

**A Biography of and Interview with
Patricia Thomson Herr, DVM**
Class of 1960, College of Veterinary Medicine, Cornell University
Authors and Interviewers: Dana Peirce, Cornell Class of 2013
and Dr. Donald F. Smith, *Austin O. Hooey Dean Emeritus*

The Value of Mentors

Each time Patricia Thomson heard, “*Girls can’t be veterinarians,*” there was someone else who encouraged her to follow her dream. In addition to her parents who faithfully supported her pursuits, Dr. Stanley Garrison, the man who skillfully performed surgery on the family’s best sheep, thought she would make a fine veterinarian. Though she was just a teenager at the time of the operation, Dr. Garrison invited her to accompany him on farm calls whenever possible. “*Dr. Garrison played an important role in my developing veterinary interests,*” Dr. Thomson acknowledged years later, “*and even hired me to work during my summer vacations.*” Stan Garrison was “*the finest mentor one could have.*”¹



Patricia Thomson, 1960

©New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph

Others were not so encouraging, including her pre-vet advisor who flatly informed her, “*You won’t get in,*” and a Cornell University counselor who suggested that medical school would be the better route for someone with her excellent grades. Trish was admitted to the veterinary college, however, and became one of three women to receive the Cornell DVM degree in 1960.

During the late 1950s, women were still something a novelty, and unbridled gender discrimination was common in the educational environment at Cornell. Sometimes the male students were helpful—like facilitating their attendance on farm calls when a male professor tried to depart from the college without them—and sometimes they just did their own thing, with hilarious results. The legendary example of the latter was when the three women, having been excluded from a road trip to central Pennsylvania to visit a Standardbred breeding farm, decided to use the time to drive to Florida to visit a circus veterinarian. “*We didn’t tell anybody, but we just had a ball,*” recalled Dr. Thomson.²

Dr. Thomson’s career has been remarkable in both the breadth and the quality of her accomplishments. After two years in small animal practice in New Jersey with Dr. Joseph Engle who operated one of the foremost clinics of the era,³ she was invited by the director of

¹ Patricia Thomson Herr, in the Introduction to *Burnt Hills Veterinary Trails*, Penny Heritage, Heritage Farm Publishing, 2005.

² Dr. Patricia Thomson Herr, personal communication 2010.

³ Dr. Joseph Engle ’26 was one of the founders of the American Animal Health Association. Dr. Engle was supportive of women as veterinarians and his practice was a welcoming place for female students and new graduates (Ms. Claire Engle, daughter of Dr. Engle, personal communication 2010.)

the Small Animal Clinic, Dr. Ellis Leonard, to return to Cornell. Under the guidance of Dr. Leonard, she served in 1962-63 as the first woman medical interne⁴ in the Department of Small Animal Medicine and Surgery.

Following her year in academia, she and her husband, a 1963 Cornell veterinary graduate,⁵ worked in upstate New York, then started their own practice in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. They built the Manheim Pike Veterinary Hospital and soon established themselves as one of the most progressive practices in the area. Dr. Thomson—she practiced under her original name though that was unusual at that time—did mostly small animal medicine while her husband concentrated more on surgery and the large animal clientele.

Dr. Thomson became involved in the Pennsylvania Veterinary Medical Association, serving in increasingly responsible positions and was elected as the association's first woman president for 1989.⁶ She also served on College of Veterinary Medicine's Advisory Council at Cornell and as a member of the President's Council of Cornell Women. She was active in fund raising, serving as co-chair of the veterinary college's Tower Club Committee where she and her husband led by example.

Dr. Thomson and her husband have three children: son Roger, a physical therapist, and daughters Martha Brown, a lawyer, and Elizabeth Collier, a music therapist. Though now retired from veterinary medicine, Trish is active in research and writing associated with her longstanding interest in local history and early American life in southeastern Pennsylvania. She is an authority on the textile arts of Lancaster County and an author of five books.

