

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Women in Veterinary Medicine: Dr. Patricia O'Connor [Halloran], Cornell 1939

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
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Cornell's Class of 1939 included three women, but **Patricia O'Connor** was the favorite. Not timid and meek like Elizabeth Beckley, nor strident and audacious like Rikki von Decken-Luers, "Pat was loved by all of us, and she was fun," said Dr. Albert Pontick as he reminisced about their college days.¹ Choosing not to hang out with the other women in the class, Pat's best friends were the guys and she shared a mutual friendship, perhaps adoration, with many of her classmates.

Dr. Pontick continued,

She always told us that our neck needed to be washed or our shirt was dirty. She was a mother to us all. We hated her for that and told her we were working [at outside jobs] but she would say, "Well, you don't come to class looking like that!"

Pat worked hard for her marks and was a good student. She chided us for not working as hard. She took a lot of teasing from us [because] she was the only girl and she could have any of the boys. [But then] she hooked up with Halloran, so the teasing stopped.²

John Murray, one of the more mature men in the class, was particularly fond of Pat and told me with a chuckle one day how Rikki would sit at one end of the front row in lecture with her dog tucked under her desk, and Pat would sit at the other end, wearing a stylish dress or skirt and with her legs neatly crossed in front of her in a manner that was distracting to the professors.³

Patricia was born in New York City in 1914 and grew up in Buffalo with her mother and step-father.⁴ Animals, large and small, surrounded her during her formative years and she would play doctor to her own dogs and cats, anticipating that one day she would become a real veterinarian.⁵

When the Depression hit, she worried about not being able to afford an education. However, a relative's bequest of \$16,000 relieved that concern and she entered Cornell in 1935.⁶ After

graduating in 1939, she spent one year in small animal practice in Charleston, West Virginia, then married a classmate she had been dating in college, Dr. John Halloran Jr.⁷



Patricia O'Connor Halloran, graduation photo New York State Veterinary College, 1939
(© Cornell University)

They moved to Staten Island where her father-in-law, also a veterinarian, had a general practice. John Jr. did the large animal work—at that time there were many riding stables and some cattle and small ruminants on Staten Island—and Pat spent her days in the small animal clinic and on house calls. Though her husband was paid a reasonable wage by his father, she was neither paid for the small animal clinic work she did, nor for the miles she put on her car making house calls. Though she loved the work, she was overjoyed when the Staten Island Zoo called her and interviewed her for a paying job.⁸

Dr. O'Connor was pregnant with her second child in fall 1942 when she started working at the city-owned zoo as veterinarian and chief animal caretaker. She anticipated that she would be relieved of her job when the war was over and male veterinarians returned, but she stayed on for 28 years.⁹ Her zoo career was iconic for that generation. She traveled to domestic and international meetings, and she developed close associations with public health officials (some veterinarians) in the greater New York City area. She was extremely proud of the extensive bibliography of diseases of wild mammals and birds that she compiled, published in 1955 by the American Veterinary Medical Association.¹⁰

When she was widowed in 1966, Dr. O'Connor retired from the zoo and returned to the small animal hospital that her husband had operated. She continued to manage that clinic for several

more years, though with fewer and fewer clients. To her chagrin, the number of veterinarians on Staten Island increased, moving in around her. She became known occasionally – though in a loving and respectful way – as the “little old [veterinarian] lady on Broad Street.”¹¹

In 1998, in memory and out of profound respect for her career as a zoo veterinarian, a dinner-tribute was held on Staten Island in her honor. My wife and I attended the function and saw the confidence, spunk, and wisdom of this veterinarian who had been such a leader by example. Their love and respect for her never having been diminished, many surviving classmates from 60 years earlier sent messages of congratulations.

The following year, Patricia moved to Indiana to be near family. Her communication with me, once robust and contemplative, became less regular and more perfunctory as we celebrated anniversaries and acknowledged special holidays. She died on July 8, 2003.

¹ Pontick, Albert P. (DVM Cornell 1939, now deceased), interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University). 2008, Apr 2. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/12794>

² *Ibid.*

³ Murray, John D. (DVM Cornell 1939, now deceased) unrecorded conversation with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University), circa 2009.

⁴ Pat’s father died when she was an infant.

⁵ *Women in Veterinary Medicine. Profiles of Success. A Series of Autobiographies*, edited by Dr. Sue Drum and Dr. H. Whiteley, Iowa State University Press, Ames, IA, 1992; 150-165.

⁶ Dr. O’Connor’s preveterinary requirements were fulfilled by one year at the University of Alabama (1934-35).

⁷ *Women in Veterinary Medicine, Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ She said that the only reason she got the zoo job was that the male veterinarians were working for the war effort.

¹⁰ *Women in Veterinary Medicine, Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

KEYWORDS:

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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.