

J. Franklin Witter
1906 - 1982



Prepared by: R.L. Witter
Date: 2000
Revised: 2006

XX

The Life of Frank Witter

Dr. John Franklin Witter, always known to friends as Frank, had a long and productive professional career as veterinarian, professor, and, for a period, Department Chair at the University of Maine, in Orono, from 1932 through retirement in 1971. He presided over the Department of Animal Pathology during a period when the State of Maine was developing a significant broiler industry and when his department was developing a significant research and service program in the arena of poultry health. Frank also participated actively in the Northeast Conference on Avian Diseases and the New Hampshire Poultry Health Conference (now known as the New England Poultry Health Conference). He was a life member of the American Association of Avian Pathologists (AAAP). He was the first chair of the AAAP History Committee and wrote the inaugural article to launch a series of historical papers – a series that continues through the present time. By virtue of these tangible contributions, and because Frank’s personality and character influenced many persons within the professional community, it is appropriate that he be included among those who have contributed positively to the advancement of avian medicine.

Frank was born on June 11, 1906 in Frederick, Maryland, the 8th of 9 children born to Harry and “Jennie” (Mary Catherine Virginia) Miller Witter. He was born and raised on a farm, just outside of town, and in later years recalled with pride that he was a “farm boy.” His father was a professional livestock showman, raising and showing rare breeds of hogs, cattle and sheep. Frank later wrote, “As a farm youth, I learned to respect farming not primarily as a business, but as a way of life”. He attended high school in Frederick, attaining an excellent scholastic record and finding time to participate in baseball and wood shop. His shop training produced a number of pieces of furniture with inlaid designs, all done with hand tools, that still grace the home of his son. It also laid the groundwork for a lifetime hobby in woodworking that would reappear in his retirement years. He was especially proud of a prize awarded to him in high school as the “best moral influence.” The development of a strong character early in his life was important in guiding him to leadership roles later.

He entered the College of Agriculture at the University of Maryland in College Park in the fall of 1924 where he continued his strong scholastic record. He was elected to Phi Kappa Phi honorary society for scholarship. He was on the debate team where he honed his speaking skills and his ability to influence others through logical expression of ideas, both orally and in writing. He was a member of the student Grange, and a member and later president of his fraternity, Delta Psi Omega. He was a member of the livestock judging team. After receiving a B.S. degree in agriculture from the University of Maryland in 1928, with honor, he accepted a job teaching vocational agriculture to students in Lisbon and West Friendship high schools. It was during this interval that a college friend, Charlie Gray (I believe), influenced him to consider veterinary medicine. This was a pivotal moment and I have incomplete information about the details but, nevertheless, in the fall of 1929 Frank enrolled in the veterinary school at Michigan State College in East Lansing. He was supported by an assistantship in the Department of Pathology, and worked with Dr. E. T. Hallman.

The 3 years at Michigan State resulted in a veterinary degree, a wife and a lifetime job at the University of Maine. Frank met Verna Church through Dr. Henrik Stafseth, a professor and microbiologist in the Veterinary School who was himself a distinguished contributor to poultry medicine. Verna’s home was in East Lansing and she had graduated from Michigan State College in mathematics, receiving both a bachelors and masters degree. Their friendship bloomed and a marriage occurred on July 1, 1933, less than a year after he joined the faculty at University of Maine. While in East Lansing, he became close friends with Chester Clark, who was later Dean of the Veterinary School at Michigan State, Cleon Morrill, who was later Head of the Pathology Department at Michigan State, and Oscar Schalm, later a prominent veterinary pathologist at University of California. All were life long friends. However, it was Ward Giltner, the dean of the Veterinary College at that time, who located a job for Frank. According to my mother’s notes, Giltner asked Frank, “How would you like to spend the rest of your life in Maine?” Well, jobs were scarce in the Great Depression so he was pleased to be selected and, “spending the rest of your life” is exactly the way it worked out. Frank received his D.V.M. degree from Michigan State with “high honor” in June of 1932 and left for Maine in August.

