

Veterinary education in South Africa: The Class of 1927

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ABSTRACT

Joan Morice, a member of the class of 1927, broke the tradition of male student domination at the Onderstepoort Veterinary Faculty, but it took almost 20 years before other young ladies started following her courageous example. The accompanying photograph is unusual in the sense that the students appear in their then customary white coats instead of graduation regalia and that their dean is absent. Concise descriptions are given of the life histories of the 8 graduates. Their careers show more variation than in previous years. Only 1 of them spent his entire career at the Onderstepoort Research Institute and its Faculty, whereas another left the Institute after several years for a well-known pharmaceutical company in the United Kingdom. Although 1 entered private practice shortly after qualifying, she did not make it her permanent career and sadly died at the early age of 44. Another made the move from the field into private practice fairly late in his productive life. One left South Africa to spend most of his career in the Colonial Service in Tanganyika (now Tanzania) and later even joined the FAO in Rome. Two spent their entire careers in the field as state veterinarians – 1 died at the age of only 43 – and a third moved from the field to a locally-based pharmaceutical company.

Key words: 1927, 1st female graduate, Colonial Service, graduates, Onderstepoort, pharmaceutical industry, scientists, state veterinarians, veterinary education.

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The class of 1927 broke the tradition of male student domination at the Onderstepoort Faculty by having a member of the fairer sex in the person of Joan Morice in its midst. Almost 20 years were to elapse before a 2nd woman, Maud Bales, was prepared to follow in her footsteps. Most unusual is the fact that the only available photograph of this class was not taken with the students garbed in their grand graduation regalia as in the previous years, but with their customary – in those good old days – white lab coats on (Fig. 1). Also of interest is the dog being held by René du Toit, obviously the predecessor of the many hostel mascots that followed in the years to come. No dean or any other lecturer, however, is anywhere in sight! Note that 2 of the 8 names have been misspelt in the photograph, errors that will be corrected in this article.

Joan Morice, although born in Barberton in South Africa, had her school education in England but returned to South Africa in 1922. She then made history by enrolling for the veterinary course at Onderstepoort. Although she qualified in 1927, she apparently only took up her 1st appointment in September 1928 as a temporary veterinary officer in the Allerton Laboratory for a few months.

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Her services were terminated, probably by herself, on 31 December of the same year. She immediately started a practice in Johannesburg and after her marriage in 1930 to Maurice Robinson, who qualified in 1928, she and her husband practised together. Private practice was, however, relatively short-lived for both of them. She discontinued her involvement in 1935, doing charitable work for the SPCA and the so-called Bantu Animal Welfare Association in Johannesburg instead, whereas her husband joined the municipal service of Johannesburg. Sadly, Joan died from lung cancer at an early age in 1944.

Max Sterne – spelled incorrectly in the legend to the photograph – gained undying recognition for the development of his famous anthrax spore vaccine. He was born in Trieste of Austrian parents who emigrated to South Africa in 1909 when he was 4 years old. He grew up in Durban and excelled in sports such as boxing, swimming and athletics, both at school and university. After qualifying at Onderstepoort he spent 2 years in the Belgian Congo (now Democratic Republic of Congo) managing a cattle ranch. Back in South Africa, he joined the government service and was posted to the Allerton Laboratory in Natal to assist with the East Coast fever eradication

campaign, as was the fate of many young government veterinarians in those days. In 1934 he was transferred to Onderstepoort where he worked as assistant to Prof. E M Robinson as veterinary researcher in bacteriology and developed the above-mentioned live vaccine against anthrax which is still internationally used and acclaimed today, 61 years after its discovery. He served as editor of the *Journal of the South African Veterinary Association* from 1937 to 1942. In 1947 Sterne obtained the highly rated Diploma in Bacteriology at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and left South Africa in 1951 to join the Wellcome Research Laboratories in London. He died in 1997 in Hampshire, England, at the ripe old age of 92.

Heinrich (Heinie) Franz was born at a German mission station (Leibzig Mission) near Pietersburg (now Polokwane). He was appointed as state veterinarian for Pretoria early in 1928, but was transferred to the Allerton Laboratory in Pietermaritzburg shortly afterwards and then in quick succession to Umtata, Rustenburg and Estcourt. From 1930 to 1944 he was state veterinarian for southern Zululand and was stationed at Eshowe. From there he was transferred to Greytown only to die tragically in 1947 at the age of only 43 years from reputed sunstroke probably suffered while doing field work. After his death his widow worked for many years as a smear examiner for the Division of Veterinary Services in Greytown and Pietermaritzburg.

Leslie (Pat) Stonier – note that his name is also misspelt in the legend to the photograph – was born in Cape Town, matriculated at Pretoria Boys High School and was a teacher for a short period before he started studying at Onderstepoort. His entire career was spent as a state veterinarian, first at Vryburg from 1928, then at Allerton Laboratory from 1933 to 1935 and finally at Kimberley where he remained until he retired in 1964. Pat served in the South African Defence Force during World War II. After retirement he was re-appointed on a temporary basis for a year. Thereafter he worked for the Kimberley City Council doing meat hygiene control. He was one of the first veterinarians to contract Rift



Fig. 1: The Class of 1927.

Valley fever, presumably during the 1st epidemic that occurred in South Africa from 1950 to 1951. This permanently impaired his vision due to retinal detachment. Pat was devoted to his church and sang in its choir for many years. He was also a member of the Kimberley Rotary Club. He died from an attack of coronary thrombosis in 1970 a week before his 69th birthday.

