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The Summer of '42: So Begins Dr. Raker's Six-Decade Odyssey of Healing, Teaching and Learning

BY SUSAN I. FINKELSTEIN

Sixty-six years ago, at Penn Vet, a young man named Charlie Raker was named valedictorian of that year's graduating class. The Class of 1942 was the 55th class to graduate from the school, and the first to graduate while the United States was officially at war. That year, Penn Vet adopted an accelerated education program in response to the needs created by World War II. The last class on the regular program —Dr. Raker's class—graduated in June, and classes resumed that July. Until 1946, new classes started every nine months.

The Class of 1942 was notable for another reason: the singular quality of its graduates. **David Detweiler**, for instance, went on to found Penn Vet's Section of Cardiology and has been called the "father of veterinary cardiology." **Julius Fabricant**, still a faculty member at Cornell, became a leading researcher in avian health. And then there was **Charles W. Raker**. Joining Penn Vet's faculty in 1950 after eight years in private practice, he is a recognized expert on upper-respiratory surgical techniques in horses and a pioneer in the field of equine joint

"To teach is to learn twice."

~ Joseph Joubert, Pensées

surgery. Dr. Raker also helped grow New Bolton Center, purchased by the school in 1952, into a premier treatment center for horses and farm animals. But perhaps it is his contribution as a teacher that Dr. Raker remembers most fondly.

"I think the experience of eight years in practice was what students appreciated most," Dr. Raker explains. "Because it was practical; it was what they were going to experience when they got out. I used to present students with a case they would have and ask them, 'What are you going to do? How are you going to handle it?' 'Well, I'll



Clinicians examine a horse in the courtyard of the Old Quadrangle Building in Philadelphia, c. 1950s. Plans for renovation of the Philadelphia campus include restoring this courtyard—now a parking lot—back to its original state of a park-like space.

Quarter-Century Club

Penn Vet is proud to acknowledge members of the faculty who have given 25 or more years of invaluable service to the school. Highlighted in this section is Dr. Charles W. Raker, the Lawrence Baker Sheppard Professor Emeritus of Surgery for the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine.

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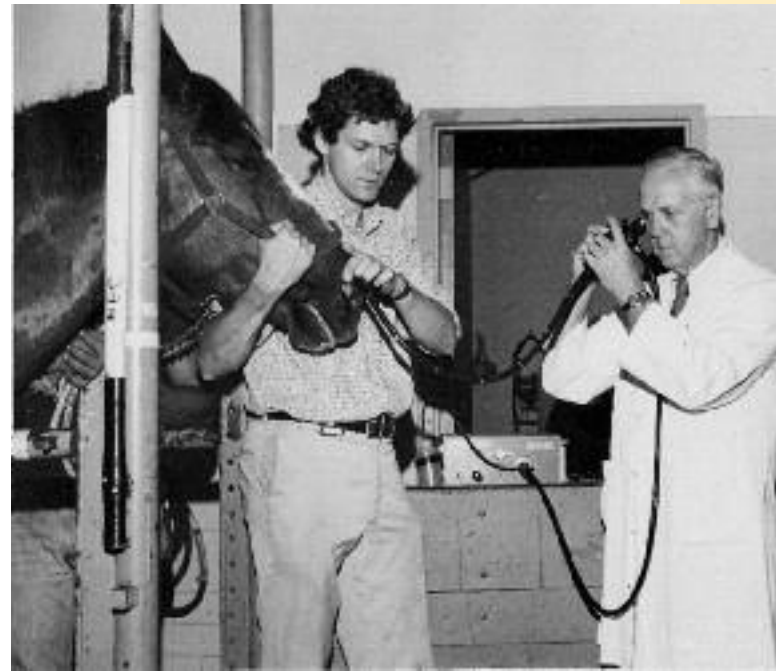
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take some blood and I'll do this and this,' they would say. I said, 'Wait a minute, there's no laboratory around here. You're on a farm and here's a sick animal and you have to make a decision and treat it. How are you going to proceed?' And that made the students stop and think. We didn't have all the luxuries of a lab right across the street or down the hall back then."

Of course that wasn't the only difference between veterinary education then and now. Long before his teaching days, in 1938, with just a year of undergraduate study under his belt, 18-year-old Charlie decided he'd apply to vet school. The "admissions process" was quick and to the point. "I was asked if I knew how to milk a cow, and I'd had experience with that, so I said yes," he remembers. "And then they asked, 'Can you hook up a team of horses and I said yes to that, too. So, okay, then I was admitted.'"