Although his first experience with lobster was not pleasing, Frank quickly grew closely attached to the State of Maine. He was the only veterinarian in the Department of Animal Industry and was housed in the same small wooden building with Prof. J. Robert Smyth. Smyth, a poultry scientist, became good friends with Frank and Verna and Smyth's son, Robert Smyth, Jr., went on to a distinguished career in poultry genetics at the University of Massachusetts. Frank's responsibilities were varied, diagnostics, teaching, veterinary care for the University herd, wildlife consultations, and, yes, even the chance to conduct a private veterinary practice on the side. This arrangement was approved early by the University and was never rescinded. The early years in Maine established Frank as "the" expert in poultry diseases in Maine (along with all the other species). He also taught many courses on animal health and physiology. Dr. Floyd Horn, who was for several years administrator of the Agricultural Research Service of the USDA, was a former student of Frank's. He and Verna designed and built a comfortable family home where they moved in 1939 and lived out their respective lives. This was also a period to develop interests in gardening and outdoor activities. Frank was a consummate gardener and made what was generally acknowledged as "the most fertile piece of land in town" produce bountiful crops. He also developed an avid interest in hunting and fishing, which he enjoyed with friends for many years. During this period, the author of this article was born (in 1936) which undoubtedly caused changes both good and bad in the lives of my parents. Frank's professional career at the University of Maine solidified and he was made full professor in 1944

He was an active member of the Maine Veterinary Medical Association, where he served as president (1938) and for 33 years was secretary-treasurer. He was known for his quarterly newsletters and his enthusiastic support of MVMA meetings, especially the softball games.

During the 1940's poultry increased in importance in Maine and there was an opportunity to expand the role of the University to provide greater service. Frank recruited Dr. Harold Chute to join the department (November 1949). Harold went on to become well established in the field of avian medicine, establishing expertise in mycology and in biosecurity programs. Harold was one of the founding fathers of the AAAP and served as its president. In 1953, a new Department of Animal Pathology was formed with Frank as the head. Frank and his staff served as training ground for others who went on to careers in avian medicine. Prominent among these was Dr. Jerry Rountree, a veterinarian with Lipman Poultry and then a private consultant, Dr. Torgny Frederickson, and Dr. Louis van der Heide, who has had a most distinguished career at the University of Connecticut and for several years was the editor of the journal, Avian Diseases. Louie likes to tell the story of his first meeting with Frank, in a hotel in London. Louie was to meet Frank for a job interview and called his room, perhaps inappropriately, in the wee morning hours only to be told to wait until tomorrow. The interview was successful and played a key role in Louie's migration from The Netherlands to the United States. The team he assembled during the 1950-60s was recognized as a major contributor to avian medicine in the Northeast. The principal players were Harold Chute, Lois McDaniel, Donald Payne, Melvin Gershwin, David O'Meara and Roscoe Cuzzo plus those

mentioned earlier and several epidemiologists assigned by APHIS (Darrell Johnson, Doug Stouffer and Dyarl King). Efforts by Frank and his coworkers resulted in the construction in 1949-50 of what is now a wing of the present Hitchner Hall. This new facility housed the animal pathology group and was an important achievement to establish credibility for the unit and provide the physical space needed for its growth. Frank considered this group as family, along with all the secretaries, technicians, janitors and all. Frances Fling assisted Frank for many years and became a long time personal friend.

Frank was a social person. He would do the inviting and Verna would cook – few visitors lacked for an invitation to eat in their house and sample the current garden produce. The guest list included many prominent veterinarians including Glenn Snoeyenbos, Irwin Jungherr, and Jim Steele (formerly with the US Public Health Service), a robust man who apparently set some kind of record for consumption of sweet corn that Frank mentioned in later years.

