

Becoming Mr. Turkey: The Career of Benjamin S. Pomeroy

It is January 2023, and the beginning of a lecture in a course named “Avian Core” addresses Minnesota’s poultry industry with a PowerPoint slide that reads “Commercial poultry: 42 million turkeys. #1 turkey production state.”¹ The lecture continues, introducing the National Poultry Improvement Plan (NPIP) and biosecurity recommendations for diseases including salmonellosis, avian influenza, and Newcastle disease. While not mentioned in the lecture, there is a veterinarian whose work, research, and teachings laid the foundation for the control of these diseases as well as many others. His name is Benjamin Sherwood Pomeroy (1911-2004), whose veterinary career is threaded throughout poultry production and the control of poultry diseases.



Figure 1. Benjamin Sherwood Pomeroy in 1944²

EARLY LIFE

Benjamin S. Pomeroy was born in St. Paul, Minnesota on April 24, 1911. He graduated from Central High School in 1929. His father, Dr. Benjamin A. Pomeroy, as well as two of his brothers, Dr. Harold Pomeroy and Dr. James Pomeroy, were practicing veterinarians. No stranger to veterinary medicine, Benjamin S. Pomeroy spoke of his career choice in an interview with Dr. Paul Cox. “I didn’t know anything else... I suspect my two brothers and I kind of fell into the same trap, so to speak, that they were exposed to veterinary medicine. It was a good profession. And so you had interest there, and that’s the reason why it developed.”³ His father, Benjamin A. Pomeroy, obtained his Doctor of Veterinary Surgery (DVS) in 1883 from Montreal Veterinary College,⁴ and established Pomeroy’s Animal Hospital

in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1886. Still operating today, I stopped by the Pomeroy Animal Hospital to connect with Dr. Fred Pomeroy, son of Dr. Harold Pomeroy and nephew of Benjamin S. Pomeroy. Dr. Fred Pomeroy had a short period of time to give me a tour between seeing patients. The walls of the waiting room and exam rooms are lined with news articles, awards, and black-and-white photographs of horse-drawn carriages in front of the hospital. Echoing Benjamin S. Pomeroy, Dr. Harold Pomeroy had told the Minneapolis Star in 1953, “We didn’t know anything but animals.”⁵ When I asked if Dr. Fred Pomeroy felt the same way, his response was, “Same thing. My father was, of course, a veterinarian and I went to house calls with him when he went to treat cattle and horses. At that point I knew I wanted to go into computers or veterinary medicine, and then I decided I wanted to go into veterinary medicine.”

The hospital is rich with history. Outdoor kennels that once housed patients are no longer in service due to noise complaints from the hotel that had been built next door. Some of the first x-ray equipment owned by the hospital sits in the same room as the currently utilized digital x-ray machine. The hospital, once almost entirely equine exclusive, has changed with the times to serve the city’s dog and

cat companion animal population. As Dr. Fred Pomeroy showed me around the hospital, there was a palpable excitement in the sharing of the hospital, its history, and our mutual passion for veterinary



Figure 2: Pomeroy's Animal Hospital.¹⁹

medicine. One might imagine how Benjamin S. Pomeroy's upbringing, a combination of exposure to veterinary medicine and pride in the profession itself, influenced his career path.