Similarly, Dr. Raker was fast-tracked into a surgery position in 1953—with little previous surgical experience. The school's one large-animal surgeon had decided to return to Canada, and Dr. Raker was presented with an unexpected offer. "**Dr. Mark Allam** [dean at the time] and **Dr. John Beck** [V'30, professor of medicine] asked me if I would agree to accept a position as assistant professor of surgery. I said, 'Well, I'll have to think about this, gentlemen.' Eventually, I told them I would do it under two conditions. I said, 'First of all, I'm not a large-animal surgeon and I've had no training. And I don't really feel qualified to do what you're asking me to do on some of these very expensive Thoroughbred racehorses. Really, you must send me somewhere to get some kind of training as a large-animal surgeon.' And then I said, 'Number two, if I can't do this job, I don't want you to dump me by the roadside or fire me, because I like teaching and I want to stay here.' Anyway, they agreed to that. So I went to Cornell for two weeks and worked with Dr. Gordon Danks, who originally had been at Bolton Farm. I observed quite a bit of horse surgery, but I never made an incision, I never placed a suture and I never picked up an instrument. I just looked. And that was how I had my surgical training."

Despite such modest preparation, Dr. Raker was charged with taking over an ailing referral service still in the Old Quadrangle Building in Philadelphia, with its circus-like ambiance of trucks, trailers and vans unloading horses, cows and swine—interspersed with grooms and students exercising animals—all around a dirt patch of land known as "fecal field."



An endoscopic examination performed by Dr. Charles Raker (right) with assistance from fourth-year student Luke M. Martin (Class of 1981).

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“I can still see those big horse vans driving up on 39th Street in front of that big iron gate,” Dr. Raker remembers with a smile, “and they’d bring these horses off onto that brick walkway and these horses had never been on bricks in their lives before!”

Almost single-handedly, Dr. Raker proceeded to transform Penn Vet’s equine service into one that drew top-quality sport horses from around the country, and the waiting list for elective surgery grew dramatically. “I went to Philadelphia every day from the beginning of 1954 until we moved out here [New Bolton Center] in January 1964. And that’s when I saw a whole lot of horses. Somehow I’d gotten a reputation—a good one, I don’t know how it happened—but I had those 17 stalls in Philadelphia full of horses all the time. I handled the entire case-load until 1957—cows, horses, everything. I was on call 365 days a year. Plus I also was teaching large-animal surgery.”

It was this tremendous workload that prompted Dr. Raker to start the school’s first internship program in equine medicine and surgery. (In fact, one of the first female interns in the field, **Dr. Olive K. Britt**, got her start with Dr. Raker.) “I got my first intern in ’57. And that was one of our own graduates, **Dr. Alan Sayers**. Next year, I got another intern, and next year, another—and then I decided I was going to start a residency program. From then on, it just kept mushrooming. We always had two or three interns and a couple of residents on duty. They helped me with cases. And eventually some of them stayed on and became fully qualified staff members. It was quite a busy place at that time.”

In 1967, the renowned Lawrence Baker Sheppard—president of the Hanover Shoe company, head of the U.S. Trotting Association and owner of Hanover Shoe Farm, one of the largest Standardbred horse-breeding facilities in the United States—funded the nation’s first endowed chair of veterinary surgery at a veterinary school. Dr. Raker served in this role through his retirement in 1985, now holding the Lawrence Baker Sheppard Emeritus Professorship of Surgery for the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine.

Although he has been officially out of the classroom for 23 years, *Professor* is still a way of being—not just a title—for “Dr. Charlie” (as he signs his e-mails). He continues to mentor veterinary students, help with externships and aid



Former students Scott Palmer, V'76, and Taryn Gassert, V'07, with their professor, Charles Raker, V'42. Photo by Sabina Louise Pierce.

in the job search for new graduates. Since 1998, up until this year, Dr. Raker served as the Opportunity Scholarship Fund committee chair and reported approximately 132 scholarships totaling more than \$1 million for qualifying veterinary students. The Charles W. Raker Professorship in Equine Surgery, held by **Dr. Dean Richardson**, is an ongoing tribute paid to him by grateful clients, residents, interns and students. “One of many things that I admire about Dr. Raker was his willingness to accept innovation,” Dr. Richardson says. “A good example is that he was one of the very few surgeons with a lot of experience doing traditional joint surgeries, but he was solely responsible for buying arthroscopic equipment in the very early 1980s and telling us young surgeons to figure out how to use it. He knew arthroscopy would supplant one of the major procedures for which he was known, but he also knew the future wasn’t waiting. He was generous in every possible way to those of us lucky enough to be under him.” And still, nearly every Wednesday, you can find Dr. Raker at New Bolton Center, visiting with colleagues, talking with students, answering questions. “The best teachers learn from their students, and keep learning,” he says with a smile. “I just learn so much from them.”