

A Biography of and Interview with Lawrence T. Waitz, DVM

Class of 1931, College of Veterinary Medicine, Cornell University

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

The Depression's Veterinary Legend

Lawrence Waitz, who is thought to be the college's oldest living DVM alumnus, became a veterinarian as the impact of the Great Depression was reaching its acme. He spent his entire veterinary career on Long Island and was recognized by his colleagues and friends as an inspiring veterinarian and gentleman.

Born on July 12, 1910 in Queens, New York City, Larry's love of horses led him as a high school student to take a job exercising horses at a stable, and leading trail rides. There he met veterinarian from Queens, Dr. Tom Corwin,¹ who so impressed him that he decided to become a veterinarian:



New York State Veterinary College Graduation Photograph

Lawrence T. Waitz 1931

After he treated me to a great lunch, we went to a stable where they kept milk delivery horses. I went with him on calls and I just was fascinated with it. Just in that one day, I got hooked on becoming a veterinarian.²

Waitz entered Cornell at the age of 16 and graduated with a DVM degree as the youngest of the 36 students in his class. His classmates included Arthur Fredericks,³ the first of a three-generation legacy of Cornell-educated veterinarians; Elmer Woelffer,⁴ a noted bovine specialist who practiced in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin; and, William E. Jennings,⁵ who later became a colonel in the U.S. Army.

Though students attending college during the Depression lived modestly and held jobs to support their living expenses, Waitz loved Cornell as well as Ithaca and the surrounding region. He would sometimes walk downtown at night, then climb the steep Seneca or Buffalo Street hills to return to his apartment on Eddy Street. On occasion he would team up with a classmate who had a car to visit nearby towns like Watkins Glen.

Larry deeply respected his Cornell professors, finding them enormously generous with their time, and respectful of him and his classmates. During my interview with him, his face was

¹ Tom E. Corwin, graduate of the American Veterinary College in New York City (prior to 1899).

² Lawrence T. Waitz, personal interview, 2007.

³ Arthur W. Fredericks '31, also from Long Island.

⁴ Elmer A. Woelffer '31, from Wisconsin, to which he returned for a long and distinguished career.

⁵ Col. William E. Jennings '31, after whom Jennings Hall at Fort Sam Houston, TX is named.

radiant and youthful as he recalled his frequent walks up the hill from his apartment to the Cornell campus accompanied by his neighbor, the esteemed anatomy professor, Dr. Grant Hopkins.⁶

Graduating at the age of 20, too young to be licensed as a veterinarian in New York, Dr. Waitz spent his first year working with veterinarians in New York City and Long Island. With the practical experience he gained to complement the academic studies and large animal clinical knowledge that he had acquired at Cornell, he started his own general practice in Hempstead, which he considered to be the hub of Nassau County:

I started off there in the Depression when men were selling apples on the street and, right from the beginning, I made a good living. I was so fortunate to be a veterinarian and have work that was needed, particularly in that area, because there was a shortage of large animal veterinarians. I took care of about 18 commercial dairies, many stables of horses, and many private horses on estates and riding academies and that sort of thing. And I enjoyed it very much.⁷

Unfortunately, Dr. Waitz was afflicted with such debilitating asthma as a result of his constant exposure to stables and hay that he was forced to give up large animal work. He purchased a partnership in the Sunrise Animal Hospital in Rockville Center in 1948, and shifted his professional career to caring for the health needs of dogs and cats.

In 1958, he moved farther east on Long Island to an area where he had worked during the summers while he was in high school. There he built a new small animal hospital in Southold that later came to be known as the North Fork Animal Hospital. For the final ten years of his professional career, Dr. Waitz enjoyed his new clientele as his practice flourished. One year before his retirement in 1968, he sold the practice to Dr. William Zitek⁸ and expanded his interests beyond veterinary medicine.

Dr. Waitz's retirement brought great joy and fulfillment to him, his wife, Ann, and their three children. He developed nascent artistic skills and established an association of like-minded painters in the "Tuesday Morning Group" that lasted two decades. His wife taught him to sail, and they bought a 30-foot sailboat, which they used for racing and cruising. He sailed all over the East Coast and was known locally as a "crackerjack" sailor, very skilled and highly respected. Living comfortably in a 200-year-old farmhouse on a spacious lot, Larry and Ann Waitz remain close to Peconic Bay, which they have come to love and enjoy so deeply.

