

# Peter Olafson

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“Cattle die, kinfolk die, even to us ourselves will death come. But the good fame which a man has won for himself will never die.” These words from the Icelandic poem “Hávamál” were suggested to us by Lennart Krook and Leon Saunders. Their simple elegance defines the life philosophy of Dr. Peter Olafson.

He was the son of Sigurbjorg and Olafur K. Olafson, Icelanders who had settled in Gardar, North Dakota. His rural upbringing taught him resourcefulness and self-sufficiency, traits that he never outlived. When his primary and secondary schooling was completed, he spent seven years on his father’s farm at Edinburg, North Dakota. In addition to his farm duties, he taught all eight grades at a local rural grammar school.

In 1922 he matriculated at North Dakota State Agricultural College and in the spring of 1924 completed the veterinary courses offered. During that summer he worked in the laboratory of Dr. Schalk, a veterinarian well known for his work in ruminant digestion.

That autumn he entered the New York State Veterinary College [at Cornell] as a third-year student. He was awarded the D.V.M. degree in 1926, having spent his final year as an instructor in the Department of Pathology and Bacteriology.

Beginning as an assistant professor following his graduation in 1926, he earned an M.S. degree in 1927, became a professor in 1936, and was named head of the department in 1946.

Dr. Olafson’s capacity for research and medical inquiry was enhanced by postgraduate work for a summer with Percival Bailey in Chicago and in 1935 with Karl Nieberle at Leipzig, as well as by studies in Munich and Copenhagen. Bailey and Nieberle were his role models. From this firm background he made fundamental contributions toward understanding a number of diseases in cattle. The first to describe virus diarrhea and to define listeriosis, he also studied muscular dystrophy in calves and lambs, toxoplasmosis, cardiac anomalies, “wobblers,” brain tumors, and sterility in all animals. His crowning achievement, however, was his work on hyperkeratosis in cattle.

By a conservative estimate that disease was causing losses to the cattle industry of two to four million dollars annually. In 1955-56 Olafson was sent to Israel by the U.S. Overseas Mission to help with the diagnosis and prevention of hyperkeratosis. The Israeli government presented him with a scroll of honor for his work, the first ever awarded to a non-Israeli.

Dr. Olafson was the recipient of many honors and awards. In 1959 he was elected president of the New York State Veterinary Medical Society, and that same year he was presented the Borden Award by the American Veterinary Medical Association. The state society selected him as Veterinarian of the Year in 1968. He was regarded by many as an international figure. One of his cherished honors was the designation of distinguished member of the American College of Veterinary Pathologists. Probably no honor pleased him more, however, than the esteem in which he was held by his graduate students.

He was a member of the American Association of Pathologists and Bacteriologists, the American Veterinary Medical Association, the New York State Veterinary Medical Society, the Southern Tier Veterinary Medical Association, Sigma Xi, Phi Kappa Phi, Phi Zeta, the American College of Veterinary Pathologists, the Conference of Research Workers in Animal Diseases, and the International Association of Medical Museums.

Peter Olafson was a dedicated man, both to his work and his family. Through his influence on his graduate students much of his dedication has been retained in succeeding generations of veterinary pathologists. To many of these men Peter Olafson was the “Father of Pathology.” He once described his philosophy regarding research by saying: “You go up blind alleys to find one that leads somewhere. It can be discouraging—you spend a year or two on a project and then find you are just plain wrong. But there’s no point to having a nervous breakdown over it. Just wash it out and start over. Most problems can be solved if you’re resourceful and stubborn enough. No matter how worthless the results are, you usually learn something.”

Regarding his work on hyperkeratosis, his laconic remark was, “It isn’t often a man who discovers a disease lives long enough to see it disappear.”

His wife, Harriette Elizabeth Smith, whom he married in 1929, predeceased him in 1984. He is survived by four daughters: Aldies Edwards of Athens, Georgia; Sigrid Farwell of Boulder, Colorado; Erna Olafson of Lafayette, California; and Freya Olafson of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

*Francis H. Fox, John M. King, Ellis R. Leonard*