
Reflections . . .

The path followed . . .



John J. Mettler, Jr.

In front of the Eldredge Library in Chatham, Mass, is a monument dedicated to the first settlers who came there in 1637. It bears the following inscription: "He who has no feeling of veneration for his predecessors should expect none from those who follow him." Perhaps the word veneration is a little strong by today's standards, but whoever we are or whatever we do, someone we deeply respect walked before us and showed us the path we now follow.

We all know of the work of Drs. D. E. Salmon, Theobald Smith, James Law, and a host of other giants in our profession who led the way to greater advances in veterinary medicine. But does the name Dr. Harold C. Parker, Cornell Class of 1928, mean anything to you? Chances are you never heard it. But chances are that, if you are a veterinarian or are studying veterinary medicine, your choice of career was influenced not by one of the great names in our profession but by an ordinary practitioner whose love and devotion to our profession shone and was seen and felt by all who had contact with him or her.

For a veterinarian to succeed in practice, loving animals is not nearly as important as liking people. The veterinarians most people admire are those who show concern not just for animals, but for the people who own them. I have enjoyed my profession since my first introduction to it as a boy, not just because of working with animals, but because of all the wonderful people I met along the way.

Growing up on a dairy farm

I was born in 1923 on a dairy farm in Hillsdale, NY. My father, who was born in 1888, considered that there was a difference between a dairyman and a dairy farmer. Although he and his father (who was born in Switzerland in 1839 and came to America about 1859) were experienced with dairy cows and milk-wagon horses, they knew little of growing crops and being dairy farmers instead of dairymen.

My father had but a third-grade education, yet, like his father, he read everything he could get his hands on about dairy farming. His background in dairying gave him knowledge of dairy hygiene, including mastitis prevention. It enabled him to ship milk year after year without losing his Grade A premium, which meant keeping the bacteria below 10,000 raw count. I use the word prevention of mastitis, rather than control, because in the days before sulfonamides and antibiotics there was no cure for mastitis and the dairyman had to practice milking hygiene to stay in business.

A hot, blown quarter was treated by alternating cold and hot wet massage and milking every 15 minutes, sometimes all night long. The utensils, and even the milk stool used for such a cow was never used for anything else except cows with "garget." Hands were always washed with soap and water before going to the regular milking string. If the cow with the blown quarter cleared up she was milked last when returned to the milking string. If she didn't clear up she became a nurse cow or went for beef.

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their entire herd on Long Island was destroyed because of foot and mouth disease. My grandfather hid one favorite cow, feeding her gruel until the sores in her mouth healed and she could eat. When the federal veterinarians reinspected the premises, the cow was found and, of course, destroyed along with all hay, bedding, and some buildings. People such as my grandfather must have made the life of a government veterinarian somewhat trying.

One of my earliest recollections was of coming back from a visit to Long Island, probably in 1928. As the Model T Ford carried us the last 5 miles to the farm, we met a herd of TB reactor cows, including several from our own herd, being driven to the stockyard in Hillsdale. I remember mostly my father's silence the rest of the drive. He had planned the trip in order to be away from the farm when the branded cows left.

In later years, he told me that as bad as he felt about his own cows being taken, which he knew was for the best, he felt more sorry for a neighbor who had permitted his one family cow to be tested only because my father had told him "she's too fat and healthy to have TB."

The influence of Dr. Harold C. Parker

By 1930, when Dr. Parker moved to Hillsdale, tuberculosis was nearly eliminated from the local herds in our area, but brucellosis, then better known as Bang's disease or just plain abortion, was prevalent. It was apparently thought then that because a test-and-slaughter program worked for tuberculosis it would work for brucellosis.

At first Dr. Parker's only work was the yearly TB test done at state expense. He fast earned a well-deserved reputation as an excellent veterinarian. People liked him because he was as interested in treating cattle as horses, and would show as much concern for an old lady or child with a sick kitten as he would for the owner of a large purebred herd. Previously, the only veterinarian available to the area had been called only to treat horses. Dairy farmers trusted Dr. Parker and, despite the Depression, apparently felt they could better afford to call a professional and get results than to treat cows themselves or call a neighbor to help, often with disastrous results.

