

Becoming Mr. Turkey: The Career and Contributions of Dr. Benjamin S. Pomeroy

Courtney Labé

Introduction

The veterinary career of Benjamin Sherwood Pomeroy (1911-2004) is threaded throughout poultry production and the control of poultry diseases, including salmonellosis, avian influenza, and Newcastle disease.¹

Early Life and Veterinary Family Dynasty

Benjamin S. “Ben” Pomeroy (Fig. 1) was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, on April 24, 1911. 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, *“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.”*²

His father, Benjamin A. Pomeroy, established Pomeroy’s Animal Hospital in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1886. Still in business (Fig. 2), Pomeroy’s Animal Hospital is the fourth oldest continuously operating veterinary clinic in the US today.³ The



Figure 1. Benjamin Sherwood Pomeroy, 1944 Source: University of Minnesota Libraries, University Archives. <https://umedia.lib.umn.edu/item/p16022coll175:17695>



Figure 2: Pomeroy’s Animal Hospital. St. Paul, Minnesota. Photo by author, March 1, 2023.

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.

The hospital is rich with history. Outdoor kennels that once housed patients are no longer in service because of noise complaints from the hotel that was built next door. Some of the first x-ray equipment owned by the hospital sits in the same room as the current 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. 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 and Interest in Poultry

Benjamin S. Pomeroy (hereafter referred to as Pomeroy) received his Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree from Iowa State University in 1933.⁴ During his time at Iowa State, 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.⁵ He attended Cornell University on a scholarship and obtained a Master of Science in 1934.⁵ His thesis was titled, “Allergy and allergic skin diseases in the dog.” During 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 [Herbert L. Gilman] and Dr. Wilks [Howard J. Milks]... so I got exposure to both the cattle disease problems at Cornell and small animal practice.”²

After completing his master’s, Pomeroy joined the University of Minnesota’s division of veterinary medicine, beginning his 47-year-long career there. From 1934 to 1937, Pomeroy worked as a diagnostician. It was during this time 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.”*²

During this time, the poultry farmers of the US were shifting from flocks to large-scale hatcheries. From his vantage point in the University of Minnesota Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory, Pomeroy 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 course of his career, but his ability to notice a problem and confront it head-on transformed the trajectory of poultry production.

Professorship at University of Minnesota

Pomeroy continued working at the University of Minnesota as a diagnostician. In 1937, he was appointed as an assistant veterinarian. A year later, he was both promoted to instructor and married his wife, Margaret. She became actively involved and held leadership roles in state and national veterinary auxiliary organizations.

As he was pursuing his research on poultry disease detection and control, Pomeroy became an assistant professor in 1943. During this time, he joined the US 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."*²²

In 1944, Pomeroy earned his PhD from the University of Minnesota. His thesis, entitled "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."²⁵ From 1945 to 1948, Pomeroy held an associate professor position until he became a full professor in 1948.

In 1947, the University of Minnesota's College of Veterinary Medicine was officially established. During Pomeroy's professorship, he advised 36 MS students, 31 PhD students, and 10 postdoctoral researchers.⁴

Pomeroy went on to become 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."²²

Evidently, Pomeroy's leadership was heavily relied upon within the University of Minnesota's newly established College of Veterinary Medicine.

Outside the University of Minnesota, Pomeroy's leadership skills were similarly recognized. He was an active member of many 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.⁴ His leadership skills, combined with his focused research, would soon prove useful in another facet of veterinary medicine.

Specialization in Avian Pathology

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.



Figure 3. Benjamin S. Pomeroy (left), 1956. Source: University of Minnesota Libraries, University Archives, <https://umedia.lib.umn.edu/item/p16022coll175:18500>

With his propensity for leadership and focused work in poultry diseases, Pomeroy became instrumental in the beginnings of veterinary specialization. (Fig. 3) He helped found both the American Association of Avian Pathologists (AAAP) and the American College of Veterinary Microbiologists (ACVM).

In the 1950s, the AAAP credits the impact of poultry diseases, research progress, and a growing interest in forming a national organization as factors leading to the organizational committee formed in 1957. As one of its founders, Pomeroy was appointed to this committee, which was tasked with finalizing a constitution, bylaws, and other organizational details. During the AVMA meeting in Philadelphia in 1958, Pomeroy was elected the first president of the new American Association of Avian Pathologists.⁶

In 1966, Pomeroy became a charter diplomat of the ACVM⁷ and received a charter fellowship from the American Academy of Microbiology in 1959.⁴ Pomeroy was once again at the forefront of a transformation, this time the transformation of veterinary medicine itself.

Research Expertise as "Mr. Turkey"

From 1947 to 1982, support for Pomeroy's research came from various sources, including Agricultural Experiment Stations, the US Department of Agriculture, and the Minnesota Turkey Growers Association.⁴

His years of extensive research involving laboratory and field studies on poultry diseases, primarily salmonellosis, Newcastle disease, psittacosis, leukosis complex, mycoplasmosis, and colibacillosis, led to Pomeroy's reputation as an emergency contact for avian disease issues. Such work and consultations often involved resistance to antimicrobial drugs related to *Salmonella spp.*, *Escherichia coli*, and *Mycoplasma spp.* It was very important in the 1960s and 1970s not only from a turkey health perspective but also for public health implications concerning the nation's food supply. As a result, he was often called on to investigate infectious and toxicity outbreaks encountered by commercial

poultry hatcheries, breeder flocks, and processing plants, as well as for incidences in wild waterfowl.