Frank was in demand as a speaker at professional meetings. His talks were aimed at the common man and given in language understood by all. Most persons appreciated his file of jokes that he used liberally to liven up the audience. That collection of 3x5 cards still exists and makes for an enjoyable lesson in how the social acceptability of humor has changed over the years. For many years, he served as the moderator of the final panel for the New Hampshire Poultry Health conference, always delivering a humorous and memorable message.

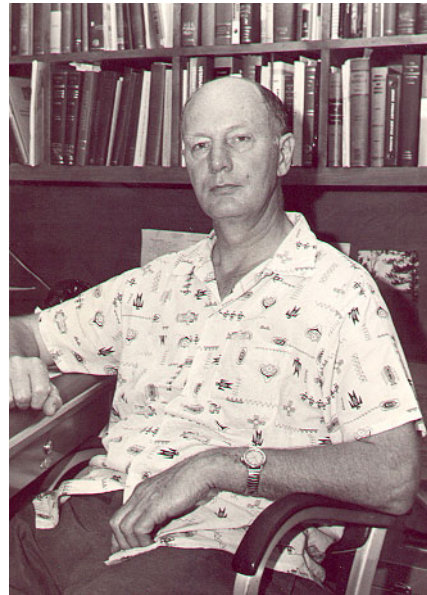
He enjoyed his professional veterinary associations. Among other roles, he twice led delegations of veterinarians on People-to-People trips to Russia, at a time long before the demise of the Soviet regime. Although poultry emerged as a focus of his department, he continued a strong personal and professional interest in dairy and wildlife diseases. Although his personal involvement in pure research was limited, his interest in knowledge was keen and he enjoyed for many years trips to Chicago for the Conference of Research Workers in Animal Diseases, one of the premier research conferences in the field. I believe this tradition commenced during the early 1940s as I remember him returning (via train) with candy and various goods that were rare during wartime. He was also a stalwart member of the Maine Poultry Pathology Roundtable that brought together veterinarians from Maine and elsewhere to share views on current disease problems. He participated actively in the early years of the Conference of Laboratory Workers in Pullorum Control in the Northeast, organized by Dr. William Hinshaw and others. Even in the 1960s this was still known as “the Pullorum Conference” although the name had been changed to the Northeastern Conference on Avian Diseases.

His publications were mainly interpretations of knowledge for various lay publications and covered many topics. He published with E. T. Hallman on Johne’s Disease (1932) and on sodium chloride toxicity in chickens in Poultry Science (1934). He contributed a chapter on brucellosis in the text, Infectious Diseases of Wild Mammals (1970). Between the above, there were numerous publications and case reports for trade journals, conference proceedings, and extension bulletins. Interestingly, no list of personal

publications was found in his professional papers – perhaps because he had never recognized the need to have an updated CV on hand. Frank liked to write and did it well. He maintained active correspondence with many persons through letters, many of which are preserved.

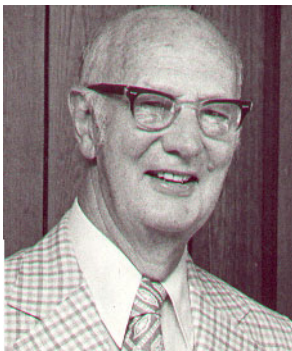
Frank retired from the University of Maine in June 1971, after 39 years of service. Recognition rolled in from many quarters. He was feted by the Maine Veterinary Medical Association. He received the distinguished alumnus award from the College of Veterinary Medicine at Michigan State University in 1970. He was elected a life member of the AAAP in 1971. In 1974, the University of Maine named its newly constructed animal research and teaching facility as the J. Franklin Witter Animal Science Center. After his death in 1982, the Orono-Old Town Kiwanis Club named one of their auction barns in his name. For Frank, active participation in his Kiwanis Club was a way of life, one that brought many satisfactions and paid back to the community he called home for so many years. If one travels to Orono today, Frank’s name will be found on two buildings, a cemetery monument, and in the hearts of many citizens.

