

Anecdotal History

Middlesex University School of Veterinary Medicine

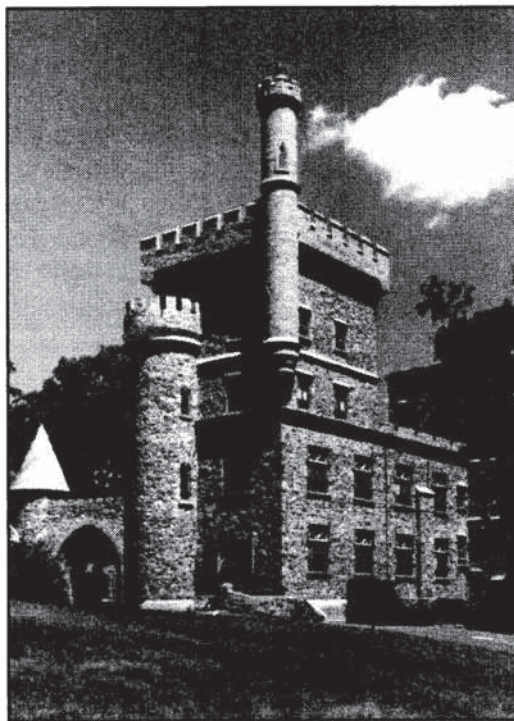
*Henry E. Childers**

Sixty-six years ago (1938) what many thought would be an up-and-coming veterinary school was established in Massachusetts. Middlesex University in Waltham, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston, was a small, privately owned and supported institution. Middlesex University was primarily a medical and veterinary school, although it was empowered to give degrees in the liberal arts. It was founded in 1926 by a surgeon, Dr. John Hall Smith, an acknowledged leader in medical educational circles, who had committed his personal resources in the venture. Dr. Smith spent several million dollars that had been earned through real estate investments.

Dr. Smith had strong conviction about medical school admissions and steadfastly refused to set up restrictions on the basis of race and creed. Middlesex increasingly became a refuge for Jews and Catholics, who were barred elsewhere and for whom Middlesex was almost a last desperate measure. This brought the university into endless conflict with organized medicine and its associations, which were subject to considerable bias. The state constantly threatened to revoke its charter.

The trustees of Middlesex University undertook the establishment of a veterinary school for two reasons. First, there was no veterinary school in all of New England, and all of the remaining schools in the country were state-supported and

admitted only residents of their own or contiguous states. The opportunity for prospective veterinary students to gain admission to veterinary schools elsewhere was very limited. Second, the University was ideally located and equipped to develop a veterinary school on the spacious campus. The College of Arts and Science and the School of Medicine were well established at Middlesex at that time.



In the fall of 1928 construction began on the Waltham site and continued until peacetime building was suspended with the outbreak of World War II. It was in the building of this campus that both the versatility and eccentricity of Dr. Smith were truly revealed. He was indeed a strong-willed and often stubborn individual. Proof of this lies in the fact that not only was the college curriculum under his specific direction, but that it was he alone who was responsible for the design and the construction of the collection of buildings today popularly known as "The Castle" Dr. Smith had designed a complex of buildings which

was replica of a Gothic castle perched high upon a hill overlooking much of the Greater Boston area. The development of the Middlesex campus eventually became Dr. Smith's major project, thus causing him in the ensuing years to withdraw from his surgical practice, to establish his home upon the campus and to devote all his time to the development of the School.

The middle thirties saw the completion of the castle complex and a gradual shifting of the School's activities from the Boston and Cambridge buildings to the Waltham campus. In 1937 the Massachusetts Legislature merged the two Charters of Middlesex and the University of Massachusetts into one corporation. The purpose of this legislative act was to give Middlesex true university status. Whereas originally Middlesex had been strictly a medical college, it now possessed the power to grant Bachelor's degrees leading toward admission to the Medical College. The change in the Charter led directly to the stiffening of entrance requirements from two to four years, and in turn created much higher admission standards. With the rewriting of the Charter, the title "University of Massachusetts" was returned to the State where it was later revived with the founding of the Amherst campus. Another important result of this new Charter was the creation of a veterinary school.

The School of Veterinary Medicine was chartered by the legislature of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as a department of Middlesex University with the authority to confer the degree of Doctor of Veterinary Medicine. The School aimed to provide a thorough, systematic education in all the basic and applied sciences of veterinary medicine and to educate veterinarians to diagnose, prevent, and manage animal diseases.

The Veterinary School's first official year of operation was 1938. Beginning with a class of 44 students and a preveterinary class of 25, the School had become a reality. The feelings of those first students attending Middlesex varied from great joy at the opportunity to attend a veterinary school, to uncertainty and doubt as to the durability of a school so recent in its origin.

