

Wow! Has it really been that long?

I cannot believe that the 42<sup>nd</sup> Anniversary of the start of my career as a practicing veterinarian is fast approaching. Nearly 40 years of that time have been spent in this wonderful Upper Montgomery County area.

When I graduated from the University of Georgia School of Veterinary Medicine in 1967, my new wife, Paula, and I decided that I should accept a position in the Public Health Service, located at the NIH Animal Center in Poolesville. When we arrived here, we bought a small house in Beallsville. Friendly neighbors made our early years delightful. When my obligation to the Public Health Service was complete, in late 1969, we decided that we wanted to remain in the Up-County, something that we had not considered when we came here. The beautiful countryside and the many wonderful people who lived here made our decision simple...and as we look back now, we realize that it was an absolutely wonderful decision.

My first job as a practitioner was at the Southeast Animal Hospital, in Washington, D.C., beginning on January 2, 1970. It was a bit of a drive every day, but the experience in that busy clinic was very valuable to a recent graduate. There was a lot going on there, every day. After about a year, the person that owned that clinic asked me to take over the New Hampshire Avenue Animal Hospital, in Takoma Park, which he also owned. Paula and I decided to make a temporary move for me to take the position, to eliminate the long commute. That clinic was an okay-place to work, but an apartment on the 11<sup>th</sup> floor of a nearby high rise was no comparison to our now-beloved home in the country. After about a year, we made the decision to return to the Poolesville area. Another good decision!

Because a long-established veterinary practice in Beallsville had just closed, there was no free-standing clinic for a lot of miles, in any direction. I decided to set up a small clinic in Poolesville, and was helped in great measure by a generous offer from the Commissioners of Poolesville. There was concern that there were no veterinarians in the area, so they allowed me to rent the old church on West Willard Avenue, which is owned by the town. That building also housed The Thrift Shop, which is still operating there. I clearly remember that I was very concerned when I met with Fred Campbell, one of the Commissioners, to discuss rent for the building. When he said, very apologetically, that they wanted \$125 per month rent, I was overjoyed. I had expected to pay four times that amount.

After modifying that small space into a rather cozy and efficient clinic, I began my Practice on July 1, 1972, about a week after Hurricane Agnes flooded the area. Since Poolesville had less than 1000 residents, I knew that a Small Animal practice was not going to do well. I had always wanted to conduct a Mixed Animal practice (small animals and farm animals), and the time was right. Thus, I saw all types of animals, in a practice that became rather busy, in short order. I

was a little short on experience, especially with horses and farm animals, but learned quickly, out of necessity. There were quite a number of dairy farms and beef farms in the area, and plenty of horses. The small animal part was a tad slow, for a while. Paula worked in the clinic, as my only “employee”. Truthfully, there were many afternoons when the telephone never rang once.

I was blessed in those early days to begin caring for the animals for two major clients. The first was the Spring Valley Hereford Farm, which was at the time a beautiful farm in a beautiful place. The farm, on Darnestown Road, just east of the intersection of Cattail Road, housed 300 Polled (no horns) Hereford cows, the red ones with the white face, all purebred. The herd was nationally known, and great care was given to the cows in the herd. I spent a lot of time there, and learned so much from the very capable folks that operated the farm. As an extra bonus, the farm owner sold me the property just across Darnestown Road from Lewis Orchards, where Peachtree Veterinary Clinic has stood for the last 33 years. What a great client for a young veterinarian, just starting out!

The second major client, the biggest of all, was the Al-Marah Arabian Horse Farm, on Peachtree Road, near Barnesville. They claimed to have 300 horses, although I never counted more than 240 at any given time, and they were all well-cared for. When I went to meet the owner, Mrs. Garvin Tankersley, I confessed that I had a “heck of a lot to learn” about horses. She looked at me, and said “Fine. We will teach you”, and they did.

Through her generosity, I was able to attend a number of equine conferences and short-courses. That, plus intensive hands-on work on the farm, made me a pretty capable equine veterinarian, in short order. I remember one foaling season in the mid-1970s when the farm had an incredible 90+ foals born on the premises. As an added bonus, Al-Marah had a large beef cattle operation, as well as the horses. That herd also received thorough veterinary care. Although neither of the major clients continued operating past the ‘70’s, they helped shape my career, and I remain eternally grateful.

