

Differences That Matter: The First Two Female Veterinarians in the U.S.

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Abstract

Similarities and differences between two of America's earliest women 1910 veterinary graduates are presented. Florence Kimball and Elinor McGrath came from opposite backgrounds and challenged tradition, yet they both achieved success in their respective careers. They paved the way for women over the years which recognize the benefits of diversity in this versatile medical profession.

"Firsts" tend to be faceless images. Stick figures we use as placeholders in history. We hear "first woman" and we think vaguely of a long skirt, a chignon, and a defiant chin. It's worse when there are two, as in "first women." Then, we have twin stick figures, marching into history, paving the way for generations of equally faceless mannequins to come behind them.

The fact that Drs. Elinor McGrath and Florence Kimball both made history, by being the first women to graduate from U.S. veterinary schools in 1910, causes many to refer to them in a single breath.¹ But they were as different as they were groundbreaking, and that individualism is both striking and instructive.

Early Years

Dr. Kimball was born on October 15, 1885 in Worcester, Massachusetts² to a well-to-do New England blueblood family. As a young girl, she studied at Boston Latin School and traveled through Europe, attending private schools in France, Germany and Belgium.³ At Wheaton Seminary (later Wheaton College) in Norton, Massachusetts, Kimball took science preparatory courses. She was trilingual, refined and world-traveled before she ever entered the D.V.M. degree program in 1910.

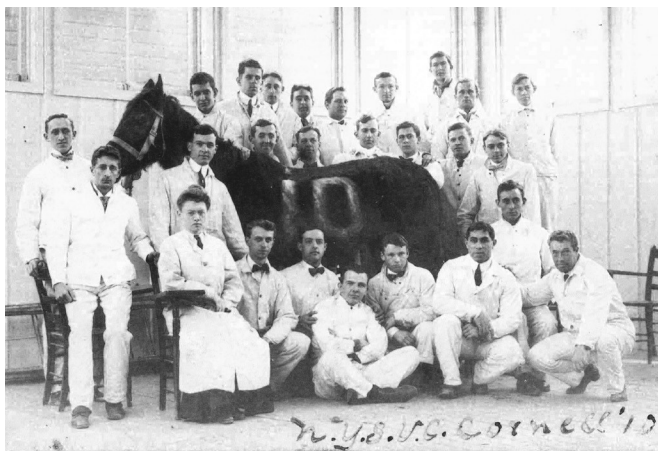


Figure 1. Florence Kimball with her 1910 classmates from the New York State Veterinary College at Cornell University. Photo courtesy Cornell University.

The 22 men who were her classmates at the New York State Veterinary College at Cornell University noted that,⁴ (Fig. 1) "Miss Kimball has won our hearty admiration by the ease and dignity with which she had filled her place as our only (female) representative in the Veterinary College.⁵ She graduated at the age of 24.

Dr. McGrath, on the other hand, was born near Milwaukee, Wisconsin on December 25, 1878 to Irish immigrant parents.^{6,7} She was more than a decade older than Dr. Kimball when she enrolled at the Chicago Veterinary College in 1907 (Fig. 2), as the lone woman in a class of 137 men. She graduated at the age of 35 with a Doctor of Comparative Medicine (M.D.C.) degree.⁸ (Fig. 3) At that time, the curriculum extended over three sessions of six months each and students were encouraged to spend the summer with a qualified veterinary

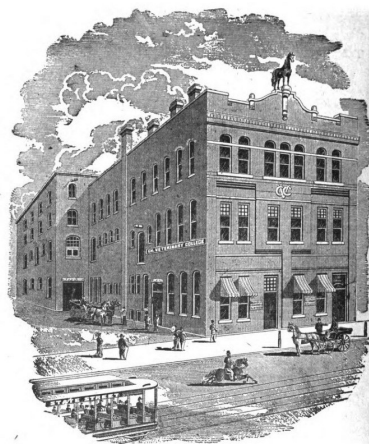


Figure 2. Sketch of the South State Street building of the Chicago Veterinary College, in operation from 1883 to 1920. Source: Chicago Veterinary College, Prospectus, Session 1907-08. Chicago: Chicago Veterinary College, 1906. "Miss E. McGrath" is listed as a freshman on pages 27 and 45. <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=chi.105693257;view=1up;seq=60>



Miss E. McGrath
Figure 3. Miss Elinor McGrath graduated from the Chicago Veterinary College in April, 1910.

practitioner.⁹ Only “a good common school education” had been required for admission.¹⁰ Her journey before graduation from veterinary school is less well known. McGrath may well be a married name, changed before her historic achievement.¹¹

Breaking New Ground in Small Animal Practice

After graduation, both these women again challenged tradition by choosing to specialize in small animal practice. Within five years, Dr. McGrath had repeatedly made local news by both purchasing a plot of land to create the first ever small animal cemetery in Chicago¹² and by marrying a more recent veterinarian graduate.¹³ The courtship was brief, the ceremony raucous. It involved a dog cart ride for the groom pulled by a “nervous hound” to McGrath’s hospital by 300 students from the Chicago Veterinary College accompanied by “enough animals to stock a two-ring circus.”¹⁴ This escapade even made news in England.¹⁵ It was reported that, “The bride appeared, smiled at the assemblage, and at her husband, and expressed herself as delighted with the entire procession.” Her character comes through in numerous local newspaper snippets as brash, confident, and impetuous.

