

Sustaining A Rural Practice Requires An Understanding Of Rural Lifestyle

An understanding of rural lifestyle, mentorship and communication play key roles in rural veterinary practice sustainability. Veterinary students Ryan Rademacher, Hermiston, OR, and Holt Tripp, Stillwater, OK, gained hands-on experience through the Northwest Bovine Veterinary Experience Program this past summer.

By Kim Holt | Sep 12, 2012

At early ages, students Ryan Rademacher and Holt Tripp knew they wanted to be a part of the veterinary profession. While the two met this past summer through an externship, they share similar passions and aspirations. Their goals are to combine their passions for veterinary medicine and agriculture into, ideally, future feedlot consulting careers.

Rademacher and Tripp aren't alone in their early interest in rural veterinary medicine. Nearly 40 percent of respondents in the survey, *Why Veterinarians Enter Rural Veterinary Practice in the United States*, told researchers they developed an interest in a rural veterinary profession before eighth grade.

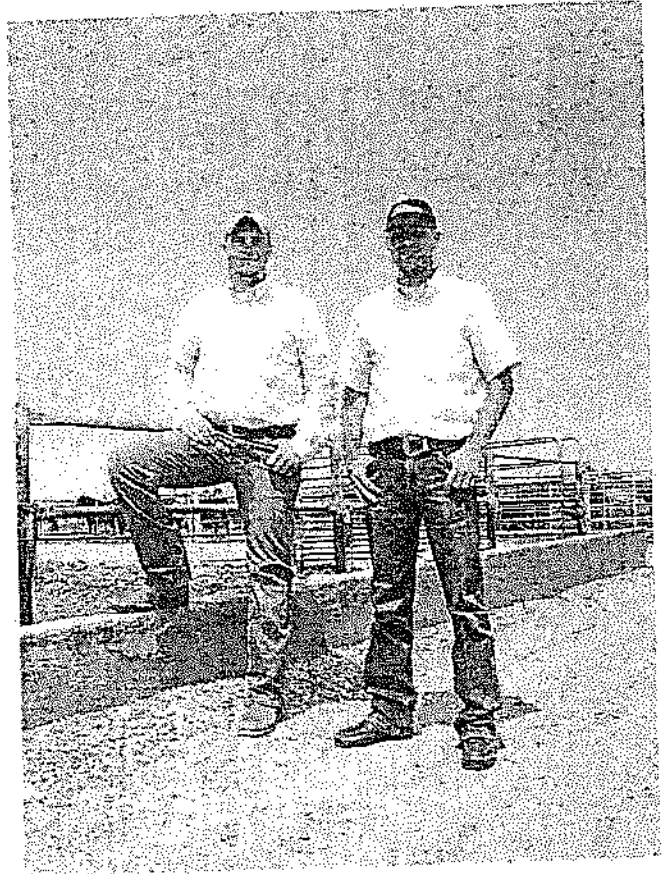
This study, and its companion study, *A Survey of Reasons Why Veterinarians Leave Rural Veterinary Practice in the United States*, was a combined collaboration of veterinary college researchers in Oregon, Ohio, Michigan, Colorado and Iowa. The published results offer insight for rural veterinary practice owners and employees and the sustainability of these businesses within rural America.

In the study, more than half of veterinarians interested in rural practice indicated they had relatives with farm backgrounds who were influential in their career choice. Relative influence rated even higher than parents, rural veterinary mentors and veterinary school. Farm and livestock backgrounds were frequently a factor in why men, especially, chose rural veterinary practice over urban.

“There are a lot of reasons we’re all attracted to the rural form of practice,” Tripp points out. “When you grow up around the veterinary community—especially the agricultural side—you start to gain an appreciation for the fact it’s not only a way to mix your passions for agriculture and veterinary medicine, but it’s a way to give back to the agricultural community.”

Tripp, who is originally from Shelbyville, KY, but lives in Stillwater, OK, is the son of an equine practitioner practicing at Churchill Downs. Rademacher will also be a second generation practitioner. His father is a partner in a rural mixed animal practice in Hermiston, OR.

Rademacher attends Oregon State University, Corvallis, and enjoys all aspects of veterinary medicine. “I’ve always had a strong passion for the beef industry,” he says, through herd work with his dad and work experiences on a friend’s farm.



As a third year veterinary student, he also really enjoys economics of business. “I like the fact bovine medicine is more from a herd health standpoint. You can help producers make animal health decisions that are not only going to be good for the health of the animal, but also help them be more profitable,” he relays.