After retirement, Frank turned his energies to other projects. The family camp (cottage) on Pleasant River Lake, which was his pride and which he built in 1952, received additional attention and stands today, in use by his family, as a testament to his hard work and his love of the outdoors. He experimented with a small animal practice out of his home, but soon found that this interfered too much with other pursuits. He continued his active involvement with the state 4-H association, and was a consummate fundraiser for this and other causes. He became more actively involved with the AAAP, accepting in 1975 the invitation by then president, Dr. Harry Yoder, to form and chair a new committee on the History of Avian Medicine. According to Frank’s notes, Dr. Henry van Roekel suggested the idea for such a committee in order to



contribute to the bicentennial celebration of this country in 1976. The original committee, including C. A. Bottorff, Kenneth Bullis, Harold Chute, Tevis Goldhaft, William Hinshaw and Arnold “Rosy” Rosenwald, was responsible for recruiting (and authoring) the first series of articles in the AAAP history series. Frank personally authored the inaugural article in the series, “The history of avian medicine in the United States – Before the big changes.” This committee continues to record information of importance to the history of AAAP and of avian medicine. Indeed, without this committee and its biography project, this piece would not have been written. He also presented a well-researched paper at the 1977 New Hampshire Poultry Health Conference, “Progress in poultry disease control over the past 25 years.”

This article is focused on the professional life of Frank Witter. However, to know Frank is to also know the way he balanced his life between professional and personal goals. He believed that, in the scheme of life, one's profession was important but not the most important part. Consequently, his energies were often directed toward his family, church, the community and his several avocations of hunting, fishing, gardening, and wood working. He contributed to his community in many ways but especially through active membership in the Orono-Old Town Kiwanis Club and the Church of Universal Fellowship. He valued physical activity and worked long and hard at whatever project was at hand. He aspired to and achieved a quality of life nourished by long hours of activity in his garden, camp and service clubs. He declined several offers of professional employment that would have provided upward mobility in his professional life. According to Harold Chute, "Frank scowled at those at the University of Maine who lived in distant towns and never did anything to improve the community where they worked. He was a great believer in philanthropy. He believed so much in the future and that he was going to influence it." Along with his wife, Verna, he supported the Maine 4-H Foundation for many years. He loved people and actively cultivated rich friendships in both professional and private relationships.



If Frank were writing this, I am sure he would list as one of his accomplishments a son who followed his footsteps into veterinary medicine and, ultimately, into academic pursuits in poultry diseases. His profound respect for Dr. P. Philip Levine was instrumental in my choice of Cornell for a Ph.D. program. He became good friends with my other mentors at Cornell, Julius Fabricant and Bruce Calnek, and with later mentors at East Lansing, Ben Burmester and Charlie Cunningham. He was an inspiration and a wonderful example to this writer, as he was to so many. His many contributions are represented not in scientific publications but, rather, by his influence on people and organizations. He established high standards of moral character, dedication and excellence that should be a guide and inspiration for future generations of veterinarians.

Addendum. Although Frank died September 29, 1982, his wife, Verna, continued to live in the family home in Orono, serving her church, the 4-H Association, the Maine Veterinary Medical Association and her community until her death, April 23, 1999. The personal papers of Frank Witter are in the possession of his son, R. L. Witter, presently of Okemos, Michigan. They contain many letters, photographs and printed materials that reflect on Frank's career as well as the state of veterinary and poultry medicine in the middle years of the 20th century. A portion of these papers are deposited in the AAAP Archives, at Iowa State University.

Biography solicited by the Committee on the History of Avian Medicine, American Association of Avian Pathologists.

Additional biographical materials may be available from the AAP Historical Archives located at Iowa State University. Contact information is as follows:

Special Collections Dept. & University Archives

403 Parks Library

Iowa State University

Ames, IA 50011-2140

Phone: (515) 294-6648

Fax: (515) 294-5525

WWW: <http://www.lib.iastate.edu/spcl/index.html>