

## Challenging the Land Grant Mission: Cornell's Class of 1939, Part II

**Editor's Note:** Part I of this article described how the demographic profile of Cornell's Class of 1939 was at variance with the traditional land-grant culture and priorities of the era.<sup>1</sup> The class members were older, more urban, and better educated than the college preferred at the time.<sup>2</sup> It also was a very diverse class, with three women, an African-American man, eight Jewish students, and one Chinese man.

Donald F. Smith

By Dr. Donald F. Smith  
December 19, 2013

Though public interest in companion animals began to expand during the 1930s, Cornell's land-grant priority left little opportunity for teaching or research involving dogs and cats, and only two faculty members had dedicated responsibilities for teaching small animal medicine and therapeutics.

Dr. Clifford Hoppenstedt, a 1935 graduate, summarized Cornell's educational priorities, "Cornell was a land-grant college. It was basically for agriculture... The land grant college worked on behalf of the farmer."<sup>3</sup>

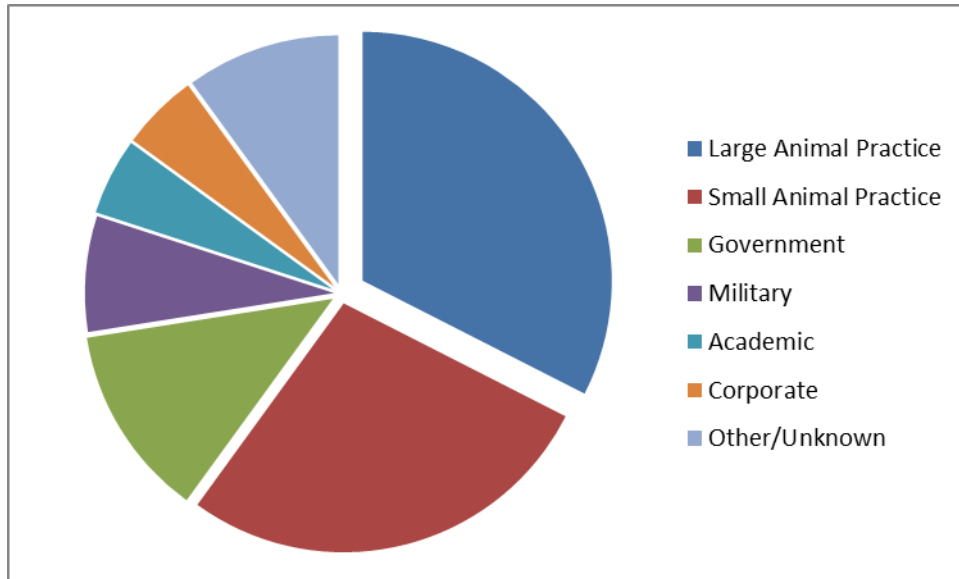
The land-grant mission not only guided admissions criteria, but also career expectations for graduates as listed in the 1935-36 college catalogue.<sup>4</sup>

1. Medical department of the US Army
2. Bureau of Animal Industry
3. State, County, or District veterinarians
4. Municipal veterinarians (inspectors of food and milk)
5. Serving on commissions for disease control of tuberculosis, etc.
6. Educators in comparative pathology (agriculture and medical colleges)
7. Private veterinary practice (for agricultural species)

The actual profile of career pathways for the Class of 1939 bore little resemblance to this listing of potential jobs when the students graduated four years later. Sixty percent of the graduates entered private practice as their first job, split almost evenly between general (large animal) practice, and small animal practice. While the Depression had a profound impact on the job prospects for graduates (especially with the paucity of large animal positions), it is hard to

escape the fact that the college's catalogue (if not the faculty as a whole) was out of touch with the reality of the importance of small animal medicine and the redistribution of other job opportunities from government-sponsored to private practice.

The following graph shows the career distribution of new graduates (1939).



