

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Flashback for Women Veterinarians

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

July 16, 2015

While participating in a strategic planning meeting for the Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative (WVLDI) at the AVMA Conference in Boston last week, I was struck by the desire of my colleagues to share stories of women who have struggled, who have succeeded, who have interesting stories as veterinarians. Though the context of the request was intended for contemporary women—and many of their stories have appeared at this site in the last two years—it is sometimes relevant to recall what it was like before the gender shift in veterinary medicine.

It made me reflect upon how the face of the profession has changed over the last two generations. And I thought of women who entered the profession half century ago, those who are the grandmothers of our current graduates.



Dr. Carolyn F. Comans, 1960, Graduation Photo
(© New York State Veterinary College, Cornell University)

When Carolyn Comans was in the fifth grade, her teacher asked her class to write an illustrated paper on what they would be when they grew up.

I could only draw cocker spaniels and horses' heads, so I said, "I would like to be a veterinarian." The teacher looked at the paper and said, "You can't do that. Women can't be veterinarians."



Dr. Patricia Thomson, 1960, Graduation Photo
(© New York State Veterinary College, Cornell University)

Patricia Thomson applied to veterinary college but despite her outstanding academic record and extensive experience working with a veterinarian while growing up, she was told she wouldn't get in. Meanwhile, her brother, a student at Iowa State University, reported to her that they had a wonderful veterinary school in Ames. Then she unexpectedly got a letter from him saying, "Sorry, they don't accept girls so I can't send you an application."

While full interviews for Comans¹ and Thomson² may be found elsewhere, the testimonial of Dr. Comans at the time of her 50th class anniversary is a special tribute to equanimity despite the harsh reality that so few women were being accepted into the profession. She reminisced of driving with her father down the west side of Cayuga Lake to begin her veterinary studies at Cornell. As they neared the south end of the lake close to Ithaca, he pointed across the lake to the bell tower that loomed as a sentinel high above the campus. "That's your future," he told his daughter. Dr. Comans remembered her feelings at the time,

In those days, I couldn't have gone to another school that was outstanding. Only Cornell took women. Notre Dame didn't. Princeton didn't. The teachers' college did and the women's college did. But I could not have gone to another school of quality. Only Cornell.

As today's students and young veterinarians struggle with challenges of debt, work-life balance and other professional and personal challenges, it would be good for them to reflect upon the fact that they stand on the shoulders of the women who preceded them, and who overcame obstacles that are unheard of today. Despite being told that women couldn't be veterinarians, Comans and Thomson led distinguished careers in private practice, contributing in substantive ways both to the profession and to their respective families.

Rather than bitterness and resentment, Dr. Comans expressed gratitude. What a remarkable testimonial for all generations.

¹ Smith, Donald F. A Biography of and Interview with Carolyn Foster Comans, DVM. *An Enduring Veterinary Legacy*. eCommons, Cornell University Library. July 28, 2010. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/17032>

² Smith, Donald F. A Biography of and Interview with Patricia Thomson Herr, DVM. *An Enduring Veterinary Legacy*. eCommons, Cornell University Library. July 20, 2010. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/17052>

KEYWORDS:

Carolyn F. Comans
Patricia Thomson
Gender Discrimination
Women in Veterinary Medicine
Cornell University
Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative

TOPIC:

Women in Veterinary Medicine

LEADING QUESTION:

What did women who wanted to be veterinarians face in the 50s and 60s?

META-SUMMARY:

Women veterinarians of 60 years ago opened the door for women leaders in the veterinary profession today.

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.