

one for the *ages*



REMEMBERING DR. PHYLLIS HICKNEY LARSEN FROM THE CLASS OF 1947

By Joe Montgomery. Photos courtesy of Lesley Gentry.

To Hold Its Own

If I were pushed
to carve one thought on lasting stone,
I'd say,

“I trust we come from stuff that’s
tough enough to hold its own.”

A poem by Dr. Phyllis Hickney Larsen, 1965

This past August, the College of Veterinary Medicine lost one of its pioneering female alumni, Dr. Phyllis Mae Hickney Larsen. At 95 years old, she had still been quite active in retirement at her home in Ithaca, New York.

She and her husband, C.M. “Mac” Larsen had returned to Ithaca in 1987 after living in California for about 37 years. Mac died in 2015. Dr. Larsen is survived by four children: Kristin (Kris), Lawrence, Ragnfrid and William; five grandchildren; and seven great-grandchildren.

A historic woman and veterinarian

Dr. Larsen was featured in chapter eight of the book, “The Lady is a Veterinarian,” written by Lesley Gentry, an author who happens to be married to a K-State veterinary alumnus, Dr. Robert Gentry, class of 1981. Lesley’s book, published in 2005, profiles the first 12 female DVM graduates from the College of Veterinary Medicine.

“The first 12 women at our veterinary school should never be forgotten,” Lesley says. “They were not only firsts for our veterinary college, but included among the first female veterinarians in the country. Their stories go way beyond what I had written about them. I am so proud of all of them — especially Phyllis. I co-authored a paper with her for the World Association for the History of Veterinary Medicine Congress in Minnesota in 2005. She was a wonderful mentor and friend.”

Dr. Larsen was herself an expert on women veterinarians. She was a member of the Association for Women Veterinarians (AWV) and in 1997 compiled the AWV’s 50th anniversary book, “Our History of Women in Veterinary Medicine: Gumption, Grace, Grit, and Good Humor.” She also served as president of the American Veterinary Medical History Society (AVMHS) in 1999-2000.

“It was her idea to start a news column in the Society’s semi-annual journal, ‘Veterinary Heritage,’” recalls Susanne Whitaker, secretary-treasurer of the AVMHS. “She felt strongly that good communication was important to keep the membership involved. Soon, that expanded into separate, periodic ‘Interim News & Comment’ newsletters several times a year.”

It wasn’t just the working relationship Susanne found to be inspiring.

“There has hardly been a day when I don’t think of her and want to tell her something, share news, talk about what’s going on in the world, or get her opinion or insight,” Susanne says. “She had a positive influence on me as we got to know each other better over the years. I will always treasure our relationship and be forever grateful for having known her.”



Dr. Phyllis Hickney Larsen’s senior photo from when she earned her DVM in June 1947.

Growing up in Massachusetts

It’s no understatement to say that Dr. Larsen developed a fascination with animals as a child. Her father, Augustus, worked at and managed a variety of dairy farms in Massachusetts.

“Phyllis enjoyed watching her father and the herdsmen take care of the dairy cows, observing and taking a mental note of all they were doing. It was not unusual to see Phyllis helping the herdsmen feed the cows their beet pulp. She loved to see the cows happy; at 5 or 6 years of age, she considered them to be her friends,” writes Lesley in “The Lady is a Veterinarian.”

Dr. Larsen grew up attending different secondary schools because her father moved a lot to work at different dairy operations. Her college education began at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, where she would earn a bachelor’s degree in zoology.

“My mother’s family did not have extra money for college, so she was fortunate to attend Vassar on full scholarships, for which she was eternally grateful,” says daughter Kris Larsen Campbell. “She contributed regularly to scholarship funds

for veterinary students because she cared about repaying her great, good fortune.”

Dr. Larsen’s choices of veterinary college between K-State, Washington State and Iowa State were narrowed by special circumstances. The latter did not yet accept women into the veterinary curriculum. Her sister Zoe happened to live in Manhattan already, being married to a cavalry officer who had contracted malaria and was stationed at Fort Riley. Zoe offered free room and board to her sister, so Dr. Larsen accepted and gained admittance to Kansas State College.

Campus life at K-State

Dr. Larsen was one of only two women in her class. The other was Mary Letitia Hammond. Dr. Larsen felt as though the odds were against them.

“One day though, the tables turned on the men,” Lesley writes in “The Lady is a Veterinarian.” “It was on ambulatory duty to a farm owned by Dan Casement, the well-to-do-son of the famous chief construction engineer of the Union Pacific Railroad, that Phyllis was the minority singled out! Upon arriving at the

farm where there were Hereford cattle, it was noticeable to the clinician and students that the owner and a couple of hands were having a degree of difficulty in getting a calf to suck a bottle.”

Lesley explains that Mr. Casement chose Phyllis to give it a try. She succeeded, crediting having had her first dairy calf to take care of at age 4.

Career and family

Dr. Larsen graduated in 1947 and took a position at a veterinary experiment station for the USDA at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. She authored and co-authored three papers that were focused on livestock. She met a teaching fellow in the mathematics department who also enjoyed folk dancing and fell in love. She married Charles M. Larsen in 1948 and gave birth to her first child, Kris in 1949.

The couple moved to California, in 1950 and had three more children. While Mac was serving in the Navy, Dr. Larsen worked part time at the San Diego Zoological Gardens and frequently cared for her neighbors’ animals. She led scout camp activities and 4-H meetings, but later returned to academic work and co-authored a research paper on goats.

After a few years, the Larsens moved to Santa Clara, a growing rural area near San Francisco that would later become Silicon Valley. In 1981, Dr. Larsen earned a master’s degree in preventive veterinary medicine from the University of California, Davis, and presented research on feral goats at the International Conference on Goats in Tucson, Arizona.

An opportunity arose to travel to China in 1984, where she would end up teaching English for three years at the Beijing (now Chinese National) Agricultural University. In 1996, Dr. Larsen was named Veterinarian of the Year by the American Association of Small Ruminant Practitioners (AASRP), and in 2002 she received the Judith Spurling Blue Ribbon Award from the Association of Women Veterinarians. She has also published a book, “To Find A Comet,” featuring 88 poems she wrote between 1939 and 2014.

In memoriam

Upon her death Aug. 11, 2018, Dr. Larsen leaves behind a unique legacy and long list of admirers. Perhaps these notes from members of the AVMHS

help to sum up who she was and what she meant to those who were close to her.

“Dr. Larsen was a trailblazer, who further instilled in me (and countless others) a love of veterinary history,” says Dr. Shannon Greeley, a practicing veterinarian from Chicago and co-historian of the Chicago Veterinary Medical Association. “It was a blessing to have known her, and I am eternally grateful for her guidance and inspiration. With the loss of Dr. Larsen, the veterinary profession has lost an irreplaceable treasure.”

“Phyllis was a gem and a most remarkable lady and veterinarian,” adds AVMHS president Russell W. Currier, DVM, MPH, DACVPM from Des Moines, Iowa. “Her contributions to females in the profession are most remarkable. I always enjoyed my interactions with her in person, by email and telephone. Bless her memory and feel that she blessed us all with a most fulfilling life and career.” 🐾



Susanne Whitaker, Dr. Debbie Tacium, and Dr. Phyllis Larsen, July 2013 in front of the James Law Auditorium, College of Veterinary Medicine, Cornell University. Photo courtesy of Susanne Whitaker.