

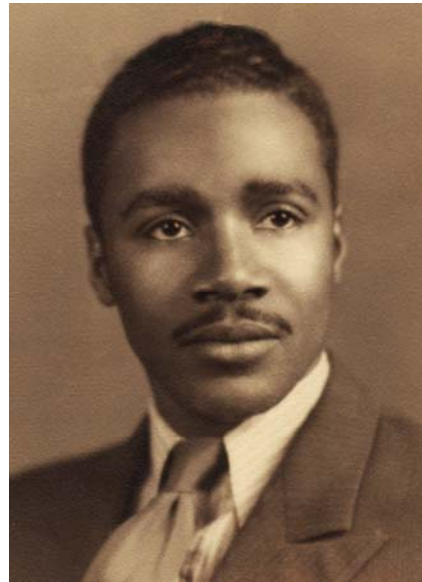
**A Biography of and Interview¹ with
Daniel Skelton, DVM
Class of 1939, College of Veterinary Medicine, Cornell University**
Author: Dr. Donald F. Smith, *Austin O. Hooey Dean Emeritus*

Country-boy Waiter to USDA Inspector

Dan Skelton '39 described his ascent from humble roots in rural Arkansas as moving

...from country-boy waiter to top-dog veterinarian in the federal food inspection service for the State of Kansas.

Daniel was born in 1912 near Brunswick, Tennessee. After his father deserted the family when he was just eight, Dan moved in with his schoolteacher aunt, who encouraged his academic pursuits.² In 1934, he received an undergraduate degree at LeMoyne College in Memphis, majoring in chemistry and biology. As with many students during the early years of the Depression, Dan worked his way through college. Fortune smiled kindly on this young African-American student, however, as Dan's job was in the residence of the university president, an Ivy League-educated man.



New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph

Daniel Skelton 1939

President Sweeney was Irish, raised in Boston and a graduate of Harvard; he was brilliant. I worked as his waiter and chauffeur—I did everything for the president—and I also helped his wife who was a volunteer with the Memphis Humane Society. I started out wanting to be a doctor, but the president convinced me I should become a veterinarian because I liked animals so much. His advice was for me to move to New York and apply to Cornell University which had free tuition for New York residents.

I graduated on a Tuesday night in Memphis, singing songs at the commencement ceremony. As soon as the program was over, Mrs. Sweeney drove me to the train station and on Thursday, less than 48-hours later, I was washing dishes in Brooklyn.

I wrote to Cornell's veterinary college, but was rejected. They told me that only one-in-six could be accepted. I applied two more times, but to no avail. Discouraged, I called President Sweeney. "Don't do anything", he said. "I will look after it." I don't know what he did, but within a week, I learned that I had been accepted!

¹ Telephone interview with Dr. Daniel Skelton at his residence in Wichita, Kansas, January 7, 2008.

² *The Wichita Eagle*, Wichita, Kansas. March 29, 1990.

Dan matriculated with 43 other veterinary students—all white—in fall 1935. Like most of his classmates during the Depression, he worked long hours while going to classes.

I was working all of the time in the first year and had little time to study. Because my grades were suffering, President Sweeney sent me some money so I didn't have to work quite as much. I made it through the first year, but then nearly busted out of pathology in my second year, getting grades of 55 on the lab part of the exam and 57 on the lecture part of the course.

Desperate, I got out my motorcycle—it was winter, zero outside—and took it for a ride. I came back shivering. My friends gave me some aspirin and sent me to the hospital and I took my pathology books with me. The doctor didn't take me seriously but nonetheless let me stay in the hospital until Saturday. All this time, I was cramming for pathology. The professor let me take the exam a second time and I got 95 on the lecture part and 95 on the lab part and they let me stay.

Dan had greater academic success in the remaining two years. He was married in 1937 and graduated on schedule in 1939. Though described as quiet by classmates, he was well-liked and respected. “*Dan was a nice person; he was a lot of fun. We kidded him a lot and he kidded us. He was an average student, worked hard. He always dressed well. He was fun to be around. He was a little stand offish with us, but was well thought-of.*”³

Dan was one of three students in his class to join the federal government’s Bureau of Animal Industry after finishing the DVM program.

After graduation, I was accepted into graduate school at Cornell. However, I couldn't accept the offer because the government required that I do meat inspection. I wanted to be assigned to a slaughter plant in a big city where bigotry would not be as pronounced, but instead they stationed me at a meat packing plant in Cedar Rapids, Iowa and paid me \$2,000 salary.

It was a small town, mostly white, and the people referred to me—I was the town's first black veterinarian—as ‘a fly in cream’. I decided not to make any waves or try to walk on water. For example, I didn't snitch when the men deliberately missed TB lesions in the slaughter house.

My wife was also unhappy in Cedar Rapids because she had no friends and there were no other professionals in the town, except a drunken dentist.

After one and one-half years, I was given a promotion to supervisor, but it was over the objection of some of the men in the plant. One of the workers in another part of the plant said to his buddy who was assigned to me (making sure I heard his comment), “How do you like a N----- supervising you? What is the world coming to?”

³ Albert P. Pontick '39, personal communication (interview), 2008.

In 1942, Dr. Skelton was transferred to Wichita, Kansas, a city of about 115,000 people at the time. Though it was still a segregated community, he and his wife were much happier living in a larger community.

The facility to which he was assigned was a dilapidated packing house, but after getting it cleaned up and renovated, he reported, *I was afraid of nobody*. He was promoted to circuit supervisor in 1972, and was in charge of 22 packinghouses and two dozen lay and veterinary inspectors throughout central Kansas. When he retired on April 1, 1990, Dr. Skelton was the central Kansas circuit supervisor responsible for the inspection of meat, poultry and packinghouses for the Department of Agriculture in Kansas.⁴

Dr. Skelton was an avid golfer and combined the travel associated with his work, both in Kansas and in association with attendance at national meetings, with the pleasure of playing at courses throughout the country. He was one of the people who helped integrate city-owned golf courses in Wichita after World War II and was still playing in his early 90s.⁵

He and his wife, Elnora, had two children, Janice and Dennis. One of his grandchildren, Debi Thomas, achieved distinction as a world class figure skater, winning the U.S. and world championships in 1986 while a freshman student at Stanford. She was named Wide World of Sports Athlete of the Year that year. She won a second national title and an Olympic medal in 1988, then went to medical school and is now an orthopedic surgeon.

Dr. Skelton remarried following Elnora's death in 1998. He continued to lead an active life for several years and marked his 97th birthday on September 10, 2009.

⁴ *Wichita Eagle*, March 29, 1990.

⁵ *Wichita Eagle*, August 9, 2004.