Dr. Parker advised dairy farmers to test for brucellosis at the same time as for TB. Our herd was brucella-negative in 1932 and 1933, then a purchased addition, negative when bought, aborted in June 1934. By July, there were other abortions and from July until August 1935, none of 35 mature females had a live full-term calf.

The worst disaster from brucellosis was not from the loss of cattle but that my father contracted the disease, spending much of the spring and early summer of 1935 as a near invalid. At one time we were down to milking only 11 cows, making it hardly worthwhile to use the newly purchased milking machine. Instead, a teenage hired man and I milked by hand.

Dr. Parker had been at the farm constantly during the past year and was as concerned with the disastrous situation as we were. Repeated blood testing, calving hygiene, and isolating and selling aborting animals was of no help, as most cows aborted before they showed a rise in titer. Although researchers considered it downright dangerous, Dr. Parker recommended that dairymen with herds nearly 100% infected, as ours was, start vaccinating calves and young cattle with *Brucella abortus* vaccine that was available. In those days, prior to Strain 19, ethical biologic companies did not sell the vaccine, but numerous supply houses of questionable reputation did. It was anyone's guess as to how effective, or dangerous, the stuff was, but in the shape we were in anything was worth a try.

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maining cows in the herd was Dr. Parker's recommendation that cows were not to be bred until examined by him and found to be free of the secondary uterine infections so often seen following brucellosis abortion and retained placenta. By 1937, the herd was fast returning to normal, with young cattle testing negative to brucellosis.

In 1935, I showed 2 Brown Swiss calves at the New York State Fair in Syracuse. By the end of the fair, I had seen cattle dead from shipping fever and hauled out on the rendering truck, which was a frightening experience for a homesick 12-year-old boy. As soon as I returned my calves to the local Columbia County fair in Chatham, NY, Dr. Parker gave each one a dose of hemorrhagic septicemia serum. Whether this was the reason or not, my calves didn't get sick, whereas others brought back from Syracuse on the same truck came down with diarrhea and pneumonia. I realize that all of the foregoing is now known as anecdotal experience. Still, Dr. Parker's handling of our brucellosis problem and of shipping fever made me a believer in what was then the most modern veterinary medicine available.

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In 1937, Dr. Parker took me to a veterinary conference at Cornell. With us we took a castrated male cat with urethral blockage. This gave me a chance to meet Dr. Hadley Stephenson, who had been a classmate of Dr. Parker when both were undergraduates, and was now a professor of small animal medicine. As I think back about that trip and the kind way I was treated by Dr. Stephenson and other faculty members to whom I was introduced, I wonder whether their counterparts today would be able to unbend enough to pay any attention to a 14-year-old boy.

On Labor Day weekend in 1939, the loudspeakers at the Columbia County fairgrounds announced, along with the results of the Standardbred races, the progress of German tanks into Poland. John Emerson, a DeLaval dealer and father-in-law of a veterinarian, called me over to his tent display. He said he wondered if I understood how the news on the loudspeaker would affect the world. He also wanted to make sure that I would be heading back to high school for my senior year and that I was planning to apply to Cornell as a pre-veterinary student. "The war will last a long time and affect your life sooner or later. Make sure you get an education first." I don't think I ever saw him again to properly thank him.

Years at Cornell University

I was 17 when I entered Cornell in the fall of 1940. In October of that year, the draft started for those 21 and over. That winter and spring there were over 400 applicants for the 40 places in the veterinary college to start in the fall of 1941. Only one year of pre-veterinary study was required, but he were told this would soon be increased. Of the 40 of us accepted, 2 were women. As I recall, there were 40 female applicants, making the odds for a woman to be accepted twice as great as for male students. I'm glad that, today, students are chosen according to their qualifications, not their gender.

