

A Biography of and Interview with Robert Ferber, DVM

Class of 1939, College of Veterinary Medicine, Cornell University

Author and Interviewer: Dr. Donald F. Smith, *Austin O. Hooley Dean Emeritus*

Establishing a Long Island Legacy

Robert Ferber, a son of Russian immigrants, was born August 2, 1914 and raised in New York City during the Depression. He and his younger brother, Leonard¹, were two of the early small animal veterinarians on Long Island.

Ferber's father was smuggled out of Bessarabia, which was then part of Russia in Eastern Europe, when he was just seventeen. His mother, also from Bessarabia, arrived in New York City after a six-week crossing in the hold of a freighter, a journey that claimed the life of her younger sister. Living first in Brooklyn and later in Flushing (Queens), the Ferber family operated a series of grocery stores. As a boy, Robert loved the out-of-doors and was interested in gardening and horticulture. He also had an innate interest in horses, and would often spend hours with his face pushed up against the screen door of the nearby Sheffield Farms horse stable, watching the horses being groomed.



New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph

Robert Ferber 1939

After completing high school, Ferber enrolled in City College of New York, where tuition was free. To save money, he lived at home and worked as a shoe salesman on Saturdays for three dollars a day, a job he absolutely hated. After his second year, he decided to pursue veterinary medicine and increased his complement of science courses, graduating with a bachelor's degree in chemistry.

Though his first application to the veterinary college at Cornell was rejected, he was admitted to Michigan State University, where he completed his freshman year in veterinary medicine. His transfer application to Cornell was successful and he arrived on the Ithaca campus in the fall of 1936. The Class of 1939 was diverse, including eight Jewish students, an African-American student from Tennessee, a Chinese national, and three women. According to Ferber, the students all got along very well and the female students mixed seamlessly with their male colleagues:

*There was no discussion about it being unusual for women to study veterinary medicine. If you wanted to be a veterinarian that was great, no matter who you were.*²

¹ Leonard Ferber '43

² Dr. Robert Ferber, personal interview, 2007.

Ferber graduated third in his class and was elected to membership in Phi Zeta, the veterinary honor society. He remembers his professors fondly, especially Peter Olafson,³ for whom he worked for 25 cents an hour under the auspices of the National Youth Administration. Upon Ferber's graduation, the dean encouraged him to take a fellowship in pathology at Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College and Polytechnic Institute. He declined, thinking that it would be more interesting, challenging, and rewarding to start a small animal veterinary practice.

Though he had a great love for horses, Ferber built a clinic devoted to small animal practice. He chose Bayside because he had been raised in that area and because it was close to growing towns like Flushing and Great Neck. There were only four small animal clinics in that region of Long Island at the time: Drs. Frank Bloom⁴ and Louis Corwin⁵ to the west; and Drs. Charles Goubeaud,⁶ and Laurence Goodman⁷ to the east.

Armed with Brumley's textbook on the diseases of the small domestic animals, the only relevant general medicine textbook in that era, Dr. Ferber started out by himself. He still remembers his first client in August 1939. The man—Dr. Ferber later learned he was one of the wealthiest individuals in Bayside—said he didn't have any money and that he'd be right back. Dr. Ferber is still waiting!

Dr. Ferber closed his practice while serving in the Veterinary Corps during World War II. Two years after his discharge, he built the North Shore Animal Hospital a few blocks east of his original practice and his brother, Leonard, joined him shortly thereafter.

Following in his father's footsteps, Robert's son, Alan, became an associate in the North Shore Hospital team when he graduated from Cornell in 1970. The practice benefited greatly from his expertise in surgery and internal medicine, as well as his organizational and management skills, and his introduction of computing.

A generation later, Robert's grandson, Michael (Class of 1996, the family's fourth Cornell-educated veterinarian) joined the practice team to continue the proud legacy established by his grandfather. With Alan's advice and encouragement, Michael (along with Dr. Robert Foley '98) established a satellite clinic, the South Bellmore Veterinary Group, on the south shore of Long Island in 2002. Dr. Ferber's other child, a daughter, Jude,⁸ a dealer in rare books and manuscripts, lives in nearby Lloyd Harbor.

Dr. Ferber retired in 1987, after 48 years in practice. He continues to live independently in the home in Syosset to which he and his wife, Ruth, moved after raising their children. The Ferber's had been married 61 years before his wife's death in 2000.