The first twenty years of the practice were exactly as I had imagined while growing up. I saw pretty much any animal that needed to be seen, but farm animals made up the majority of the business. The days were long, with the telephone sometimes beginning to ring at 6:00 A.M. I handled all of my own emergencies, since there were no emergency clinics at the time. I usually had scheduled farm calls, pretty much anywhere in upper Montgomery County, beginning at 7:00 A.M. Much of my days (and nights) were spent pulling calves, repairing wounded horses, and doing scheduled vaccinations and deworming on horses and cows, alike. I tried to get into the clinic for small animal appointments and surgery during scheduled time blocks twice each day, although I was often late, because of what was happening on the farms. It was pretty much a 24/7 schedule, every day. Truthfully, it was what I always expected, and I loved it! My

major regret is that I missed so much time away from home, away from Paula and my two young daughters.

Businesswise, things went pretty well. I was able to scratch out a living for the first 18 months or so, and then it became easier. I was able to add my first associate in 1976, and together we grew the practice. I started the permit process in Montgomery County that would enable me to build a new, much larger clinic building (permits were far less complicated to obtain in the mid-70's). In January, 1979, I opened my beloved Peachtree Veterinary Clinic building, where we have remained for 33 years. The building originally had two portions, the Small Animal Clinic, and the Large Animal Clinic. The latter had three stalls, a large work area, and an Equine Surgery, complete with a floor level surgery table that raised and lowered using a hydraulic automobile lift. We did not use the surgery room as much as we had expected to (horse surgeries are hard, just because of the size of the patient, and they take a lot of people!), but the stalls proved quite helpful. We frequently had horses hospitalized in the clinic, which saved us a considerable amount of driving time.

The Eighties were a very good time for me, and for the practice. We were able to hire some darned good veterinarians, and we increased the number of vehicles on the road. At the end of the eighties and into 1990, we had six veterinarians, and three large animal vehicles. There was lots of equine work at that time, and a growing volume of small animal practice. This was surely another wonderful period for Peachtree! We certainly noticed, however, that the farm animal business (dairy and beef cow work, mainly) was dwindling.

During the early 1990's, we had a major change in the practice. Throughout our nearly 20 years of business, I had been fortunate to hire some super Equine veterinarians. Each time we hired a new one, I hoped that they would stay for the long term. Sadly, after 2-3 years, each would leave, in several cases to go back to Graduate School. Every time one left, there would be a period of time where their replacement veterinarians had to be assimilated into the practice, and be introduced to our equine clients. Thus, in 1991, when another excellent equine veterinarian informed me that he would be leaving, I considered going in a different direction. I decided to take the practice to a 100% Small Animal practice. Reluctantly, I sold the equine part of our practice to a neighboring equine practice, and on January 1, 1992, Peachtree Veterinary Clinic became a small animal practice.

So, entering 1992, we became what we remain today, a more traditional Montgomery County small animal practice. We converted the existing large animal clinic to a boarding facility for dogs and cats, sold our vehicles for farm calls, and I began to spend each day at Peachtree. After a short period of "large animal withdrawal", I really began to like it. It was fun to go to the clinic each morning, and spend the day with the great staff there. Dealing with the clients and their delightful pets at the clinic was a bit less hurried than zipping around

the area, always late, to farm calls. Initially, there were only two veterinarians at the clinic, but as the years went by, we added others. The small animal business grew steadily as the nineties slipped past, and as we entered the new century we were very pleased with what Peachtree had evolved into. It was, and still is, a fun place to work.

As I have noted, I was privileged to have worked side-by-side with a number of very good veterinarians during these many years in which I have practiced. Special note must be made, however, of Dr. Susan Moxley, who joined the practice in 1990, and stayed for 16 years. Dr. Moxley had much to do with helping to develop the practice with her excellent veterinary skills, her keen business sense, and her willingness to work hard. Because of her input, the practice grew from a small two person practice to a thriving practice with 4-5 full time veterinarians. We worked well together, and I will forever be indebted to her for those good years.