⁶ Grant Sherman Hopkins, DSc, DVM 1900, professor of veterinary anatomy and anatomical methods, one of founding faculty of the college in 1896.

⁷ Lawrence T. Waitz, personal interview, 2008.

⁸ William E. Zitek '59

Interview

Listen to the Interview

Subject: Lawrence T. Waitz, DVM
Accompanied by: Mrs. Ann Waitz (spouse)
Interview Date: October 9, 2007
Location: Cutchogue, New York, NY (Suffolk County)



Photograph by Donald F. Smith

Dr. Lawrence T. Waitz 10/9/07



Photograph by Donald F. Smith

Dr. and Mrs. Waitz, 10/9/07

Interviewer's Note:

Though most of the veterinarians featured in this collection were familiar to me, I first met Dr. and Mrs. Waitz the day I interviewed them in their Cutchogue home in late 2007. My good friend, Dr. William Zitek '59, had encouraged me to meet Dr. Waitz whom he described as a gently sagacious veterinarian. Indeed he was, as was his charming wife who participated in the interview. His musical voice with its subtle intonations and disarming wit resonates in my head each time I return to this transcript. How marvelous for our profession to have a man—now in his 99th year—whose story about veterinary life during and after the Depression is described with such elegance. (Dr. Donald F. Smith)

Dr. Smith:

Good morning. We're here to interview Dr. Larry Waitz and his wife. My name is Donald Smith from the College of Veterinary Medicine at Cornell University and it is Tuesday morning, October 9th, 2007.

Dr. Waitz, it's a real pleasure—honor—to meet you and your wife.

Dr. Lawrence Waitz:

It's a pleasure to meet you, sir.

Dr. Smith:

Thank you. I would be delighted if you would share with us some of the things that brought you to veterinary medicine, to Cornell, and what it was like to be there in 1927 when you started?

Dr. Waitz:

When I was a boy, I was a Boy Scout and was interested in camping, that sort of thing. I enrolled in the College of Forestry in Syracuse, but in my last year or two in high school, I went horseback riding with a veterinarian named Dr. Tom Corwin,¹ who kept several horses boarding at the stable where I worked after school and weekends exercising horses and riding with people to show them the trails.

And one day, after we were riding, he asked me if I'd like to go on a call with him and so I went on a few calls with him that afternoon. After he treated me to a great lunch—and that had its effect on me, too—we went to a stable where they kept [milk-delivery] horses. They had something like 18-20 Sheffield Farms and Borden stables,² where they took care of the horses for the milk drivers. I went with him on calls and I just was fascinated with it, and just in that one day I got hooked on becoming a veterinarian.

Dr. Corwin had a small animal hospital in its infancy, so he did some small animal hospital work from his home and did the large animal work all over Queens and Brooklyn, and Nassau County. I worked for him my senior year in high school and then several summers after I enrolled in the veterinary college.

After I graduated, I worked for four or five other veterinarians because I wasn't old enough to get my veterinary license.³ I was 16 when I went to college and I was 20 when I got out⁴. I didn't find out until my senior year when I was taking one of the exams, the professor said, "You know, you have to be 21 to take the state boards." I was crushed

¹ Tom Corwin, graduate of one of the proprietary veterinary colleges in New York City, practiced in Woodhaven in Queens, N.Y.

² These were large retail dairies that each had a large number of horses to deliver milk and dairy products to the metropolitan New York City area.

³ The age requirement for New York State veterinary licensure was twenty-one.

⁴ There were no undergraduate university requirements for admission to Cornell's veterinary program in 1927. High school graduates who had completed satisfactorily required units in English, a Foreign Language, Algebra, History, Plane Geometry and electives, were qualified academically to be admitted into the DVM program.

because I wasn't 21 until July, so I couldn't take the state boards with my class. I took the state boards in New York City in January 1932.

I think the following week I took the New Jersey state boards, too, but I didn't do any others, because I had no plans to go elsewhere. I wanted to go back to Long Island. Because I did not have my license immediately, I worked for four or five veterinarians. This was a wonderful experience, because I got a lot of practical things that I wouldn't have gotten any other way than to struggle along on my own.

In 1932 after I finished with the State boards, I started up a practice in Hempstead, which I felt was the center of the hub in Nassau County. You could go in many directions to make calls—large animal calls. I started off there in the Depression when men were selling apples on the street, and right from the beginning, I made a good living. I was so fortunate to be a veterinarian and have work that was needed, particularly in that area, because there was a shortage of large animal veterinarians. So it ended up that I took care of about 18 commercial dairies, many stables of horses, and many private horses on estates and at riding academies and that sort of thing. I enjoyed it very much.