EDUCATION & INTEREST IN POULTRY

Benjamin S. Pomeroy (hereafter referred to as Pomeroy) received his Doctor of Veterinary Medicine from Iowa State University in 1933.⁶ During his time at Iowa State University, he was a member of Alpha Gamma Rho and was elected to Cardinal Key, Phi Kappa Phi, Scabbard and Blade, Phi Zeta, and Gamma Sigma Delta.⁷ He attended Cornell University on a scholarship and obtained a Master of Science in 1934.⁷ Speaking of his time at Cornell, Pomeroy recalled suggestions "that I maybe go to Cornell and take a master's program, which I did in large animal medicine with Dr. Gilmore and Dr. Wilks... so I got exposure to both the cattle disease problems at Cornell and small animal practice."³ Following completion of his master's, Pomeroy joined the University of Minnesota's division of veterinary medicine and began his 47-year-long career with the university. From 1934 to 1937, Pomeroy worked as a diagnostician. It was during this time period that his interest in poultry diseases developed. He recounted "... the majority of the specimens we got into the laboratory came directly from hatchery men and poultry producers. And that's where I... got an interest in poultry because I saw a lot of disease problems in the diagnostic lab."³ During this time, the poultry farmers of the United States were shifting from flocks to large-scale hatcheries. Pomeroy, from his vantage point in the University of Minnesota Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory, was noticing the number one barrier to the industrialization of poultry production: ineffective disease control. Not only did his newfound interest in poultry disease influence the trajectory of his career, but his ability to notice a problem and confront it head-on went on to transform the trajectory of poultry production.

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Pomeroy continued working at the University of Minnesota as a diagnostician. In 1937, he worked as an assistant veterinarian, and in 1938, an instructor. 1938 was also the year that he would marry his wife, Margaret. He continued his research of poultry disease detection and control, becoming an assistant professor in 1943. During this time, he became a member of the United States Animal Health Association's (USAHA) Committee on Transmissible Diseases of Poultry. Pomeroy recounted "the forties... this is where I developed an interest in Salmonella and became heavily involved in the development of the Salmonella control program... in Minnesota and nationally."³ In 1944, Pomeroy earned his Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota. His thesis, titled "Salmonellosis of Turkeys," was "undertaken for the purpose of determining the types of Salmonellosis encountered in turkeys and to obtain information that could be used as a basis for the development of a successful control program."⁷ From 1945 to 1948, Pomeroy held an associate professor position before becoming a full professor in 1948, a position he would continue until 1981. In 1947, the University of Minnesota's College of Veterinary Medicine was officially established. An enthusiastic mentor, Pomeroy advised 36 M.S. students, 31 Ph.D. students, and 10 postdoctoral researchers.⁶ Within the University of Minnesota, he would go on to be the head of the Department of Veterinary Microbiology and Public Health, coordinator of Alumni and Public Affairs, coordinator of Avian Disease Research Programs, director of Graduate Studies, as well as associate dean (1970-1974) and acting dean (1979), a time he sums up as the "bloody seventies when the college of veterinary medicine went through a rather horrendous

revolution.”³ Evidently, Pomeroy’s leadership was heavily relied upon within the University of Minnesota’s newly established College of Veterinary Medicine. Outside of the University of Minnesota, Pomeroy’s leadership skills were similarly recognized and utilized. He was an active member of groups including the Twin City Veterinary Medical Association (TCVMA), Minnesota Veterinary Medical Association (MVMA), American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), USAHA, and Poultry Science Association, holding various leadership positions such as AVMA’s chairman of the section of poultry diseases, president of TCVMA, and president of MVMA.⁶ His leadership skills, combined with his focused research, would soon prove useful in another facet of veterinary medicine.

