

**A Biography of and Interview About
Clarence R. Roberts, DVM
Class of 1922, College of Veterinary Medicine, Cornell University**
Author: Dr. Donald F. Smith, *Austin O. Hooey Dean Emeritus*

New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph



Clarence R. Roberts 1922

Veterinarian and Corporate CEO

Clarence Roberts' father was so upset that his son insisted on going to college to become a veterinarian that he warned him he would have to return home to the farm if he *busted out*. One of his siblings had already died during the influenza epidemic while in the service during WWI, and his only other brother was paralyzed in a farm accident shortly after he had been discharged from the army.

Clarence Roger Roberts—he preferred the name, “Keeze”—was born October 20, 1900, in Holland Patent, New York, the fourth child in his family. Realizing how privileged he was to attend college, he threw himself into all that Cornell had to offer, joining the veterinary fraternity and playing in the Cornell band at a time when Ivy League football drew large and boisterous crowds.¹ He lived in a small room in Collegetown, and worked as a waiter in one of the residence halls.

He studied hard under the tutelage of professors he considered to be outstanding, and was among the 16 students who received veterinary degrees in 1922. The six founding veterinary faculty—including James Law, the college's first professor²—were alive and still active in the college while Roberts was a student,

After graduation, Dr. Roberts started a general practice in Morrisville, New York, with the assistance of his widowed mother who moved in to help him. His newly-purchased Model-T Ford was of no use during the long and harsh winters because rural roads were never plowed. Instead, he made farm calls in the heavy snow by horse and cutter.

“It was not at all unusual to get as much as three feet of snow at one fall. It was quite an ordeal to receive a call at nine or ten o'clock at night and drive six or eight miles in a horse and cutter and then go into a cold barn with the wind blowing and do some bare-armed obstetrics, removing a calf. And no more did you get home than someone else called and wanted you out again. The cutter would tip over and you would have to retrieve your instruments

¹ Cornell football was nationally-renowned in the 1920s and many regard the 1922 season as its best.

² James Law, who had been teaching since 1868, died on May 10, 1921, at the end of Roberts' junior year.

from the deep snow. I had a fur coat and fur gloves and fur hat, and we even had a cutter with side curtains on it. But even so, it was pretty rough going.”³

Roberts treated cattle, horses, and pigs, and the occasional farm dog. In addition to bovine tuberculosis, the most important cattle diseases were mastitis and postpartum paresis. Practicing long before the advent of antibiotics, he even occasionally did abdominal surgery.

“When I started, there were still a lot of the uneducated veterinarians or quacks. Some of the farmers still swore by them but they were gradually losing their hold on the area and were not any problem from the standpoint of my finding enough work to do. My problem was mainly economic. There was too much being paid off in chickens and turkeys and potatoes. I have many records of calls that I made driving four or five miles and being at a farm half or three-quarters of an hour and charging \$2.00.”⁴

When his wife was pregnant with their first child, she insisted that Clarence rely on monetary income, and not be so heavily dependent on bartering. Consequently, after three years of practice, he accepted a position in private industry for \$45.00 per week and moved to nearby Norwich.

Though veterinary employment in the corporate field was rare at the time, his employer, Sheffield Farms Company, was an exception. The rapidly-expanding New York-based milk company was the lead member of a cluster of a 17 subsidiaries that had just been acquired by National Dairy Corporation, and they hired veterinarians to assure quality control of milk and milk products.

Milk quality was a critical issue at that time. The sanitation department of Sheffield Farms was an important component of the company, and one ideally suited for a veterinarian knowledgeable about public health issues.

Roberts was responsible for examining dairy cattle and milking facilities over a wide area of New York, and as far south as Maryland.