But I had always had a little asthma, and the more I did large animal work and got exposed to hay and horses, the worse it got. While I loved the work, I spent many a night sleepless, wheezing away the night, and then would work the next day. After talking to many doctors about it, the only solution they had was to stay away from the large animals. I finally sold out my large animal practice to Dr. Eugene Dillmann,⁵ who took it over and did a good job of it.

Not knowing anything else to do, I bought a partnership in a small animal hospital⁶ in Rockville Center⁷ with Dr. Saul Seader.⁸ I worked there for 10 years, but I didn't really like it because it was like a factory. The only thing I really liked about it was the surgery, and I did most of the surgery. He liked doing the office calls. I did some office calls, of course, but whenever I could I did the surgery and took care of the animals.

Finally, after 10 years, I just couldn't stand the rat race there anymore. It was a real factory, and the more I did, the more there was to be done, so I finally gave it up.

I had always wanted to move to Southold. As a boy, for five summers, I worked at a riding school in Southold, and that's the way I earned money to go to Cornell. So I always loved Southold, and I came back there again and practiced for ten years. But then, finally, I had to give that up, too, and sold the practice to Dr. Zitek.⁹ The area changed and became mostly an area of retired people and second homes, so that the large animal work actually disappeared about the same time I retired.

⁵ Eugene Dillmann '43 is retired and lives in Richmond, Virginia.

⁶ Sunrise Animal Hospital.

⁷ In the southwest part of the Town of Hempstead, Nassau County.

⁸ Saul Seader '45, who co-owned the Sunrise Animal Hospital, is retired and resides in Boca Raton, FL. Dr. Seader's son, Richard P. Seader '74 is currently at the Sunrise Animal Hospital.

⁹ William E. Zitek '59, retired, residing in Henderson, NC.

Since then, I have had a wonderful life. I have had a wonderful retirement. I started a new hobby, painting pictures—I was quite successful with that—working regularly with other people painting. We started a little organization called the “Tuesday Morning Group” and we painted together for 20 years.

I also got interested in sailing. My wife taught me to sail a boat (I’d never had a chance before). So after I retired I really went into sailing a great deal. I bought a wonderful boat from the Bahama Islands called the *Frigate Bird*, which we had for 22 years. It was a 30-foot sailboat that you could have gone around the world in, and the whole family really enjoyed that. We did a little racing and a lot of cruising. We cruised up to Maine five times.

[Returning to the 1930s]

Dr. Corwin, the first veterinarian I worked for, had been a large animal practitioner and then he developed this little small animal hospital in his home. When small animal medicine was in its infancy, they had to kind of learn as they went along and work it out. They did a lot of practical things that you would never learn in college. Not to discount the book knowledge, but it’s a wonderful thing to get practical experience, and they certainly had to do it themselves in those days.

Dr. Smith:

Tell me about your interest in surgery. For example, how did you learn the surgical techniques that you found so interesting?

Dr. Waitz:

I watched different veterinarians do it. I watched Dr. Corwin. I watched everything he did, and then I went to watch other ones that I heard about who did various operations. The first caesarian that I ever saw was with Dr. H. Koch in the city, and he had developed a technique. I think he only used morphine and local anesthetic. He didn’t use anything else. I did most of them that way before we had a barbiturate—Nembutal®—and things like that. And we had to do a lot of things with a minimum of anesthetic.

Dr. Smith:

You left high school and you went to Ithaca [to matriculate at Cornell]. Did you go by train?

Dr. Waitz:

I went to Ithaca on the train. My father took me to New York City from Jamaica and one of my high school boyfriends went along. I went on the New York Central to Ithaca. I got off in Ithaca, a babe in arms, and a great horde descended selling magazines and all sorts of things—all sorts of memberships and all.¹⁰

A young man came up to me and he introduced himself to me. He was a pre-med student.¹¹ He took the trouble to come to the train, and he took me up the hill and helped

¹⁰ See interview with Dr. Joseph Merenda ’34, for his description of a similar experience upon arriving by train in Ithaca at the beginning of his freshman year.

