

A Peek At The Past

by Marsha Mitchell*

Dr. West graduated from ISU in 1936 and spent thirty years in private practice interrupted by four years of military service during WW II. He then returned to graduate school earning his degree in Anatomy from Purdue University in 1972. He worked for the AVMA for fifteen years, spending eight years in the House of Delegates, two years on the Executive Board and five years on the Council on Education, retiring in 1987. He is now busy organizing an association for retired veterinarians.

Dr. Leland West was entering his third year of practice at the time of this journal's beginning. He was in Chicago attending the AVMA Convention last summer and agreed to talk about what veterinary medicine was like fifty years ago.

Dr. West is the son of a veterinarian and began going on calls and attending veterinary meetings even before he entered grammar school. He graduated from high school, spent one year taking the required prerequisites in his home state of Minnesota, and began his four years of veterinary training at ISU at the age of seventeen. "If they hadn't let me in I don't know what I'd have done," he said, "I'd have just had to die."

Many of the classes were like the current ones. The first semester was filled with anatomy courses, but the horse was studied first and used as the reference animal instead of the dog. More emphasis was placed on clinical work with third year students spending mornings in the clinics. Juniors and Seniors paired together as teams. There were no women in Dr. West's class though Dr. Margaret Sloss and Dr. Lois Calhoun were active at the college as staff technicians and took some clinical work with the veterinary students. Thirty three students graduated in the class of 1936.

Upon graduation, Dr. West returned to Minnesota and joined his father's practice. Horses took up the majority of his time — especially in 1937. When Dr. and Mrs. West returned from their June honeymoon, Dr. West's partner/father was very happy to have him back because of a large outbreak of equine encephalomyelitis. Veterinarians put in long days treating as many as twenty cases per day with supportive therapy, especially preventing the horses from lying down by innovative slings and carpentry work. After a shower and an evening meal, Dr. West would give his city-born, non-native wife directions to his next call. "I'd take a little cat nap in the car and Mary would wake me at the next farmhouse asking, 'Is this the place?'" They joked that even if it wasn't, there was probably a sick horse on that farm too. Mrs. West claims that if she hadn't gone with him on calls that summer, she'd never have seen him.

When the equine encephalomyelitis outbreak calmed down, draft horse work continued to represent the largest number of calls though nearly every farm had most species represented. Often, a group of neighboring farmers would gather all their colts and Dr. West would spend a day castrating colts.

Hog cholera "vaccination" was a large part of a practice then. "Vaccination" was accomplished by simultaneous administration of live virus and antisera. Though a few vaccination breaks occurred when debilitated animals were vaccinated, the system worked quite well. A questionable practice, bordering on quackery, was a marketed "Hem-Sep" bacterin for hogs to prevent hemorrhagic septicemia.

Bovine hypocalcemia cases were treated by udder inflation. Air was pumped into udders to reduce milk production and, therefore, reduce calcium drain. Calcium treatments, first chloride and then gluconate, more humanely and successfully replaced this treatment.

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The two doctors worked to expand their practice. Government brucellosis testing programs increased demand for services, and the new doctor, fresh from veterinary school, took on more small animal work, encouraging clients to vaccinate dogs for canine distemper as well as for rabies. One distemper vaccine proved not to be attenuated enough producing disastrous results.

Just coming out of the depression, economic conditions were tight but improving. Most of Dr. West's clients were able to pay the standard fee which was \$1 per mile for the first three miles, then \$.50 per mile plus drugs and a markup. Though his actual pay was usually a bit more, Dr. and Mrs. West set up their first budget based on his \$100/month base salary.

In his 52 years in the profession, Dr. West has seen many changes. He listed three that he believes are the most important. The first change is the availability of drugs. Sulfonamides were just being in-



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Dr. West as he is today.



Courtesy of Dr. West

Dr. West at the time of his graduation - 1936.

troduced and CaCl_2 was beginning to be used to treat milk fever. The second is that the change from large numbers of work horses to lesser numbers of pleasure horses has shifted the emphasis and teaching in veterinary medicine. The third is the scale of farming with larger farms resulting in the raising of only one species per farm and greater attention to herd health management.

In regard to veterinary education, Dr. West believes that students should be given a good general background, especially in the pathology of disease, so that they can recognize and understand the disease process and apply that knowledge to each species in each situation. In light of the tremendous volume of information known to veterinary medicine, schools need to teach students to be generalists more efficiently. Students should be trained to be "problem solvers and looker-uppers rather than memorizers."