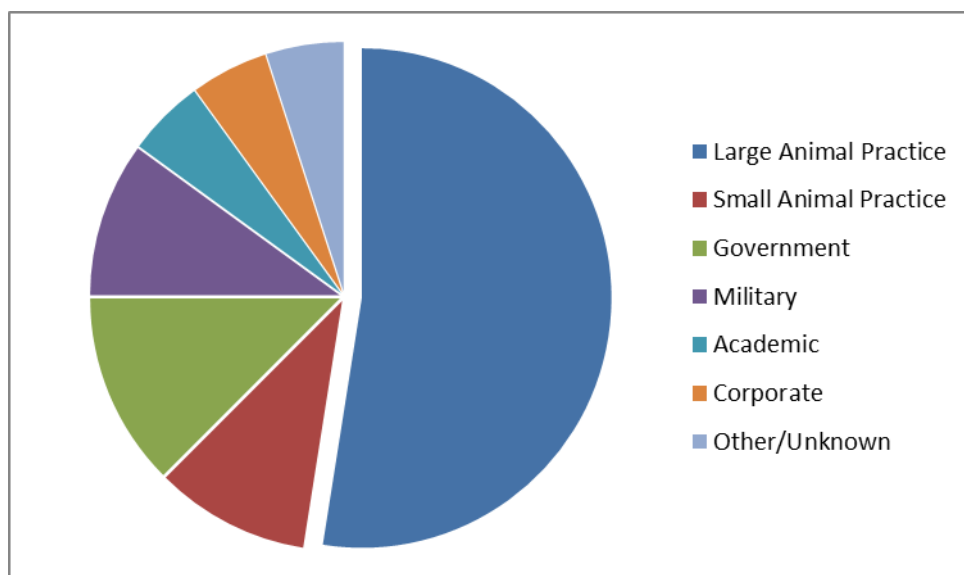
*Employment for Graduates of Cornell's DVM Class of 1939 upon their graduation.*

Two years later, after the attack on Pearl Harbor and the entry of the US into WWII, 15 of the men in the Class of 1939 were commissioned to enter the US Army or Navy. Twelve served in the Bureau of Animal Industry either in the continental US or abroad during the war, and three were engaged in combat duty in Africa, Asia, and Europe.

It is not possible to predict what would have happened to the long-term employment profile had the war not interrupted the personal and professional lives of so many members of this class. Some men were forced to sell their practices while they were away from home. Regardless of the upheaval caused by the war, return to civilian activities was often challenging.<sup>5</sup>

In some cases, the War opened the door to new professional opportunities. For example, Dr. James McCarthy, originally from a rural community in northern New York, was committed to large animal practice. However, he and his wife "got sand in their shoes" while stationed in south Florida during the war, so he decided to stay in the warmer climate and opened a small animal practice in West Palm Beach.<sup>6</sup>

By the 10-year mark after graduation, agriculture had improved and opportunities for large animal practice had increased. The proportion of large versus small animal work shifted back in favor of rural medicine. The career activities in 1949 are shown in the following chart.



*Employment for Graduates of Cornell's DVM Class of 1939 ten years after their graduation (1949).*

The careers of the three women of the Class of 1939 have been described in previous stories on this site. Dr. Elizabeth Beckley (Gundlach) became a small animal practitioner<sup>7</sup> and Dr. Patricia O'Connor (Halloran) became a zoo animal veterinarian.<sup>8</sup> After a short time as small animal veterinarian in Connecticut, Dr. Rikki von Decken Luers moved to the US Virgin Islands where she was a public health veterinarian and general practitioner.<sup>9</sup>

The career accomplishments of the seven (mostly older) students who had undergraduate degrees or the equivalent before matriculating in veterinary medicine are of particular interest as these are the ones most likely to have been categorized as "misfits" by the college administration. Following is a brief outline of their careers:

- William Bryan Bell, a 1935 graduate from Virginia Tech University, spent most of his career at that institution, and held the post of dean of Agriculture for many years.
- Raymond Fagan, a 1935 graduate of New York University with a BA in chemistry and mathematics, was initially employed in the Bureau of Animal Industry, then served in the US Veterinary Corps during WWII. For the next decade, he worked as an epidemiologist at the US Public Health Service, then taught at the University of Pennsylvania. For the remainder of his career, he worked as a scientist for the Wyeth Institute for Medical Research and the Phillip Morris Company.<sup>10</sup>
- Robert Ferber, a 1935 graduate of City College of New York, established a small animal practice in Bayside, New York, where he worked until his retirement in 1977. He was joined after World War II by his brother (Cornell Class of 1943), and later by his son and grandson (Cornell 1970 and 1994, respectively).<sup>11</sup>
- Lyndon Wainwright Potter, a 1935 graduate of Hartwick College, was a general practitioner in Penn Yan in upstate New York.<sup>12</sup>

