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Dr. Dukes - A Life Remembered

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Dr. H. Hugh Dukes, author of Dukes' Physiology of Domestic Animals, died on June 8, 1987. His work as an author and educator is internationally recognized but we know little about his life outside academia. In an interview in September, Mrs. Dukes talked about Dr. Dukes and their life together. This article is a summary of that interview.

H. Hugh Dukes was born on September 9, 1895, in Saint George, South Carolina. He was the youngest of nine children. His early memories include ringing the church bells and helping himself to the candy the suitors of his older sisters had brought them. He did not graduate from high school. Instead he took an entrance exam to be admitted to Clemson College. He passed, but he was so young that he had to get written permission from his parents to enter college. Hugh Dukes graduated from Clemson College with a BS in 1915.

Three years later Dr. Dukes received a DVM from the Division of Veterinary Medicine at Iowa State College in Ames. He had a small scholarship that did not pay all his expenses, so he waited tables. Mary Kent, the future Mrs. Dukes, was living in Ames at the time, but they two weren't to meet for several years. Mrs. Dukes did, however, get a glimpse of her husband's skills as a waiter. Many years later the Dukes had some students over for the holidays. After the first course Dr. Dukes cleared the table, carrying the dishes above his head just like a professional waiter and surprised everyone, including his wife.

While Dr. Dukes was earning his DVM, the future Mrs. Dukes was spending an unhappy year at Iowa State College. Ames was not her first choice of schools, and early in the first semester one of the freshmen came down with smallpox. All who were exposed had to be vaccinated, and a contaminated needle was used on Mary Kent. She was ill for quite a while, and because of this, her memories of freshman year were of constantly making up work.

From 1918 to 1920 Dr. Dukes spent a brief time in the U.S. Army, was on the Clemson College faculty, and was Assistant State Veterinarian for South Carolina. During this busy time his future wife was enrolled in the University of Wyoming. She was happy during her two years there, especially after she changed her major from home economics to liberal arts and began studying history instead of cooking. She asked her advisor for this change because her mother had been an invalid and Mary had kept house and cooked since she was ten or eleven. Mary Kent next studied American History and English at the University of Nebraska with the idea of coming back to Wyoming to do graduate work. She comments, "I always say that I may not be well educated, but I was widely educated." Plans of future education came to a halt when older members of Mary's family became ill and she was needed at home to help care for them. During the next few years she did some teaching in a Western Nebraska school and she worked in a bank.

Meanwhile, in 1921, Dr. Dukes returned to Iowa State College to become an instructor in the Division of Veterinary Medicine, where he remained until 1932. During these years he was a member of the Mulligan Club. This was "quite a congenial group" of mostly unmarried men who used to eat downtown at the same place all the time.

In 1923 Dr. Dukes earned a Master's Degree in
Mary Kent Dukes speaks at her husband's 90th birthday party.

Veterinary Physiology and became an Assistant Professor of Veterinary Physiology and Veterinary Research at Iowa State College. Some time after that he met his future wife, Mary Allison Kent. She and her brother were friends of an Ames woman whose husband was a friend of Dr. Dukes. Dr. Dukes and his friend had been to Des Moines and had had a flat tire on the way back. The roads were not paved in those days, and the two friends were quite dusty when they returned to Ames. Dr. Dukes was invited in to wash up, and he met Mary on the front porch. Mrs. Dukes remembers him as "a nice young man—and very persistent" and "a rather quiet person but interested in a lot of things." Their first date was to a baseball game, but baseball was not his main interest. He especially loved the outdoors and loved to hike and that sort of thing.

On June 7, 1927, Dr. H. Hugh Dukes and Mary Allison Kent were married. They lived in their own home in downtown Ames the first five years of their marriage. It was during this time that Dr. Dukes wrote the first edition of *Physiology of Domestic Animals*, published in 1933, a year after they had moved to Ithaca, NY. Mrs. Dukes, who admits that she is not a scientist, was a great help to her husband. She began to read widely to see if there was anything her husband was missing in the literature. She also proofread much of the book and made the index. "I don't care for index making, but you have to have one."

Mrs. Dukes remembers Ithaca, New York, with much pleasure. Dr. Dukes was a professor of Veterinary Physiology and head of the Department of Physiology at New York State Veterinary College at Cornell from 1932 to 1960. He was the first head of a department hired from outside the university. Mrs. Dukes suspects "the new dean might have wanted some new blood. He was brought there to build up the department and, I suppose, to change it." They took the position because the salary was to be a thousand dollars more than their present position, and that was a lot of money in those times. "We liked Cornell very much, and he was very happy to work there, but he has always been happy in his work wherever he was." The Dukes loved the parks and countryside around their home in Ithaca. The scenery was beautiful with waterfalls, gorges, and glens. They explored, had picnics, and drove around. "We found out we knew more about surrounding Ithaca than a lot of the people who lived there because when we went there we knew no one." The loneliness felt by Mrs. Dukes probably led to her befriending and helping the wives of her husband's graduate students. Dr. Dukes served on over 250 committees of graduate students while at Cornell College, and many of his students were from other countries with wives that had trouble with the English language. Mrs. Dukes always "tried to look out for them as best I could, say for instance, take
them up to the supermarket to show them how to shop and anything I could do to help them. I got so much out of working with them.” At holiday time, when the students were so far away from home, the Dukes would have the students over for dinner. “... and then the first thing we were getting foreign students from other departments. They were very interesting, and to this day we have contact with some of them.” (Many of these former students are now grandparents.)

Dr. and Mrs. Dukes returned to Iowa after Dr. Dukes’ retirement in 1960. This retirement was short lived. By the next year Dr. Dukes was a Professor of Veterinary Physiology at Iowa State University. Besides teaching during the next several years, he did physiology demonstrations for veterinary students in the USA, British Isles, and South America. He also developed the single concept movies that ISU freshmen still view today. Another of his projects was “Demonstrations in Living Biology,” which he did live in front of about 100,000 students in Iowa and throughout the United States. Dr. Dukes proved that physiology could be adapted to young people. Mrs. Dukes remembers: “He carried all his equipment with him in the car, the pigeons and all that stuff. It was presented mostly to juniors and seniors in high school.”

The Dukes spent their retirement years in Des Moines, Iowa. Dr. Dukes remained active in the IVMA, CIVMA, and the AVMA, and he occasionally lectured. One family that the Dukes had known for many years lived near them during their retirement. The Dukes felt very honored when the children of the family asked them to be their adopted grandparents. Another man, a newly retired veterinarian who met Dr. Dukes in Des Moines, told him, “This is just like meeting God.” He had studied Dr. Dukes’ book 40 years earlier as a student.

Mrs. Dukes shared some of her memories of Dr. Dukes... “I’ve had many letters of sympathy from former students since his death, and the same thing that seems to run through them all was that they all felt he thought of them as people and not just another person to call on. And he did feel that way about his students. He was always so proud of them when they did well.”... “He gave everything he tackled the best he had.”... “I never heard him say anything derogatory about anyone.”

On June 7, 1987, Dr. and Mrs. Dukes celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary. Dr. Dukes died the next day. One woman who knew the Dukes over fifty years ago wrote about him to Mrs. Dukes. “We’ll always remember his kindness and his gentlemanly ways, always a gentleman.”