

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Diary of a Columbia Veterinary College Student 1882-1884

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

August 18, 2013

First person oral histories of veterinarians who graduated many years ago provide wonderful insights into life and times in a former period of our history. However, the recounting of experiences from decades earlier may be tempered as the passage of time yields the possibility that past experiences may be replayed in the context of a more contemporary society. In addition, memories fade and events that are retold may not always represent the most compelling stories of daily life as it actually was.

Enter the diary, that day book of information recorded in real time, perhaps not intended for any audience, yet available to us several generations later.

Such is the record of the events leading up to the granting of a veterinary degree to William Henry Gribble, whom I introduced in a story posted here on July 22.¹ He attended the two-year veterinary program at Columbia Veterinary College, one of the five New York City colleges that operated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Columbia (not to be confused with the present-day Columbia University) was affiliated with the institution's medical school and placed such a high priority on comparative medicine that it was sometimes referred to as a School of Comparative Medicine.

An immigrant from England at the age of 12, Gribble lived with members of his extended family in the community of Churchville, New York, east of Syracuse. In the words of Gribble's cousin's grandson, veterinarian Dr. Bruce Widger, Gribble family members were just "honest, hard working, farmers" like other people in the area.²

I recently acquired from the family,³ a loosely-bound 214-page transcribed copy of Gribble's diary that recorded his daily activities from January 1, 1878, when he was a 19-year-old farm worker, through January 3, 1884, his last semester as a veterinary student. Records of his final months as a student and of his first several years after graduation are not available.

The diary holds day-by-day records of his activities, including farm labor such as digging potatoes and mending fences, to detailed financial records for all of his purchases and earnings.⁴

Other than several references to tending to sick animals, such as a premature foal which couldn't stand properly, there is no indication that he was interested in veterinary medicine until a notation on Saturday, September 26th, 1882:

Received a letter from dean of Columbia Vet. College, giving particulars so I made up my mind to attend that College. Course begins Oct. 3 1882 continuing for six months.

Eight days later, he "packed [his] trunk," took the train from Churchville to Rochester, and from there to New York City. He "arrived in New York about 7am [Oct. 3] and arrived at the college at 221 East 34th Street about noon and found a temporary place to stay." He was in class the following morning, "There being clinics this forenoon, I went down [into] the city after books ... attended lecture in the afternoon and in the evening found a furnished room at 266 East 26 Street for \$2.00 per week."

Gribble's weekly academic schedule consisted of attending lectures, typically the equivalent of three days per week, with an average of one evening "quizz" per week. Clinics were held during some mornings or afternoons during the week or all day on Saturdays, with notations such as, "Clinic at 3 Avenue R.R. Stable AM" or "Clinic at Dr. Robinson, Brooklin (sic) AM, clinic at Dr. Bern's PM".⁵

During December and continuing through the holiday period, he spent a lot of time preparing his horse dissection. He apparently did a good job because he won an award for "preparing the best dissected specimen." He notes end-of-year examinations for his first year at the college (referred to as the "Junior Year") in Physical Diagnosis, Chemistry, Physics, Physiology, Obstetrics, Comparative Anatomy and Pharmacy. Most examinations contained both written and oral components. These occurred over an eight-day period in late March 1883.⁶

Commencement for second year students (referred to as the "Senior Year") was on the evening of March 29th.

Chickering Hall was crowded and I was honored by receiving the Silver Medal, the highest award to a junior student. Also a case of instruments for preparing the best dissected specimen (junior). Also Hill on Dog Practice [a book], for passing the junior examination, on the questions put to the seniors for graduation.

The next day, he "walked down town and purchased a ticket to Rochester." He arrived in upstate New York about 24 hours later, and spent the summer working in the Churchville community. The locals must have considered him a veterinarian already because he records several incidents of treating horses with traumatic wounds.⁷

Gribble returned to New York City for his senior year on October 10th. The diary continues through the first few days of January, 1884, then stops abruptly. Gribble graduated that spring.

While the description of his academic activities provides a window into life of a student in a New York City veterinary program, the non-academic side of Gribble's life in the city is fascinating and demonstrates the eclectic activities available to these students when they took advantage of what was available. "After breakfast," he wrote on his first Sunday in the city, "I walked to Central Park. This is a more magnificent place than I ever dreamt it to be – Grand museum and menagerie with splendid statues and grandly laid out grounds."⁸

On subsequent Sundays (sometimes both morning and evening), and occasionally on a midweek evening, Gribble visited places of worship, often identifying both the church and the speaker. For example, on the afternoon of November 12 (1882), he heard Dr. C.H. Spurgeon Jr. from New Park Street Chapel in London, England, the foremost Protestant theologian of the era "in company of two or three MD students."