Her most recent, "Rags to Rugs",⁷ is a delightful compendium and analysis of hooked and handsewn rugs of Pennsylvania, replete with colorful photographs and exquisite commentary of the animal-rich culture of rural Pennsylvania. Trish and her husband (who has complementary expertise and authorship of books in pewter arts) are antique dealers who specialize in distinctive Pennsylvania German decorative arts of the 18th and 19th centuries.⁸ Drs. Thomson and Herr demonstrate once again that veterinarians often pursue interesting and eclectic interests following their retirement from veterinary practice.

Though Dr. Thomson's veterinary mentors are now deceased, they would be proud to recognize the extraordinary achievements, both professional and personal, of the woman they encouraged and supported during the formative stages of her career. As would be expected of one who has been the recipient of such support, Trish has given back, and continues to provide, for her beloved profession.

⁴ The current designation is 'intern'.

⁵ Donald M. Herr '63, originally from Refton, Pa.

⁶ Dr. Thomson was named Pennsylvania's Veterinarian of the Year in 1990.

⁷ *Rags to Rugs*, by Patricia T. Herr, Schiffer Publishing Ltd, Atglen, PA, 2008.

⁸ <http://www.theherrsanitiques.com/>.

Interview

[Listen to the Interview](#)

Interviewee: Patricia Thomson Herr, DVM
Interviewers: Ms. Dana Peirce '13, with Dr. Donald F. Smith
Interview Date: June 12, 2010
Location: Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine



©Photograph by Donald F. Smith

Dr. Patricia Thomson Herr, 6/12/10

Interviewer's Note:

Having known Trish and her husband (Dr. Donald M. Herr '63) for many years, I was delighted that we were able to secure this interview during the Class of 1960's 50th reunion. Even more special was the opportunity to share the interview with one of our second-year students, Dana Peirce, whose questions and pacing led to a fascinating exchange of information including a perspective on balancing personal and professional responsibilities as a woman veterinarian. The impact of mentors in the life of any successful veterinarian is evident in Trish's description of the role that people like Drs. Garrison, Engle and Leonard had as she established her early career. (Dr. Donald F. Smith)

Ms. Dana Peirce:

This is Dana Peirce. It is June 12, 2010, and we're here with Dr. Patricia Thomson, Class of 1960. Please start by telling us where you grew up, and how you got interested in veterinary medicine.

Dr. Patricia Thomson:

I grew up in upstate New York, Schenectady. The first few years of my life were spent in the city, and then my dad bought a farm, a gentlemen's farm. We raised sheep and chickens and, of course, I had a horse. I had always wanted a horse, and I was in fourth grade when we moved to the farm.

I can remember when our first sheep had a problem and we called the veterinarian, the first answer we got was *a sick sheep is a dead sheep*. So we called another veterinarian, Dr. Stan Garrison, who did come and treat it. The sheep had an everted [prolapsed] uterus, so we laid her in a wheelbarrow—I had to hold her head, and he was working on the rear-end. He extracted this round thing, a tumor, and he said, "*So you want to be a veterinarian,*" and he threw it at me. And I caught it, and he was very impressed. So that probably sort of sealed it right there.

Dr. Stan Garrison¹ was a graduate of Cornell, and I began to hang around his practice, went on large animal calls a lot with him. He had a mixed practice. I wanted to be a veterinarian—nobody had said that I couldn't be—and my parents were very supportive.

Actually I spent a lot of time with Stan Garrison, and saw a lot of practice that way, probably as early as seventh grade. So, I decided to be a veterinarian. As we progressed in high school, I took biology and chemistry and physics (which most of the girls didn't take) and I loved them. It was easy stuff for me.

I was a New York state resident, so it was logical to go to the Ag school [at Cornell]². It never occurred to me that I might not get in. I did not apply anywhere else because why would you apply somewhere else? You've got Cornell!