Content with his chosen profession, Ferber mused, "*Upon reflection, at 93 years of age, I am very happy to have made the decision to become a veterinarian.*"⁹

³ Peter Olafson '26; MS '27, professor of pathology.

⁴ Frank Bloom '30.

⁵ Louis A. Corwin '19.

⁶ Charles J. Goubeaud '28.

⁷ Laurence W. Goodman '26.

⁸ Judith Lubrano, Cornell BS (Human Ecology) 1971.

⁹ Dr. Robert Ferber, personal communication, 2007.

Interview

Listen to the Interview

Subject: Robert Ferber, DVM
Interview Date: November 7, 2007
Location: Syosset, NY (Nassau County)



Photograph by Donald F. Smith

Dr. Robert Ferber, 11/7/07

Interviewer's Note:

I had always been in awe of the Ferber name, in particular, the impressive patriarch, Robert Ferber '39. During a chance meeting outside the Statler Hotel on Cornell's campus during Reunion 2004, Dr. Ferber, with great charm and wit, graciously disarmed my apprehensions. When it became time to embark on this historical journey capturing the stories of veterinarians who made a difference in the first half of the 20th century, Robert was one of the first I called. Some weeks later, upon welcoming me into his sun porch on a sunny day in early November 2007, I was transformed to a time and a place of which I knew so little and yearned to feel so deeply. Robert's story is special to me, as is his friendship. (Dr. Donald F. Smith)

Dr. Smith:

This is Donald Smith, from Cornell University. It's my great privilege to sit here in the wonderful sun porch at the home of Dr. Ferber, Class of 1939. We're here to talk about the veterinary profession, Dr. Ferber's role in that, how he became a veterinarian, how he spent his life at Cornell and, most importantly, what he did since he graduated.

So, Bob, let's start by talking about your parents, how they came to this country, your growing up, how you went to the City College of New York, and how you got to Cornell. Just talk about your life in those days.

Dr. Ferber:

My mother and father both came from Bessarabia which, at that time, was probably a part of Russia and presently is the Republic of Moldavia. Both of them came here in the latter part of 1890 or the early part of 1900.

My father at that time, as I recall it, was 17 years old. He was smuggled out of Moldavia, and came to America. I don't know whether he had any friends here at the time, but they

had societies of people who emigrated from various parts of Russia [and] they were of some help to him in getting established in this country. I'm reasonably certain he did not have any relatives in the country at that time.

I never thought, until later in life, what it meant to him to leave his parents at the age of 17 and come to a strange country, not knowing the language. But fortunately, he established himself somehow, got married to my wonderful mother, who was from the same area in Europe. [My parents] had five children who survived: my two older sisters and my two younger brothers, and myself. There were two deaths in the family that I know of, and I must say that there was talk in the family that my mother had so-called closet abortions to avoid having too large a family. Closet abortions in those days were performed by quacks.

My mother survived this period of her life remarkably. All of my siblings were honorable people, fairly well-educated. I was the first in my family to go to college and I was followed by my youngest brother, Leonard,¹ who also became a veterinarian. [My older brother died] from influenza in the epidemic during or after World War I. There was another child—a girl—who died, I believe, shortly after birth.

I was born in Williamsburg, Brooklyn on 370 Grand Street. I am mentioning this because my grandchildren and one of my great grandchildren wanted to know where their grandfather and great grandfather, respectively, was born. So one day when we were out exploring Williamsburg, we tried to find the house in which I was born at 370 Grand Street. Unfortunately, the numbers stopped at something like 330 Grant Street and at that point, the Van Wyck Expressway crossed Grant Street.

So we proceeded to the other side of Grant Street to see if we could find 370. To make a long story short, the house where my folks lived when I was born would now be in the middle of Van Wyck Expressway, a far cry from the Williamsburg that I remember my folks talking about, which at that time, could have been considered as a suburb of the city. They would talk about the tree-lined streets, etc.

My father had grocery stores all of my life, and I would assume at the time I was born he had a grocery store. I have faint recollections of him having a store in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. I also remember that Greenpoint at that time had what I would now describe as possibly a suburban feel.

They moved from Brooklyn in 1920, when my father opened a grocery store on Main Street, Flushing. Flushing at that time—I guess it could have been considered suburban—but it had somewhat of a semi-rural feel to it. I still remember the first garden I planted from seed, whole seed I picked out of chicken feed that my father used to sell.

