REFLECTIONS OF AN ITINERANT VETERINARIAN

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The invitation to present the Bartlett Address is greatly and sincerely appreciated and comes at a very appropriate time in my life. After forty years as a veterinarian I decided to spend this past year in an endeavor that required little or no veterinary involvement. And while it was both a challenging and interesting assignment, it clearly showed me how closely my life is tied to the profession and how very much I missed it.

So today I want to share with you a few of the experiences and acknowledge some of the great people that helped shape me up, who offered insight into both veterinary medicine and life in general and who provided enough laughs for several lifetimes.

To start with I must confess that I started down that path by blind, stumbling luck. I realized that veterinary medicine was for me during a crazy freshman year at the University of Oklahoma, where I was attempting to embark on a career in petroleum engineering, just like Dad. While I was flunking those physics and calculus courses, (mostly due to the new distractions I had discovered away from home) all I could remember were those happy times on my uncle’s farm in Louisiana, where I spent every possible day caring for his livestock, helping to break and train the horses (and a mule), and assisting his veterinarian.

At the end of the year, the University, which was inundated with returning GI’s, strongly suggested I go elsewhere to pursue my training. To which I calmly replied; “No problem, I’m going to vet school.” That summer, 1949, I wrote and called every institution that offered veterinary medicine east of the Mississippi, and found that none of them really wanted me, even as an undergraduate. The only glimmer of hope came from Michigan State (then College), who left the door open just a crack for a conditional one year as a freshman, pending additional information. I was on the train to East Lansing immediately, and worked my way up through all of the clerks in admissions, clear to the Dean, Tom King, who reaffirmed everyone else’s view that I was hopeless, and not worth their taking a chance on. He gave me the emphatic NO.

Rather than go home and face my father with another failure, I took a chance and went upstairs in the administration building to see what President John Hannah had to say about this. Fortunately his secretary let me in the door, obviously because of my crestfallen attitude, and I began a conversation with Dr. Hannah, who listened politely to my plea that I was really motivated to become a veterinarian, and should be given a chance. In the middle of this, his phone rang, and he talked excitedly for ten minutes or so, oblivious to my presence. At the end of the call he announced that the great goal which he had been working toward for several years had been finalized. The Kellogg Foundation had just approved his request for funding for the Kellogg Center and Hotel Management School. Several millions of dollars were involved. “And, by the way, son, what did you need?” I passed him the admission form which he signed, much to the consternation of Tom King, and I was off and running.

During the ensuing year I attended the first of several President’s dinners for four point students, and reminded him of that incident, of which he had absolutely no recollection. Three years of undergraduate work and a degree in Zoology later I enrolled in the College of Veterinary Medicine, with 62 male and one female classmates, mostly from Michigan and many from farm backgrounds.

My role models at Michigan State were Wade Brinker, pioneer in small animal orthopedic surgery, who nearly steered me away from large animals, John (The Spook) Newman, a formidable but effective teacher of microbiology and Gabe Conner, an excellent teacher of physical diag-
nosis and large animal surgery, with whom I stayed in touch until his death a few years ago. Dr. Conner was dedicated to hands-on surgical experience for students. Consequently we all did many rumenomies, DA surgeries and C-sections on cows. The ambulatory clinic was strong on food animal work, and really prepared students for rural practice. My desire to gain equine experience was not great enough to succeed in the environment created by Dr. Riley, but once I actually got to hold the instruments for him while he did the surgical procedure. Immediately after graduation, Dr. Riley became my friend and I spoke with him frequently at AAEP meetings. He was genuinely interested in my career, even though he had done little to foster it.

A deep respect and appreciation for the veterinary profession was firmly implanted in our brains by all of the faculty. They were proud to be veterinarians, and we picked that up. There were no ethics courses that I recall, but the example was set by our mentors and was reinforced by the actions of the class. I fear some of this attitude is being lost in our current system of education. Or else it’s being overshadowed by the sheer numbers of veterinarians out there, some of whom will do anything to gain a client.

