

## Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

# James Law, Teacher of Veterinary Medicine

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

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The people who established successful veterinary colleges in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were visionary, resolute, self-reliant and bright. All were able to withstand great periods of uncertainty and unanticipated challenges.

Some of these pioneers were entrepreneurs and others were scholars. All were teachers. But for one man, James Law of Cornell, his many accomplishments in clinical medicine, epidemiology, and public health are accompanied by his passion to teach and mentor the next generation of veterinarians, veterinary scientists, and comparative pathologists. His principal goal, it seemed, was to have his legacy live through his students.

James Law's story can be found in earlier postings at this site.<sup>1,2</sup> A graduate of the Edinburgh Veterinary College, Law was one of the handful of founding faculty when Cornell began instruction in 1868. Throughout his 40-year-professional life at Cornell, Law's students can be considered in several clusters, each cohort having an impact on animal health, and in some cases, a major impact on human health as well.

Though he was relatively young to have achieved faculty status, having graduated just 11 years earlier, he had availed himself of post graduate instruction in medicine (London) and veterinary medicine (Alfort and Lyons, France), as well as having taught veterinary medicine in both Edinburgh and London. Not only did he have a deep intellect, but he was a magnificent and prolific writer. He was also a builder, a person who saw what needed to be done, and did it.

When Cornell went for several years before filling the chair in agriculture with a suitable professor, Law stepped in to help fill the gap. This, along with his desire to have agricultural students develop an understanding of livestock health, represented a substantial portion of his teaching activities in the early days of the university.

Among the group of non-veterinary students whom Law taught were three who would become so distinguished as to affect the course of comparative medicine and veterinary science. Theobald Smith entered Cornell in 1877 and was granted a degree in natural science four years later. He then returned to his hometown of Albany for medical school and was awarded the MD two years later, before returning to Cornell for graduate work. During his subsequent career in Washington, he was the principal scientist behind the discovery of the organism that was named Salmonella, after Smith's boss, Daniel Salmon. He later moved to Harvard and Princeton where his work distinguished him as the foremost comparative pathologist of the period. His

legacy lives at New York City's Rockefeller University where one of the primary buildings bears his name.

Cooper Curtice was a classmate of Smith (BS, 1877). He received his veterinary degree from the Columbia Veterinary College in New York City, and his MD in Washington. Like Smith, he worked for Daniel Salmon at the Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI) and also in Albany, New York, where he had an important role in developing techniques to eradicate tuberculosis. His greatest accomplishment was his elucidation of the life cycle of the tick that became important in the control of Texas fever in cattle.

Leonard Pearson, who was to become the third dean at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Veterinary Medicine, was another of Law's most accomplished undergraduate students, receiving his BS in Agriculture before moving to Philadelphia where he was awarded the VMD in 1890.

James Law's rigorous standards for admission to the veterinary degree program, and his insistence that the veterinary curriculum be a full four years of study, proved to be a major roadblock for most aspiring veterinarians. Indeed, and as noted above, neither Curtice nor Pearson stayed at Cornell for their BVM (Bachelor of Veterinary Medicine, the educational equivalent of the DVM), choosing instead the shortened curricula at Columbia and the University of Pennsylvania. Hundreds more aspiring veterinarians went north to the Ontario Veterinary College in Toronto, where they could enter veterinary college without a high school diploma and become veterinarians after only two semesters, six months of instruction.



*Daniel Elmer Salmon*  
(©Cornell University)

Only four men received their veterinary degrees from Cornell in the first decades of Law's program. The most famous of these was Daniel Salmon, who entered Cornell when instruction began in 1868. As noted in a story written here last fall,<sup>3</sup> Salmon's 22-year tenure as head of

the BAI left such an indelible legacy on both animal and public health that he is generally considered one of the most important veterinarians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A concise summary of his accomplishments was written by Greg Cima in his series on great veterinarians for the profession's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>4</sup>

The other consequential veterinary graduate in those early days was Dr. Fred Kilborne, who also spent much of his career at the BAI with Salmon and Smith. His role in establishing the fact that the tick transmitted Texas Fever led to a seminal paper published in the Bureau's 1893 annual report, and a prominent place in the history of animal health, specifically, and the transmission of infectious agents through an intermediary host, more generally.<sup>5</sup>

When the State of New York passed legislation, in 1894, to establish the New York State Veterinary College<sup>6</sup> as the first contract college at Cornell—it was ten years before the College of Agriculture was established by the State—James Law's dream of publically-funded veterinary education was realized. He assembled a group of faculty, three of whom he had taught as undergraduates at Cornell, and they began instruction in 1896.

One little known fact about Law is his willingness to admit women into the veterinary curriculum. His first female student, Stella de Liancount Berthier, arrived from England in 1905 on the steamer, *Luciania*, at the request of Professor Hobday of the Royal Veterinary College in London. Though she was a successful student, her interest did not extend beyond companion animals. She wrote at least two letters complaining to Law about the preponderance of large animals in the curriculum before abandoning her studies and returning to England. A second woman, Florence Kimball from Connecticut, commenced her studies two years later and became Cornell's first women DVM graduate.

By the time Law retired in 1908, he had graduated well over 100 veterinarians, and his reputation as one of the most consequential educators in the history of veterinary medicine was fully established.

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, Donald F. James Law: He Helped Establish a University and Founded a Veterinary College, Part I. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. April 10, 2014

<sup>2</sup> Smith, Donald F. James Law: He Helped Establish a University and Founded a Veterinary College, Part II. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. April 11, 2014

<sup>3</sup> Smith, Donald F. Daniel Elmer Salmon, First DVM. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. October 2, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Cima, Greg. "[LEGENDS, America's First DVM. Daniel E. Salmon Helped Reduce Disease in Animals and Humans](#)." *JAVMA News*, 244, volume 5 (March 1, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Leonard, Ellis. *A Cornell Heritage. Veterinary Medicine. 1868-1908*. (Ithaca, New York: New York State College of Veterinary Medicine, 1979), 155.

#### KEYWORDS:

James Law

History of Veterinary Medicine

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Theobald Smith  
Fred Kilborne  
Cooper Curtis  
Daniel Salmon  
Cornell University  
Women in Veterinary Medicine

TOPIC:

Cornell University

LEADING QUESTION:

What pioneer United States veterinarian was a master educator?

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.