Tripp is a second year student in a dual DVM-MBA degree program at the Center for Veterinary Health Sciences at Oklahoma State University. His family’s participation in the beef business further confirmed his interest.

“I always knew that I would enjoy beef cattle, but I really found that to be my passion in seventh or eighth grade. I thought long before that I wanted to be a veterinarian,” he assures.

A Rural Draw

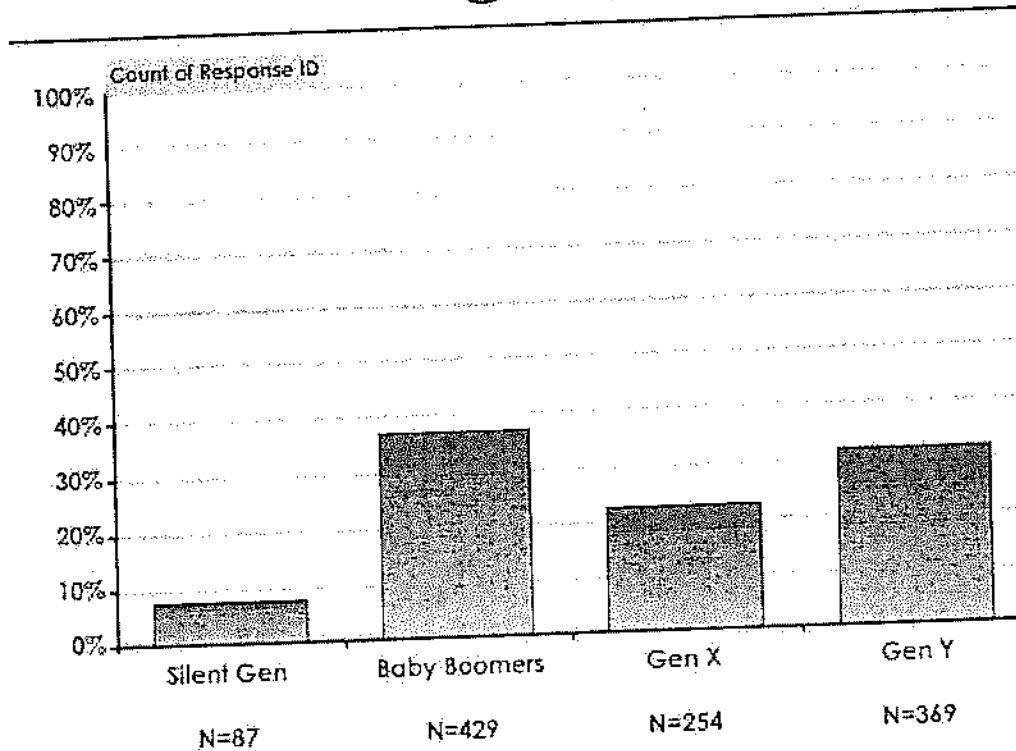
Along with an early interest in the profession, veterinarians who responded to this survey also told researchers that a rural lifestyle was an important factor in why they chose to pursue a rural career. Other reasons, weighted equally, were community need, individual animal care, herd level animal care and family concerns.

“The relationships we have with people in the community are a big draw for a lot of veterinary students and veterinarians to return to rural areas, raise their families, and enjoy that kind of lifestyle,” Tripp points out.

Rademacher adds, “Mainly because of my background in agriculture and coming from a rural community I want to be back in one.”

Figure 1.

Demographics



Location and practice atmosphere, followed by mentorship, ownership, facilities and caseload were other factors respondents deemed to be of higher importance in their work of choice. These factors trumped salary, time off, emergency pay and family concerns—for the time being, at least.

For Rademacher, the location of a practice, its atmosphere and longevity are important factors. “Definitely the opportunity for partnership or ownership is a big one because I’d really like to own my own practice, or be partners in one or multiple practices,” he notes.

“That’s another thing that drew me to veterinary medicine; the entrepreneurial aspect where you do have the opportunity to be a professional, a doctor, and own your own business at the same time.” He’s also interested in furthering his education with an MS or PhD and long term, raising a large herd of commercial cattle.

Tripp comments, "A veterinary career is so diverse with opportunities. Whether you want to do urban, small animal or rural mixed animal, feedlot consulting, industry or academia, the door is wide open for all those things. You work on animals, but it's still a people business whether you're a small animal or a food animal practitioner." And mentors are very important.