He took advantage of many cultural activities. On Thanksgiving Day, there being no lectures he studied most of the day, then in the evening (once again, with medical students), went to the 5th Avenue Theatre. The following day he "walked to the Museum of History at 77 St [and] 8th Avenue. This museum is a large brick building and contains birds, fish and animals (stuffed) of almost every species, also curiosities from all over the world. In the evening went to Haverly Theatre; the play was Black Crook."

Perhaps because of Columbia's priority for comparative medicine, Gribble would sometimes attend functions in medicine, whether a gynecologic clinic at Bellevue Hospital or a lecture on digestion at the Masonic Temple.⁹

He noted current events including, on December 3, 1882, the enforcement of the new Sunday Laws. "I took walk down to the Bowery to see if it was enforced, it did not look as it usually does Sundays it was quiet." He recorded the centennial anniversary of the evacuation of New York by the British on Nov 26, 1883, which was "commemorated by an immense civil and military parade, despite the rain." On Sunday, October 14, 1883, he returned from Brooklyn where he had assisted "Dr. Robinson" remove a tumor from a horse's shoulder "by walking over the [newly-constructed] Brooklin Bridge."

Gribble received his DVS (Doctor of Veterinary Surgery) on February 29, 1884 from the American Veterinary College, not from Columbia. This is perhaps because Columbia closed that year when the dean (Erskine Bates) was forced to resign and the college merged with the more stable American Veterinary College. Columbia graduated only about 80 veterinarians in its six years of operation.¹⁰

There are no detailed records of Dr. Gribble's activity for the next five years, though he is thought to have practiced in Colorado and Indiana. He married in 1889 and settled in Washington County, Ohio, where he practiced for the remainder of his career. He served as Secretary of the Ohio Veterinary Association for many years, until about 1930.

An unanswered question is the nature of Gribble's pre-veterinary schooling, of which there is no available record either in England as a boy, or upon arrival in the US at the age of 12. This diary that starts when he was 19 contains no reference to formal schooling until he entered veterinary college four years later. His lack of high school education would certainly not have qualified him for entrance to Cornell's veterinary program under Professor James Law. Because of Law's rigorous academic requirements and a lack of public funding, only four students received their veterinary degrees from Cornell between its opening in 1868 and the opening of the state-supported college in 1896.



Dr. William Henry Gribble (1857-1944)
Student at Columbia Veterinary College (1882-1884)
(Photo provided by June Varner and Janet Ward, 2013)

One final unanswered question is that of Columbia's tuition. Gribble makes reference to possibly receiving a reduced fee because of letters of reference; however, the cost of tuition is not mentioned in the diary despite the detail of all other expenses during his time in New York City.

This diary provides a glimpse into a period in the history of veterinary medicine when veterinary medical education was almost totally the provenance of private colleges in Toronto, Chicago, New York and other large cities. It demonstrates the ardor with which a relatively poorly-educated young man appeared to have received credible instruction for the era. It also shows how, with that education that totaled about 12 months, he developed a career that allowed him to stand alongside graduates of both private (and soon-to-be closed) and public colleges through the early decades of the 20th century.

¹ Smith, Donald F., *The Personal Story of a Columbia Veterinary College Graduate. Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. July 22, 2013.

² Widger, Bruce (DVM Class of 1951, Cornell University), telephone conversation with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) 2013, Aug 14.

³ Gribble, Wm. Henry, *Diary and Day Book*, January 1, 1878 to January 2, 1984. From the family collection provided by Janet Ward, great granddaughter of the Dr. Gribble. August 12, 2013.

⁴ Examples are purchasing postage stamps for \$.33 and ½ dozen handkerchiefs for \$.20, to selling the hide of a dead calf (\$.50).

⁵ Wednesday, Nov. 8 and Saturday, Nov. 24, 1882, respectively.

⁶ March 16 – 23, 1882.

⁷ May 8th, 1883 "W. Lehman had a horse injured today by falling onto the plow beam & the top part of the wheel, passing through her side to the lungs. The air passed out of the opening. I was called to see her & treat local inflammation was hastened and soon closed the opening this preventing the escape of air. Not much chance of living. [though the next day he felt the prognosis to be better,] may yet save the mare." (sic)

⁸ Sunday, October 8, 1882.

⁹ Saturday, Jan 13, and Sunday, Jan 14, 1883.

¹⁰ Peneyra, Samantha, *New York City's Five Veterinary Colleges. Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*. July 18, 2013.

KEYWORDS:

History of Veterinary Medicine
Columbia Veterinary College
American Veterinary College
Cornell University
Henry William Gribble
Bruce Widger
New York City Veterinary Colleges
Private Veterinary Colleges
Oral History

TOPIC:

Veterinary Colleges in the United States

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.