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With Love From Texas

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I should have known New Bolton Center was half a century old, but somehow in my life and career I’ve always thought it was just “there”. The positive influence New Bolton Center has had over these many decades is incredible and worldwide. It is particularly noticeable here at Texas A&M. Our “equine program”, I believe, is an excellent one and I think that is the case because we have exceptional faculty, including folks like Drs. Martens, Varner, Blanchard, Hinrichs, Love, Cohen, Marsh and me (I like to picture myself as a contributor). Guess where we were all trained? New Bolton Center – and the folks who made it what it is and will always be is – for me personally – the equine veterinary “head waters”.

However, I didn’t always know or think that. My exposure to New Bolton Center was initially in the spring of ’69. Dr. O. R. Adams, at Colorado State, found out I was heading east as both my wife and I had family back there. He suggested (for those of you who actually knew O.R., it was hardly a suggestion) that I try to spend my summer months at the University of Pennsylvania. You have to understand that I didn’t know that Pennsylvania even had a vet school, or if they had one, surely it must be at Penn State.

In any case, I initially hooked up with Dr. Loren Evans and was welcomed to come as a guest. It never dawned on me to ask where the place was, simply because I figured it had to be at the University of Pennsylvania. So I loaded my stuff, eventually found Philadelphia, and even made it to the campus. Now I sure hope I don’t hurt anybody’s feelings, but for a person basically raised in northeast New Mexico and southwest Colorado, West Philadelphia for me had that “Beirut War Zone” look. It took lots of circling, time, and ‘near death’ experiences to find a place to park my pick-up and make my way to what seemed like the front door (I never did determine if y’all have a front door). I then asked somebody where I could find either Dr. Evans or Dr. Charles Raker. No-one in that part of the building knew who those people were, and I was beginning to think that I would be better off heading back west. Finally found an older gentleman, explained my deal, and eventually, through the laughter, he told me I was thirty-odd miles east of where I should have been.

I got lost several times trying to find Route One and then Kennett Square. I also found it interesting that most of the folks in Kennett Square did not know where New Bolton Center was. This two thousand mile trip was looking more and more like a bad deal. I finally found Route 926 and New Bolton Center’s white fence and lovely sign. I could not believe the size and beauty of the place and the surrounding country. I met Shirley Poole at the front desk and was introduced to Dr. Evans. Dr. Evans spoke pretty clearly; that is, as opposed to the foreign dialect I got when asking for directions in Philly. Eventually he introduced me to Dr. Charles W. Raker, the head man, THE CHIEF.

I will always remember my first introduction to Dr. Raker. He was sitting behind his desk with a neat pile of case records, smoking a pipe and wearing one of those “pork pie” cloth hats. He also had on a white lab coat, tan pants with black socks, shoes (no boots) and a white shirt with a tie. This was definitely not my image of a big time “horse doctor”. The faculty at Colorado State in those days, especially O. R. Adams, could have easily been stand-ins for a John Wayne movie – so this was a very different look. But Dr. Raker could not have been any nicer and told me how to find a room at the student dorm.

On the way to the cafeteria I met Roy Bergman, Bob Vallance and Lee Bach, along with Jim Stewart (a resident at that time) – all names that have made their mark on veterinary medicine. That afternoon I got some greens and scrubbed in with two students and Dr. Raker; and also met George Pournaris, a New Bolton Center legend. We did two “knees” and alter in the day a standing “roarer”. This was one more center that “Beirut War Zone” look. It took lots of circling, time, and some actually wore what seemed to be a leather football helmet when they shipped, and everything got bandaged (even tails).

