

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

The Road Less Traveled

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

June 27, 2013

In a commencement address in New York City,¹ Animal Health expert Clinton Lewis² recently advised graduating DVMs not to fear the current veterinary work force challenges, but to embrace the future with hope built upon expanding the vision for career opportunities that include areas outside of clinical practice, non-traditional employers as well as traditional, and international venues as well as domestic. He said this would not only expand the job market for veterinarians and thereby broaden the influence of DVMs as comparative medical experts in new fields of medicine, commerce and education, but would also provide some of the most satisfying careers for veterinarians.

Like most veterinarians, I entered the profession wanting to treat illness and prevent disease. The fact that I did a residency and attained board-certification in surgery were incidental to my desire to treat a sick cow or horse and their herd or stable mates so they could be healthier and more productive for the work they were intended to do. But along the way, I discovered I liked teaching. I also found that applied research made me a more astute and innovative clinician, and a more informed and effective educator.

Through a series of unanticipated events, some beyond my control, I assumed increasingly responsible administrative roles relatively early in my career. That led to the opportunity to serve as veterinary dean, a position which I could never have imagined only a few years earlier.

When I finished my ten-year deanship at Cornell in 2007, I took a very long drive in a jeep with my dog. We stayed off the interstate and took the secondary roads, mostly, and we took our time. Just the two of us drove to Alaska and back, though we met Doris in Anchorage for an eight-day interlude before climbing in our jeep and retreating south as the early snows began to clothe the Rockies.

The 10,000 mile journey over 35 days allowed me to contemplate my future career goals. I knew I did not want another executive administrative job in academia, nor a job in industry. Rather, I wanted to return to teaching, feeling that the unique experiences and contacts from a decade as dean could have an impact on the rising generation of veterinarians.



My dog, Beau, at Lake Kluane in the Yukon, August 21, 2007

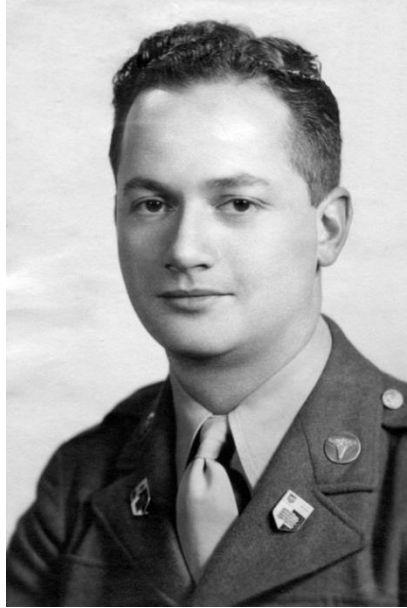
Photo by the author.

More specifically, I decided that I wanted to incorporate my childhood passion of history with a study of the people and events that brought veterinary medicine to where we are today, and could help show a path for the future. “There is nothing new under the sun,”³, or so the teacher⁴ said three millennia ago. Or, as Churchill and others have echoed in modern times, the best way to view the future is by knowing the past.

I wanted to test that hypothesis, as well as that aggravating notion, that history tends to repeat itself. So, in addition to returning to the classroom to teach traditional veterinary medicine, I also embarked on a series of interviews with veterinarians to hear what they had to say about this multi-faceted and adaptable profession of veterinary medicine.

Starting with a small grant, my goal was to meet and interview Cornell graduates from the 1930s, all eighteen or so. With a couple of exceptions, I completed that goal before branching out with additional financial support cobbled together from a gift here and there, and my own resources, to interview younger people and those who were graduates of other colleges. I developed an elective course for veterinary students called “Veterinary Medicine: The Versatile Profession”, that is in its fifth year in the upcoming academic year (2013-14). With the help of several people but most notably my wife, I developed two web sites⁵ and more recently launched this VeritasDVMblog with the support of Zoetis and Cornell University.

Some of the people whom I have met and interviewed have already been mentioned in these stories including Patricia Thomson Herr,⁶ Clarence Roberts⁷ and Daniel Skelton.⁸ Others will be highlighted in future blogs.



Dr. Morris L. Povar, 1944
(©Cornell University)

I think Clint Lewis would find the Morris Povar story that I mentioned in a story about World War II on June 18th⁹ might resonate with his admonition for new graduates to embrace a fuller spectrum of veterinary medicine. Povar spent the war years in California at a laboratory devoted to creating vaccines to counteract what many believed could have been a German biological attack. Though he would have preferred to stay in California afterwards to get a PhD at UC-Berkeley, he returned to the East when his brother, a veterinarian in Rhode Island, developed undulant fever from exposure to Brucellosis. Together, they built a mixed animal practice—and later, a progressive small animal practice—in East Providence, Rhode Island.¹⁰

Povar's career was interrupted again when he was called into government service during the Korean War. Working as adjutant for the colonel, Captain Povar was in charge of a group of 50 reserve officers and enlisted men stationed in New York City, providing meat and food inspection for the domestic and overseas war effort. He returned to Rhode Island following his discharge and the brothers expanded their small animal practice. In 1948, they built the Povar Animal Hospital that—with necessary modifications—survives to this day.¹¹

The opportunity for a research and academic career returned for Dr. Povar when he seized the opportunity to work with Brown University faculty involved in primate and other animal experimentation. His early consultation services grew into a major assignment assisting in the design and deployment of Brown's first major animal care facility for their new medical school. In 1970, he accepted a tenured position as professor of psychology and medical science and worked for the final two decades of his career as the university's only laboratory animal veterinarian. His work was so successful that he was appointed tenured professor in Psychology

and Medical Science in the School of Medicine.¹² “These were the happiest years of my life”, he told me.¹³

I think that’s what Clint Lewis was telling new veterinary graduates during his commencement address. Think broadly, follow the path even when it is outside your comfort zone, make the most of all your experiences, and do not be afraid to journey beyond traditional clinical medicine. For Morris Povar, for myself, and many others, seizing the opportunities along the way and being willing to take the road less-traveled when you come to a fork in life’s journey, makes all the difference.¹⁴

¹ Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine Commencement, Avery Fisher Hall, New York City, June 10, 2013.

² Clinton Lewis, Jr., Executive V.P. and President of Zoetis, U.S. Operations (formerly Pfizer Animal Health)

³ Ecclesiastes 1:9 (NIV)

⁴ King Solomon is sometimes referred to as “the teacher”, Ecclesiastes 1:1.

⁵ Smith, Donald F. Legendary Tuskegee Veterinarian Dr. Eugene W. Adams Passes. *Veterinary Legacy*. February 21, 2016. www.veterinarylegacy.blogspot.com. www.vet.cornell.edu/legacy

⁶ Patricia Thomson Herr, What’s in a Name? *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. June 13, 2013.

⁷ Clarence Roberts, Dr. Clarence R. Roberts: Corporate Veterinarian and CEO. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. May 30, 2013.

⁸ Daniel Skelton, Dr. Daniel Skelton: The Story of a 1930s-educated African American Veterinarian. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. May 26, 2013

⁹ Veterinary Education and Non-Combat Veterinary Service During World War II. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. June 20, 2013

¹⁰ Povar Morris L DVM (retired veterinarian in Boca Raton, FL, now deceased). Interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) 2010 Apr 28. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/15200>

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ A reference to the Robert Frost poem, The Road Not Taken.

KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine

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Patricia Thomson Herr

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Careers in Veterinary Medicine

Traveling with pets
Cornell University

TOPIC:

Careers in Veterinary Medicine

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.