So it was at a very early age that I started gardening and I am, in a sense, still doing it, but no longer have a vegetable garden because the neighbor's trees shaded the area where my garden was. I gave the garden up some three or four years ago. But I still work outside the house taking care of some of the shrubbery, both as a form of enjoyment or recreation, and a hobby.

¹ Leonard Ferber '43, deceased Sep 27, 1996.

Dr. Smith:

How did you become interested in animals as a child?

Dr. Ferber:

It's very hard for me to pinpoint any period of my life where I became interested in animals, but I do remember a short distance from where my father had a store in Flushing, there was a Sheffield Farms horse stable.² In those days, there was daily milk delivery by horse-drawn vehicles and the animals were stabled and cared for just a short distance from the house. I remember I spent hours—I think it was literally hours—with my face against the screen door to the barn, watching the horses being groomed. There was something about the odor of a barn, and something about the horses, that just got to me and I just loved it. And, whenever we were out for a little ride for recreation, if we were to pass a barn and I would see a barn, I would insist that they stop so I could smell it. Possibly at that time, this attraction to animals evidenced itself.

It's very hard for me to pinpoint a time when I became interested in veterinary medicine. Not knowing what field to enter and not having any particular bent except [that] I did know one thing, that I was interested in the sciences and I was interested in something that would get me out of doors or keep me out of doors in my occupation.

I also wanted, if possible, to get into a field, where I would enjoy the work and not look upon it, frankly, as work. And it so happened that I eventually got to veterinary school, and I still feel that, as some sage once said, "You find something that you love to do, and you'll never have to work a day in your life". I felt that way about the profession that I chose, because I really never—oh, I shouldn't say, *never*—I *hardly* looked upon it as work. There are some aspects of everyone's occupation which are not pleasant but have to be taken as part of the occupation.

I went [to college] after high school, not knowing what I wanted to do; and not having any money to go to college, I had to select a school that I could go to that didn't cost any money. I selected City College. Well let's be practical, I'll go downtown—at that time City College was known as the downtown branch of CCNY, City College of New York.

I started a commercial course that would lead to a degree in some type of commercial endeavor. Well, I took that as best I could for six months, and couldn't stand it. It had no interest for me. I transferred to the uptown branch after six months downtown. I went to the uptown branch of CCNY at 137th Street and started courses in a degree towards a bachelor of science. I went to City College for the subsequent three and one-half years, got a degree, a bachelor of science, majoring in chemistry and biology.

That was 1931. I was in high school from 1927 to 1931, graduating '31, City College downtown for six months, transferred to CCNY Uptown, where I started in my courses for a degree majoring in chemistry and a minor in biology. I was always interested, even as a kid, in plants and anything associated with some kind of occupation that would bring me outdoors where I could work in a non-office environment.

² Sheffield Farms was a retail dairy with many branches. They had a large number of horses to deliver milk and dairy products to the metropolitan New York City area (see interview with Dr. Lawrence Waitz '31).

Dr. Smith:

You graduated in 1935. How did you get to Michigan State?

Dr. Ferber:

I was graduated from City College in '35, applied to Cornell,³ was turned down, but I also applied to Michigan State, where I was admitted. I was admitted to Michigan State, spent a year there, '35-'36. I always wanted to go to Cornell, so towards the end of the first year at Michigan State, I applied to Cornell vet school for admission and was admitted to the sophomore class. I know at the time this had never been done, and I don't know whether it's been done since.

Dr. Smith:

Did you have an interview, or did you just apply and were accepted in 1936?

Dr. Ferber:

I don't recall having an interview.⁴ I applied and was accepted, plus I got all A's and one B. That might have been the attraction, I don't know.

Dr. Smith:

So you joined the class that eventually had about eight Jewish boys [Ferber: Yes], and they overlapped strongly with boys who were from New York City as well [Ferber: Yes]. And the Jewish people in your class—we talked about this earlier—were Isidor Sprecker⁵ [Ferber: Yes], Morris Erdheim⁶ [Ferber: Right], Al Michaels⁷ [Ferber: Right], Fagan⁸ [Ferber: Raymond], Dan Sasmore⁹, Ralph Povar¹⁰ [Ferber: Yes], and then there was an older man you said was a pharmacist, Milton Spiegel¹¹ [Ferber: Yes]. Tell us about him.

