

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Interviews for Women Veterinarians

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

July 30, 2015

In the previous posting I discussed how a half century ago female students who aspired to become veterinarians were generally discouraged from the profession because, “Girls can’t do that!” But for those few who were selected to be interviewed to fill the two or so slots held for women in each class, the interviews were surprisingly predictable.

It perhaps wasn’t so much that the admission committee was going out of its way to make it more difficult for women—after all, they anticipated choosing two from a cohort of just eight or ten short-listed candidates each year—but that they just didn’t know how to interview women. They had no trouble knowing what questions to ask male candidates, such as:

- How do you harness a horse?
- What’s the price of beef in Cortland County?
- Can you back a loaded four-wheeled wagon up an incline?

But what do you ask a woman when the male faculty had rarely done it before? One woman interviewed at Cornell just assumed they didn’t know what to say, “Talk about clueless, they had no idea how to deal with interviewing a woman,” she reported half a century later.¹

The issue of what they wore to their interview and their social habits were recurring themes, at least at Cornell where the chair of the committee upheld the agricultural land grant priorities of the college with a tenacious grip.

Dr. Carolyn Comans followed a young man who wore his FFA (Future Farmers of America) jacket to the interview. She, on the other hand, wore a dress she had made herself.²

In those days, animal feed came in patterned cotton bags and you could take those bags and make things. A pot holder may have been more appropriate but I made a dress. So I was sitting there, so proudly, in my handmade dress and was asked, “Did you make that dress?” And I said, “Yes, yes I did.” And he said, “Did you make it out of a feed sack?” And I said, “Yes, yes I did.” And I got in. I don’t know if he was appalled or pleased, but I was accepted.

Classmate Dr. Patricia Thomson had the same question asked of her,³

I can remember sitting there with my legs crossed at the ankles and arms folded in my lap. I was wearing a gray suit, my best stuff. One of the first questions was,

“Did you make your own suit?” All I said was, “No.” I think it was just a matter that nobody knew what to do, so that was my interview.

Five years later, in 1961, Linda Reeve sat before an admission committee that had a similar composition as for the previous two women. As she was leaving for the interview, her roommate told her she looked more like she was going to a party than to an interview. She responded, “I’m going to interview with a bunch of men. I want them to like looking at me.”⁴

They asked me if I cooked, if I sewed, if I danced, if I enjoyed dancing. Did I date? Then he [the committee chair] asked, “If you were to marry someone who had a vocation out in the desert, somewhere where there weren’t any animals, just what would you do with this degree?” That one really threw me because I thought he must have known I was dating a guy from Dartmouth who was studying oceanography.

Dr. Linda Reeve Peddie was the only woman with 59 men, and graduated at the top of the class. She led a very successful career and recently returned to Cornell for her 50th class reunion.⁵



Dr. Linda Reeve Peddie, 1965, Graduation Photo
(© New York State Veterinary College, Cornell University)

While today’s students may cringe at such overt discriminatory techniques, these women laid a foundation that we should all take the time to acknowledge and celebrate.

What would happen if each of us sifted through the AVMA directory, or our respective alumni directory, and located a woman who graduated in that generation? A brief note to thank her for being a trailblazer might put a smile on her face. It may also be the beginning of a wonderful friendship.

¹ 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>

² Smith, Donald F. A Biography of and Interview with Carolyn Foster Comans, DVM. *A Enduring Veterinary Legacy*. eCommons, Cornell University Library. July 28, 2010. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/17032>

³ 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>

⁴ Smith, Donald F. A Biography of and Interview with Patricia Thomson Herr, DVM. *An Enduring Veterinary Legacy*. eCommons, Cornell University Library. June 21, 2010. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/17052>

⁵ Smith, Donald F. The Only Woman in Her Class. *Veterinary Legacy*. February 5, 2011. <http://veterinarylegacy.blogspot.com/2011/02/only-woman-in-her-class.html>

KEYWORDS:

Carolyn F. Comans
Patricia Thomson Herr
Linda Reeve Peddie
Gender Discrimination
Women in Veterinary Medicine
Cornell University

TOPIC:

Women in Veterinary Medicine

LEADING QUESTION:

What interview questions were asked of women candidates for veterinary college in the 50s and 60s?

META-SUMMARY:

Sixty years ago, awkward interview questions still lead to acceptance of women candidates for 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.