American Veterinary Medical History Society

A Tribute to
J. FRED SMITHCORS

Dr. J. Fred Smithcors (1920-2006) was the Founder, President (1992/1993), and Editor of *Veterinary Heritage* (1996-2006) of the American Veterinary Medical History Society.

Compiled for the American Veterinary Medical History Society by Susanne Whitaker with advice and assistance from Mrs. Ann Smithcors. Rev. August 16, 2016

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I. PROFESSIONAL CAREER

J(ames) Fred(erick) Smithcors was born March 27, 1920 in Camden, New Jersey and died in Santa Barbara, California April 9, 2006, at age 86. He grew up on a farm near Elmer, New Jersey and won a State Scholarship to attend Rutgers University, where he majored in Dairy Husbandry and Zoology, graduating with a B.S. with honors in 1941. He was awarded summer fellowships by the Danforth Foundation in 1940 and to the Marine Biological Laboratory at Woods Hole, Massachusetts in 1941. He declined a fellowship in Endocrinology at Harvard University in 1941, but was inducted into Sigma Xi, the national honorary scientific society, that same year.

Dr. Smithcors’ Cornell University, New York State Veterinary College, class photo, 1945.

After his undergraduate studies at Rutgers, Dr. Smithcors came to Ithaca, New York in anticipation of getting an advanced Ph.D. degree at Cornell University. While a graduate student in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, he met professor of veterinary surgery, Dr. A. Gordon Danks, and Cornell’s veterinary college dean Dr. William A. Hagan, both of whom encouraged him to get his D.V.M. degree.

Dr. Smithcors attended the New York State Veterinary College at Cornell University where he earned the M.S. degree in 1942 (Endocrinology) along with being elected into the Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi, and was awarded a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree in October, 1945. He later was elected into The Society of Phi Zeta, the veterinary medicine academic honor society, in 1944 while a veterinary student at Cornell. While Dr. Smithcors indicated that he enjoyed his four years as a D.V.M. student and valued his veterinary education at Cornell tremendously, he knew he would not practice veterinary medicine and never did.
While in veterinary school he was enrolled in the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) from 1943 to 1944. From 1950 to 1961, he was a member of the Veterinary Corps of the U.S. Army Reserve where he later attained the rank of Major in 1961.

Dr. J.F. Smithcors relaxing at home while on the faculty at Michigan State University.  
Photo courtesy Ann Smithcors.

After graduation, Fred joined the College of Veterinary Medicine Faculty at Michigan State University as Assistant Professor of Anatomy from 1945 to 1947, and Associate Professor from 1947 to 1961, the youngest person ever to be appointed to that rank at Michigan State in 1947. In 1952, he was awarded a Ph.D. in Animal Breeding and Genetics from Michigan State.

Dr. Smithcors indicated that his interest in “veterinary history, [which] started more or less as a hobby about 1950, has become a part of my regular activities.” His avocation involved collecting old works on veterinary medicine and farriery as he was able resulting in an extensive personal library of classic volumes on the history of veterinary medicine which was later donated to Washington State University.

While at Michigan State, he developed and taught the first course in veterinary history at any school or college in the United States in 1955. Begun in fall and winter of the year before, his elective course was offered to first year students and included some 300 lectures. He reported in *Veterinary Medicine* (November 1955, pg. 524) that, “the reception of the course was not only favorable, but nearly half of the class also elected to do additional library research and writing. A number of students asked to have the work continued, and during the spring term we conducted a seminar based upon the papers which had been written.” Thus the course “apparently sold itself” and a limit had to be put on the amount of time that could be devoted to it. It was made a course requirement for the first year class the following fall of 1955.