Dr. Ferber:

Milton at the time—I don't recall exactly—I think I would be correct in saying that he was 46 years old at the time.¹² And he had difficulty retaining the information. He used to take voluminous notes and would ask the other students questions, ask them for help—which was readily given. He was graduated. I don't know what he did after graduation, lost track of him completely after graduation. I don't think he ever went into practice. He may have worked for someone.

Dr. Smith:

Dr. Erdheim, Morris Erdheim, you called him something...

³ For admission to Cornell's DVM program in 1935, a prospective student was required to have one year of study (30 semester hours) in a registered college of arts and sciences.

⁴ Cornell's Announcement manual stated that the Committee on Admissions required a personal interview, whenever feasible.

⁵ Isidor I. Sprecher '39 (he later changed the spelling to Sprecker), deceased Jan. 20, 2004.

⁶ Morris Erdheim '39, currently retired and living in Boca Raton, FL.

⁷ Albert M. Michaels '39.

⁸ Raymond Fagan '39, deceased Feb 1, 2004.

⁹ Daniel P. Sasmore '39, deceased Jun 23, 2007.

¹⁰ Ralph Povar '39, deceased Feb 12, 1998.

¹¹ Milton Spiegel '39, deceased Jul 1, 1952.

¹² Spiegel was born June 30, 1897.

Dr. Ferber:

Swiftly. I don't know why, I don't know, maybe because he moved so slowly.

Dr. Smith:

Izzi [Isidor] Sprecker, he was the only one of the Jewish fellows who came from Connecticut. What was Izzi like?

Dr. Ferber:

Oh, Izzi was very quiet, seemed to be withdrawn, kept to himself, made very good grades and apparently very smart.

Dr. Smith:

You knew John Murray.¹³

Dr. Ferber:

Yes, I don't know whether John Murray has changed through the years. John was very nice, very affable. We were always friendly, told me I was his banker.

He reminded me the other night [during a telephone conversation] of when we were in Stockholm. He wanted to buy a ring for his wife at that time, and he had no money, and I lent him the money. I don't know how much it was, probably it was 10 or 15 or 20 dollars. I asked him the other night, I asked him whether he had paid me back, and he said, "No".

Dr. Smith:

Dan Skelton was in your class?¹⁴

Dr. Ferber:

Danny Skelton, yes, he was the only black fellow in our class. He appeared to be accepted. Of course he, too, kept more or less to himself.

Dr. Smith:

You also became very good friends with Jack Halloran;¹⁵ he and his wife were in your class.

Dr. Ferber:

Yes, I became very good friends with Jack Halloran and with Pat O'Connor.¹⁶ Jack Halloran had quite an interesting background. He was an older fellow. I really don't know, I can't recall, whether he had gotten a degree from college before he entered veterinary medicine. His father was a veterinarian on Staten Island¹⁷ and there was some time in his past he had considered the priesthood. But whatever prompted him to turn to veterinary medicine, I don't recall. [Perhaps] with his father being a veterinarian, he may have thought that it would be a lifestyle that he would prefer over the priesthood. Jack was a very highly intelligent, and I would think, well-read person. We were very close, as

¹³ John D. Murray '39, retired and living in Keuka Park, N.Y.

¹⁴ Daniel Skelton '39, retired and living in Wichita, Kansas.

¹⁵ John L. Halloran, Jr. '39, deceased 1966.

¹⁶ Patricia O'Connor Halloran '39, married to John L. Halloran; deceased July 8, 2003.

¹⁷ He had built an equine hospital on Staten Island in 1902.

I was with his wife, Pat, who subsequently became a zoo veterinarian and a very well-known one, very accomplished.¹⁸

Dr. Smith:

There were two other women in your class.

Dr. Ferber:

Yes, Rikki von Decken-Luers,¹⁹ who I recall, subsequently went to the Virgin Islands to practice and this is the only knowledge I have of her; and Elizabeth Beckley²⁰—I lost complete track of her, except through the grapevine. I know she got married, but I don't have any recollection or any information about her since that time.

I was very friendly with Ralph Povar,²¹ whose younger brother, Morris,²² was a veterinarian. He could have been in the class with my brother, who was in the class of '43.