Mentors make a difference

"It would be hard to put into words the value of good mentors," Tripp remarks. "Mentors are valuable and the more you have, the better. That's something that we as young, aspiring practitioners have to be very diligent about pursuing—identify good practitioners and pursue them as mentors."

Among several others, Tripp lists industry experts such as Dr. Del Miles, Dr. Bob Smith and Dr. Dee Griffin on his list of "incredible mentors." This list also includes Dr. D.L. Step, one of his professors at Oklahoma State, the late Dr. Roger Wonderlich, his own dad, two uncles, an aunt and cousin all in rural mixed animal practices.

"The value of their advice and encouragement is immeasurable in my mind. Their enthusiasm for the profession and what they do is infectious. Dr. Step is a great example of that," he says.

Rademacher identifies his father and his father's partners as his key mentors. He's also traveled with his dad to meetings such as the Academy of Veterinary Consultants. Veterinarians, especially feedlot consultants such as Dr. Miles and Dr. Smith whom he met there, along with lectures and learning more about what these professionals do for the industry, helped him solidify his career choice.

Tripp remarks, "It's preached to us all the time at school that learning

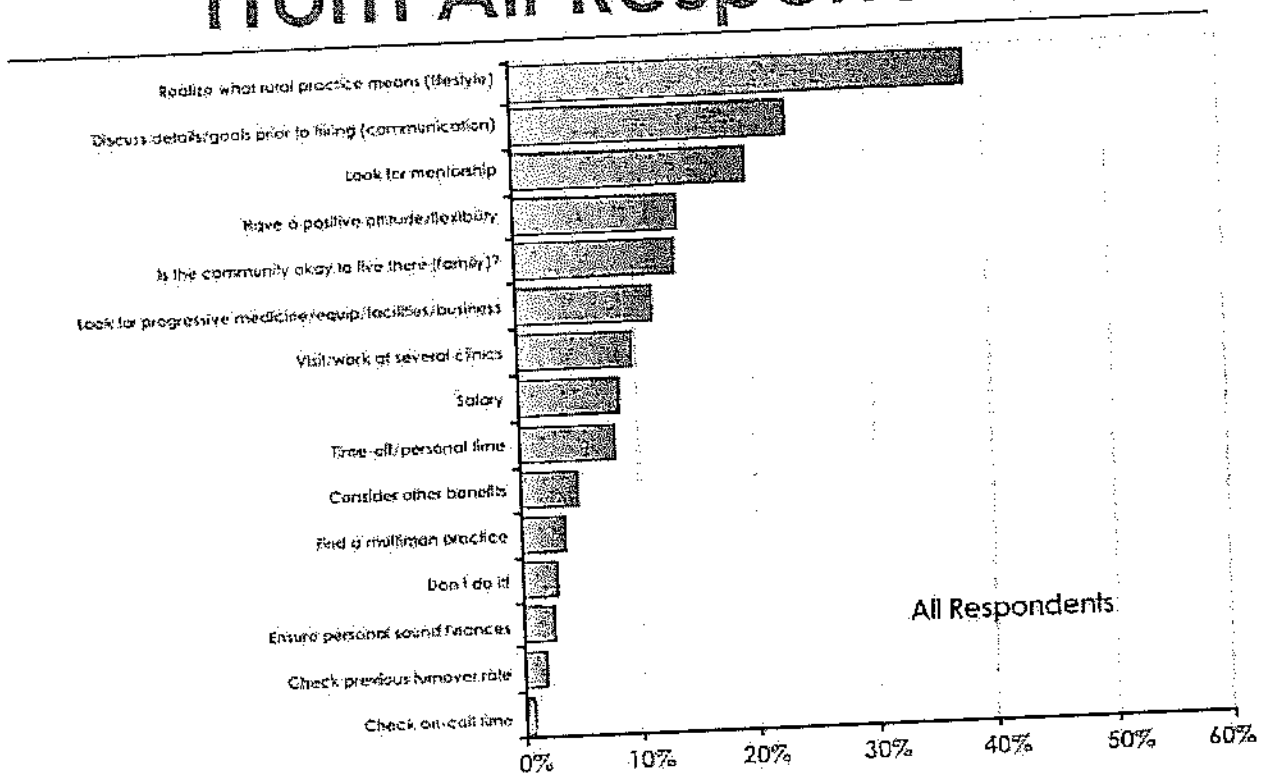
doesn't really start until you graduate. As hard as we work and as much as we learn, all we're doing in veterinary school is establishing baseline knowledge and preparing ourselves for the true learning. So the value of mentors is tremendous for new grads."