“I would leave home on a Monday morning and come back generally on Friday night or Saturday noon, having been examining cattle all week. A few months later, they asked me to supervise a group of barn inspectors, people who went around to the farms, examined the cleanliness of the barn, the milk cows, and the toilet if it was outside.”⁵

In 1929, Roberts was appointed to a Sheffield Farms management position in New York City. He moved his family to Leonia, New Jersey, and ferried across the Hudson River daily to Manhattan until the George Washington Bridge was constructed. Roberts’

³ From a 1998 interview with Dr. Clarence R. Roberts.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid.

department was responsible for dealing with all the health departments in New York City and surrounding suburbs serviced by the company.

The company operated almost 2,000 retail routes in the metropolitan New York City area where milk was delivered in bottles door-to-door. They also had 32 wholesale routes, making “loose milk” available in 40-quart cans to neighborhood stores, where the store owner would use a large ladle to stir in the risen cream and then fill up the home-maker’s container for household use. Almost one million quarts of milk and other dairy products were transported daily by 3,000 horses maintained in massive stables in strategic locations throughout Manhattan.

In 1945, Dr. Roberts completed the transition from rural veterinarian to corporate executive when he became President of Sheffield Farms.

Ten years later, he was appointed CEO of Sealtest Foods, the milk and ice cream division of National Dairy Corporation. Now responsible for over 20,000 employees, Roberts’ first priority was to improve the deteriorating human resources practices that he had inherited. His predecessor had gradually lowered milk prices to address growing competition. By re-establishing the confidence of the milk dealers in the city, Roberts was able to reverse that trend and he turned a deficit into a four million dollar profit in just one year.

Though a very successful corporate executive, Sealtest policy required that employees retire at age 65. Roberts’ son describes the impact of the abrupt change in pace:

“I think it just about killed my father to have to stop working because of mandatory retirement. He was just getting going good, just getting wound up. After that, he did a lot of volunteer work, primarily with the Red Cross, taking old people to the doctor and so on, though he was older than most of the people he was helping.”⁶

For many years, Dr. Roberts was his Class of 1922 representative at Cornell and eventually had the distinction of being Cornell’s senior living veterinary college alumnus.

Keeze and his wife, Florence, whom he had met at a dance in his first year in practice and with whom he had three children, celebrated 75 years of marriage in December 1998. Dr. Roberts died at his home on December 1, 1999, in his 100th year. His wife died in July 2009, at age 104.

⁶ Dr. Kent C. Roberts, personal interview 2008.

Interview

Listen to the Interview

Subject: Clarence R. Roberts, DVM
Interviewee: Kent Roberts, DVM, son
Interviewer: Dr. Donald F. Smith
Interview Date: January 20, 2008
Location: Orlando, FL, during the North American Veterinary Conference

Interviewer's Note:

A loyal Cornell alumnus, Clarence Roberts was for several years the college's oldest living graduate. I had the privilege of meeting him when he attended his 75th reunion in 1997. Through my association with his son, Dr. Kent Roberts '51, I became increasingly aware of the unique nature of Clarence Roberts' professional accomplishments as CEO of a company responsible for 20,000 employees. Earlier in his career, he had promoted public health by assuring the quality and safety of milk and milk products during the early days of pasteurization. Though Dr. Roberts graduated a decade before many of the people profiled in this collection, I am pleased to include his story. (Dr. Donald F. Smith).

Dr. Donald Smith:

Good afternoon. This is Donald Smith from Cornell University, meeting with Dr. Kent Roberts from the Class of 1951. We are here to talk about Kent's father, Dr. Clarence ("Keeze") Roberts, who graduated from Cornell in 1922. Today is January 20th and we are in Orlando, Florida, at the North American Veterinary Conference. (Dr. Kent Roberts is a past president of that organization.)

Kent, let's start by talking about your father. You are very proud of him as you have noted in our conversations over the years. For many years, he was the oldest living alumnus of the college and he had a wonderful history that goes back to almost the foundation of the college in terms of his relationship with some of the very early faculty.¹

Please start by telling us about his early life, how he grew up, how he decided to become a veterinarian, and how he ended up at Cornell.