When the Veterinary School opened in 1938 it possessed a few facilities of its own. Very often veterinary students were required to adapt to the facilities provided by the Medical School. However, this doubling up was soon eliminated as Dr. Smith once again threw himself into the effort of building the Veterinary School into a first-class operation. Each year he would invite the American Veterinary Medical Association (A.V.M.A.) to inspect the School for the purpose of learning how to develop the institution so that it might soon gain accreditation. Dr. Smith and

the Trustees spared no expense in their efforts to upgrade the quality of the Veterinary School. Taking advantage of the turmoil in Europe, Dr. Smith was able to hire many of the leading veterinary professors from Germany, Austria, Italy, and the Balkans who had fled to America with the rise of Hitler. Professors such as Alberto Ascoli, Leo Weisz, Richard Weisenberg, Karl Singer, and Hans Elias, to name just a few, were leading figures in their specialties until forced to flee their native lands due to the onslaught of Fascism. Dr. Rosa Kubin, who also fled Hitler's wrath, established a curriculum of clinical laboratory pathology at Middlesex University that eventually was copied at other veterinary schools. Serving as Dean of the Veterinary School was Edgar Crossman, a graduate of the Harvard Veterinary School (Class of 1891) who had made a splendid reputation for himself in the field of livestock sanitation, and who was former head of the federal Bureau of Animal Industry.

The physical plant at the Veterinary School grew quickly and efficiently, reflecting the earnestness of the School's administration. In October, 1940, the Veterinary School opened its own classroom and laboratory complex, separate from that of the Medical School. In addition to building this modern complex, the Veterinary School had also managed to furnish this facility with the equipment and teaching aids necessary to put Middlesex on an equal footing with the veterinary schools already in existence. Though small in size, the Middlesex Veterinary School had remarkably complete facilities. Besides the classroom and laboratory complex, the School also maintained a small animal hospital, and animal husbandry department that included three red-bricked dairy barns, silos, corrals, and a water tower. The collection of University-owned animals was extensive, including four breeds of cattle, bulls, sheep, swine, horses, and goats. Other related structures included an English fieldstone riding stable, sheep and goat sheds, a piggery, poultry yards, an aviary, numerous kennels and maintenance buildings to keep the School in proper running order. Among the other facilities of note were a separate veterinary section in the University library, museum collections in the fields of anatomy and vertebrate zoology,

a collection of non-domestic animals, and an agricultural farm which produced feed and grain for the School's animal population. Thus, by 1941 the School had enrolled over 200 students in its veterinary and preveterinary programs.

Because of the institution's small size, students developed an intimacy and rapport that still exists among them today. Their school's unrestrictive admissions policy was unique at that time; the Charter specified that no person was to be denied entrance on the ground of race, religion, or national origin. The resulting diversity of backgrounds and interests seemed to encourage warm and open relationships among students. Because of its unrestrictive admissions policy, the initial graduating class consisted of nine men of Jewish background and seven Christians, mostly Catholic.

Writing to classmates on the occasion of the 55th reunion of the Middlesex class of 1940, Dr. Raymond Russo noted: "We were like orphans of the storm—buffeted by the winds of bigotry, lashed by the waves of intolerance and barred by geographic restrictions. Middlesex University became a refuge for those deserted or displaced by these negative forces. We endured four difficult academic years—living with uncertainty, and the day-to-day threat of our dreams being snuffed out summarily. They were not easy times, but, in retrospect, they served us well. We learned to survive despite adversity; developed our own form of gallows humor—learning to laugh in the face of ongoing pressures and disasters . . . We became better people for having lived and endured the Middlesex experience."

Many of the lessons learned by the students at Middlesex were not to be found in textbooks, labs or field trips. Deeply ingrained in all Middlesex students were the values of hard work, diligence, and perseverance. The School's atmosphere was one of grim determination where people were deeply committed to the goal of one day being able to practice veterinary medicine. Outside of occasional school socials, journey to Boston and goldfish-eating contests, Middlesex students remained intensely devoted to their work. Living conditions at Middlesex were Spartan at best, where students were required to find their own room and board in surrounding homes in the Waltham area. In addition to the uncertainty of

their careers, the veterinary students also occasionally faced animosity from the Medical School. Unlike the Veterinary, the Medical School came under increasing pressure over the years to either meet the new standards or suffer the consequences of being closed down. Contrary to this were the fortunes of the Veterinary School, which seemed to improve with each year.

Unfortunately, the Veterinary School was never to take its rightful place in educational circles, due to the outbreak of World War II. The effects of the War upon the Veterinary School were enormous. Not only was new construction suspended, but many of the School's offerings were curtailed. Manpower was so severely drained by the war effort that the agricultural farm had to be abandoned; many of the farm animals were sold and only those animals required for actual teaching and research were maintained. Even though the Selective Service System provided exemptions for the veterinary students, they soon found themselves involved in an accelerated wartime program which had them attending classes on a year-round basis.