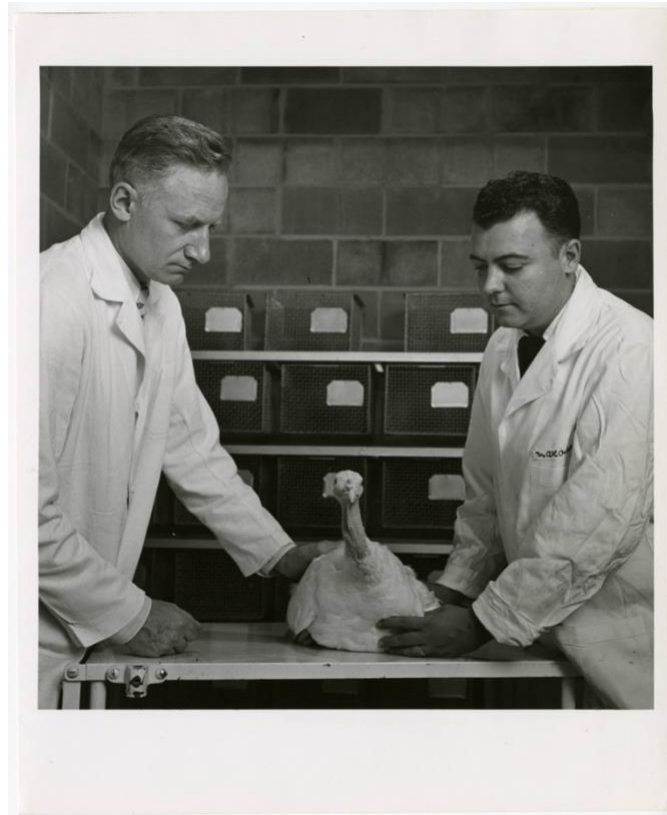


Figure 3. Benjamin S. Pomeroy in 1956.¹⁸

SPECIALIZATION OF VETERINARY MEDICINE

Following World War II, the increase in companion animals mirrored the beginnings of specialization in veterinary medicine. Human medicine had already undergone extensive specialization in the 19th century. With his propensity for leadership and extensive background in poultry diseases, Pomeroy was fortuitously present for the specialization of veterinary medicine, helping to found both the American Association of Avian Pathologists (AAAP) and the American College of Veterinary Microbiologists (ACVM). In the 1950’s, the AAAP credits the impact of poultry diseases, research progress, and a

growing interest in forming a national organization as factors leading up to the organizational committee formed in 1957. Pomeroy was appointed to this committee and the committee was tasked with finalizing a constitution, by-laws, and other organizational details. During the AVMA meeting in Philadelphia in 1958, Pomeroy was elected the first president of the American Association of Avian Pathologists.⁸ In 1966, Pomeroy became charter diplomat of the ACVM,⁹ and he received a charter fellowship from the American Academy of Microbiology in 1959.⁶ Pomeroy was once again at the forefront of a transformation, this time the transformation of veterinary medicine itself.

MR. TURKEY

From 1947 to 1982, continuous support for Pomeroy's research came from various sources, including Agricultural Experiment Stations, the United States Department of Agriculture, and the Minnesota Turkey Growers Association.⁶ Years of extensive research into poultry diseases including salmonellosis, Newcastle disease, psittacosis, leukosis complex, mycoplasmosis, and colibacillosis led to Pomeroy's widespread reputation as an emergency contact for avian disease issues. Of note, Pomeroy served on committees such as the National Research Council's (NRC) committee on Salmonella, the NPIP Technical Advisory Committee, the United States Department of Agriculture's Poultry Inspection Program, the Veterinary Services Emergency Lethal Avian Influenza Scientific Advisory Group, and he served as the chairman of the Veterinary Services Emergency Newcastle Disease Eradication Program Scientific Advisory Group.⁶ Pomeroy's involvement on the federal level and with

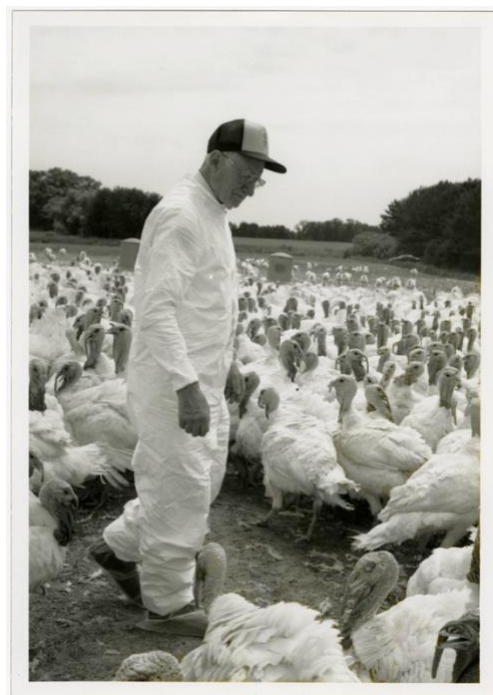


Figure 4: Benjamin S. Pomeroy, undated.¹⁷

multiple emergency committees highlights his reputation as renowned scientist, one whose knowledge was complimented by his ability to tackle problems head-on and see them through to the end. It was this combination of attributes that led Pomeroy to