Wilhelmus Rijksen was born in Sumatra in 1903 and came to South Africa in 1921 to write the matriculation examination after preparing himself for 6 weeks at Grey College, Bloemfontein. After qualifying at Onderstepoort he served as state veterinarian in Umtata, Potgietersrus (now Makopane), the Allerton Laboratory, Beaufort West, Windhoek and Bethlehem during the first 2 decades of his career. In 1951 Dr Rijksen established a very successful private practice in Bethlehem.

He served as Secretary of the South African Veterinary Medical Association and as editor of its Journal in 1966 and 1967, but left for personal reasons at the end of that year. In 1972 he finally returned to Bloemfontein to start a practice in the city where he had matriculated. Dr Rijksen received a special award ('oorkonde') from the South African Veterinary Association in 1986 for his dedicated services to the veterinary profession. He died in Bloemfontein in 1994 at the ripe old age of 91.

John (Jack) Thorburn was apparently a 'super' who had to repeat his final year. Although he was a member of the class of 1927 he qualified in 1928 and his 1st appointment in the Division of Veterinary Services as state veterinarian dates from January 1929. After initially being stationed at Onderstepoort, he was transferred to the field and served in the

Northern Cape, Zululand, Transkei (Peddie), Grahamstown and East London, in the last from 1942 to 1945. Jack played a major role in the East Coast fever eradication campaign in the Peddie area. In 1945 he resigned from the government service to join the well-known company Cooper & Nephews, probably the 1st Onderstepoort graduate to enter the pharmaceutical field. He formed the Coopers' Veterinary Research team in East London and guided its early years. In 1949 he moved to Johannesburg and took up the position of Veterinary Adviser to the company with specific responsibilities for the Rhodesias, Congo and East Africa. In 1963 he was appointed Technical Director of Cooper, McDougall & Robertson Central Africa. He retired in 1968 but was re-appointed as research scientist at Cooper's Research Station in East London where he served until shortly before his death in 1971 aged 68.

NR (Neil, or is it Niel, as spelled in 2 of 3 obituaries) Reid matriculated at Michaelhouse in 1922, studied at the Witwatersrand University College from 1923-1924 and at the Onderstepoort Faculty from 1925. After qualifying, he proceeded to the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, London, in 1928 where he was admitted as MRCVS. It is not clear when exactly he joined the Colonial Veterinary Service - he married Gwendolyn du Toit in 1932, apparently a South African - but we know, from the publications by Thomas & Reid, and Kolbe's unpublished mimeograph on the activities of the Zoological Survey, that Reid was already in Tanganyika (now Tanzania) in 1941 where he is identified as a local state veterinarian. We also know that he was Director of Veterinary Services of Tanganyika from about 1946 to 1953 and that he was very much involved in the control of rinderpest and, to a lesser extent, bovine pleuropneumonia. He was awarded the MBE on his resignation from the British Colonial Service.

In 1953 Reid entered the service of the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations in Rome where he became intensely involved in the development of field programmes to increase animal production in developing countries in Africa (an expanded research and field programme on the control of ticks and tick-borne diseases, especially East Coast fever) and the Near East (the strengthening of laboratory services). He retired from the FAO in 1963 but returned as a consultant 10 years later. Reid died in Reading, Berkshire, on 19 December 1994.

René du Toit will always be associated with the successful anti-tsetse fly campaign in Zululand of which he was

the chief architect. The son of a State Artillery officer who fought in the Anglo-Boer War and later a senior policeman, he was born in Cape Town, but matriculated in Ermelo in 1922. After qualifying he immediately joined the government service and was posted at the Allerton Laboratory as a veterinary research officer. In 1929 he was transferred to the Section of Entomology. He remained at Onderstepoort as a veterinary entomologist for most of his career, temporarily being transferred to the experimental farm Armoedsvlakte close to Vryburg as officer in charge from 1930 to 1931, and studying at the University of Minnesota as a Commonwealth Foundation Fellow in 1936 and 1937. Back at Onderstepoort, Du Toit conducted pioneering research on the use of DDT for the control of various ectoparasites from 1939 to 1945. During this period he planned the successful application of DDT, which was administered mainly by aerial spraying, to rid an area of more than 18 000 km² of bushveld expanse in Zululand, an area about as big as the Kruger National Park, from the most important species of tsetse fly, *Glossina pallidipes*, occurring in that portion of Natal. Du Toit was awarded a DVSc degree by the University of Pretoria in 1953 for a thesis based on his research

on the control of tsetse flies. He also made the pioneering discoveries in 1944 that African horse sickness and bluetongue of sheep were transmitted biologically by *Culicoides* spp. and that cattle may serve as reservoirs of bluetongue virus.

Du Toit filled the positions of Sub-Director of the Veterinary Research Institute, part-time Professor of Parasitology at the Onderstepoort Faculty and full-time Professor of Parasitology at the Faculty during his career. He also served as Dean of the Onderstepoort Faculty from 1960 to 1963. Other prestigious positions held by him were: President of the South African Biological Society (on 2 occasions) and President of the South African Entomological Society. He died in Cape Town in 1988 aged 84 years.

He always told his students that as dog owners resembled their pets, so professors tended to resemble their subject and he felt that as an entomologist he resembled a tick – a well-engorged tick.

The name of the dog in the photograph could not be traced!

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