¹¹ This student was the son of one of Larry’s father’s work associates.

me to find a room at 306 Eddy Street for five dollars a month. I stayed there for three years with a fine family called the Mitchells. The last year I moved to the Alpha Psi fraternity and roomed with Paul Marvin,¹² who was one of my friends and classmates. He was a son of a dairy farmer from Upstate, and his brother, John,¹³ had studied veterinary medicine a year or two ahead. His father didn't want him to become a veterinarian. He wanted him to help run the dairy farm, but he was hooked like I was.

Paul had to work his way [through college]. He worked every night as a short-order cook in some little restaurant up near the campus and then he would come home at 11:00 and look through the studies that I had been puzzling over all evening. He'd look at them for about 15 minutes and go to sleep and get the best mark the next day in the class. Abe Kleinfeld¹⁴ was the best student in our class, but he worked at it day and night. He lived in a room that I could see from my room at 306 Eddy Street. I could see him sitting at his desk studying while I would be up at my desk studying and I had comfort from that. But Paul Marvin hardly had any chance to study, but he still did very well.

Dr. Smith:

How did the Depression affect students? It hit after your second or third year?

Dr. Waitz:

The Depression started in '31 and I started practice in '32, and it never hurt at all because they needed a veterinarian in Hempstead, in that area. There was a shortage of them at the time. And a lot of people would say—and I remember going out with a girl one time who said—"You're crazy to be a veterinarian. The horses are gone up there; there won't be any horses in a short time." How wrong she was; they're still going! But I didn't charge very much and people always paid you.

I can remember going to a dairy in East Meadow¹⁵ [owned by] Kate Priesmont, an old matriarch of a woman with a big family. After I would get done taking the afterbirth¹⁶ or pulling a calf¹⁷, she'd say, "Mr. Doctor, come in the house, I'll give you a drink." So I'd go into the house. It would be cold weather, and I'd be stripped down, and she'd give me a shot of homemade potato whiskey and then she'd say to me, "Mr. Doctor, you marry one of my daughters. I got five strong daughters."

Dr. Smith:

Dr. Waitz, you had the privilege of knowing Dr. Hopkins¹⁸ and Dean Fish¹⁹.

¹² Paul D. Marvin '31, deceased.

¹³ John G. Marvin '30, deceased.

¹⁴ Abraham Kleinfeld '31, deceased.

¹⁵ Near Hempstead in Nassau County, about 30 miles from New York City.

¹⁶ Placenta, sometimes abnormally retained inside the uterus for several hours in cattle after parturition; removed manually by veterinarian.

¹⁷ Obstetrical procedure used on cows experiencing problems delivering their calf.

¹⁸ Grant Sherman Hopkins, DSc, DVM '1900, professor of veterinary anatomy and anatomical methods, one of the founding faculty of the college in 1896.

¹⁹ Pierre Augustine Fish, DSc, DVM '1899, professor of veterinary physiology, one of the founding faculty of the college in 1896, dean of the college (1929-31).

Dr. Waitz:

Yes, they were wonderful men. Hopkins was the anatomy professor who we had the first year. He lived right around the corner from me and many a cold day we walked up Eddy Street, through the archway and into the campus, and up to the school. And he trudged up all the way on foot and was always willing to help you at any time, day and night. If you couldn't understand something, he said, "I'll meet you up there and help you." And they were all like that, all the professors. They were always so fine.

Hagan²⁰ was one of the brightest men that I ever knew. Always willing to help also, but very strict, and he'd have a ten-minute prelim on Saturday morning. And I remember, boy, you'd better be ready.

Pierre Fish was a fine, fine gentleman, very sweet and gentle, and I remember him giving a lecture in the old building.²¹ It was a room with graduated seats up to the back, and he said out of the blue—he stopped his lecture and he said— "Waitz, will you straighten Crandall's²² neck, he's going to have a stiff neck?" He was sleeping in the back row. Well, he worked all night somewhere; we mostly all did, you know.

I washed dishes, evenings, at Cascadilla Hall²³ for three years—not every night, but most nights. You'd get a dinner and 35 cents for working there, washing the dishes, but I made the most of the dinners and got my money's worth by eating plenty. The fourth year, I washed dishes at a sorority house up on the other side of the campus. And I can remember walking home in the middle of the evening, walking across the campus and hearing those beautiful chimes²⁴ as I was walking across the campus. It was a delight. I'll always remember that, though I'm not musically inclined. They had a wonderful man who could play beautiful music on those chimes. And it was so nice coming home from working.

Dr. Smith:

You knew Helen Goldhaft?²⁵ Her husband was in your class.²⁶

Dr. Waitz:

Yes, he was in our class, and I saw her, but I didn't know her at all to talk to or anything.