Dr. Kimball had a quieter entry into practice, setting up shop in a renovated stable at her home in Newtonville, Massachusetts after graduation.¹⁶ (Fig. 4) She advertised her services as a veterinarian in the local newspaper,¹⁷ but she didn’t make the sort of societal “splash” that McGrath did. Kimball also operated a boarding facility called Pomcroft Kennels where she raised and showed pure-bred collies and Irish terriers winning bench ribbons at AKC competitions.¹⁸ As a sideline, she was building a flock of raised Indian Runner Ducks for winter egg production.¹⁹ Her Cornell alumni magazine reported her as presiding over a “fine small animal practice,”²⁰ but something was missing for her. While Florence Kimball was a pioneer, the view from 100 years away shows her as anything but brash. Her refined upbringing left her possibly more comfortable with fulfilling (or exceeding) expectations, rather than flying in the face of them. It is telling that in the U. S. Census taken in May of 1910, the year and very month she graduated from veterinary school, Florence Kimball, living with her sister and her widowed mother, listed her occupation not as a veterinarian, not as a student, but as “none.”²¹

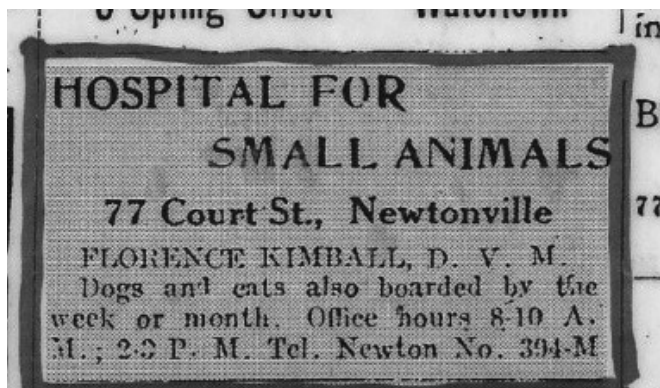


Figure 4. Advertisement for Dr. Kimball’s practice. From Newton [Massachusetts] Journal, March 4, 1911, p.7.



Figure 5. Elinor McGrath (1878-1963), first woman graduate of the Chicago Veterinary College and first woman elected to membership in the A.V.M.A. Date of photo and source are unknown.

Nineteen-fifteen happened to be the year that a nursing shortage was causing a panic in the United States, and women were urged en masse to enter the field.²² It was also the eve of World War I when so many men were involved in that great conflict in Europe. Interestingly, her obituary later noted that “war in Europe influenced her to enter nurse training.”²³ Dr. Kimball couldn’t resist. She entered the nurses training program at Boston Massachusetts General Hospital in 1915²⁴ receiving an R.N. degree in 1918, and never looked back. It is interesting to note that Dr. Kimball did acquiesce to including the letters D.V.M. after her name in the Massachusetts General Hospital Alumni Directory. Yet, the true reasons why she made the career change will never really be known.

Professional Path Differences

There were other differences between these two women aside from their professional paths. Elinor McGrath (Fig. 5) married at least twice that is traceable through newspaper accounts. In 1914, she married Charles Babcock, a freshly-minted D.V.M. who had wandered by her hospital in search of a job—and was smitten.^{25,26} In 1920, McGrath unabashedly declared herself divorced on the 1920 U.S. Census,²⁷ identifying as the head of her own family and working “for herself” in business as a veterinarian.