Dr. Kent Roberts:

He was born in 1900, the fourth child in his family. He had two older brothers and an older sister. There were twins born after him, only one of whom survived. It was a country family in the small town of Holland Patent, New York, 15 miles north of Utica.² He lived on a farm where his father—whom I never knew as he died at the age of 54, before I was born—was a great entrepreneur. He was the postmaster of the town of Holland Patent. He ran a meat market; he was a cattle appraiser and dealer, and a farmer. He was an amazing person. He was involved in many things and was a leader in the town of Holland Patent.

¹ Veterinary medicine was taught by Professor James Law when Cornell first began instruction in fall 1868. He was joined by five other veterinary faculty when the New York State Veterinary College opened in 1896.

² In Oneida County, midway between Rochester and Albany.

My father grew up in that environment of working hard, being on the farm and working with animals all of his early years. He graduated from Holland Patent High School in 1918. His father, of course, wanted him to stay and help with the family business, but he had decided that he wanted to go to college. Having worked with many animals over the years, he wanted to become a veterinarian.

His class at Cornell was the first to have a four-year program.³ At the time, there was no pre-veterinary program. You went directly from high school into veterinary college, which he did. He did not have a lot of funding for his education so he worked almost the entire four years he was there. The job he seemed to enjoy the most—I think he had it during the majority of the time he was there—was as a waiter at Prudence Risley Hall.⁴

He lived in Collegetown in a room there and he would make the trip over to Risley at all times of the year—all kinds of weather—and he would cross Cascadilla Gorge by way of the trolley tracks.⁵ I guess he had some exciting times when a trolley would come along, but the trolley bridge was the shortest way to get over to Risley. I think he enjoyed that job very much because he held it a long time. As far as I know he probably had it most of the four years he was there. And that helped put him through school.

He joined the *OTS* veterinary fraternity, though he didn't inform me until after I had joined many years later that we were fraternity brothers. That pleased me to no end. While he was one of the younger members of the class and not necessarily a leader, I think he was well-liked. He'd played in the Cornell band as a snare drummer.

He was very involved in campus life, though this was a tremendous change for him to have come from a small high school to Cornell University. But he loved it. I don't think you could ever find a more loyal alumnus of Cornell, or the Veterinary College, than my father. He was thoroughly into it—it had been such an important part of his life.

So many of us now are a little blasé about things like that, but it never was that way for him. Cornell was a tremendous experience and he treasured it. He was a very loyal alumnus and he was tremendously pleased that I decided to become a veterinarian, and that I went to Cornell. That pleased me to be able to please him.

I remember him telling me there were thirteen in his class at some point, perhaps at graduation.⁶ He worked hard and I know he thought he had excellent professors. Several of his professors were founding faculty of the college.⁷

Once he graduated, he definitely wanted to practice his profession. He found an opening in Morrisville, New York, which was not too far from either Ithaca or Holland Patent.⁸ He was

³ The veterinary curriculum had previously been three years after high school.

⁴ Women's dormitory at Cornell.

⁵ The scenic Cascadilla Gorge cuts through Cornell, falling over 400 feet between campus and downtown Ithaca through a series of spectacular waterfalls.

⁶ The names of 16 senior students are listed in the college catalogue of the academic year 1921-22.

⁷ All of the six founding faculty of the college were living and four were actively teaching (two were professors emeriti) when Roberts started at Cornell. Founding Dean James Law died on May 10, 1921.

⁸ Southeast of Syracuse in Madison County.

not married at that time and his mother actually moved to Morrisville and lived with him to keep house and help him with the practice.

During the Christmas holidays of 1922, my father met a young lady from Kansas who was visiting relatives in Morrisville. He met her at a dance and they were married in December of 1923. We had a tremendous celebration on their 75th anniversary. About the time of their 76th anniversary, in December of his 100th year of life, my father died. My mother is still alive, so there are pretty good genes in the family.⁹

My father was practicing in Morrisville and was being paid in a variety of ways: eggs, chickens, things that didn't involve any cash. Then my mother announced that they were going to have a child and they would need some cash income—the cash flow was pretty bad.