become a driving force within the state of Minnesota

as well as the entire country, communicating

recommendations that would later be described as

instrumental in allowing poultry producers to “today

speak of once devastating poultry diseases... in the

past tense.”¹⁰ At the core of many of Pomeroy’s

recommendations was the urge to collaborate.

Having extensive experience in modes of disease

transmission, he understood the need for not only

education of newly discovered modes of transmission

(Figure 5) but also standardized protocols on a national scale. Pomeroy’s 1973 Pullorum-Typhoid

Eradication Committee annual report listed Minnesota, Iowa, Oregon, North Dakota, and Utah’s

Pullorum-Typhoid free status under the “good things that have happened.”¹¹ Under “Frustrations,” he

noted that 33 states had turkey flocks operating under the NPIP and only 5 of those states had entered

the APHIS Pullorum-Typhoid eradication plan.¹¹ Similar calls for concerted efforts to eradicate diseases

echo throughout Pomeroy’s manuscripts, committee recommendations, and speeches. In an example of

his tireless work toward cooperation on a national level, Pomeroy is credited as being instrumental in the

1980 signing of the statement of cooperation for the control of Salmonella in turkeys between the

Minnesota Turkey Growers Association and the California Poultry Health Advisory Board.¹² Pomeroy

had also become a highly sought-after speaker on the national as well as international level. His

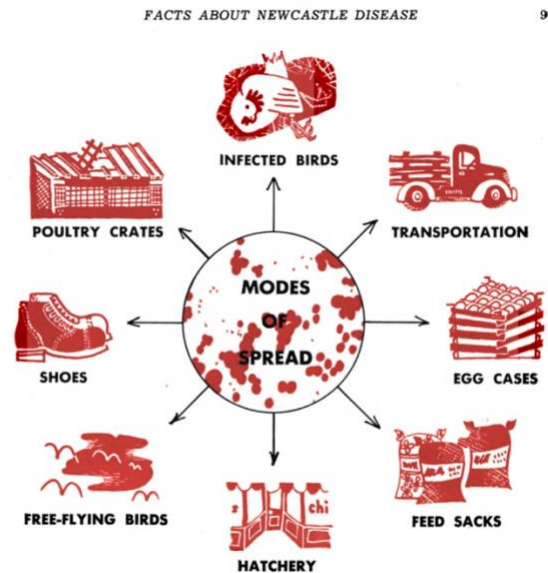


Figure 5: Graphic from “Facts about Newcastle disease” Pomeroy, Benjamin S., Brandly, Carl A.²²

expertise led him to visit poultry farms, participate in seminars, and visit research facilities in places including Spain, Thailand, Mexico, France, Italy, England, Brazil, and Canada.⁶ Dr. Dick McCapes, a past president of the USAHA and a colleague of Pomeroy, described Pomeroy's participation in USAHA meetings and offers us a glimpse into what it was like to be in the audience while Pomeroy was speaking. "He was a great speaker and presenter, one you did not want to miss because of his insights and clarity of thoughts ... and because of his not infrequent and passionate exhortation and prodding of his audience (and the nation) to *stay the course* and do what was necessary to complete difficult eradication and control programs."¹² Starting from his beginnings as a diagnostician who noticed an issue of rampant poultry diseases, Pomeroy's steadfast dedication to detection, control, and eradication exemplifies his own determination to "stay the course," a quality that would, rightfully so, earn him the nickname "Mr. Turkey." Pomeroy retired from the University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine in 1981 as a professor emeritus, but his veterinary career continued beyond retirement.