- Daniel Paul Sasmore, a graduate of Columbia University, had a distinguished career in the US Army and Air Force serving in the United States and Europe. His various teaching and research positions included teaching (rank of professor) at the University of Tennessee, and managing the colony of chimpanzees at Holloman Air Force Base (New Mexico) from which the first two primates were launched successfully into space. After leaving the armed forces in 1962, he worked as director of toxicology and pathology for a major pharmaceutical company.<sup>13</sup>
- Daniel Skelton, a 1935 graduate from LeMoyné, an historic black college in Memphis, TN, worked 40 years with the Bureau of Animal Industry and its successor, the USDA Animal Plant and Health Inspection Service.<sup>14</sup>
- Edwin Joseph Sunderville, who had received an AB from Cornell University in 1935, served in the Veterinary Corps and became a faculty member in military science at Cornell University.

The Depression years represented a period of great flux in the veterinary profession. Cornell saw its class profile shift to include those who came from urban areas as well as rural, and those who were older and had more undergraduate university education. The 1939 class profile was also more diverse, including more women, more Jewish students and those of color.

Though it was several decades before the agricultural priority changed in a more substantive way, the Class of 1939 was a harbinger of greater shifts that would eventually happen.



*Robert Ferber DVM (1914-2013)*  
(Photo by the author, 2007)

**Addendum:** *As I finalized this story for posting, I learned of the passing earlier in December of Dr. Robert Ferber at the age of 99. He was a grand man, a leader in the “new age” of the profession, and one who loved veterinary medicine. I shall*

*miss him. When I started this project in 2007, there were 16 living graduates of the 1930s. Now there is one, Dr. John Ayres (1939). What a legacy they have left for us.*

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, Donald F. Challenging the Land-Grant Mission: Cornell's Class of 1939. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. Dec 15, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> As noted in the December 15<sup>th</sup> story, Cornell's faculty gave priority to those students who had the minimum one year of pre-veterinary education over those with two or more years, or even a degree. Their rationale was that applicants with more than the minimum requirement were *misfits* in other lines of work and were only turning to veterinary medicine with the hope that they would find *golden opportunities in the new field*.

<sup>3</sup> Hoppenstedt, Clifford H. (Class of 1935, deceased). Interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University). Feb. 9, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Announcement (abridged) of the New York State Veterinary College for 1935-36. Ithaca, New York, February 1935. Page 28.

<sup>5</sup> Ayres, John (Class of 1939, retired). Interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University). Dec. 11, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> McCarthy, James J. (Class of 1939, deceased). Cornell University Alumni Records, self report, Apr. 18, 1958.

<sup>7</sup> Women in Veterinary Medicine: Dr. Elizabeth Beckley [Gundlach], Cornell 1939. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. Aug 5, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Women in Veterinary Medicine: Dr. Patricia O'Connor [Halloran], Cornell 1939. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. Aug 7, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Women in Veterinary Medicine: Dr. Rikki von Decken-Luers, Cornell 1939. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. Aug 6, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Harley, Deborah (daughter of Ray Fagan). Telephone communication with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University). 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Ferber, Robert (Class of 1939, deceased). Interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University). Nov. 7, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Potter, Lyndon W. (DVM Class of 1939, deceased). Cornell University Alumni Records, self report. Date unknown.

<sup>13</sup> Sasmore, Daniel P. (DVM Class of 1939, deceased). Letter to "Don" (unknown, but in possession of Cornell University Alumni Records) undated.

<sup>14</sup> Skelton, Daniel. (Class of 1939, deceased). Telephone interview with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University). Jan. 7, 2008.

#### KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine  
Cornell University  
Great Depression  
Land-Grant University  
Elizabeth Beckley (Gundlach)  
Patricia O'Connor (Halloran)  
Rikki von Decken Luers  
William Bryan Bell  
Raymond Fagan  
Robert Ferber  
Lyndon Wainwright Potter  
Dan Sasmore  
Daniel Skelton  
Edwin Joseph Sunderville

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TOPIC:

Land-Grant

LEADING QUESTION:

What jobs were students who graduated during the Great Depression able to find?

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.