Most unusual, and perhaps the only reason I made it, was that all but 4 or 5 of my classmates were only 18 when entering veterinary college. The rumor was that we young applicants were given preference as we would not be eligible for the draft until our senior year.

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor during my freshman year in veterinary college, there was much talk of enlistment, but we were advised: "finish your education, your country needs you as educated persons more than as riflemen." In the spring of 1941, we were offered the opportunity to apply for commissions in the Medical Administrative Corps, which gave the Army control of us, but meant we were not eligible for the draft. The next step was to put

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the veterinary colleges in the country on a 3 term/year schedule. Thus, at the end of my first year of veterinary college, and second college year, I immediately started my sophomore year of veterinary college.

The ROTC was compulsory at land grant schools in those days and I, for one, enjoyed it. As late as 1941 to 1942, Cornell still had horse-drawn artillery ROTC. In the spring of my freshman year in veterinary college we took the teams, caissons, and guns afield. Those of us who could ride the best were allowed to ride and guide the teams; those who didn't had to ride the caissons, getting all the mud from the horses. Then when we returned to the stable we riders only had to clean our horses, whereas the caisson riders had to clean the caissons, guns, and harness. It was great fun!

In December 1942, we were told that in June 1943, the Army would take over the veterinary college. If we so desired we could resign our Medical Administrative Corps commissions and enlist in the Enlisted Reserve Corps. We would be called to active duty between the spring and summer terms and then return to Ithaca. Only one male student of my class of 40 did not enlist. In June 1943, after 3 days at Camp Dix, we were back on campus at Cornell and immediately promoted to Private First Class. Barracks were not yet available, but we ate at Willard Straight Hall, which was the official Army mess hall.

At that time several of us were living upstairs in the old medicine building of the veterinary college, getting our rooms and a little bit per hour for doing everything from janitorial work to book-keeping and pharmacy work. In the fall of 1943, when barracks became available and compulsory, we favored few were "indispensable" because there was no civilian help available to do the work we were doing, and we were allowed to stay where we were. We still had to make reveille and drill formations, but while everyone else had to be in barracks by 10 PM, we were available to assist on night surgery and ambulatory.

On top of all this, we still got 45 cents an hour for the time we spent on our old civilian jobs. When I talk to present-day 4th-year veterinary students with \$100,000 debts, I'm ashamed to tell them that I and many of my class of 1944 graduated with savings accounts.

Service in the Army Veterinary Corps

Upon graduation, June 25, 1944, 7 others and I were commissioned First Lieutenants in the Veterinary Corps, and the rest were released from active duty. I spent the summer of 1944 stationed in Brooklyn at the Port of Embarkation, receiving training in food inspection from slaughterhouse work to checking food going on troopships bound for Europe. In October, several of us were sent to Fort Lewis, Wash, where we prepared for overseas shipment with units of 4 enlisted men and one veterinary officer.

My unit, the 147th Veterinary Food Inspection Detachment, spent 31 days on a troopship and arrived on Guam in May 1945. Of the 15 ships in the convoy, one was carrying 105 dairy cattle destined for Guam and another had 500 hogs for the same island. On Guam, we were met by Maj. Chase Folger of Mt. Vernon, Wash, who had been overseas since before Pearl Harbor and had been working alone on Guam since the invasion in July 1944.

My unit was attached to the 5th Marine Field Force, which had, among its other supply duties, the responsibility to store and supply food for approximately 200,000 military personnel on the island. In the huge refrigerator depot of portable walk-in "reefers," spoilage of food had been as high as 30%. With a little common sense, and a tremendous amount of cooperation from the Marines, my unit organized a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week surveillance and inspection

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of food in the refrigerator units and, of course, its distribution, lowering the spoilage to about 2%. Perhaps this sort of work doesn't require a DVM degree, but who else could be better qualified? I figured the saving in food alone during the 6 months I spent on Guam more than paid for what the Army spent on my education. Other work on Guam consisted of providing veterinary service for the Marine War Dog Replacement Training Center and helping to get the 105 cows producing milk to supply the many burn patients in the military hospitals.