Pomeroy's many graduate students also conducted important work on coronavirus infections in turkeys and reticuloendotheliosis virus (REV)-induced lymphoid tumors in the 1970s. This was important because the differential diagnosis with Marek's disease in turkeys was not yet clear.

His work on the reduction of *Salmonella* also had significance for supporting the objectives of the USDA-APHIS's National Poultry Improvement Plan (NPIP),⁸ a voluntary state-federal cooperative poultry and poultry products testing and certification program. It had become operational in 1935 primarily to eradicate bacillary white diarrhea caused by *Salmonella pullorum* but since expanded over the years to cover other infectious poultry-related diseases along with certifying interstate and international shipments.

Organization Leadership

Of note, Pomeroy served on numerous committees such as the National Research Council's Committee on *Salmonella*, the NPIP Technical Advisory Committee, the USDA's Poultry Inspection Program, and the Veterinary Services Emergency Lethal Avian Influenza Scientific Advisory Group. He also chaired the Veterinary Services Emergency Newcastle Disease Eradication Program Scientific Advisory Group.⁴

Pomeroy's involvement on the federal level and with multiple emergency committees highlights his reputation as a renowned scientist, one whose knowledge was complemented 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 and 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."⁹

At the core of many of Pomeroy's recommendations was the principle of collaboration. Having extensive experience in



Figure 4: Benjamin S. Pomeroy and microscope. Source: *Avian Dis.* 2004 Apr;48(2):231.

modes of disease transmission, he understood the need for not only education of newly discovered modes of transmission but also for 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."¹⁰ Under "Frustrations," he noted that 33 states had turkey flocks operating under the NPIP and that only 5 of those states had entered the APHIS Pullorum-Typhoid eradication plan.¹⁰

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.¹¹

Pomeroy had become a highly sought-after speaker on the national as well as international level. His expertise led him to visit poultry farms; participate in seminars; and visit research facilities in Spain, Thailand, Mexico, France, Italy, England, Brazil, and Canada.⁴ Dr. Dick McCapes, a past president of the USAHA, described Pomeroy's participation in USAHA meetings and offers a glimpse into what it was like to be in the audience while Pomeroy was talking: "*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.*"¹¹

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." (Fig. 4)

Pomeroy retired from the University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine in 1981 as a professor emeritus, but his veterinary career continued.

Political Activity in Retirement

After retiring from the University of Minnesota, Pomeroy became more prominently involved in politics. His political activity echoed his career's emphasis on collaboration for the betterment of veterinary medicine. Pomeroy described, "*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.*"¹²

Once again, Pomeroy's leadership and fearless problem-solving proved beneficial, this time in the political sphere. Pomeroy dedicated himself to setting up VET-PAC, the political action committee of the MVMA, as well as the Veterinary Key Contact Network.¹²



Figure 5: Dr. Pomeroy with turkeys, date unknown.

Source: University of Minnesota Libraries, University Archives, <https://umedia.lib.umn.edu/item/p16022coll175:17012>

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 viewed as the face of veterinary medicine at the Capitol.”¹¹ Regarded as an “authentic Minnesota veterinary government affairs hero,”¹² 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 in Education and Avian Health

Benjamin S. Pomeroy’s legacy resounds throughout the state of Minnesota and the entire US. 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 10th editions) and *Isolation and Identification of Avian Pathogens* (1st and 2nd editions).⁴

Pomeroy received numerous honors and other distinctions, including the USDA-APHIS Animal Health Award, University of Minnesota’s Siehl Prize for Excellence in Agriculture, MVMA’s Veterinarian of the Year, and induction into the



Figure 6: Pomeroy Student/Alumni Center. Source: Miller Dunwiddie. Ben Pomeroy Student/Alumni Learning Center – University of Minnesota, <https://millerdunwiddie.com/projects/the-ben-pomeroy-student-alumni-learning-center/>

Minnesota Livestock Hall of Fame and Poultry Industry Hall of Fame. These awards 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,¹³ and Minnesota boasts the highest numbers of turkeys in production in the US.

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 building after Benjamin S. Pomeroy. The Pomeroy Student/Alumni Learning Center (Fig. 6) is a central hub at the College of Veterinary Medicine and features the Pomeroy Gallery as well as the Memorial to the Legacy of Dr. B.S. Pomeroy from the Minnesota Turkey Growers Association.

Additionally, the Pomeroy Chair in Avian Health was established in 1985, creating the only endowed poultry chair in the US.¹⁴

In summary, Benjamin S. Pomeroy’s career can be likened to a masterclass in “staying the course.” Beyond his significant contributions to the health of turkeys and poultry industry in general, he was a true visionary in veterinary medicine. Pomeroy saw what needed to be done and tirelessly acted, 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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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Courtney Labé is a member of the class of 2025 at the College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Minnesota in St. Paul, Minnesota.