He relays, "Compensation and lifestyle aside, one of the things I know a lot of students I visit with value, and hope for, is a really strong mentorship from whomever they go into practice with. That's not something you can quantify or put a number on. The mentorships and the experience you can get under experienced practitioners once you enter practice are extremely, extremely invaluable."

Interestingly, mentorship was a factor that constantly came up, according to researchers, when survey respondents advised students interested in a rural veterinary practice career.

Figure 2.

Advice For Students From All Respondents



Respondents, considered as seasoned, experienced and skilled veterinarians or recent graduates, especially encouraged students to realize what the rural practice lifestyle means and to also be sure to discuss the details and goals of a job before being hired. Also important for rural practice is a positive, flexible attitude.

“We have the chance not only to help sustain the rural lifestyle we’ve come to know, but help provide a safe, wholesome, nutritious food supply,” Tripp points out. “All of the fundamentals and numbers show our jobs, as it relates to food production, aren’t going to become anything but more important as we progress through the 21st Century.”

He adds, “Looking back, I can’t imagine anything different. And looking ahead, I think it’s going to be a rewarding career—not just for me, but for

any aspiring food animal practitioner.”

For Further Reference

The studies were conducted by: Aurora Villarroel, DVM, MPVM, PhD, Dipl. ACVPM; Stephen R. McDonald, DVM; William L. Walker, DVM; Lana Kaiser, MD, DVM; Renee D. Dewell, DVM, MS; and Grant A. Dewell, DVM, PhD. The full studies were published in the April 15, 2010, issue of the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association. Modules are available online through the American Association of Bovine Practitioners at www.AnimalCareTraining.org, managed by the Beef Cattle Institute at Kansas State University.

Fostering Rural Interest & Retention

Urban students without livestock experience can become interested in rural veterinary practice, too. The study, *Why Veterinarians Enter Rural Veterinary Practice in the United States*, shows that if these practitioners developed an interest, it was more likely in veterinary school, especially true for women of the study's Generation Y.

This isn't a surprise for M. Wayne Ayers, DVM, an assistant professor of food animal production medicine at Caine Veterinary Teaching Center, Caldwell, Idaho, who says they're seeing a great influx of women, especially, entering veterinary school today.

Dr. Ayers, who spent 20 years in mixed animal practice, a big percent cow-calf, says, "I think there's a big difference between urban and rural kids because growing up in rural America, you see lots of different things." Rural kids, he says, tend to make up their minds earlier about veterinary practice because greater experiences often lead to a targeted interest. "When you

grow up truly urban, you don't have all of those experiences, so you find something that sparks interest later in life," he explains.



From his work at Caine Center, he often sees students who don't develop an interest in rural veterinary practice until fourth year. "Then it's nearly too late," he says. "The student is past the point in their education to take the elective courses that would help develop the skills for mixed or food animal practice. The whole idea is to get people with an urban type background exposure early in their education so they can determine if they have an interest and be able to pursue the elective course work and experiential learning opportunities that will prepare them for a career in food-animal medicine."

Caine faculty and staff maintain a highly rated and effective veterinary medicine teaching program, including hands-on experiences in food animal production medicine. It provides summer internship opportunities specially designed for pre-veterinary students and a number of food animal electives for fourth year veterinary students from Washington State University and schools around the country.

In northeastern Oregon, Dave Rademacher, DVM, a partner in Hermiston Veterinary Clinic, a five person mixed animal practice in Hermiston, OR, reports they're seeing more true interest from local, high school-age students.

"We have it set up at the schools so these kids can job shadow. There is a class for credit hours where they can come in and observe two or three times a week for a couple of hours. They get a real feel for 'is this what I

really want to do?”

If these students go through veterinary school and want to return home, that presents a great opportunity for practices like theirs. Two of this practice's five persons are, in fact, from the local area.

This past summer, Dr. Rademacher and his partners also hosted a veterinary student awarded a Pfizer Animal Health scholarship. One of the focuses of this program, sponsored by Pfizer Animal Health and the American Veterinary Medical Foundation, is to help improve the availability of veterinarians to serve in mixed or rural practices.

Dr. Rademacher explains that it gives students from non-rural backgrounds opportunities to experience rural veterinary practice in the summer between their second and third year. “It's more for those students on the edge, trying to decide if that's the direction they want to take.”

Rural Veterinary Practice— Is It for Everybody?