Entering private practice

On Jan 1, 1947, I began working for Dr. Ed Steinfeldt in Cortland, NY, for \$42.50/week—a good salary for that time. Considering all I learned from Ed about practice management and getting along with clients, I think I should have been paying him.

In June 1947, I left my job in Cortland, and Elinor Fox, who was a magazine fashion editor, left her job so that we might be married in July. I set up a practice in Copake Falls, NY, near Hillsdale, where I was born.

My first calls in that practice were made June 21, 1947, and were to see horses. One call was to castrate a yearling colt, for which I charged \$10, but as I was being paid cash I made it \$9. It should also be noted that the owner of the colt was the local Chevrolet dealer, who had just sold me a new car for \$945. In 1985, I bought my last practice car for \$20,000 and was castrating 2-year-old colts for \$75.

To get back to Dr. Parker, in 1944 he had had a coronary and was told he must work only half a day. We had discussed my working for him after graduation but the war made that impossible.

From his earliest years of practice, Dr. Parker had always stressed preventive veterinary medicine, using routine vaccination, fertility exams, and mastitis control as a matter of course. He was literally years ahead of his time. In 1948, he went to work for the New York State Mastitis Control program handled by Cornell University. His organizational skills were put to good use and the Earlville Laboratory, of which he was in charge, handled more herds and more cows than any other laboratory in the program.

In 1948, Dr. C. Murray Jenkins, Cornell Class of 1946, and I formed a partnership and bought Dr. Parker's equipment and supplies. We didn't buy, nor did we realize that he was giving us, something far more important and valuable than pharmaceuticals and equipment, a ready-made practice with dairy farmers who took herd health programs as the normal thing. Sure, we had some backward clients, but most took prebreeding exams, pregnancy checks, and the current popular vaccinations for granted.

Murray and I practiced out of a small office I had added to my garage until 1952, when we built a new office and hospital building with room for 17 dogs and/or cats. However, the progressive dairy farmers in our area who raised purebred cattle and wanted to control their production levels to fit the lucrative Connecticut market kept us too busy to do much small animal work. By 1959, we hired an assistant, Dr. Paul Layer, who became a partner 2 years later and now is the senior partner in that practice of 5 veterinarians.

Launching a writing career

About that time, I was asked by the publisher of the *Rural New Yorker* to write a monthly veterinary column. The first one was changed by the copy editor to a column of advice on how the owner could treat his own animals instead of calling his local veterinarian for advice and treatment. After reaching a better understanding with the magazine, my columns were never changed, giving me a chance

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to promote herd health practice, always ending with, "Call your local veterinarian."

In 1964, the magazine was merged with the *American Agriculturist* and the editor, Gordon Conklin, continued my column. Meeting a monthly deadline was difficult, and an editor of less patience probably would have dropped me, but once a month for over 25 years I could promote our profession and herd health, putting in writing things I couldn't dare say face-to-face to my own clients. When I left practice in 1985, I stopped writing the column because I found it impossible to write about things I wasn't actually experiencing. Recently, however, the editor has requested a series of articles on horse care. This gives me the opportunity to sell the advantages of veterinary service to the backyard horse owner.

Equine practice grows

From the early 1950s until the early 1960s, when the New York Sire Stake program started, horse work in our practice area was nearly nonexistent. Suddenly, in 1964 to 1965, we had half a dozen Standardbred and Thoroughbred breeding farms in our area. By applying the same methods to mare fertility that we had used for years on cattle, with emphasis on good records, we were able to help these new clients obtain good conception rates. To me it was, and still is, the most satisfying part of veterinary medicine.

Working for DeLaval

During the late 1960s I found myself with a booming equine practice within the general practice. In addition, I was becoming more involved with milking and milking machines through my longtime friendship with Dr. Harry Hodges. He was in his late 70s and trying to retire from his work as consultant for the DeLaval Separator Company, and urged me to take over his duties there. In early 1969, we learned that George Beneke, son of one of our good dairy clients and a senior at the Veterinary College at Cornell, was interested in coming back home to work in our practice after graduation. I decided to go with DeLaval and Dr. Beneke took my place in the practice.