In addition to his faculty teaching and research responsibilities in Michigan, Dr. Smithcors began writing about veterinary history and developing his skill as an editor. As a frequent contributor to the *M.S.U. Veterinarian*, he published a regular column,
many papers, and edited a special supplement in 1960 on topics related to veterinary history. In particular, “as the first veterinary publication to have a regular column on veterinary history, *M.S.U. Veterinarian* has set a precedent that we hope will be followed by others. In these columns we will present news items and short topics of general interest in this area.” (*M.S.U. Veterinarian* 1957 fall;18(1):50.)

His extensive writing and research progressed and lead to authoring the first two major works published in the subject in this country in 1957 and 1963 -- *Evolution of the Veterinary Art; A Narrative Account to 1850* and *The American Veterinary Profession, Its Background and Development*, respectively. These were followed by another well-illustrated volume, *The Veterinarian in America, 1625-1975*, in 1975.

Dr. Smithcors presented a copy of his new book to the AVMA president Dr. Jack O. Knowles in 1963. He gave all royalties to the AVMA Research Trust.
“Author Presents New Book on Veterinary Medicine to AVMA.

Dr. J.F. Smithcors (center), Santa Barbara, Calif., presents Dr. Jack O. Knowles, president of the AVMA, with a copy of his new book, “The American Veterinary Profession,” while Mr. Merritt Bailey (left), sales manager for Iowa State University Press, which published the book, looks on. The presentation was made at the AVMA Centennial Convention in New York City. All royalties from the book have been assigned by Dr. Smithcors to the AVMA Research Trust. An editor for American Veterinary Publications, Inc., Dr. Smithcors related in “The American Veterinary Profession” the important role veterinary medicine has played in both animal and human welfare and the significant role it is destined to play in the future.”


In support of the AVMA’s centennial in 1963, he wrote a series of 1-page articles that appeared in 100 consecutive issues of the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association from 1960 to 1963, entitled, “The First Hundred Years: History of the AVMA.” Each article highlighted events occurring in one of the years of the AVMA existence and included a short biographic sketch and photo of a notable individual.
During his tenure at Michigan State, their Veterinary Medicine Historical Library acquired “the famous Beaudette Collection of rare veterinary works [which] is one of the world’s definitive collections on this subject and the finest of its kind in America” in 1958.

After being at Michigan State University for eight years, he relocated with his family to Santa Barbara, California to join the editorial staff as Technical Editor and become part-owner of American Veterinary Publications on July 1, 1961. He would serve as Editor for American Veterinary Publications for 25 years until his retirement in 1986. During this time he shared the editorship of *Modern Veterinary Practice*, was the Editor of *Veterinary Reference Service*, a loose-leaf update publication, and contributed to several books published by AVP and other firms. He became Publisher at AVP in 1985.

Also at the time of his move to California in 1961, Washington State University invited him to be visiting professor and consultant on their veterinary history program in his first year as editor, and would continue in this capacity for over 20 years.

After retirement in 1986, he continued to lend his expertise part time as Contributing Editor for the *Veterinary Reference Service*. As noted at the time of his retirement from AVP, “All of Fred’s many friends here at MVP and elsewhere thank him for his dedication to the advancement of our profession and for his contributions in veterinary journalism.”

![Dr. J.F. Smithcors, Editor for American Veterinary Publications for 25 years and noted author, is the inspiration for the Clinical Writing Awards Competition.](image)


During nearly 35 years of his professional life, he collected over 1200 16th-19th century veterinary books, pamphlets, and other works that he later donated to Washington State University where he had a 20-year tenure as Visiting Professor of Veterinary Medicine. With his wife, Ann, an annotated catalog of those books was assembled and published in 1997. This bibliography, *Five Centuries of Veterinary Medicine: A Short-Title Catalog of the Washington State University Veterinary History Collection*, is an excellent resource for identifying rare and historical works in veterinary medicine. He was made an honorary DVM alumnus of Washington State University. In addition, due to the value of this book collection, WSU named Dr. and Mrs. Smithcors benefactors of the University, of which they are most proud.
Dr. Fred Smithcors with his wife, Ann, a registered nurse originally from England, who helped assemble, edit and publish the bibliography of his historical books now held at Washington State University. 