POLITICAL ACTIVITY

After retiring from the University of Minnesota, Pomeroy became more prominently involved in politics, and his political involvement echoed his career's emphasis on collaboration for the betterment of veterinary medicine. Pomeroy described to Dr. Cox, "I guess my life has been veterinary medicine and I enjoy working on organized veterinary medicine and where the action is really, whether it be in public health of animal welfare issues, legislative issues or so forth."³ Once again, Pomeroy's leadership and fearless problem-solving proved beneficial, this time in the political sphere. Dr. Steve Dille described Pomeroy as having "a special set of skills and temperament to work well with Democrats, Independents, and all who come together in the political arena to solve the problems of the day."¹³ Pomeroy dedicated himself to setting up VET-PAC, the political action committee of the MVMA, as

well as the Veterinary Key Contact Network.¹³ At the core of these organizations was the desire to bridge the information gap between veterinarians and legislators. Dr. Tom Hagerty, a past Minnesota State Veterinarian who worked with Pomeroy wrote that Pomeroy “commanded respect and was regarded as the face of veterinary medicine at the Capitol.”¹⁴ Regarded as an “authentic Minnesota veterinary government affairs hero,”¹³ Pomeroy put his veterinary knowledge, teaching experience, advisory experience, and ability to unify his audience to the test, and was triumphant in improving veterinarian-informed legislation.

LEGACY

Benjamin S. Pomeroy’s legacy resounds throughout the state of Minnesota and the entirety of the United States. Over the course of his life, Pomeroy authored or co-authored over 450 articles on animal and avian disease, co-authored *Diseases and Parasites of Poultry*, and contributed to *Diseases of Poultry* (4th through



Figure 6: Dr. John Arnold (L) and Dr. Benjamin Pomeroy (R) in 1970.²¹

10th editions) and *Isolation and Identification of Avian Pathogens* (1st and 2nd editions).⁶ Far too many to name, Pomeroy’s curriculum vitae lists 56 honors and other distinctions. Awards such as the USDA-APHIS Animal Health Award, University of Minnesota’s Siehl Prize for Excellence in Agriculture, MVMA’s Veterinarian of the Year (Figure 6), and induction into the Minnesota Livestock Hall of Fame and Poultry Industry Hall of Fame highlight the widespread recognition of and gratitude for Pomeroy’s lifelong contributions to poultry medicine. Perhaps an even greater testament to his lifelong work, cooperation on the national level to reduce poultry disease transmission is now the standard, the NPIP

currently has 44 states listed as Pullorum-Typhoid clean states,¹⁴ and Minnesota boasts the highest numbers of turkey production in the United States. At the University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine, the historic Dairy Barn completed renovations in 2007 and the University of Minnesota Regents named the



Figure 7: Pomeroy Student/Alumni Center.²⁰

building after Benjamin S. Pomeroy. The Pomeroy Student/Alumni Learning Center is a central hub at the College of Veterinary Medicine, and features the Memorial to the Legacy of Dr. B.S. Pomeroy from the Minnesota Turkey Growers Association as well as the Pomeroy Gallery. Additionally, the University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine established the Pomeroy Chair in Avian Health in 1985, creating the only endowed poultry chair in the U.S.¹⁵ Dr. Jagdev Sharma was appointed Professor and Pomeroy Endowed Chair in Avian Health and held the position for 20 years,¹⁶ and he is succeeded by Dr. Carol Cardona whose research interests include gut health, respiratory health, and welfare. Benjamin S. Pomeroy's career can be likened to a masterclass in "staying the course." A true visionary of veterinary medicine, Pomeroy saw what needed to be done and tirelessly took action, culminating in a widely-respected career that inspires one to stop, look around, and see if we too can answer the call to action.

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