**Leo Forbes Conti, D.V.M.**

*California's Twentieth-Century Renaissance Veterinarian*

Over the course of the twentieth century, public perceptions of the veterinarian’s work shifted from the maintenance of animals as a source of livelihood to the care of animals as human companions. The life of Leo F. Conti exemplifies this shift as his enduring dedication to animal welfare placed him on the forefront of advances in veterinary medicine. A man of many interests and talents, Conti enjoyed a long and accomplished career in public and private veterinary practice in California. Beyond private practice, he was influential in the fields of international disease control, microbiology and zoological research, forensic criminology, and conservation. Dr. Conti’s central passion, however, was the care of animal companions, and his dedication to veterinary continuing education lives on through the Dr. and Mrs. Leo Conti Endowment Fund at UCI.

Leo Conti was born in San Francisco on February 3, 1896, the youngest of five siblings and the only son. The story goes that when the doctor arrived at the Conti home with his Dalmatian twenty minutes after Leo’s birth, the dog reached over and licked the newborn’s face. Thus began a remarkable life of human and animal friendship.

Leo’s early life provided an encouraging beginning for a veterinarian. His parents Arthur and Anne Conti emigrated from England to the United States in 1885 with their three young daughters Ivy, Bianca, and Italia. Their fourth daughter, Nina, was born in San Francisco in 1891. Arthur operated the city’s first rubber stamp factory on Market Street where Leo worked as a boy until the great San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906 destroyed the factory. Leo’s family relocated to Alameda, where he worked in a pharmacy polishing bottles and making deliveries. A delivery to Dr. J. A. Hill sparked Leo’s interest in veterinary medicine. As a graduate of the Chicago Veterinary College, Dr. Hill was one of the small number of licensed veterinarians who first settled in California’s San Francisco Bay area. Dr. Hill’s extensive travels, his private veterinary practice, and his experience training horses for war maneuvers during the Spanish-American War inspired Leo, who would soon follow a similar path.

Although operating only briefly, the first two colleges established in California to train veterinarians were in San Francisco: The University of California from 1894 to 1901 and the private San Francisco Veterinary College from 1898 to 1918. It would be thirty years before the School of Veterinary Medicine at UC Davis would open in 1948. Leo was fortunate to graduate and receive his license from the San Francisco Veterinary College in 1917, just as the country was becoming entrenched in World War I. During college, Leo developed two hobbies, one that would serve his future career and another that reveals his playful and imaginative nature. He worked in his sister’s photographic portrait studio, which was associated with the famous photographer Arnold Genthe, and he performed magic shows with classmate Raymond V. Stone, otherwise known as “Ramo the Boy Magician.”

Leo enlisted in the U.S. Army in April of 1918 at the age of twenty-two. After a short time at Camp Greenleaf Veterinary Training Center in Georgia, he was transferred to
Camp Lee, Virginia, where he was quickly promoted to captain. He then became commander of an animal detachment to France. Leo’s ship safely delivered five hundred healthy mules to Bordeaux, despite heavy storms, short rations, and some injuries among the human passengers. Leo had never ridden a horse before joining the army. A riding accident at a veterinary hospital in France sent him back to the United States. Although he had won a cross-country race against two hundred while at Camp Lee, he claimed the only explanation for this victory was that the horse ran away with him.

After the war, Leo returned to the Bay Area and worked at Cutter Laboratories in Berkeley producing anthrax vaccine, hog cholera virus, and anti-hog cholera serum. On the first day of his job at Cutter, he met Doris Taylor of Nevada City. They married in 1922 and moved to Southern California where Dr. Conti became the head veterinarian at Fontana’s Southern Livestock Company.

Leo was well positioned to be of aid when the first outbreak of aphthous fever, or foot-and-mouth disease, occurred in Los Angeles in 1924. The epidemic united veterinarians across the state and beyond, and Dr. Conti joined California’s Division of Animal Industry. He developed a reporting system for ranchers in the United States and Mexico that helped curb subsequent outbreaks, which was later recounted in a federal BAI film on aphthous fever in Mexico. After the first outbreak, he became the senior Los Angeles County Veterinarian and then Chief Deputy Livestock Inspector. During his time in Los Angeles, Conti wrote editorials on livestock care for the Los Angeles Times, established the first poultry pathology laboratory in the city, and joined twelve men in forming the West Hollywood Aviation Club. He was the first veterinarian in California to pilot an airplane, and made several flights to photograph foot-and-mouth outbreak areas.