The biggest character at MSU, (it became a University while I was there) was Dr. George Moore, of displaced abomasum fame. George had spent some time on the frontier, at Kansas State, with Drs. Frick and Frank, where he claimed to have seen thousands of every imaginable disorder known to domestic animals. George was short, stubby, loud and self assured. His twelve year old son was a spitting image of the father, complete with vocabulary. Once in downtown Lansing, the son was riding with George when a car cut them off. Junior leaned out the window and blasted the driver with an exceptional array of profanity. The other driver was stunned into silence. This event was witnessed and verified by two of my classmates riding in the back seat at the time. George apparently beamed with pride.

Anyway, just before graduation, I was lamenting my lack of equine experience to Dr. Moore. He announced that he had worked at Kansas with Dr. J. D. Wheat, who was now at the University of California, and overwhelmed with equine cases. George put in the good word, and I migrated west. Dr. Wheat had offered me his house for the summer while he went back to New York with his family. When I drove into town, he handed me the keys and took off. Since the other large animal clinician, Dr. Ed Rhode, was on the shelf with serious reactions to the Pasteur treatment (the old vaccine), I found myself at the helm of the large animal hospital, along with a new graduate from Davis, Hyram “Red” Kitchen. This classic combination of the blind leading the blind survived for two months in spite of a Salmonella outbreak which killed several valuable animals, hospitalized for lameness diagnosis or minor opthalmic disorders, and in spite of numerous bad clinical decisions.

Red Kitchen was an amazing, fearless guy, who would try anything. Those talents propelled him on to a highly productive career which culminated with his appointment as Dean at Tennessee in 1980. One incident remains clearly embedded in my mind from that first year. In an attempt to instruct me on the finer points of standing castration of the horse, Dr. Kitchen inflicted a deep laceration to the palm of his left hand while making the initial bold incision. Seeing that he was unable to complete the task, I jumped in and took over, making an identical incision in my left palm. A reproductive surgeon was born that day.

J. D. “Don” Wheat returned from his vacation and never complained about the havoc we had inflicted on his caseload. He became a good friend and patient mentor during my years at Davis, and beyond. Also starting off at UC-Davis that year was Dr. John Hughes, who was a Kansas State graduate with seven or eight solid years of practice experience under his belt. John joined the faculty as an ambulatory clinician, which was the seed that eventually grew into the equine reproduction service that set standards for the rest of the country. The association with John Hughes was the most important factor in my developing interest in clinical reproduction. But I learned much from John about medicine as well, with a particular emphasis on physical diagno-
sis, a vanishing art today, I fear.

After two years at Davis, I accepted a job with Dr. Frank Wayland who operated a quality practice in Salinas, Monterey County. Frank was an excellent practitioner who had accumulated the best beef cattle and horse clients in that area of California. One of these was the Laguna Seca Ranch of Frank Bishop, who was breeding some of the better Thoroughbreds in the state at that time. I got hooked on Thoroughbred horses in short order, an addiction that continues today. In those days, Dr. Wayland was sharpening his skills in the art of palpation of the reproductive tract per rectum that had been stimulated by the publications of Dr. Fred Day in Newmarket. I went along for the ride.

In the three years spent in Dr. Wayland’s practice, I developed immense respect for the livestock producers with whom I was able to work. Their commercial and purebred beef operations, and various types of horse production units represented the very best management systems available. I learned quickly that the potential for successful health management was absolutely dependant on the level of general management on the place. And in the reproductive arena this is even more critical. Conception rates, calving rates, and foal production can only be influenced by the veterinarian when nutrition, observation, animal handling and record keeping meet the acceptable standards of the industry. This concept is more easily accepted by practitioners who have had experience in animal agriculture, and may be a factor in the decline in numbers of food animal practitioners today.

In 1961 Dr. John Kendrick paid a visit to Salinas and convinced me to return to Davis on the ambulatory clinic. A serious component of the ambulatory practice, horse breeding farm work, was blossoming under John Hughes’ direction, and I felt that working with him was a logical step for me. But the amount of food animal work available for teaching was also a factor in the decision. So, I turned my back on my bountiful salary of $800 a month and got on the gravy train of academia.