My years with DeLaval were professionally both the best of times and the worst of times. I met some wonderful people in those years—dairy practitioners, dairy farmers, mastitis research people, and dairy specialists at the various land grant universities. On occasion I met some not so wonderful people, even a few from our own profession, I'm sorry to say, who, for unknown reasons, were trying to sell milking machines or designs for milking machines as prevention or cures for mastitis. I'm glad to add that these people are from a past era.

Today's literature on mastitis emphasizes milking technique and hygiene instead of machine specifications. Still, the informed dairy practitioner today knows as much about machine design and how to detect malfunctions as about the anatomy and physiology of milk production and letdown.

Despite the fierce competition, I found a genuine feeling of fraternity within the dairy business, from other manufacturers and industry representatives. This, I believe, is because they know that if dairy farmers go under the whole industry goes with them. The National Mastitis Council, which got its start through the efforts of 3 veterinarians, Dr. Bob Metzger, Dr. Harry Hodges, and Dr. Chris Haller, has done a great deal to promote better understanding and cooperation with the industry.

Returning to practice

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work nights and weekends, and by 1975 began to wish I was back in practice. At about that time, DeLaval announced that its headquarters would be moved from Poughkeepsie to the Midwest. I did not wish to make the move, but left the company with the suggestion that they recruit veterinarians in various areas who could be called on when their expertise was needed rather than have one person cover all of the United States and Canada, as I had done.

Shortly before the date I was to leave DeLaval, I was attending a veterinary meeting on June 10, 1976, in Syracuse, when I suffered severe chest pain. I was taken to a hospital where I was found to have had a myocardial infarction, which apparently did extensive damage to my heart.

I was told that I was permanently disabled as far as practice was concerned, but my own physician encouraged me to resume walking, hiking, and skiing, activities I had neglected during my years of traveling for DeLaval. She also encouraged me not to give up the idea of practice but to start out doing a few calls, beginning with the care of her Arabian horses. In January 1977, I began to practice alone, limiting my calls to equine work except for some mastitis and milking consultation.

Retirement years

In June 1984, I suffered a brain stem stroke while on a call. Although I made a good recovery and was soon taking calls again, I decided it was time to quit active practice. I sold my practice to Dr. John Jagar, and on June 30, 1985, I made my last call as a private practitioner, 38 years and 9 days after I castrated that colt for \$9.

Surprisingly, I don't miss practice. I've occasionally taken calls for other veterinarians but find there's not the same satisfaction as when it was my own practice. I still attend continuing education courses, including those presented at the meetings of the Hudson Valley Veterinary Medical Society.

Since leaving practice, I have had 2 books published. *Basic Butchering of Livestock and Game* was written at the request of the publisher, Garden Way, after one of their editors read one of my articles in the *American Agriculturist*. Last spring Garden Way published *Horse Sense*, a book on understanding and handling horses, aimed particularly at inexperienced adults who acquire a horse for the first time. This book has already gone into its second printing. I have been aided and encouraged in the writing of these books by my wife, who was editor and publisher of a weekly newspaper for many years.

Talking with recent graduates and attending continuing education meetings, I have no fear about the future of our profession. There is so much more known now, and even more that still must be learned. Whole new approaches made possible by laser and ultrasound, for example, are exciting, but no more so than new uses for old techniques such as acupuncture. To me veterinary medicine has been a great celebration . . . but it is really just getting started.

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Since leaving practice in 1985, Dr. Mettler has taken an active role in local community affairs, serving on the town and county planning boards and as a member of the Board of Assessors in Copake, NY. Dr. Mettler has sold the working part of his dairy farm, but kept 100 acres of woodland where he recently built a 1-room Swiss-style mountain cabin. He still enjoys skiing, hunting, and fishing.

For this feature, the editor welcomes and seeks contributions from veterinarians who have retired or are about to retire.