Dr. Smith:

The classes of 1939 and '40 were unusual in the sense that they had seven women between them. The Class of '40 had four women and your class had three. That was more than usual. The class of '38 had one, Marion Leighton²³ [Ferber: I remember her]; and the class of 1937 had one woman.²⁴ She was the daughter of a professor named Koenig²⁵ [Ferber: Didn't know her]. She married a fellow from Class of 1957 whom she met in practice down in Jamestown²⁶.

You talked earlier that you worked during a summer for Nat Wernicoff,²⁷ whose wife was the Class of 1933. She was the sister of Tevis Goldhaft²⁸.

Go back to your class and tell me a bit more about the three women.

Dr. Ferber:

Pat [O'Connor] was very popular, she was very outgoing. Pat was—I would say she was an assertive individual. My recollection is that she had very definite ideas, which she asserted without thinking that she was a woman. Forgive me, in those days there was more than a little distinction between a man and a woman—which no longer holds, of course. Evidence to that fact is that, contrary to the 30s when there were few women, most of the class today is women. Pat was very assertive, she was a good student. She liked what she was doing and she did well. She and Jack [Halloran] became very close friends while we were in school and the three of us frequently went down to Johnnie's for dinner for the 65 cent steak dinners.

¹⁸ Veterinarian at the Staten Island zoo, 1942-1970.

¹⁹ Rikki Von Decken-Luers '39, deceased.

²⁰ Elizabeth Gundlach Beckley '39, deceased Jan 28, 1998.

²¹ Ralph Povar '39, deceased Feb 28, 1998.

²² Morris Povar '44, retired and living in Boca Raton, FL

²³ Marion L. Leighton '38, deceased Sept 21, 2000.

²⁴ Marie Koenig Olson '37, deceased.

²⁵ Fred F. Koenig '09, served as Ambulatory Clinician at Cornell until 1918.

²⁶ Raymond F. Olson '57, deceased.

²⁷ Nathan Wernicoff '31, deceased.

²⁸ Helen Goldhaft Wernicoff '33, deceased. She was the sister of Tevis M. Goldhaft '35, who is retired and living in Haverford, Penn.

Dr. Smith:

And the other two women in your class.

Dr. Ferber:

Rikki Von Decken-Luers was, of course, outwardly a lesbian, but there was no discussion about her sexual preferences and she was accepted like anyone else in the class. There may have been some discussion among the other students at times but there was nothing unusual said about her. She was accepted as a homosexual. She dressed like a man, looked like a man, spoke like a man. She subsequently went to the Virgin Islands and then I lost track of her.

Elizabeth Beckley, she was [just] another girl in the class.

Dr. Smith:

Did the three women tend to hang together or did they mix with the guys?

Dr. Ferber:

No, they mixed with the guys in the class, Pat and Elizabeth, and Rikki, too; there was no discussion about them being them women in the class. And there was no discussion about them being unusual to study veterinary medicine, as I recall it. If you want to be a veterinarian, that's great.

Dr. Smith:

So tell me about some of the professors that you remember the best. Do you remember Dukes, for example?²⁹

Dr. Ferber:

Oh, I remember H.H. Dukes very well, very well. He was truly professorial and he was engaged in physiology and the experiments and the demonstration of the physiological aspects of medicine. I remember very well the small lab where we were at that time, hooked up to a sheep or a goat—hooked up an electrocardiogram. It was a small room, no more than six or eight feet square and there were wires all over the place. I remember Dukes with a great deal of fondness.

Dr. Smith:

I've heard that Olafson³⁰ was similar.

Dr. Ferber:

I was close to Olafson. I worked in the path lab, I put the specimens up in jars, formaldehyde jars. There may still be some of them around. Yeah, I did that—it must have been under the auspices of what was then NYA, National Youth Administration, at the magnificent sum of 25 cents an hour. I enjoyed that work. I was very interested in pathology. As a matter of fact, on my graduation, Dr. Hagan³¹ called me in for an interview and encouraged me to take a fellowship at Blacksburg, the University of Virginia, in the path department. I still like pathology.

²⁹ Henry Hugh Dukes, BS, DVM, MS, professor of veterinary physiology.

³⁰ Peter Olafson '26, MS '27, professor of pathology.

³¹ William Arthur Hagan, DVM, MS, DSc, professor of bacteriology and dean of the college, 1932-59.

Dr. Smith:

Let me digress for a moment. I've heard that Dr. Frank Bloom,³² whom you knew, was a pathologist of sorts.