The wonderful part of my New Bolton Center experience was that all kinds of people were always around for me to ask questions of, without that horrible feeling of being a giant fool. Dr. Raker treated us students like we were in his practice, we were not just students, we were his colleagues. For me that was a great life lesson. Dr. Evans every Thursday afternoon showed us all kinds of palpation ideas, where to block and inject, and a bazillion stories to go with each anatomic area. Dr. Jim Rooney could cut up a horse faster than most butchers, and to this day I have yet to see another pathologist literally take horses apart to that degree of completeness. He could also entertain in rounds and most all the clinicians attended – it was wonderful. Mr. Jack Anderson was without a doubt the best horse shoer in the world at that time; he was also amongst one of the finest and most accomplished teachers. He’d come in after hours and show whoever wanted to learn how to bang on iron. These two were of the most cherished months out of my life that I will never forget. By the end of the summer I was very much better prepared for my last year at Colorado State. New Bolton Center and the wonderful folks that were there changed my life.

For reasons unknown to me I was accepted as an intern the following year; that sure must have been an interesting discussion when my name
New Bolton Center Recollections continued from page 23

Mark Allam was also quick to appreciate New Bolton Center’s advantage over other veterinary schools in geographic proximity to concentrations of quality horse breeding and racing operations in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and other mid-Atlantic states. He understood that excellent medical care would motivate horse owners to contribute generously to equine research and to the development of New Bolton’s physical facilities. It was, therefore, extremely fortunate that Dr. Charles Raker, and his colleagues, most notably Dr. Jacques Jenny, had already established Penn’s reputation in the equine field.

Dr. Raker achieved renown as an equine surgeon during ten years as Head of the large animal service in Philadelphia. Students of that era will remember the Old Quad Hospital with its carnival-like atmosphere: trucks, trailers, vans unloading horses, cows, swine; grooms and students exercising horses and dogs around sodden, pitted Huidekoper Field. The gloomy stables were survivors of a time when the City’s commerce moved no faster than a trot. The high box stalls with their noble occupants were bedded deep with straw, and iron posts topped with brass balls bestowed an apt touch of elegance. Just west of the antiquated operating theater the clinic hall with its worn red brick floor, soak stalls and casting mats served as the main teaching and treatment area.

Over this sprawling, tumultuous scene, Charlie Raker presided with a steady, determined hand. He moved between the OR, stable, office, lecture hall, and conference room at a near gallop; popping in one door and out another: operating, teaching, consulting, writing, conferencing – a study in disciplined motion. His stamina was matched by an exceptional surgical talent and keen intellect. He had a strong aversion to anything false or pretentious.

In that extraordinary decade of the Raker Era, the scope, quality, and success rate of equine surgery at Penn improved remarkably, and the Old Quad began to attract top quality horses. The waiting list for elective surgery grew alarmingly long, overwhelming the Old Quad’s facilities and personnel. So in 1964, when the new large animal hospital at New Bolton Center finally opened its doors, Charlie Raker was the obvious choice to take charge of the equine service.

With facilities and personnel now appropriately matched, equine surgery soon reached the high standard of human and canine surgery as an academic discipline and, in the process, Penn earned its reputation as the best place in the world to bring an equine patient for surgical care. The rate and magnitude of the change in the sweep and sophistication of horse surgery can probably be appreciated only by those privileged to have worked in close association with Charles Raker and Jacques Jenny and their small circle of disciples, Bill Donawick, Loren Evans, Bill Moyer, and David Nunamaker, to name a few.

In my collection of memorabilia there is a photograph I particularly treasure. I am standing between Charlie Raker and Bill Boucher, beloved colleagues, major contributors to the Veterinary School’s great leap forward.

I first met Bill at a dinner party at the dean’s house in Media during my initial visit as a candidate for a faculty position. If hired, I would be Bill’s boss, a circumstance that didn’t seem to thrill him. Bill’s Boss. Could there be a more perfect oxymoron?

At the time, I assumed that anyone who disagreed with my strongly held views on veterinary medical education must, a priori, be at least a closet anti-intellectual. I figured that our paths were destined to diverge in unpleasant ways, especially because I planned to locate my office, for starters, in Philadelphia instead of New Bolton Center where Bill was an assistant professor assigned to Field Service. Eventually, I