Photo courtesy Ann Smithcors

Over the course of his 50-year career, Dr. Smithcors is credited with having authored more than 150 articles in medical history and veterinary journals in addition to many scientific papers and editorials. In 1958, he was awarded a fellowship grant in history from the American Philosophical Society for the study of veterinary medicine in colonial America. This study would “form the first part of a comprehensive history of veterinary medicine in American to be published in conjunction with the centennial of the American Veterinary Medical Association in 1963.” He received additional grants from the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) for the study of veterinary history. For several years from 1956, Dr. Smithcors served as Chairman of the AVMA Committee on History.

In addition, after publishing several articles in its Bulletin and giving talks at their meetings, Dr. Smithcors was the first and to date only veterinarian member and one to be elected a member of the Council of the American Association for the History of Medicine, a signal honor.

Among his other activities have included participating in a U.S. Bicentennial project in 1975. Having written an article on veterinary medicine for the Encyclopedia Britannica in 1961 gave him the prestige of being a Britannica author. He also wrote pieces for the Yearbook of Science and the Future from 1960 to 1986.

Dr. Smithcors served as editor of some 13 short history-related articles written called “Pages from the Past” that were written by various authors. They were published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association between 1989 and 1991.

Dr. Smithcors is listed in various editions of American Men and Women of Science and in Who’s Who in the West. He was also a member of the British Veterinary History Society and the Honorary Editorial Committee of Historia Medicinae Veterinariae, a veterinary history journal published in Denmark.
II. FOUNDING OF THE AMERICAN VETERINARY MEDICAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Although a number of veterinarians have been interested in veterinary history over the years, some of whom served on the AVMA’s History Committee, Dr. Smithcors was a persistent champion and promoter of veterinary history. He is credited as the person who independently “formed” the American Veterinary Historical Society initially as a vehicle for exhibiting at the 1959 American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) convention. He subsequently constructed several exhibits for display at AVMA annual meetings in the name of the Society.

In addition, Dr. Smithcors conducted and taped 24 oral history interviews with AVMA presidents, veterinary college deans, and other prominent veterinarians in the field at AVMA meetings in 1958 and 1959. The oral history project was discontinued after he left Michigan State for Santa Barbara in 1961. The tapes and transcripts of those interviews are currently held by and may be accessed from Manuscripts and Special Collections of the Washington State University Libraries. He also arranged for a student artist to create the AVHS seal featuring a centaur as the central figure. It was patterned after the original emblem of the United States Veterinary Medical Association when that organization was established in 1863.

“Dr. Elden E. Leasure (left), president, American Veterinary Medical Association, accepts illustrated map of the history of veterinary medicine in the United States from Dr. J. F. Smithcors, president, American Veterinary Medical Historical Society, during AVMA’s 97th Annual Convention. Edited by Dr. Smithcors, the map was produced under a grant by the veterinary division of the Schering Corporation, and will hang in AVMA headquarters in Chicago. It traces then development of veterinary medicine from the first importation of livestock into this country in 1537, to the present.” Photo: J.A.V.M.A. 137.7 (1960): 435.
From 1963 to 1970, Dr. Smithcors remembered that there was “little or no activity as a Society.” Nevertheless, annual veterinary history-related exhibits continued to be held at AVMA meetings, largely as the result of his efforts in cooperation with others.

In 1976, Drs. Smithcors and William E. Ryan constructed an exhibit entitled, “‘Two Hundred Years of Veterinary Medicine in America,” for the AVMA meeting in Cincinnati. Dr. Ryan also had considerable interest in history as well having established the National Museum of Veterinary Medicine in Fort Dodge, Iowa in 1971. In that booth, a request for expression of interest in membership in the Society along with suggestions for appropriate activities drew responses from 27 individuals.