Originally from rural midwestern South Dakota and a graduate of Kansas State University's College of Veterinary Medicine, Dr. Rademacher has practiced mixed animal medicine in the same clinic for 28 years.

While he enjoys rural practice and his community, he realizes “it definitely is not for everybody,” especially from being on call to going from one species to another.

“People in the rural areas, they understand and accept that, and a lot of those clients become really good friends or basically family, so it turns out to be a win-win situation. But you never know when you're going to be called. That's going to be a lot of what keeps veterinarians there at work or

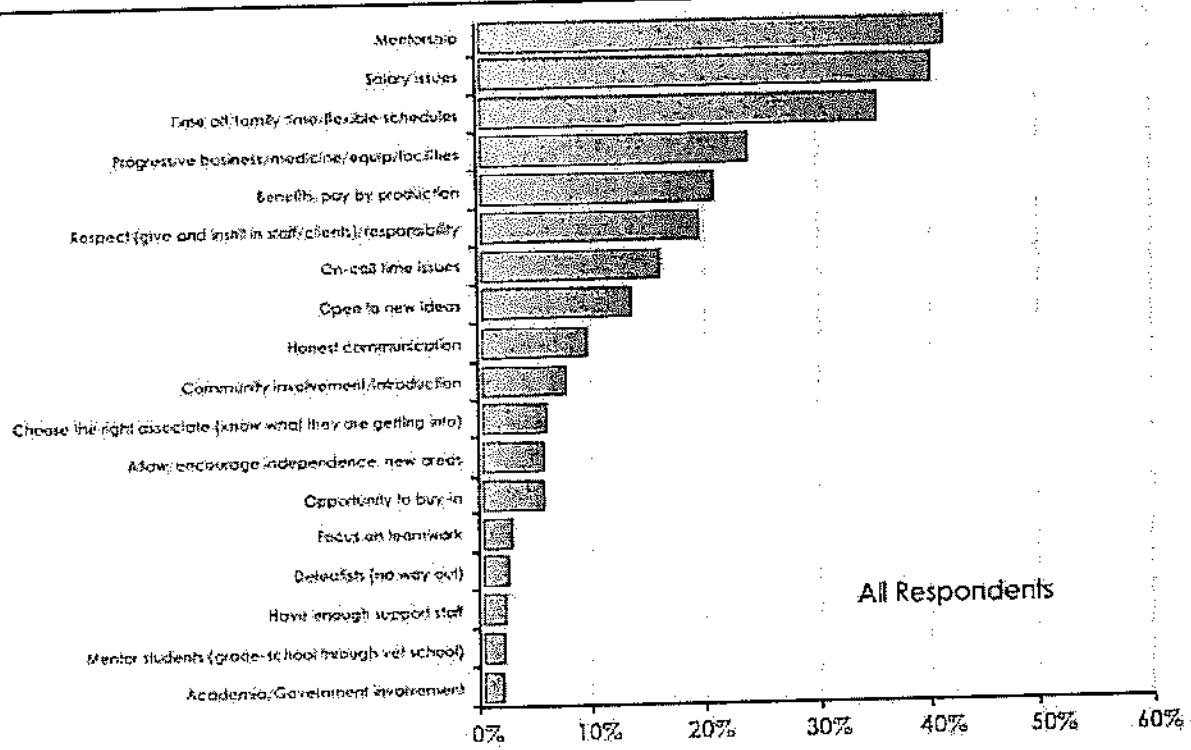
sends them away.”

His take is similar to what researchers found in the study, *A Survey of Reasons Why Veterinarians Leave Rural Veterinary Practice in the United States*. A polling of 805 rural veterinarians (246 who left this field) listed emergency duty, time off, salary, practice atmosphere and family concerns as the top five reasons why.

Some 75 percent of those who answered the survey, but are no longer employed in rural veterinary practice, are considered seasoned veterinarians with more than 12 years in practice. Their next job after rural practice was in academia or urban practice.

Figure 3 outlines advice for practice owners from all who responded to the survey. Mentorship was most requested followed by salary and time off.

Figure 3. **Advice For Practice Owners From All Respondents**



Though not addressed by the study, Dr. Rademacher points out the happiness of a spouse is another important retention consideration in rural practice.