Dr. Ferber:

He was, yes. He practiced in Flushing. He had a lab in his office and he did a lot of work on kidney disease. I remember one of the articles he wrote (it's peculiar the things you remember), the extra genital lesions of pyometra in the dog, with special reference to the effect on the kidney. He considered himself a pathologist. I think he was quite accomplished.

Dr. Smith:

He was brilliant but a great egotist?

Dr. Ferber:

Yeah, I don't know whether he could have worked with, or in association with, anybody. I know when he retired he moved to Miami. I think he [may have done] *pro bono* work in a lab there. He always had his finger in the pathology pie.

Dr. Smith:

You took a dog to him once.

Dr. Ferber:

I took a dog to him once, yes. The patient was a puzzle to me. It was a wire-haired fox terrier: progressive loss of weight, to the point of emaciation, most prominent symptom of which was anorexia and persistent vomiting. We had no commercial veterinary labs at that time [to which] I could send specimens. I don't recall doing any lab work on this animal, with the possible exception of a urinalysis.

So Frank Bloom, being about two miles or three miles from my office, I thought I would take the dog to him for his expertise. He examined the dog and gave me a diagnosis of gastromyorrhea, which is like saying to somebody who has a cold that they have coryza or rhinitis. It's just putting another name on it and not giving me an etiological diagnosis. And gastromyorrhea, of course, translated into English, means excessive vomiting mucus from the stomach.

Dr. Smith:

Did he charge you?

Dr. Ferber:

He charged me three dollars. Let me tell you, three dollars was a lot of money in those days, especially because the office visit was two dollars in my office. I never forgave him for it. But, it made him feel better, but it didn't make me feel any better, but that was an experience.

And I also remember Finkelstein in Brooklyn.³³ Finkelstein at that time had a reputation of being an authority on Boston Bulls. I had a Boston Bull terrier with—I'll call it—

³² Frank Bloom '30, deceased July 9, 1993.

glaucoma because the dog had enlarged eyeballs. I thought, “Well, Ferber doesn’t know anything about glaucoma, I’ll take him to an authority.”

I trucked this dog over to Brooklyn, and it was a trek in those days to go from Bayside to Brooklyn, because the parkways weren’t developed at that time. And here, too, I had a disillusioning experience. He gave me a very professorial dissertation on what he saw. But, as I recall [the explanation], it had the tone of affectation. The professor was talking to me. I just got out of school. I didn’t know anything. This is something that you often run across, you get used to it as you get older.

Dr. Smith:

Did you know Dean Hagan very well?

Dr. Ferber:

No, I can’t say very well, but Dean Hagan was a very friendly kind of guy. He was a very well-liked dean.

Dr. Smith:

I’ve heard that he had dinner engagements in his home.

Dr. Ferber:

Yes, the freshman class in groups was invited to his home for dinner and, looking back, it probably was a way of making us possibly feel a little bit more at home. We were kids. I was a kid. I was a little older than the rest because I had four years of college, but we were kids, and my social education had not even begun. He had sets of puzzles, I remember that, and he gave us these sets of puzzles, not written puzzles, [but] the things you undo and so on, to make us feel at home, and I remember a very pleasant evening.

He was—if I may—you’re somewhat like him, you’re a step above, not above, ahead, the relationship between a student and the faculty. And when I went to school, I don’t know whether it was because of my background or not, but the doctor was revered. They were in a class by themselves. The lawyer was revered, the dentist somewhat similarly. They were in a class by themselves. A college professor was a very, very distinguished individual as it is today, but not as much as when I was a kid. Everything is questioned today, even the college professor. I don’t know whether it’s good or bad, to tell you the truth.

Dr. Smith:

There were six original faculty of the college in 1896 and one of them was Dr. Williams, W.L. Williams.³⁴ You recall seeing him?

Dr. Ferber:

I remember seeing W.L. Williams—I can’t recall exactly where—it could have been in the large animal clinic or one of the path labs. I remember seeing him over what I believed to have been a bovine uterus. I made some casual remark to him, asking him something about it and I remember getting a very short reply. He was probably engrossed

³³ Benjamin J. Finkelstein ’18.

³⁴ Walter Long Williams, professor of obstetrics and research professor in the diseases of cattle, emeritus.

in something at which I interrupted him. But I remember him—he's the only one of the original faculty that I knew.

Dr. Smith:

He was an older man, not an active professor.