Difference between the determined Dr. Smith and the rigid hierarchy of the A.V.M.A. stiffened attitudes. The A.V.M.A., added to their woes by steadfastly refusing to recognize Middlesex, and continuing to judge the School by harsh peacetime standards, in spite of the damaging effects of the War. So draining were the effects of the War upon Middlesex, that prior to his death in 1944 Dr. Smith tore up a personal note of \$750,000 owed to him by Middlesex. Following Dr. Smith's death, further difficulties were to besiege the School. The draft deferment for preveterinary and premedical students was ended in 1944 and that same year the Massachusetts Legislature revoked the School's charter to teach medicine. It is ironic that the slogan of Middlesex throughout the War was "Praise the Lord and give us recognition." Had it not been for the Federal government's Student War Loan Act, Middlesex might not have made it through the War.

Despite the impending closure of the Medical School in 1945, the Trustees were determined to make a success of the Veterinary School. With the War all but over and many GIs eagerly looking toward attending college, Middlesex made one last

stab at attracting candidates for the veterinary and preveterinary programs. It appeared at first that this program would be a success and that the School would survive due to provisional acceptance of the State Board of Education's allotment of the GI Bill of rights to Middlesex. However, in a strange and never fully explained series of circumstances the School suddenly became ineligible for educational funds as provided by Public Law 346 (GI Bill of Rights). When the State and Federal money was withdrawn, Middlesex was forced to realize that it would soon have to suspend operations. No longer able to absorb the overwhelming costs of maintaining a veterinary school, the Board of Trustees voted to suspend the School's operations.

Interestingly enough, though, the School did not just disappear, as the Brandeis Corporation took on responsibility for the Middlesex Charter in 1947 when the School announced its cessation of operations. The Middlesex Corporation was more than willing to give control to the Brandeis group because it sought to guarantee the rights of education to all men and women regardless of belief or background. On March 12, 1947, Middlesex University officially ceased operation and on March 13, 1947, Brandeis University was the new legal tenant of the Waltham campus.

But it would be too easy simply to blame the War for the downfall of Middlesex University. Years ahead of its time in breaking down the barriers of prejudice in education, Middlesex had ignored the quota systems adhered to by many of the better professional schools. Not only did Middlesex provide the opportunity for an education to people of all backgrounds but furthermore it attempted to keep costs at a bare minimum so that rich and poor alike would have an opportunity to attend the School. It was an innovative veterinary school whose scope and offerings were considerably more varied and interesting than its fellow schools, not to mention its adaptability when the War threatened to close the School altogether. Above all else, Middlesex filled the crucial need for a veterinary school in the New England region.

In its short history the Middlesex Veterinary School produced 243 graduates, many of whom still practice today throughout the country. Graduates of Middlesex knew the kind of resistance

they would encounter and yet this did not deter them from their goals. They knew they had to be good when taking their licensing exams and they usually were. It was not uncommon for the Middlesex grads to finish at the top of the list of those who took the State exams.

One of the many factors that lead to the School's closing was the political pressure from local veterinarians. Professional jealousies caused those Massachusetts veterinarians already in practice to resent these new graduates. Some believed, or wanted to believe, that the A.V.M.A. brought pressure to bear upon the State Legislature to make operation of the Veterinary School even more difficult. Even Dr. Smith was partly to blame for the School's difficulties as his running feuds with Harvard and other institutions were to become almost legendary. In essence, Middlesex was a school, which defied all the conventions of the day but paid the final price in the end when it passed out of existence.

The story of Middlesex cannot end without an accounting of the School's graduates. Today Middlesex alumni are among the most prominent veterinarians in America. They have become involved in all aspects of veterinary medicine ranging from public health to research. They also serve on the Boards of Registration in Massachusetts, Virginia, and Illinois, to name just a few states. Prominent Middlesex graduates include an assistant Surgeon General of the U.S. Public Health Service and the President of Charles River Laboratories, Inc. Other Middlesex alumni have served as administrators, educators and department heads in medical schools, contributed in research at MIT, Johns Hopkins and Stanford University and in such foundations as the Sloan Kettering Institute; others have given of their time freely to such organizations as the Kennedy-Shriver Foundation in mental health. Not a bad track record for a group of men and women from a school that everyone called second-rate. But of all the accomplishments of Middlesex veterinarians, none was quite so satisfying as the 1964 edict handed down by the A.V.M.A. which gave full recognition to all practicing graduates of Middlesex Veterinary School. The recognition from the A.V.M.A. followed the previous recognition provided by the Bureau of Animal Industry which is why so many graduates worked for the

U.N.R.R.A. at the end of World War II, shipping out with horses and cattle being sent under the Marshall Plan to devastated Europe.

Today Middlesex is just a faint memory. Little remains of the original campus except for the Gothic castle. And it is that Gothic castle, now a classic and celebrated centerpiece much beloved by Brandeis students, which serves as a memorial to a noble experiment that lived and died 57 years ago.

REFERENCES

1. *President's Report*, Middlesex University, July 19, 1940
2. *The Life and Death of a New England Veterinary School, Animals*, Vol 107, No. 4, April 1974. Published by the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

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*— with editing and additions by S.B. Bigman, DVM and Raymond Russo, DVM

PHOTO LEGEND

The "Castle" at Middlesex (now Brandeis) University, Waltham Massachusetts. Courtesy Brandeis University Photography Department