Given that level of interest in history, Dr. Smithcors initiated and wrote a series of six newsletters beginning in 1976 on behalf of the Society which later evolved into its semi-annual bulletin, Veterinary Heritage. He would later serve as Editor of Veterinary Heritage from 1996 to 2006 and initiated a change in format that first year.

The first formal program and business meeting of the Society was held in Dallas, Texas in 1978 during the American Veterinary Medical Association convention. It was attended by approximately 12 persons. Dr. Ryan, who chaired the organizational meeting, talked briefly on formation of the Society as a needed agency to promote the study of veterinary history and the collection of memorabilia. When the roster of those attending was combined with earlier lists, 43 individual were designated as Charter Members of the American Veterinary Historical Society as it was known until 1998 when re-incorporated under its current name, the American Veterinary Medical History Society.

In 1991, the creation of an essay contest for veterinary students was announced at the Society’s annual meeting in Seattle. It was named the “J.F. Smithcors Student Veterinary History Essay Contest” in honor of Dr. Smithcors’ significant contributions to veterinary history and his pioneering interest in teaching veterinary students about the history of their profession. For more than 25 years, this contest has continued to be the AVMHS’s primary outreach to doctor of veterinary medicine students in the United States, Canada and West Indies and serves as a lasting tribute to Dr. Smithcors.

Until his death in 2006, Dr. Smithcors remained an active contributor to the study of veterinary history and loyal member of the Society serving both as its President in 1992/93 and Editor of its bulletin from 1996 to 2006. He was honored as “Pioneer of Veterinary History” in 2005.

In July 2013, the AVMHS sponsored a day-long “Smithcors History of Veterinary Medicine Symposium” in conjunction with the AVMA’s 150th Anniversary convention in Chicago. It featured ten speakers on various topics ranging from the transition from horse farriers to veterinarians to the history of milk pasteurization.
All those who knew this gentle and very humble man and appreciated his keen sense of humor could not help but be impressed by his knowledge and be inspired to emulate his passion for research, writing and education about the history of veterinary medicine. Dr. Smithcors is often spoken of and regarded by his peers as the “dean of American veterinary historians.”

III. PUBLICATIONS

A. Publications About Dr. Smithcors


Publisher’s Note: Dr. Smithcors retires. *MVP: Modern Veterinary Practice*. 1986 May;67(5):433.


B. History-Related Publications Written by Dr. Smithcors

--- BOOKS, CHAPTERS & PREFACES


Smithcors JF. *Sex, Psyche, and Soma.* Unpublished 80,000 word manuscript, 1993. [Intended for both the veterinary profession and the public, it is “based on the belief that a knowledge of word origins can greatly enhance one’s ability to understand the use of medical terminology appropriately.” The manuscript was never published because “publishers did not feel there would be enough interest,” but a copy is held in the Smithcors Collection at Washington State University.]


Smithcors JF. *The veterinarian in America, 1625-1975.* Santa Barbara, Calif.: American Veterinary Publications; c1975. 160 p. “Much of the text…has been abridged, with revisions, from Smithcors: The American veterinary profession.”

--- BOOK REVIEWS


--- JOURNAL ARTICLES & EDITORIALS


Smithcors JF. But they never warned me! Modern Veterinary Practice. 1978 Sep;59(9):647.


[From 1960 to 1963, a series of 1-page articles appeared in 100 consecutive issues of *JAVMA* titled, “The First Hundred Years: History of the AVMA.”]


1897. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*. 1960 Nov 1;137(9):34,36 (adv).


1949 *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*. 1963 Jan 1;142(1):100.


Smithcors JF. USVMA paves the way to a name change. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*. 1998 Feb 15;212(4):480.

Smithcors JF. The veterinarian and the guide dog. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*. 1958 Nov 1;133(9):481.


C. History-Related Publications Edited by Dr. Smithcors

[From 1989 to 1991, J.F. Smithcors edited a series of short 2-3 page articles on veterinary history topics, called “Pages from the Past.” These were authored by various AVMHS members and published in issues of the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association.*]

[Chronological Order]