In 1921, she married Edward L. Girard, an engineer and self-proclaimed mechanical inventor.²⁸ Adept at making the most of free publicity, McGrath was quoted in the local paper at the time saying, “Dogs and cats are happiest when treated kindly, and that’s how I’m going to treat my husband.”²⁹ The social reporter for the local newspaper was chagrined to find that Dr. McGrath “showed her practical nature by appearing at the wedding [in the church] in the same clothes she had worn only a short time earlier at her pet hospital”—denim shirt, khaki suit, and a slouch hat.³⁰ McGrath was still married to Edward Girard in 1930.³¹

Florence Kimball, in comparison, never married. She moved from her home state of Massachusetts in 1920 and worked briefly at Ellis Hospital in Schenectady, New York and as Head Nurse of the Contagious Department at Children’s Hospital



Figure 6. Advertisement for “Dr. Elinor McGrath, Dog, Cat and Bird Specialist” practice appearing for several months in the *Suburbanite [Southtown] Economist*, June 23, 1931 p.6.

in St. Louis before settling in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma in 1929 during the Great Depression.³² There she worked as a night nursing supervisor at State University Hospital for nearly 20 years.³³ She was later described by a nursing colleague as “business-like and not terribly communicative. She was ‘not young looking’ and appeared somewhat short and stout, more ‘muscular’ than fat.”³⁴ Kimball died in 1947, at the age of 61³⁵—the same year that Elinor McGrath was elected Vice President of the Association for Women Veterinarians (AWV) during its first official meeting.³⁶

Lifelong Pursuits

While Dr. Kimball pursued a career in nursing overseeing the care of people through most of her life, she never lost her interest in animals. Outside Oklahoma City, Kimball was “proprietor” of “a little place out in the country, 12 miles from Oklahoma City” in Edmond called Chuwanusuh Pet Farm. At this facility, she raised pure bred collies and dachshunde and special breeds of Havana rabbits, guinea pigs (cavies), white rats, white mice and silver marten [rabbits].^{37,38}

Alternatively, McGrath maintained an active pet practice and also advertised medical services for dogs, cats, and birds for about 37 years in a south side neighborhood of Chicago filled with immigrants from all over Europe.^{39,40} (Fig. 6) In the beginning of her career, Dr. Elinor McGrath, “Chicago’s only lady veterinarian,” performed a tonsillectomy on a six-month old bull dog with a troublesome cough at the Illinois Veterinary Medical Association meeting held on November 30 and December 1, 1910 in the Chicago Veterinary College’s auditorium.⁴¹ Her Hospital for Dogs and Cats at 3247 Indiana Avenue was listed nationally for several years in the C.R.S. Blue-Book of Dogdom^{42,43} and she lectured on the diseases of dogs, cats, and smaller animals and their cure for the Anti-Cruelty League of Chicago.⁴⁴

When Dr. McGrath retired in 1947, she relocated to Hot Springs, Arkansas and the following year, at age 65 married James Donnelly, a man six years her junior.⁴⁵ In retirement McGrath, “continued to work professionally with an alligator farm and an ostrich farm in that city.”⁴⁶ She would live there

for another 16 years. Upon her death at age 85, on June 19, 1963, her name was listed as Elinor Lake, so presumably she may have married yet again.⁴⁷

Gender Does Matter

So why does this matter that these women were so different? Because, just as it is an egregious error to exclude an entire group of people from a profession by virtue of their gender, it is also such an error to lump persons of that gender into a single identity once they’re in the profession. Sure, the face of veterinary medicine has changed radically since Drs. Kimball and McGrath first paved the way—many women now make up an overwhelming majority of veterinary students and are quickly overtaking their male counterparts in the practicing world.⁴⁸ But words such as “feminization,” and the like do a disservice to the individuals who have, like Drs. Kimball and McGrath, brought their varying respective backgrounds and experiences to both their veterinary education and practice. In the end, making judgments about a person by virtue of their reproductive equipment—be it exclusive or inclusive judgments—is essentially the same action, with the same pitfalls.

Comparison 100 Years Later

For my veterinary class at Colorado State University—which graduated in 2013, the interesting news is not that women made up 113 of the 138 members. It is that five of the 138 veterinary students in our class already had Ph.D.s. One was an engineer, another a lawyer. Two were pilots, and several had served in the armed forces—including one woman who was injured while serving in Iraq.

Our classmates hailed from Peru, Dubai, Hawaii, New York, Wyoming, and everywhere in between. We ranged in age from 22 to 48. Some were mothers, some were fathers; some had barely left their mothers and fathers. Our only similarities were our love of animals, our dedication to the profession, and our willingness to work hard. The 113 of us who happen to be women were not the crowd of faceless mannequins one imagines after hearing of our two “pioneers” who broke the gender barrier in the profession more than a century ago. We were as varied as the dreams that brought us there. That variety is essential to the future of veterinary practice. For as animals continue to permeate every level and sector of our society—it will take a myriad of individuals—all with different life experiences—to adequately address their care.

One hundred years after Elinor McGrath and Florence Kimball, many women veterinary students still find themselves having to sneak into the men’s bathrooms during short class breaks. Not because there aren’t any facilities for women, but because there are too many women for the older, outmoded building facilities. Maybe eventually gender will become irrelevant in history—and only our deeds and accomplishments will describe us. Until that time, we will remember Drs. McGrath and Kimball, for both their similarities *and their differences*.

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