Dr. Ferber:

Oh no, no, he was emeritus. Now, I worked for—I don't know how long—I worked in the path lab putting up specimens. At that time, Pete Olafson was the head of the path department, and I remember him with a great deal of fondness.

Dr. Smith:

Tell us about your brother, Leonard, who graduated in 1943.

Dr. Ferber:

He graduated '43. At that time, of course, the world war was '42 to '46. When he was graduated, he went into—he was asked to join—UNRRA, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and he was assigned to transport ships where they were transporting animals—horses and cows—to Europe. He was the ship's veterinarian. I think he was at that for three years, then he joined me in practice.

Dr. Smith:

Let's talk about your practice. You graduated in '39.

Dr. Ferber:

... [During my college days], I ate well, pretty well, because my mother used to send me what I used to call "care packages". What I remember most about the food is that it was usually a roasted chicken. At that time, I was rooming on the second floor of a house somewhere on the hill there, I can't remember the name of the street, but it was on the second floor. I got chicken, roast chicken and my friend, Tony Favata, [*laughing*] he got pizza from his mother. I got the chicken and he would eat that cold pizza with a glass of water. I didn't know what the hell pizza was at that time. How could he eat that? So, that was my experience.

I was graduated in 1939 and I was anxious—very anxious—to get out and make a living. I couldn't wait until I got out to so-called make a living. The attitudes were different at that time. At least among the people I knew, you didn't go to college to make money. There may have been fellows who did, but if there were, I didn't know them. We went to college to improve our chance of making a living. It was a living. It wasn't to make money or anything like that. It was to make a living, hopefully, doing something that you would enjoy.

I was very anxious to get into practice and I didn't work for anybody after I got out of school. I went into practice. As a matter of fact, I had my first office visit in August of 1939 and I still remember the client. I do not remember what the diagnosis was. I do remember that the fee was \$2.00. I do remember his name [and] I do remember that he never paid me. He said he didn't have any money with him, that he'd be right back. He hasn't been back since. [*laughing*] Subsequently, I learned that he was one of the wealthiest men in Bayside.

But I went into practice—I don't have to tell [you] that a lot of it was self-learning and, as I mentioned before in our conversation, when I took small animal medicine, there was one book, Bromley's book on diseases of the dog and cat.

Before I quit practice, we had a library, I don't know how many books, but it was well into hundreds of books about the various areas of practice [about] which, of course, I continued to take continuing education courses, continued to read. I taught myself and learned by experience, and whatever I did seemed to have worked out pretty well.
[laughing]

Dr. Smith:

You practiced 48 years [Ferber: Yes, '39 to '87], and you had a brother, a son³⁵ and a grandson³⁶.

Dr. Ferber:

My brother joined me in either '46, immediately after he was released from UNRRA, or shortly thereafter, and he practiced with me until after I retired in '87. There was a time in my practice when I tried to operate a practice around the clock, to be a complete and full service. I think we had at one time ten or twelve [employees] altogether. But for the most part, in the mature stages of my practice, there were six of us. There was my brother, and myself, and four employees. Before I retired—I don't recall the exact year—we admitted a third veterinarian, Ronald Rosen³⁷, who did not go to Cornell. He's a graduate from a foreign school, and he had worked for me as a kennel man. He became a partner and he still is there, practicing with my grandson. My grandson is at the North Shore Animal Hospital³⁸, with two partners and two or three other employees. They have another practice in Bellmore³⁹, which they established three or four years ago.

Dr. Smith:

What's your recollection of Cornell? Are you fond of Cornell?

Dr. Ferber:

Well, I can tell you. This is a very frank admission. I went to City College for four years. It entailed a train ride. I used to walk to the subway station because I didn't have the extra nickel for the bus to get me there. I used to walk to the subway station at Flushing Main Street and get off at the station at 137th Street in Manhattan, and I did that for four years. So I spent my time, from the time I got up in the morning, traveling to CCNY classes, because I was in the science program. The laboratories were in the afternoon from 1:00 to 5:00, so I would have classes from either 8:00 or 9:00 in the morning til 5:00 in the afternoon. Get back on the "GD" subway, get home, have dinner, go up to my room, study, repeat; did that for four years.

