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Dr. Margaret Wragg Sloss:

The Past and Future of Women in Veterinary Medicine

Suzanna Brown* with O. H. V. Stalheim**

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Above: Margaret Sloss takes ribbon for a microtome for the veterinary pathology laboratory in 1935.
Margaret Wragg Sloss always liked to begin her lectures with a joke—like this one. “The city boy came to visit his country cousin and found him in the barn milking a big cow and holding the pail between his legs. ‘Come in,’ he said. ‘Would you like to learn how to milk a cow? I’ll show you.’ The city boy hesitated, then replied, ‘Gee, thanks, but could I start with a calf?’”

Though Dr. Sloss was not the first American woman to receive a D.V.M. degree (that was Florence Kimball at Cornell University, 1910), she was the first woman to graduate from the nation’s oldest state veterinary school, then called Iowa State College, in 1938. During her 34 years of service at Iowa State, Dr. Sloss produced thirteen scientific reports and a textbook, *Veterinary Clinical Pathology*, which became a standard in the veterinary profession. She held the positions of assistant professor, 1943; associate professor, 1958; and full professor, 1965. At her retirement in 1972, she had earned the title of professor emeritus. The list of professional and social honors bestowed upon Dr. Sloss is extensive, and includes the Carrie Chapman Catt Award and the Stange Award. In addition to her many other accomplishments, she helped organize the Women’s Veterinary Medical Association in 1947 and served two terms as its national president.

But Margaret Sloss’ path to success had not been without difficulty. In 1932, after receiving a bachelor’s degree in zoology and a master’s degree in anatomy, she applied to the College of Veterinary Medicine at Iowa State. She was immediately denied admission, with the reason being that the profession was for men only. However, a persistent Margaret Sloss researched her rights and found that, as a federal land-grant institution, Iowa State College was established on the following condition: “Persons applying for admission can not be refused on the basis of sex.” Thus Iowa State’s College of Veterinary Medicine grudgingly admitted its first female student. Interestingly, another woman, M. Lois Calhoun, was admitted the following year, but a third woman would not be admitted for another ten years.

Today, women are fast becoming the majority of practicing veterinarians, and the percentage of female veterinary students already outnumbers the percentage of male students. In fact, the veterinary profession has accepted women more rapidly than any of the other traditional professions, such as medicine and law, and this change does not appear likely to reverse in the near future.

The major influences in this change in the veterinary profession were both social and legislative. The Women’s Movement occurred during a time period when two pieces of legislation, the Educational Amendments of 1972, and the Women’s Education Act of 1974, were being written into law. In order to continue receiving federal funds, institutions of higher learning had to comply with these two acts, which insisted admission policies be based on the merits of the individual rather than on physical characteristics such as gender. Thus, in the 1970s, as one woman academic put it, “The flood gates were opened, and we moved in.”

However, despite the fact that, in general, the veterinary training of men and women is essentially identical, female graduates able to work full-time still, on average, receive less employment offers than men, smaller salaries than men, and, usually, smaller benefit packages than men. Women are still often seen as inferior or problem-
Dr. Margaret Wragg Sloss in her later years.

Dr. Margaret Wragg Sloss

atic as prospective employees partially because of concerns that women will want to marry and have children, thus not being able to participate fully in professional life. It is interesting to observe that, even though men share an increasingly large proportion of the work involved in raising a family, they are not subjected to the same prejudices. Also of notable mention are the results of some recent research which concluded that there are actually, on average, few differences in men and women in regard to work force differences when comparing professional activity, hours worked per week, and time out.

Whatever happens in the future within the profession of veterinary medicine, it is obvious that the needs of women will have to be taken into consideration. It is predicted that the percentage of women in the profession is only going to increase. According to most experts, women veterinarians can be very optimistic about their prospects in the 21st century.

In an unpublished article on science and women, Dr. Sloss relates her resentment of the prejudices women face in the male-dominated arena of science. Throughout her life, she worked diligently for equal opportunities for women, and evidence of sexual discrimination seemed to help Dr. Sloss summon more strength and courage to oppose it.

At the same time, Margaret Sloss liked people and social events, and her jokes made her a very popular speaker. Laughter and smiles permeated her entire life. At her retirement in 1972, a "This is Your Life" banquet was arranged for her. Five hundred friends, colleagues and former students who could not attend sent letters of appreciation and affection. She never married, and she died on December 11th, 1979, at the age of 78.

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