veterinary College: A Short-Lived Experiment in Meritocracy. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. October 24, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Salk, Sylvia Burg (DVM 1946). Letter to Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) Sept 9, 2014.

KEYWORDS:

Sylvia Burg Salk  
Herman Salk  
Jonas Salk  
Polio  
Cornell University  
Women in Veterinary Medicine  
Jewish veterinarians  
Anti-Semitism  
Discrimination  
Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative

TOPIC:

Women in Veterinary Medicine

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LEADING QUESTION:

What female veterinarian from the 1940s spent much of her career working in underdeveloped countries?

META-SUMMARY:

Veterinarian Dr. Sylvia Burg Salk spent the majority of her veterinary career doing humanitarian work in Africa and the Far East, and among the Native Americans in the Southwest.

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.