

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Returning to my Canadian Roots: Traveling with Beau

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

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We had been fussing over Beau's preparation for weeks: a fancy harness that doubled as a seat belt and lead shank, a new identification tag, pet shampoo and grooming supplies. A couple of large towels for the car seat and his mattress for sleeping. Food and water bowls, some moist treats.

International health certificate plus proof of rabies vaccination. I carefully folded those papers into my passport and locked them in the glove compartment, having convinced myself that we would not be getting very far without them.

Departure morning finally here, I awakened early and lay in bed contemplating what was before me. Doris was already up, packing a few last minute items. She made sure we had a handy supply of poop bags so I didn't have to paw through the back seat, and that Beau's water bottle was filled with cool water. She cleaned his food dish and packed a zip lock bag of fresh kibble.

A warm embrace for me, a hug and cuddle for Beau, and we waved goodbye, promising to reunite at the Anchorage airport on the afternoon of August 23rd.

Pulling out of the driveway a few minutes after eight, I shoved Bach's Goldberg Variations in the CD player and we drove north on Route 89 along the west shore of Cayuga Lake until we hit Route 5-20 and turned toward western New York in the direction of the Canadian border.

Beau curled up on the front seat and slept. Other than periodic rest stops along the highway that crosses northern New York – Varick, Canandaigua, Avon, Alden -- we pushed on to Niagara Falls.

The Peace Bridge border crossing was uneventful: where do you live; what is your citizenship; how long will you be in Canada; any fire arms or alcohol? The Canadian agent only glanced at my passport and didn't even look at the health papers that I had carefully unfolded and placed on top of my documentation. Moments later, she signaled us to enter Canada. As we pulled away, she nodded at Beau. Their eyes met briefly as she said directly to him, ignoring me, "You two have a nice day."

I was back in Canada, my native home, and only a few miles from where my father had been born in the small fruit-growing community of Niagara-on-the-Lake. Southwestern Ontario looked peaceful and prosperous as we passed through rolling farmlands and small towns. Glancing over at my Beau, I suggested that we continue north to the little city of Guelph, home of my *alma mater*.

An hour later, we pulled into the parking lot of the Ontario Veterinary College. There stood the austere brick administration building that dated back to 1922, the year that the college had moved from downtown Toronto, to the farming community of Guelph. Most veterinary colleges in the last half of the 19th century were located in cities: Toronto, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Washington, Boston, St. Louis. But when the internal combustion engine replaced the horse, veterinary medicine turned to the country within the rural footprint of the land grant university system. Veterinary medicine lost its integration with the population centers of North America and migrated from medicine to agriculture for its academic home.



The Ontario Veterinary College, Guelph, Canada
(Photo by the author, 2007)

The historical context of veterinary medicine was not evident to me when I finished my undergraduate studies and applied to enter veterinary college. All I wanted to do was work with dairy cows, and I wasn't even sure I wanted to become a veterinarian as a career since dairy farmer or agricultural extension agent seemed equally satisfying.

At least, that is what I told the somber group of presumably distinguished faculty who encircled the unadorned oak table during my veterinary interview in the spring of 1970. "Why do you want to become a veterinarian?" the man at the head of the table chortled, waiting to hear what line this particular student would respond with to the routine introductory question.

"I'm not really sure I want to be a veterinarian," I replied truthfully, and his mouth dropped open as the other professors looked up, distracted from absently fumbling through their papers. "I just want to do something with cows and this is an option that I will consider if you offer me a seat." Averting my eyes from him, I added, "My grades are pretty good and my

girlfriend's brother is a doctor" (as if that had anything to do with it). They admitted me anyway and, after a lot of dithering and soul-searching, I decided to become a veterinarian.

That was over 30 years earlier and I slowly surveyed the parking lot now through a different set of eyes. As I was reflecting how narrow my image of veterinary medicine had been at the time, I found myself running my fingers absentmindedly through the hair of Beau's oversized ears while he looked over into my eyes.

We continued west, stopping briefly at the town of Forest where I had worked as a summer intern between my third and final year of veterinary college. As was the custom in Canada during that era, veterinary students gained clinical experience from seasoned practitioners who were as anxious to impart real-world experience to their book-weary students as they were to have summer students give them a brief reprieve from the endless rigors of practice. Beau and I followed a county road out of town and then pulled off the road when I saw a decaying barn that seemed familiar. I wasn't sure if this was the right place, but it appeared to be the site where my first patient had died.

It was a Saturday night in July, and I was working for Dr. Bill Cooper, a 1950 OVC graduate. He was a marvelous mentor, teaching me things that I used time and time again throughout my career. Living in a guest room in his home, he would patiently awaken me for night calls, though he knew that having me along would only slow him down. During the daytime, we would travel to farm calls in the mornings and attend to small animal patients during afternoon clinic hours.

I was never permitted to treat an animal by myself unless it was one of the sacs filled with baby pigs that farmers dropped off at the back door of the clinic for surgery on Wednesday afternoons. The farmers castrated the baby pigs themselves but they needed veterinary help for removal of retained testicles or inguinal hernia repair. Dr. Cooper charged \$3.00 - \$5.00 per pig (depending on size) and I did hundreds of them.

Come the weekend, however, and I was transformed into a real veterinarian, making farm calls myself, delivering calves and treating cows with milk fever and retained placentas. I knew cows and dairy farmers, and though I looked younger than my 23 years, they both they sensed my comfort with them.

I was not so comfortable around horses, however. My Dad had sold our last team of draft horses when I was a toddler, and I had almost no experience at veterinary college until my final year—still two months into the future.

So I was shaking like a leaf as I got out of my car to attend to a Standardbred brood mare that was bleeding from the uterus after delivering her first foal, stillborn. My boss and his wife had left the house an hour earlier, he attired in a tuxedo in anticipation of a very special evening, and certainly not wanting to be disturbed regardless of the nature of the emergency. With an anxious and questioning owner hovering over me, I did my best with the mare, removing the placenta and treating her with a couple liters of IV fluids, while trying to slow the unrelenting

hemorrhage from deep within her womb. The mare was already prostrate when I arrived at the farm, unable to arise. She was in the same position when she drew her final breath an hour later.

As the events of that evening came rushing back, gazing at the grassy strip between the old house and half-standing barn, a shiver went through my body as I again swept my fingers over the edematous walls of the mare's uterus. I could feel the wet fluid on my arms, blood seeping through my coveralls and soaking my underwear. At first warm and gelatinous, it turned cold and crusty as it dried on my skin. I heard the raspy snores of the mare's labored breathing. I felt the sting on my thighs as her legs thrashed at me in her spasmodic throes of death.

I lay exhausted behind her with my left arm aimlessly probing her womb. I tasted the slimy fluid that she squirted over my face from her dying uterus. I smelled the putrid stench of her death.

Sensing my anxiety, Beau snuggled close to me and put his head on my arm. Unable to look into his face, I picked up the AAA road atlas and peered into the map through bleary eyes. Seeing only blurred lines and faded colors, I threw it in the back seat and we headed south towards the ferry that would return us to the States.

KEYWORDS:

One Health
Ontario Veterinary College
History of Veterinary Medicine
Guelph
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TOPIC:

Traveling with a dog
One Health

LEADING QUESTION:

Did you know that the Ontario Veterinary College was originally located in Toronto?

META-SUMMARY:

The author returns to his alma mater at the Ontario Veterinary College.

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.