HOOFBEATS OF THE PAST

By CLIFFORD H. EBY*

A strange and tragic story may be related concerning the fortunes of the social and medical standards of veterinary medicine in 18th century England, with its subsequent impact upon the profession for the next century or more.

Because of the death of a single horse, the profession gained immense and immediate impetus, while by the death of a single man, six years later, the profession lost its recently gained social standing, prestige, and advancement.

Both deaths, man and horse, were directly caused by the want of knowledge in the field of veterinary medicine. Fate's tools of death for the horse, were ignorance and neglect, for the man the timeless Malleomyces mallei.

Eclipse, the gangly, big boned, unruly idol of the English turf was dead. This magnificent runner, never defeated and never fully extended, ran his first race on May 3, 1769 at Epsom for a £50 plate carrying 8 stones (112 pounds), and from that moment captured the hearts of the entire island. Now he was dead. This prolific stud, born in 1764, during a great annular eclipse of the sun, died at Cannons, Surrey, February 26, 1787 at the age of 23.

Eclipse's owner, Captain Denis O'Kelly, distressed and dejected, called upon his close friend, Vial St. Bel to perform a necropsy on the venerable campaigner. St. Bel, a former instructor at the famous Alfort Veterinary School in France accepted the unwelcomed task. The necropsy findings were a shock to the nobility and the sporting world in general. Eclipse's death had been due to colic and founder because of neglect and improper attention. The shocked English nobility suddenly and fully realized the utter lack and destitute state of veterinary medicine in their country. Long, though, it had been brought to their attention by many prominent men of the realm. Thus the fact of a horse's death launched veterinary medical education in England with noble backing and a bright future, the cow leech and farrier were to be reputed.

Charles Vial de St. Bel, born into nobility in the province of St. Bel, France in 1753, was a logical individual to found and direct a new Veterinary College. He could command the respect and loyalty of the nobility while offering as professor of the school a socially acceptable status for his students.

The first year, he drew to him twenty students, among them Bracy-Clark, Lawrence, Bloxam, and Field, some of the best available men in England, and the school was launched on a high and enlightened plane. Thus

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veterinary medicine achieved a start in England on an equal basis with other fields of medicine.

Although modest, St. Bel's school at St. Pancras in London's suburbs, seemed assured of immediate success. Materially, it consisted of but 50 stalls, a dissecting room, an amphitheater, museum and forge. The patronage of the Duke of Northumberland was extended, and the eminent John Hunter became its protector. Veterinary medicine, though in its modern infancy, had arrived on the highest of medical and social planes.

Fate in its strange and unforeseen ways now took its toll. Vial St. Bel fell desperately ill. He suffered excruciating bodily pain with ulcers and festering sores covering his limbs. The dreaded glanders had struck. So with only one year of formal service to the profession in England, St. Bel succumbed on August 21, 1793.

Thus the second death, this time a man, altered profoundly the future of the still budding profession. The new regime took over.

For want of a veterinary successor to St. Bel, the college's most infamous and longest tenured professor, Mr. Edward Coleman, was appointed to direct the school. His degrading attitudes, which were carried on by his immediate successor, Mr. Sewell, held the college in its grip for nearly half a century. During this time veterinary medicine in England could but eke out a meager advancement and social acceptance for its members.

By education, Coleman was a human surgeon, by birth a gentleman, but as an educator incompetent. Professor Coleman could have, had he wished, carried on St. Bel's traditions and even advanced them through his acquaintances and contacts. This he did not choose to do. On the contrary, his choice was to draw his pupils from the lower educational levels of society.

Many reasons have been given for Coleman's actions. The most prominent among them being avarice and his wanton void of veterinary knowledge. No doubt both played an important role in his actions.

Professor Coleman's introductory lecture each year states clearly his thoughts on recruitment of veterinary students "... the son of farriers make the best (veterinary) practitioners; medical men the worst." ... the farrier's son need not learn all that the other knows; such learning is not called for in the veterinary practitioner; besides, the farrier's son will perform his task with the greatest cheerfulness and pleasure."1

The new regime had taken over and for decades to come the veterinary practitioner in England was to be held under its evil spell. Strange as it may seem, the death of a horse and the death of a man wrought untold influence upon veterinary medicine's future.