Dr. Smith:

What was the impression of having a woman in the class at that time?

²⁰ William Arthur Hagan, MS, DVM, professor of bacteriology and dean of the college (1932-59).

²¹ James Law Hall (original veterinary college building).

²² James C. Crandall '31, deceased; brother is Mark Crandall '39, currently residing in Gloversville, NY

²³ Cascadilla Hall, student residence.

²⁴ Cornell Chimes, from Campus Bell Tower.

²⁵ Helen B. Goldhaft '33, sister of Tevis Goldhaft '35, and wife of Nathaniel Wernicoff '31; the fifth woman graduate of the college, the previous being Florence Kimball '10, Adalyn Schoenfeld Yaskin '25, Cornelia Jaynes '27 and Johanna Asmus Sutorius '29.

²⁶ Nathan Wernicoff '31, deceased.

Dr. Waitz:

I didn't think much about her one way or the other. But the horseshoer's daughter,²⁷ Asmus's daughter, we were very impressed by her, because she didn't have it easy. She went on clinics and everything with us. And she afterwards moved to Long Island and married and had a family, and didn't practice at that time. She came to see me once when I was in Hempstead, just to greet me and tell me that she was there on the island, but she wasn't practicing anymore.

But I knew her dad pretty well.²⁸ Because I was interested in horses, I was interested in horseshoeing, but I never was very good at it. That's a very difficult thing, very skillful thing, to be a fine [farrier]. Afterwards, when I took care of some racehorses and fine horses around the island, I was very aware of the blacksmith, because the blacksmith could make or break a horse whether he was good or not. Some of them would take suggestions from a veterinarian and others wouldn't. There was one I knew named Willie Meehan. He would go all over with his car and his forge, and he would listen to you if you suggested a bar shoe or something like that. But some of the others wouldn't listen to you. They weren't listening to any old horse doctor. But Willie Meehan did, and I think we got a lot of horses sound by working on their hooves and using bar shoes and so on.

Oh, I loved that work, going around on calls and working on horses. Sometimes, I would file the teeth on 15 or 20 horses in the stable in one morning. That was good money; I'd get five dollars, five dollars for filing a horse's teeth. I'd do the whole bunch of them, whatever ones needed it.

Dr. Smith:

Well, thank you very much. Can you just finish by saying what you liked about Cornell and why you liked it?

Dr. Waitz:

Well, I liked Cornell. It was such a beautiful place, and the professors were always so friendly and helpful. I never knew one of them not willing to help you after school or on Sunday morning if you needed it. And I also loved riding around the surrounding country and visiting all points of interest from Syracuse to all the Finger Lakes. Most of the time I didn't have an automobile, but I had two buddies, Arthur Fredericks²⁹ and Ben Fisher,³⁰ who came from Northport, studying in my class, and one of them usually had a car. So, except for the first time that I went on the train to Ithaca, I never went on the train again. I also was able to get a ride with some friends, and we shared the gas expense so it made it much cheaper that way.

²⁷ Johanna Asmus Sutorius was the daughter of Henry Asmus; she was a junior when Dr. Waitz was a freshman.

²⁸ Henry Asmus, assistant professor (farrier).

²⁹ Arthur W. Fredericks '31, deceased.

³⁰ Sebastian B. Fisher '31, deceased.

But all my impressions of Cornell are wonderful. I loved to walk all over Ithaca. I'd walk down to the train station³¹ sometimes at night after I'd get done studying. I'd walk down through Ithaca, then back and up the hill. I'd walk up the Seneca Street hill or Buffalo Street steep hill.³²

All the time I was at Cornell, there never was very much snow. I loved to go skiing and I had a pair of skis along. I wasn't a very good skier, but I always wanted to go skiing and there was only one snowstorm all the while that I was at Ithaca where there was enough snow to go skiing.

I put the skis on about 9:00 at night at the back of my house. I went down all the way to the center of the town, and then I got the trolley car and came up again. I was able to go a couple of times down that hill. That was the only time in the four years that I got to do any skiing.

But I loved the surroundings, Watkins Glen, all those beautiful places where you could go. It was great. Fortunately, I had these buddies that always had an old car that we could go in. It was a delightful time for me, really, and I'd recommend it to anybody.

Dr. Smith:

Thank you. That's terrific. Thank you very much.

³¹ Located about two miles from campus.

³² Campus was located on East Hill, overlooking Ithaca.