Dr. Conti resigned from his post in Los Angeles in 1937 to become Director of the Zoological Research Hospital in San Diego. During his three year tenure, his research took new directions, resulting in publications on aspergillosis in penguins and a new bacterium identified in chuckwallas. He collaborated with the medical profession through his magician friend and classmate Dr. R.V. Stone, who had become the Director of Laboratories for the Los Angeles County Health Department, studying trichinosis and food poisoning. Another of Dr. Conti’s hobbies also led to his collaboration with the Los Angeles Criminological Laboratory. While at the research hospital, he assisted the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s office in the work of hair identification and earned the title of Special Deputy. He would later donate his large personal collection of hair samples to the FBI.

In pursuit of his primary passion and following veterinary medicine’s larger transition to caring for companion animals in the 1930s and 40s, Dr. Conti left the zoo research hospital in 1940 to build a private veterinary practice. He chose a location on the first Spanish road in California near what is now Old Town San Diego. While there, he continued to pursue other scientific research interests and began traveling regularly to Mexico to seek medicinal plants for Merck and Company. He joined photographer Lewis Wayne Walker on expeditions to the Gulf of California to research sea birds and a rattlesnake parasite found on Tortuga Island. These trips resulted in a widely popular
National Geographic article that prompted the Mexican government to step up its conservation efforts.

Of all the wide-ranging interests of Dr. Leo Conti, many still unlisted such as painting, carving, fly fishing, and sports cars, nothing defines him better than his sense of humor and his remarkable ability to connect with animals. Colleague Donald E. Stover remembers, “Often the practical joker when he wasn’t serious, Dr. Conti liked to mix in a little fun.” He recalls a time at the San Diego Zoological Research Building when Dr. Conti passed off an Australian wombat as a guinea pig on growth hormones to a group of visiting veterinarians. He surmised that Conti’s sole purpose in keeping the wombat nearby was to entertain visitors. Leo also made headlines when he reportedly visited San Diego animal shelters to collect a species of flea that does not bite humans to ship to Germany for research. He took in refugee puppies from England during World War II, trained a pair of baby panthers which he claimed were less threatening than some human beings, and in retirement was often seen with a pet dove on his shoulder. Conti acquired one of these birds when it landed on the end of his gun while hunting. “I knew it was a dove of peace,” he said, “So I called him Khrushchev.”

Dr. Conti and his wife, Doris, retired to her family’s hometown of Nevada City in 1953. They purchased a small ranch he called “Balmy Burro Ranch,” perhaps in tribute to his war-time experiences. The Contis had no children, but they continued to remain active in community and professional organizations. Leo Conti was a Distinguished Lifetime Member of the California Veterinary Medical Association, serving as president of the CVMA in 1940-41 as well as holding leadership positions in the San Diego VMA, the Museum of Man, the University Club of San Diego, the Natural History Museum, the Lens and Shutter Club of San Diego, the San Diego and Nevada City Rotary Clubs, and the Nevada City Pioneer Arts Club. Dr. Conti also participated in programs at UC Irvine’s Center of Continuing Veterinary Medicine Education, created in 1971 and the first of its kind in the country.

Dr. Leo Conti died on October 11, 1980, at the age of eighty-four. Responding to perceived budgetary constraints for UC Irvine’s continuing veterinary education program, the Contis had created a living trust in 1976 that included provisions for the UCI program’s continuation, as well as a large endowment to UC Davis’s College of Veterinary Medicine for research on canine and feline diseases and population control efforts, equipment for the Los Angeles Zoological Society, the study of veterinary medicine at Alabama’s Tuskegee Institute, and a scholarship endowment at Colorado State University’s College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences.

Kristina Shull, Ph.D.
Department of History
University of California, Irvine
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Acknowledgements

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