

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Dr. Wilson Bell '39, Connecting Cornell to Virginia-Tech

By Dr. Donald F. Smith, with assistance from Jeffrey S. Douglas
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Cornell's veterinary class of 1939 was distinctive. Thirty-six men and three women arrived in Ithaca, New York, in the depths of the Depression and would form the nucleus of the most diverse classes in the history of veterinary medicine, as well as one of the most cohesive?¹

I became interested in this class several years ago and interviewed as many of the surviving alumni as possible though they were all well into their 90s at the time.² For those who were deceased, I tried to find out as much about them as possible through second- and third-hand sources. One of my greatest challenges was to learn of Dr. Wilson Bell, a Virginia native, who had died in 1992. All I could find out from the Cornell records was that he had entered the class as a freshman in 1935 and graduated on schedule four years later.



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

Little was remembered about this man by the members of Class of 1939 whom I interviewed, though one recalled that he had worked at Virginia-Tech University. Not surprising, I thought,

because he had been from Virginia. This was corroborated by a letter written to his classmates at the time of their 30th reunion in 1969 that had “director of development” on its Virginia-Tech masthead.

I made several calls to the Blacksburg Virginia-Tech campus at the time, but neither library personnel nor various administrative offices were able to confirm any more than Dr. Bell had worked at the university. One person told me that he had been an administrator in the College of Agriculture.

I did not pursue Dr. Bell’s history any further until a couple of months ago. While reading the centennial history of the Virginia Veterinary Medical Association,³ I stumbled upon several references to him written by Mr. Jeff Douglas who had spent many years working on the Blacksburg campus. I learned that Dr. Bell had been dean of agriculture for many years, then had moved into central administration in the late 1960s where he was the inaugural development officer for the university.

Dr. Bell’s pre-Cornell history was also intriguing. He had received his undergraduate education in biology from Virginia Tech, followed by a masters in microbiology. He then moved to Ithaca where he accepted an assistantship in bacteriology and pathology. One of the fringe benefits of being a Cornell faculty member at the time was to take courses at the university, so he enrolled in the DVM program at the veterinary college. Perhaps one of the reasons he was never well known by his classmates is that he was heavily engaged in teaching at the time. He also was the most educated person in the class, as only one year of undergraduate education was required at the time.

Following graduation, Dr. Bell was employed by the University of California until he entered military service during World War II. After the war, he returned to Virginia Tech where he eventually became dean of agriculture and, in 1968, director of development.

Cornell has connections with many of the veterinary colleges that arose in the 1960s and 1970s, and the Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine is no exception.⁴ However, it is unusual that the shared history goes as far back as the 1930s.

Dr. Smith thanks Mr. Jeffrey S. Douglas, Senior, Communications Consultant, Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges, for his assistance.

¹ In addition to the three women (the most of any veterinary class to that time), two foreigners (a Canadian and a man from China), an African-American from Tennessee (Cornell’s only Black veterinary graduate of the 1930s), and eight Jewish students were members of the Class of 1939.

² Smith, Donald F. *An Enduring Veterinary Legacy*. <http://www.vet.cornell.edu/Legacy/>

³ Sanford, S. Mason (1994). *A Century of Science. The Virginia Veterinary Medical Association. 1894-1994*. Gurtner Printing, Salem, Virginia.

⁴ One of the founders of the Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine was Dr. Kent Roberts '51, a prominent Virginia veterinarian. The third dean of the college, Dr. Gerhardt Schurig received his PhD from Cornell in 1977.

KEYWORDS:

Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine
Cornell University
Virginia-Tech
Wilson Bell
Jeffrey Douglas
Gerhardt Schurig

TOPIC:

Colleges of Veterinary Medicine

LEADING QUESTION:

How do legacy colleges provide educational support for emerging colleges of veterinary medicine?

META-SUMMARY:

An elusive veterinary alumnus is revealed to be a major contributor to the profession.

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.