So I came up here for an interview for Ag school, and I had applied as a pre-vet major. I talked to a man—whose name I forget, fortunately I guess—and he was interviewing me. He looked at what I had and said, "*You're applying as a pre-vet? You won't get in, because girls don't get into vet school.*" I went home, all panicked. He suggested I reapply as just 'general agriculture'. But on the following Monday, I got my acceptance in the mail—after he had told me that I wouldn't get in.

When I got here on campus, he was my advisor, but I actually never visited him again. What could he tell me? I applied [to veterinary college] after two years. And then, somebody said, "*Well you're probably not going to get in!*" Meanwhile, my brother was at Iowa State University, and he said, "*We've got a wonderful veterinary school out here; I'll send you an application.*" Then I got a letter from him saying, "*Sorry, they don't admit girls so I can't send you an application.*" So then I figured, well, I'll go to Cornell!

¹ Stanley E. Garrison '50, originally from Ballston Lake, NY; deceased October 10, 2008. Dr. Garrison's biography, written by Penny Heritage, is entitled *Burnt Hills Veterinary Tales* and published by Heritage Farm Publishing, Ballston Spa, 2005. The introduction is written by Dr. Thomson Herr.

² A minimum of two years of college experience was required to qualify for admission to veterinary college at Cornell.

I can remember Dean Hagan³ was part of the interview committee, and Dr. Danks⁴ and various other people. Talk about clueless, they had no idea how to deal with interviewing a woman. Obviously they must have interviewed some, but it wasn't the routine. I can remember sitting there with my legs crossed at the ankles and arms folded in my lap. I was wearing a gray wool suit, my best stuff.

The pre-vet people had told me you have to know the market price of beef and whatever in Cortland,⁵ and you have to know all this stuff related to agriculture. But the men on the committee were the same as I was, not knowing what to do. One of their first questions was, "*Did you make your own suit?*" I did sew, but I surely wasn't going to wear something I'd sewn for an interview, and so all I said was "*No.*" I think it was just a matter that nobody knew what to do, and that was my interview.

Meanwhile, I'd been told how hard it was [to get into the veterinary college], so I went down to Day Hall⁶ to get career advice. They looked over whatever information they had, and they said, "*Well you're not going to have any trouble getting into medical school, go to medical school.*" And I said, "*But I don't want to be a physician, I want to be a veterinarian.*"

Ms. Peirce:

What was it like, once you were here—there were a few other women in your class?

Dr. Thomson: Yes, we started out with four. The four of us did the first year, and the one woman (or *girl*, as they said at the time) was getting married and her husband was in the service and he was being sent somewhere, so she left: Sandy Mosher.⁷ So it was Lyn Comans,⁸ Susan Goddard,⁹ and myself. Yeah, so many of them [the male students]! I was fortunate because I was from Cornell, and had pre-vet, so I knew most of the other people in the class.

You mentioned the bathroom. There was this pass through. You had to go, not really through the actual men's room but the anteroom, because Dr. Leonard¹⁰ had a division between the small and the large animal clinics. There was a door that he had installed and he kept it locked, and the only way you could get from the large animal clinic over to the small animal clinic—unless you were going to go outside in the middle of winter—was to go through the anteroom for the men's room.

³ William A. Hagan, DVM, MS, DSc, professor of veterinary bacteriology and dean of the college (1932-59).

⁴ A. Gordon Danks '33, professor of veterinary surgery, head of Department of Surgery, director of the Large Animal Hospital.

⁵ Nearby town to Ithaca, known for its agriculture.

⁶ Central university administrative building.

⁷ Sandra M. Mosher, originally from Elmira, NY.

⁸ Carolyn Foster Comans '60, originally from Randolph, NY, now resides in Lady Lake, FL. See her biography and interview elsewhere in this collection.

⁹ Susan Goddard Walter '60, originally from Larchmont, NY; currently resides in St. Louis, Miss.