A history of the practice would certainly not be complete without noting the many good people who did so much of the “real work” of running a business. I have been so fortunate to have had so many enthusiastic and caring people alongside me, throughout these past 40 years. As noted, I have been able to find a wonderful stream of associate veterinarians, starting in 1976, and continuing through the present. Each has brought so much to the practice, and the practice and I have benefited. We learn a lot from each other, as we all have different backgrounds and different learning experiences. We watch over each other’s shoulders, and all involved – veterinarians, owners, and, especially, the patients – are better for it.

We have been able to attract some incredible people to handle those jobs “in the trenches”; our very important front desk folks, our compassionate and knowledgeable technicians, and our wonderful kennel people. Many have stayed with the practice for lots of years, and have been extremely influential in the success of the business. There are numerous names that I want to mention at this time, those who have invested years of their lives into the practice, but if I mentioned even a few, I would miss so many others that I should have mentioned. Suffice it to say that I totally realize how lucky I have been to be able to work side by side with these talented and dedicated people.

There is one person that I must single out, however, one who personifies what I hope that what Peachtree is all about. In 1974, while I was still the only clinician in the practice at the old church building in Poolesville, I had two good ladies splitting the work at the clinic. They had asked me to hire another person, to do various kennel and technician duties while they answered the phone, and dealt with clients. In the summer of that year, Christie arrived. She had graduated from high school a couple of years before, and was looking for a job in the area. Truthfully, she fit the very description of the term “hippie”, so popular in that era.

She seemed easy enough to get along with, and compassionate enough, so I hired her. What a super move on my part!

Today, more than 37 years later, Christie Mullis is still with us, (and she remains a bit of a “hippie”). Frankly, she has devoted much of her life to this practice, physically and emotionally. She cares so much for our patients, and their owners. In the years of large animal practice, she went on numerous calls with me, day or night, hot or cold. It made no difference what she was doing, or what she had planned...she was always available. During the many years before we had emergency clinics so readily available, we handled our own emergencies, 24/7. I, and the other veterinarians have called her, literally thousands of times, on Christmas Day, on Super Bowl Sunday, on weekends and uncountable times out of her bed in the wee hours, and she always picked up the phone, with a cheery attitude. Many times, we worked together to treat sick or injured animals, on the farm or in the clinic. Early on, we performed large numbers of surgeries where we were the only people in the building, except for the animal’s owners. From simple wound repairs to complex surgeries, I did the surgery, she did everything else, and we had lots of good luck together. To this day, even though we have several excellent referral emergency clinics, we will sometimes see cases at night or on the weekends. Christie gets “grumpy” if she learns that I called others from our great staff to help with those cases, to give her some much-deserved peace. This practice would never have become what it is today without Christie, and so many others.

I would like to insert a brief note here, to mention something that I am very proud of. At my last count, I see that there are now 28 veterinarians at various places around the country that, as kids or young college students, rode on farm calls or worked in the clinic with us. They eventually applied to veterinary college, and were accepted. It makes me feel good! Who knows, but one of my two granddaughters may some day make that list (I sure failed with my two daughters!).

I guess that it is time to get to the main reasons for this rambling letter. Actually, there are two reasons.

The first reason is that, after much agonizing during the past couple of years, I have decided it is time to retire from active practice. It is the time for the younger veterinarians to take over, with their more up-to-date knowledge base, better understanding of the wonderful diagnostic equipment we have at our disposal, and the times to correctly use all of the newer drugs that are out there. Although, it will be a very difficult time for me (and Paula), I have decided that December 31, 2011 will be my last day in practice. I know that it will be tough on us. When you have done something for 42 years, and have looked forward to going to work each of those days (with a few, very rare exceptions), it is going to be hard. Peachtree will continue to thrive, with the current staff of excellent veterinarians

and caring group of technicians and front desk folks ready to work, starting January 2.

The second reason, the most important of all, is to thank all of the people who have helped to make my life, and that of my family, so wonderful. Whether or not you have used our services at Peachtree is irrelevant (although we greatly appreciate it!); the fact that you are our neighbors in this whole beautiful Up-county community that has been, and will continue to be, our home for the past 44 years is what is important. Everywhere we look, we see friendly and caring people. What better place could there be to live and raise a family than here? We are so pleased that our decision to come here to stay, some 44 years ago, was so right.

Again, thank you, so much.

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