The next few years proved to be extremely valuable. The opportunity to do clinical work with John Hughes, Bud Tennant and several promising residents like Al Merritt and Ed LeTourneau moved me ahead quickly. Tackling clinical problems in the investigative arena also proved to be stimulating. One of our farms was fighting a problem with Pseudomonas endometritis, apparently transmitted by breeding to a particular stallions from who’s semen the organism could be recovered. This led to a number of studies which defined the significance of bacteria transmitted by the stallion and set the stage for future efforts in understanding the mechanisms of uterine defenses. Dr. Bob Loy was on the Animal Science faculty at the time, and was a welcome contributor to some of this work. In fact, Bob and John Hughes went on to collaborate on the cornerstone studies that defined the equine estrous cycle.

During the next phase of my career, the Thoroughbred world drew me away from the halls of truth. First I worked five years at the El Peco Ranch of George Pope in Madera, California. George had ideas about developing a commercial breeding farm to best utilize his 1962 Kentucky Derby winner and his upcoming star, Hill Rise. When it became clear that these horses would have a better chance in Kentucky, the grand plan collapsed. Fortunately for me the manager of the cattle operation departed about then, so I took over the cow-calf herd and the operation of the feed lot, which fattened about 5,000 head a year on a ground barley ration. So for five years I supervised the breeding and foaling of about 50 mares a year, monitored the well being of the horses in training and sweated whenever the level of ground barley was increased in the ration the feedlot.

A reproductive moment to remember occurred one fall afternoon at the El Peco. Visiting the ranch were Bob Kleberg of the King Ranch and A. B. “Bull” Hancock, master of Claiborne Farm, Lexington, both lifelong friends of George Pope. We had a number of calving heifers in the horse pastures for closer observation, and one had started in labor. It was soon obvious that a Cesarian
section was inevitable, and that event drew a crowd. So, with the heifer stretched out between two horses, and with the able assistance of two of the absolute heavyweights of the livestock world, I went to work. It took a little longer than usual to get the job done, as I had to constantly remind my two assistants about their roles in the process, and bark at them when they threatened to contaminate the pristine surgical site under the trees. After the live calf was delivered, the heifer proceeded to run all of the dignitaries out of the field when she got up. Mr. Hancock and Mr. Kleberg scrambling over the fence made for a historic sight!

In 1969 I began an eight year stint based in the Santa Ynez Valley, Santa Barbara County. Initially I joined Fletcher Jones and his manager, Jack Dempsey, as resident veterinarian at their newly developing farm, Westerly Stud. Jones was a young computer and business genius who had developed Computer Sciences Corporation, starting with one collaborator and working in his garage. When the company exploded into a multimillion dollar leader in the field, he got involved with a racehorse or two. That interest progressed quickly to a desire to breed his own horses, and to unravel the myths of the genetics of performance. That dream was cut short tragically, while well on its way to success, by the crash of his private plane while returning from Los Angeles in 1972. In the three years prior, I had learned a lot about the business from Dempsey, an Irish horsemastern with a huge store of practical knowledge and the ultimate gift of gab.

For the next five years I practiced in the area, focusing on a couple of quality breeding farms, helping manage a couple of farm operations, and marrying my wife Clare, who dutifully switched her loyalties from Arabian horses to Thoroughbreds. For one breeding season I helped out an old friend and colleague in Southern California.

When the first ideas of joining the new veterinary school at University of Florida began to surface, I was drawn to them by two factors; a desire to return to teaching and a wish to investigate the complexities of infectious infertility in mares. John Hughes encouraged me to find out more about the job. The location of the school, 35 miles from the center of the breeding farms of Florida was important, and the faculty at that time lacked any real experience in the breeding farm scene. I met with Maarten Drost at UC-Davis to discuss the situation. He was going to head up the new Department of Reproduction, which would be patterned after the structure at Davis. There were to be enough faculty to allow all clinicians some time for professional development.

The youth and enthusiasm of the faculty already on board at Florida was a big draw. Charles “Corny” Cornelius, who was the founding dean was another. But when Jim Ticer, Chief of Staff of the VMTH, started working on me, I knew I’d have to go. And it was clearly the best career decision of my life.