¹⁰ Ellis P. Leonard '34, professor and head of veterinary therapeutics and small animal diseases, director of the Small Animal Clinic. Dr. Leonard arrived at Cornell in 1948 and introduced aseptic surgery technique to the small animal clinic. To help achieve cleanliness in the clinical environment, he limited the movement of students and staff into the small animal clinic area by locking the door between the large and small animal clinics.

They didn't have actually a women's locker room and we were assigned lockers in the space that the maintenance people had. And we were low on the totem pole, the last thing they wanted was us students in their locker room, taking up space.

I think being in a fraternity—which obviously I wasn't¹¹—helped you because you had the example protocols and exams that faculty were going to give. I don't know how the other women felt, but I considered the male students to be like brothers, and they watched out for us and they sort of took care of us.

I can think of examples in junior year with ambulatory,¹² and I can remember that Francis Fox¹³ wasn't necessarily a proponent of women in the classes. In my ambulatory group, he would set up places to meet you as opposed to right outside the Ambulatory Clinic. You'd meet somewhere else on campus, and the guys would always tell us where it was [so we could join them on farm calls instead of being left behind].

Every year the junior class went down to Hanover Shoe Farms¹⁴, which is near where I now live. Women were never allowed to go. I don't know if it was as much because you were a woman as it was an issue of what would you do, where would you stay? We really took issue with that, and the assumption was that we would stay and we were supposed to report for class. Well there wasn't going to be a class; nobody was there!

So I had a car, a new car, a station wagon. I didn't have a radio, so we all pitched in, bought a radio, and we drove to Florida straight through, sharing the driving. A relative of Lyn's [classmate] was a circus veterinarian with Barnum and Bailey. And he set it up, we visited him and he talked to us about circus animals.

We just took turns driving (we didn't stop), and we just had a ball. It was our little way of saying, “*You know, we're not coming to class!*” And we didn't tell anybody, we just decided nobody needed to know. So that was a big deal, we had a lot of fun.

Ms. Peirce:

And then after Cornell, you said your husband was three years after you?

Dr. Thomson:

We didn't know each other yet. When I interviewed [for a job after graduation], they did it very informally. There were just notes on the bulletin board, interviews: So and so's having an interview: *Want new, recent graduate man to practice*. It was very specific [excluding women], but there were a couple of notes that said, *Will interview women (or girls, whatever)*.

¹¹ Women were not allowed in the veterinary fraternities at that time.

¹² Ambulatory clinic serviced local farms (mostly dairy cattle).

¹³ Francis H. Fox '45, professor of veterinary medicine and obstetrics, currently retired and resides in Ithaca, NY.

¹⁴ Hanover Shoe Farms, Hanover, Pa, <http://www.hanoverpa.com/>.

I think E. P. Leonard was responsible for letting me know that there was a practice in Summit, New Jersey with Dr. Engle,¹⁵ who was a Cornell graduate. Dr. Leonard had worked at that practice before he came here as head of the small animal clinic. I knew that Dr. Engle hired women and that he had hired women before.¹⁶ Why would I want to [consider a job] with somebody who wasn't interviewing women? There was no feminine movement at the time—that I know of—and it was just, well, you interview with people who were looking for somebody like you.

So I went to Summit, a small animal practice. [Dr. Engle] was one of the founding AAHA hospital members, so it was a great place to work. If you worked there, you could get a job or start your own hospital, or do whatever. It was a great experience.

Ms. Peirce:

How long were you there?

Dr. Thomson:

Two years, and that's how I met my husband. He was a farm guy with no small animal experience, so he came down [to Summit] as a student. Dr. Engle deemed himself a matchmaker and he had asked us to dinner together and stuff like that, and that's how it happened. By the time Don was a senior, we were getting married. We got married that summer [before his fourth year], but I ended up coming up here in the clinic [working for Dr. Leonard as an interne]. Don's fourth year was when I taught. Dr. Leonard was very careful so that he didn't get in my group, so I wasn't teaching my new husband.