So, I had very little extracurricular activity at the CCNY with the exception of wrestling. I was fairly strong at that age and I went to a gym in Flushing. At that time, the gyms were not like they are today, just a couple of weights on the wall and a couple of parallel

³⁵ Alan R. Ferber '70, retired and living in Syosset, NY

³⁶ Michael L. Ferber '96, works at North Shore Animal Hospital, Bayside, NY and lives in Merrick, NY

³⁷ Ronald Rosen, Araneta University (Philippines) '81

³⁸ North Shore Animal Hospital, Bayside, NY

³⁹ South Bellmore Veterinary Group, Bellmore, NY

bars and so on. I developed whatever I had at the time with push-ups and sit-ups and all the other exercises. And I was on the wrestling team, but a very undistinguished member of the wrestling team. That's the only outside curricular activity that I did at the CCNY, mostly because of time priorities. I had other priorities; I had to work on Saturdays. At that time, Saturday's were 12-hour days, believe it or not, selling shoes at 25 cents an hour. What does that come to? Three dollars a day. I hated it. But I did it, had to do it.

So, my experience at CCNY, I can't say was very pleasant. I have to say this for CCNY, which I have often said. I got a tremendous education, tremendous education in courses that I would never have chosen but I had to take, [such as] music appreciation, art appreciation. What in the hell am I doing with that, what am I doing? But it comes back, and it has given me a little – very little – basis of understanding of music appreciation. I had a very wonderful education and it becomes more wonderful in retrospect.

Subsequent to City College, I applied to Cornell and applied to several other veterinary colleges because I did not know whether I would be admitted to Cornell. I was not admitted, went to Michigan State for one year. And because I wanted to go to Cornell for its reputation and because it was closer to home, fortunately I was admitted to the sophomore class and started Cornell in the fall of 1936 and completed my DVM in 1939. Of the three schools that I went to—CCNY, Michigan State and Cornell—don't ask me why, but I have the most pleasant memories and I have a great deal of affection for Cornell. Evidence to that fact is [that] my brother went there, my son went there, my grandson went there. And my daughter.⁴⁰

Dr. Smith:

You had a person in your class from China.

Dr. Ferber:

Francis Kwong⁴¹. I remember him as being very quiet. You know, he was Chinese, but he spoke English, he took his notes in English, I think. I remember him as being very friendly. You know, China at that time was a far more remote place that it is today. China at the time was Communist and he worked in the government in the poultry field. I remember him. Unfortunately, if I had known more about it, I would have made it my business to know more about his background and his family. But we were so preoccupied. You know, we had to go to classes, up to room, study, had dinner at home, in your room, or you went down to Johnnie's or someplace for dinner, back, study, and so on. That was life at Cornell, but I enjoyed it.

I did very well, you know, I was graduated third in my class. And I never thought of myself as a brain, you know, I didn't think that way. I just wanted to get as much as I could, you know.

Sunderville's son⁴² was number two in the class. Wilson Bryan Bell⁴³ —does that ring a bell? [*laughing*] I don't know what happened to him, except that he was very interested in horses. He may have been from Kentucky and I think he may have gone back there to

⁴⁰ Ms. Judith Lubrano, Hum Ec '71, resides in Lloyd Harbor, NY

⁴¹ Francis J. Kwong '39, worked at South China Agricultural University, Guangzhou, China, deceased

⁴² Edwin Joseph Sunderville '39, son of Dr. Earl Sunderville, professor of veterinary anatomy

⁴³ Wilson Bryan Bell '39, deceased Nov 11, 1992

practice. I don't know whatever happened to him. He was a very bright man: he was the top man, Sunderville was two and I was three. Izzi may have been fourth, I don't know. I think I still have the [graduation] program.⁴⁴

Dr. Smith:

Dr. Ferber, this has been magnificent. I so enjoyed talking to you. Do you have something in closing that you would like to say about your life as a veterinarian?

Dr. Ferber:

I have come across men in many, many fields of endeavor: business, medicine, dentistry; and I see men going from one business to another, completely unrelated, and I remark to myself, "How do they ever go from making brassieres to making dresses to making pants, or something like that"? And I know of cases where lawyers have given up the law and gone into medicine. I know cases where men have given up medicine and gone into law. This is beyond my understanding, I don't know and I often say to myself, "I don't know what I would have done if I had not become a veterinarian". I don't know, I really don't know.

Dr. Smith:

Well, thank you very much.

⁴⁴ In a subsequent communication, Dr. Ferber confirmed that the class rank as listed in the graduation bulletin was as follows: Bell (1), Sprecker (2), Ferber and Sunderville (honorable mention).