The teaching hospital was not yet completed when I arrived at Gainesville. Our first efforts were to develop the curriculum for the Theriogenology program, recruit the rest of the people needed to implement it and start to build the field aspects of the clinical practice. The first class of students would not take Theriogenology until the Fall of 1978, so we had a year to gear up. Maarten, who preceded me by a couple of months guided the process, using the UCD framework.

My first break came only a few weeks after I arrived in Florida. Contagious Equine Metritis (CEM) had been defined in England and Ireland by the summer of 1977, and the whole horse world was in a panic. The Florida Thoroughbred Breeders wanted to send someone over to find out more about the disease, its diagnosis and management. The senior and respected Ocala practitioner, Dr. Brawner, was unable to make it, so I represented them. That turned out to be a visit where John Hughes, Bob Kenney and I went to the farms in Newmarket, to the labs and to a seminar in Cambridge, and traveled to Ireland. It was a marvelous opportunity to learn about CEM and to meet and get to know Bob Kenney, Peter Rossdale, Twink Allen, and Peter Timoney all of whom would have influences on my career. The trip was also important in starting some interaction with the horse breeding community in Ocala. Both John Hartigan and Phil Hofmann
were to become important contacts in that arena.

In fact, CEM had a lot to do with another break. The Florida Breeders set aside some contingency funds in case a special diagnostic lab would be needed in Ocala, should CEM really heat up in the United States. Of course it did, but the state's lab system handled all of the needs of the industry. So in 1981, when the storm was over, the PTBA funded my endometritis work with $42,000 of CEM money. That seemed appropriate to me!

I took advantage of the early schedule to prepare for the ACT Board exam, which I took in May of 1978. Luckily the amount of small animal material covered was minimal, and I slid through to the oral exam, in Oklahoma City. I will reveal, at this point, that my best friend on earth that September day was John Williams of the University of Georgia. He knew what I had been doing for the past 22 years, and he saved my hide. I was getting drawn in to a deep discussion on some aspect of reproductive management of dairy heifers by a crafty examiner who shall remain nameless. When John realized that I was digging myself deeper and deeper because I didn't even understand the question, he managed to switch the conversation to horses. I was saved. Official thanks to you, John.

The next twenty years at Florida sped by. The Theriogenology section, at its peak, consisted of six faculty members. Maarten and I were joined first by Rolf Larsen then by Vic Shille and Michelle LeBlanc. Louis Archbald made it six, and among us we had special interests in small animal, bovine, equine and small ruminant reproduction covered. Three other faculty in the Rural Animal Medicine Service were Board Certified by ACT. Both the didactic and clinical teaching programs were very successful, as judged by the students who were turned out. The residency program, I dare say, was the best in the country. I am personally in touch with numbers of graduates and several of the former residents rather frequently. It is rewarding to know that their basic interest and their grasp of reproductive problems are the result, in some small part, of the output of this group.

Personally, I count the collaboration of numbers of clever and patient colleagues as a key factor in any success I had as a researcher. Immunologists like Richard Halliwell, Neil Gorman and Pete Hansen all kept me out of serious trouble. My interactions with John Hughes and Bob Kenney were extremely helpful. We bumped along for a while trying to explain the susceptible mare on the basis of defects in various aspects of phagocytosis. While this turned out to be a blind alley, it did help raise awareness of the problems of susceptibility to endometritis, influenced the use of cytology in the diagnosis and certainly had a bearing on the concepts of treatment.

A huge jump in progress came when Michelle LeBlanc got interested in the endometritis situation. Eventually she steered the thinking toward uterine clearance as a critical element in uterine defense, and then proved it with the elegant work using scintigraphy. Subsequently, more and more emphasis has been focused on enhancing uterine clearance when managing susceptible mares. Sara Lyle, a Florida graduate, resident and graduate student, was a key contributor in many aspects of this work.