My father took an opportunity to join the staff of Sheffield Farms, a large New York City milk company, as a field veterinarian to inspect dairy farms and milk plants in upstate New York. We moved from Morrisville to Norwich and lived in Norwich until I was five years old.¹⁰ During that time, Sheffield Farms had many dairies scattered throughout New York. He had a large territory to cover, down into Pennsylvania and even south as far as Rising Sun, Maryland.¹¹ He would be traveling every day, and often gone many days at a time.

While in practice, he had a Model-T for his farm calls. But that was worthless in the winter. You couldn't go anywhere in upstate New York in the middle of winter. So he also had a cutter (a type of sleigh) and two horses. He used to put all of his equipment into the cutter. And he often had to cross fields to avoid large snow drifts, sometimes cutting barbed-wire fences so that he could get to the farms. I guess he had many interesting experiences, the worst times being when the sleigh would upset and he would have to retrieve all his instruments from the snow. He practiced like that for about five years, and then he took the job with the milk company.

After he had been with Sheffield Farms about five years, they asked him to go to their main office in New York City. We moved to a little town in northern New Jersey and he commuted daily.¹² The George Washington Bridge was just being built at that time and he used to take the ferry over to New York City until the bridge was completed.¹³

He worked his way up in the company and in 1945 he was made president of Sheffield Farms. They had their main offices on West 57th Street in New York City. He used to spend a lot of his time on the telephone because one of his first jobs after moving to New York was to be in charge of all the country operations to make sure that they had enough milk coming from farms through the milk plants and into the city. Of course, the milk was all moved by trains then.

⁹ Mrs. Roberts died in July 2009 at age 104.

¹⁰ Small community south of Morrisville, in Chenango County.

¹¹ Approximately 270 miles distance.

¹² Leonia, New Jersey.

¹³ George Washington Bridge, completed in 1931, traversed the Hudson River between Fort Lee, New Jersey, and 179th Street in Manhattan.

I can remember the hours that he used to spend on the telephone talking to milk plant operators and even farmers in upstate New York concerning the supply of milk that they needed to take care of the customers. That was a big job, but apparently he did it well because he was made president in 1945. He would have been about only 45-years-old at the time which, for a company of that size, was unusual.

Sheffield Farms was bought by National Dairy Corporation, a large holding company that had various divisions including Breyers Ice Cream and Kraft cheese. The company now exists as Kraft. The milk and ice cream division of National Dairy was called Sealtest. My father became president of Sealtest soon after the buyout.

He remained in that position until he had to retire at age 65 because of mandatory retirement. I think it just about killed my father to have to stop working because of mandatory retirement. He was just getting going good, just getting wound up. After that, he did a lot of volunteer work, primarily with the Red Cross, taking old people to the doctor and so on, though he was older than most of the people he was helping.

Dr. Smith:

What were the challenges he had relative to the quality of the milk, for example, tuberculosis?

Dr. Roberts:

I can remember him telling me how great a problem tuberculosis was. Testing was not being done when he was growing up in the early 1900s. The turnover of cattle in some of these herds was very high because of TB. But through testing they were able to get rid of it.

Another problem they had was the pasteurizing of milk because many consumers thought that the process changed the flavor and quality of the milk. They had what they called “certified dairies” in which the milk was not pasteurized, but the cows in the herds that supplied the certified milk had to be tested frequently for tuberculosis.

I don't remember that they had much of a problem with Brucellosis during his era.¹⁴

Dr. Smith:

Tell me about the horses that Sheffield Farms used to deliver milk.

Dr. Roberts:

My father said they owned at least 2,000 horses. I have been to the stable in New York City—I believe it was at 125th Street in Manhattan. I can remember very well looking down a line of horse stalls almost as far as I could see.¹⁵ They employed many people who did nothing but care for those horses, and I remember my father telling me about one man whose sole job it was to purchase hay and straw for the horses.