Ms. Peirce:

So you taught here at Cornell?

Dr. Thomson:

Yes, as a clinician, not as a faculty, just as a small animal clinician. I made myself learn more because I had to teach other people. It was the best experience possible.

When we got married, we knew we were going to go back to Don's home: once you're from Lancaster, you just never get away. We ended up buying property and building a hospital. I practiced under the name, *Dr. Thomson*. That was something that Dr Engle told me, "*You're going to marry a man named Herr.*" And you're going to be Dr. Herr, and he's going to be Dr. Herr, and you're going to be hearing from clients, "*Who do you want to see, the him-Herr or the her-Herr?*"

We built this place, with an apartment to live. By then we had a child, so there was a baby carriage out once in awhile, and we heard that there was talk going around, "*Dr. Thomson*

¹⁵ Joseph B. Engle '26, one of the early and best-known small animal veterinarians of the period. Along with classmate, Mark Morris '26, and several others, he organized the American Animal Hospital Association in 1933, and served as its president in 1942-43.

¹⁶ Ms. Claire Engle, daughter of Dr. Engle, affirmed her father's supportive hiring practices of women veterinarians, personal communication, 2010.

and Dr. Herr had a baby!” At that time, that was pretty innovative, but it really was done just to be functional.

Dr. Thomson:

When we came to Pennsylvania, we went to our first state meeting and some nice Penn graduates took us under their wing and introduced us to people. There weren't any other Cornellians around, but they sort of adopted us. One happened to be on the Pennsylvania Veterinary Medical Association Board of Governors and he seemed to think it would really be good if I became involved in the state association.

I can remember they invited me and I was scared. It was the state PVMA, and they're all sitting around the table like this, and it was like, *“Well, we wanted to meet you, and get to know you, and we think that you should be active in our association.”* I went to the local group but I didn't do a whole lot during the first couple years of practice. Later, they thought that I should be on the state veterinary association board. So, all of a sudden, I was doing that. Our executive director, Ray Thompson, thought that I should become the first woman veterinary president of the state association.

I was still very clueless, but it was great group and I ended up being active in the state association, and they elected me president. Mr. Thompson was trying to say that I was the first woman of any state association but I think there was somebody else who had been the year before, so I didn't quite make that. Later I was on the state veterinary board for a couple terms, even beyond two terms. And that was a great learning situation, and made me aware that not all of us are good practitioners doing things the way we should (which was a little bit discouraging).

Ms. Peirce:

Do you have any other stories or clinical experiences that you want to talk about?

Dr. Thomson:

I look back and we joke about it now. Our oldest child, our son, was a child in a playpen. We used gas anesthesia, and the best place to keep him where somebody could watch him was in the middle of the surgery room, and so his playpen was on the floor. Who knows, the [anesthetic] gas down there was probably the most concentrated. We had two kids who were two years apart, and then another five years later. One of the things that would happen is the older kids would come home from school and be playing, and we had the baby in our back apartment. Periodically, the older kids would lock her in a cage somewhere. She still says she was mistreated, she could use a therapist because she was locked in a cage by her brother and sister!

Ms. Peirce:

Along those lines, what would be your recommendations about practicing as a woman, and balancing a family life?

Dr. Thomson:

Do what comes naturally. Fortunately it worked better for us because we're both veterinarians. It may be more of an issue if your husband's an architect, or he's traveling away a lot. With us, we could figure it out and we had a place at the office.

We have a wonderful partnership, and I think we talked about how we do things to a certain extent. But, you know, life just happens. We've always practiced together, but my cases were my cases. Don was doing large animal for the first few years and his cases were his cases. I tended not to do as much surgery. He did more of the surgery, and then as we progressed through our lives, he got interested in veterinary dentistry and he now practices only referral dentistry, one day a week.

End of interview.