Contact with other workers around the world was rewarding as well. The International Symposia on Equine Reproduction were vehicles for debate and interchange that were very important. The input of a wide array of investigators was not only helpful to ongoing investigations, but stimulated new collaborations and strengthened friendships that endure. The gatherings were particularly good experiences for graduate students.

From the beginning, the International Symposia have been appealing to practitioners because of the applied aspects of many of the research papers presented. Post symposium gatherings for local veterinarians have been extremely popular for their content, and helped develop a rapport between investigators and the practice communities around the world. Many practitioners bought the proceedings books. To maintain these positive aspects of the symposia, I believe it is
essential that veterinarians continue to play a strong role in the organization of the meetings and in the selection of the material for presentation.

In 1980 John Hurtgen suggested that I get involved with the Board of the Society for Theriogenology. My term started with a meeting the following January in Denver, and was the beginning of a very satisfying four years. It was a chance to rub elbows with a great group of characters, who invested a lot of time and energy to make the meetings, publications and other activities of the Society successful. All of this in an environment of good natured barbs and jokes, many involving the late great Bob Garey.

To say that the directors were an opinionated bunch is to do them an injustice. When you have John Hurtgen, Les Ball, Gary Duskin John Simon and especially Connie Ferreira butting heads over an issue, you have a real circus. I distinctly remember considering if we really should allow a paper on small animal reproduction to be on the program for the next meeting. It had never happened before, so it took a whole lot of convincing of the old guard to get it done. The memory of the Rocky Mountain Society and the names of Faulkner, Carroll and Hill were all invoked to remind us of the real goals of the group. But as you can see from recent meetings, the decision to broaden our scope was a good one.

All of this reminds me that I have always considered Dr. Connie Ferreira to be the kind of practitioner and human being we all should strive to be. The chance to associate with him on this board was a real pleasure. In fact, there are many individuals like Connie that I have looked up to since I started down the path to veterinary medicine. Some are mentioned in this discussion. Many are not, but are still remembered with great respect. Actually, the strength, character and integrity of its people are the greatest attributes of the veterinary profession. Looking back brings this fact into sharp focus. I have always been immensely proud to be a veterinarian.

My career has been divided between veterinary education and the practice arena. That allows me to comment on issues that affect both aspects of the profession. I will not dwell on the very obvious concerns that threaten to change the complexion of veterinary medicine. Those would include the high cost of education with its corresponding debt load borne by graduates, and the corresponding low earning potential of young veterinarians. Also the shocking drop in interest in food animal practice and production medicine needs to be addressed.

Instead, I leave you with one of my major concerns; the manner in which we develop young clinical faculty. A new assistant professor in a clinical department has more than likely been trained after graduation in an internship, a residency, possibly graduate training during or after the residency, and from there on to the faculty. Technical excellence has been the cornerstone of this training, and this young clinician is well qualified to make clinical decisions based on the scientific information available from physical examination, laboratory and other ancillary diagnostic techniques.

What the young clinician may lack is the economic background that might affect those decisions. What is the real value of the animal? Is the cost of diagnosis and treatment realistic in the light of this value? Is the owner making decisions based on economics or on emotion? Is the owner really able to be fair in this evaluation while confronting the clinician and his students?

To put it bluntly, these are some of the most important aspects of animal medicine that the student can learn. If he doesn’t get some counseling in this area, the “real” world may become a disaster. And the only way the student can get a feel for the importance of these factors is from someone who has had experience with them. Experience in an academic setting may not count. The experience may come from being on the other side of the street as an owner/producer, or it may come from private practice. It is my contention that some practice experience is desirable in all academic clinical teachers. And I realize that compliance with that requirement can add to the cost of training of the young clinician. It’s worth it.

Finally let me thank you again for the opportunity to address this group under these most hon-
orable circumstances. The "Giants" of clinical reproduction who have preceded me in this task, and in whose honor this series is conducted are a very imposing act to follow. Genuine thanks to all who have made it possible for me to pursue this marvelous career and to those who contributed to my development. Above all, I thank my supportive and understanding wife, who has not complained when I have dragged her off on another crazy mission like we are just completing. Such are the risks of associating with an itinerant veterinarian.