

A Pioneer in Veterinary Medicine

PHOTO BY BRENNAN ENGLE



Left: Dr. Ordella Geisler at her home in Lincoln, Neb.
Inset: Dr. Geisler in anatomy and physiology class at K-State in the 1940s.

By Brennan Engle

Dr. Ordella Geisler was one of the first female graduates in veterinary medicine from K-State and in 1947 became the first woman licensed to practice veterinary medicine in Nebraska. She has set an example of dignity and professionalism for generations of veterinarians.

“Giz,” as she is referred to by friends and family, broke tradition by pursuing a career in veterinary medicine at a time when there were virtually no women practicing in the profession. Although it wasn’t always easy, the road Dr. Geisler chose led her to a successful and rewarding 40-year career.

She grew up the second oldest of five children in the small town of Hebron, Neb., where her father was the sheriff. Times were lean, but Dr. Geisler’s work ethic and an intense desire to learn served her well. Although she had no career in mind, she began taking college classes at Hebron Junior College during the 1930s and transferred to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1940. Dr. Geisler could not afford to go to college full time, so she worked part-time as a bookkeeper for Dr. Grant Ackerman’s veterinary clinic in Lincoln.

This event would shape the rest of her life. “That was serendipitous because I had no interest in veterinary medicine,” she recalled. “I just needed a job, any job. That was still partially during the depression and the drought.”

Over time, her duties in the clinic expanded from bookkeeping to administering anesthetic to the animals and preparing them for surgery.



Dr. Geisler with retired thoroughbred cavalry horse “Romany” in Lincoln, Neb., circa 1940.

Dr. Ackerman encouraged Dr. Geisler to pursue higher education and was willing to schedule her hours around her classes. “His primary concern was that I get an education. That was very important to him,” she said.

In 1943, at the age of 27, she applied to the two veterinary schools closest to Nebraska, Iowa State University and K-State. She soon realized the challenge she was up against. “Iowa State wouldn’t even look at my transcript. They just didn’t take women at all,” Dr. Geisler said.

The veterinary program at K-State had accepted women since 1928. Dr. Geisler began veterinary school there in May, 1944. There were 41 men and three women in her class.

She got along well with her classmates and professors; however, there was one well-known instructor, Dr. Edwin Frick, who believed she was wasting the resources of the publicly-funded university. “He said to me, ‘Ordella, you’ll never repay the taxpayers,’” Dr. Geisler recalled. Fortunately, those comments did not deter her from achieving her goals and may have even been inspirational.

The curriculum was accelerated dur-

ing the years of World War II so students took three semesters of classes each year. Dr. Geisler remembers taking 27 hours of laboratory class one semester in the summer months with no air conditioning. It seems she encountered many extremes while in veterinary school. One winter Burt Hall caught fire and destroyed the area where classes congregated each day. "It was February and we ended up sitting outside in the middle of winter getting our orders so we could treat the animals," she said.

In February 1947, Dr. Geisler received her DVM and returned to Lincoln to join Dr. Ackerman as an associate.

She treated mainly small animals while the men handled large animals. She has many memories of unique cases that she handled over the years. One involved a farmer whose cow was down one night with a mineral deficiency, or "milk fever." When Dr. Geisler arrived to treat the animal, the farmer told her she was "a hell of an excuse for a veterinarian" because she was female. But she held her ground. "I said to him, 'It's Saturday night, and I don't know where you can do any better,'" Dr. Geisler recalled. She treated the cow and it made a full recovery.

She refers to the techniques of her early practicing years as "old fashioned medicine." That was before the advent of modern anesthetics, vaccines and



Dr. Geisler at her hospital, 1972.

PHOTO COURTESY ORDELLA GEISLER

antibiotics. "It was a godsend when antibiotics came on the market, you just can't imagine what we did without them."

Over the years she learned to treat a variety of exotic animals for three zoos in the Lincoln area. Whether it was performing a cesarean section on a chin-chilla, alleviating ulcers in a snake's mouth, or treating a kangaroo with frostbitten ears, she always found this work challenging and exciting.

In 1972, Dr. Geisler purchased the hospital from the Ackermans and renamed it the "Geisler Animal Hospi-

tal." Each day brought different animals and unique cases. "I enjoyed it very much. It was hard work but very satisfying. There were never any dull days."

In 1978, at the age of 62, Dr. Geisler married Wendell Hoffman, an award-winning CBS news cameraman. Five years later, Dr. Geisler retired and sold her practice after 40 years in the veterinary field. They were mar-

ried for 20 years before Hoffman passed away in 1998.

Today Dr. Geisler looks back on her veterinary career with a deep sense of pride and an unassuming humility. "I was just doing my thing. It didn't realize I was being different. It was just work and I loved it."

In March, Dr. Geisler celebrated her 90th birthday. She lives in an apartment in Lincoln where she enjoys cooking, sewing, reading and collecting art. She still attends class reunions at K-State to reminisce with friends. It was at one such reunion several years ago that she ran into her former instructor, Dr. Frick, when he was in his nineties. He acknowledged the error in his prediction made years earlier. He told Dr. Geisler she had in fact repaid the taxpayers.

Just as others had encouraged Dr. Geisler to pursue her dreams, she has been a mentor to younger people. Dr. Rebecca Arnold, CVM '90, a veterinarian and owner of the "All-feline Hospital" in Lincoln, cleaned kennels and prepared equipment for Dr. Geisler in the early 1980s. Dr. Arnold remembers Dr. Geisler's work ethic and high standards, which inspired her to go to veterinary school.

"She was a role model for me because she was the first woman veterinarian in Nebraska, and one of the very few women veterinarians who owned her own practice, which is what I wanted to do. And she did it well," Dr. Arnold said.

During her lifetime, Dr. Geisler has seen significant changes in attitudes toward women in her profession, especially as veterinary care progressed in the area of companion animals. Today, two-thirds of veterinary students at K-State are female, which further punctuates the contributions made by the first women to enter the field. She says she has no regrets about her life or the career she chose.

"I certainly have had a good life. It really has been wonderful," she said. "I am fortunate that I have been happy and healthy, and I'm still living a good life."

PHOTO BY PATRICE SCOTT



Dr. Rebecca Arnold (left) visits with her mentor and friend, Dr. Ordella Geisler, at a reception at the Nebraska Veterinary Medical Association's conference in January. Dr. Geisler was honored at the reception by the CVM for her outstanding career.