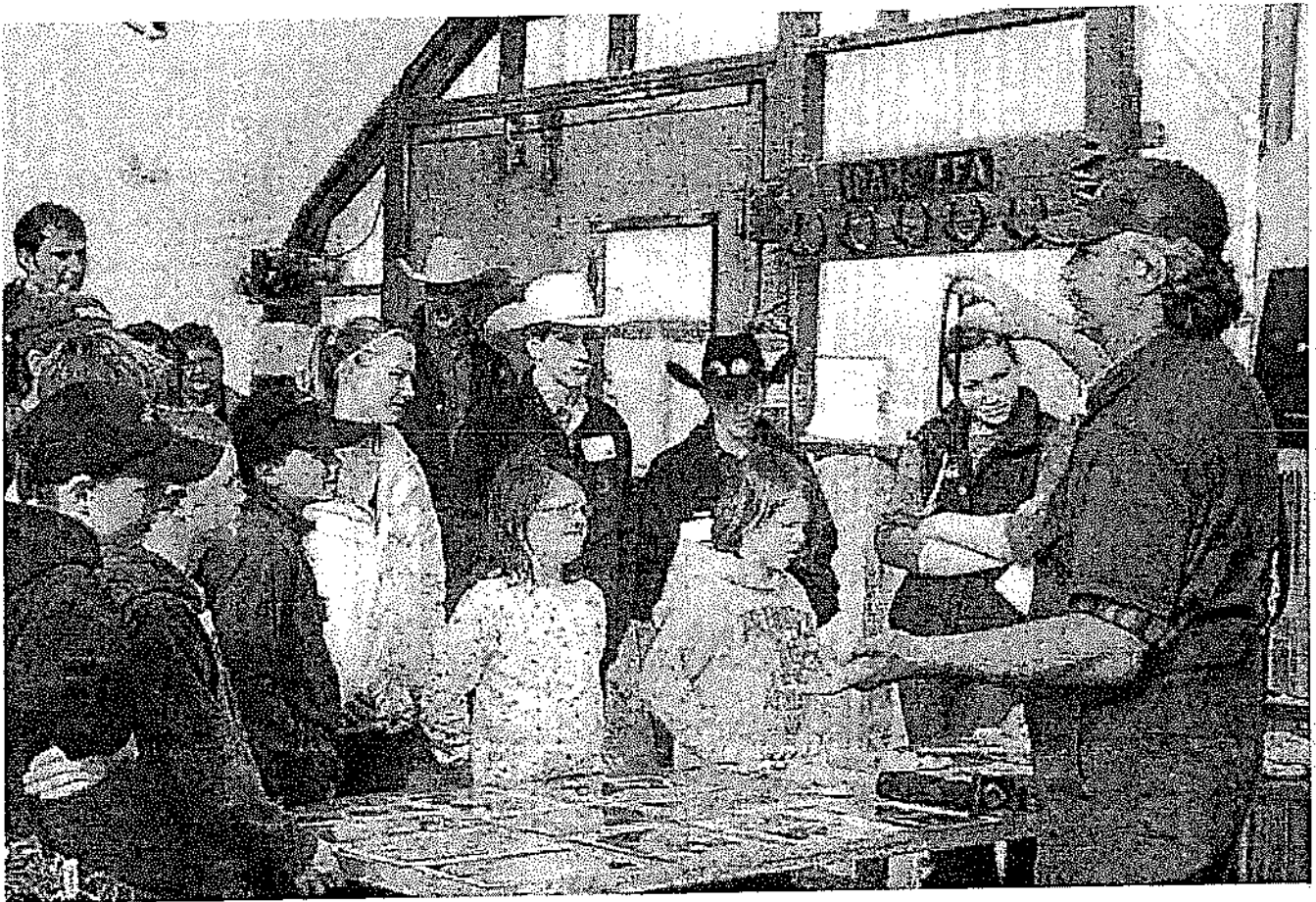
“It’s not only the veterinarian, it’s also their spouse and whether they’re comfortable in a rural community,” he assures. “Is your spouse acquainted with rural areas? Or did he or she come from the city?”

To Dr. Rademacher and his wife, Anna, a rural community has been a great place to raise their family with little traffic, trustworthy neighbors and nearby hunting and fishing, something he and his son, Ryan, enjoy.

“We just feel so much more comfortable out here. It’s really what you’re used to.”

BEEF

BEEF Vet



Southwest Idaho's Gaipe Veterinary Teaching Center provides continuing education and extension outreach programs for veterinarians and animal owners, including youth. On this day, Dr. M. Wayne Ayers shared his knowledge about a food animal veterinary career with 4-H youth at an area beef field day, which included aspiring veterinarian Jordan Smith (second from left), an 11-year-old whose grandfather and uncle both practice veterinary medicine.