¹⁴ Brucellosis is a disease in cattle that is can be transmitted to people through unpasteurized milk or infected meat; also called Bang's disease in cattle and undulant fever in people.

¹⁵ See interviews in this collection with Dr. Lawrence T. Waitz '31 and Dr. Robert Ferber '39 for their references to the equine stables of Sheffield Farms.

I believe the horses were phased out in favor of motorized vehicles in the late '30s or early '40s. They had been such an institution; they knew the route better than the drivers. The horses would know when to stop and the man would jump out and deliver the milk.

My father was not involved in the care of the horses. By the time he got to New York City, he was no longer working as a [practicing] veterinarian, but was managing the business.

Dr. Smith:

Please tell me a little more about his family, his siblings.

Dr. Roberts:

He had two older brothers, an older sister, and a younger sister, a surviving twin.

Dr. Smith:

Was he the only one who received an education beyond high school?

Dr. Roberts:

My father's older sister, Florence, went to Teachers' College in Oneonta, New York. She became a teacher, but in 1914 there was a call from Washington for office workers to help the federal government. She went to Washington and worked for the Internal Revenue Service for the duration of her career, after which she lived many more years.

Dr. Smith:

What about the First World War? He would have gone to college just about when that was closing.

Dr. Roberts:

My father was in ROTC at Cornell. I don't think he ever got very close to going into the Army because WWI ended about the time he went into veterinary college. But he was in the ROTC.

He had an older brother, Stanley, who was in France in WWI. He came through the war in the trenches without a scratch, only to come home and fall out of a cherry tree on their farm. He broke his neck and was an invalid the rest of his life, though he served as a probation officer for Oneida County, New York, and had to deal with some of the worst people in our society. He could drive a car, but was unable to tie his shoes or shave himself. Like my father, he was also an amazing person.

Dr. Smith:

Do you have any recollection of the faculty who taught your father?

Dr. Roberts:

I remember my father talking about Dr. Williams¹⁶ and Dr. Fish,¹⁷ and also Drs. Hopkins¹⁸ and Veranus Moore.¹⁹ Students were much more impressed by their professors than they are these days.

¹⁶ Walter Long Williams, professor of principles and practice of veterinary surgery, obstetrics, zootechny, and jurisprudence.

Dr. Smith:

How did you decide to become a veterinarian?

Dr. Roberts:

I was certainly indoctrinated about Cornell. Dad had yearbooks and all sorts of things about Cornell, and I used to enjoy looking at them. When my father was at Cornell, the football team was national champion so it was great to look at those football heroes in his yearbook. My father played in the band, so he went to football games and enjoyed that very much.

When I graduated from high school in 1943, I immediately went into the Navy V12 program. They sent me to college and I was in college almost the rest of the war. I graduated from college two years after I graduated from high school. I was commissioned as an ensign in the Navy after graduation. The Japanese heard about this and promptly surrendered [laughing]. I graduated from Cornell veterinary medicine in 1951, a class that was almost entirely World War II veterans.

I became a veterinarian because I admired what my father had done. I had the GI Bill available and I already had an undergraduate degree. Though my major had been naval science, when I got out of the Navy in 1946, I went back to Chapel Hill (from which I had graduated) and took my pre-veterinary work before entering Cornell in the fall of 1947.

Dr. Smith:

Thank you for sharing that, Kent.

¹⁷ Pierre Augustine Fish, DSc, DVS, DVM, professor of veterinary physiology and secretary of the college; dean of the college (1929-31).

¹⁸ Grant Sherman Hopkins, DSc, DVM, professor of veterinary anatomy and anatomical methods.

¹⁹ Veranus Alva Moore, BS, MD, VMD, professor of comparative pathology, bacteriology and meat inspection; dean of the college (1908-1929).