The Auxiliary lost one of its leading ladies on May 14, 2003 with the death of Bea Schimoler of Glen Head, New York. Mrs. Schimoler served for many years as the group’s historian, saving every record of their activities and photographing every event. In the mid-1970s she held every office in turn from treasurer through president of the group and was also the parliamentarian who swore in new officers.

“She kept track of everything,” remembers Doris Smith. “She was a teacher and a member of the Cedar Swamp Historical Society. She was very interested in history and in making sure that everything was preserved.” She organized all of the material she had compiled into a series of scrapbooks that now reside in the College library.

“She was a very gracious lady, very helpful, always supportive, and always willing to do a little extra,” recalls Cully Fox, herself an Auxiliary stalwart and a past president of the group. “I can’t say enough nice things about her. She was always there to greet anyone and everyone.” These sentiments are universally shared. “Bea Schimoler was one of the great ladies; she just made you feel so good. She did this for everybody,” says Smith. Carroll Manning, another long-time member and past president, says, “She was Steady Eddie, to say the least. She was always faithful to the profession and the Auxiliary. She was a quiet supporter and mover, and a real role model. My biggest impression of Bea was that she was very much a lady, a very lovely lady. I think that that’s unique.”

“Bea’s great love was day-to-day charity,” says her husband, Lou Schimoler, DVM ’47. In addition to her work for the Auxiliary, he says that she ran the St. Vincent de Paul Society for the Nassau North Conference. As part of her work for that organization she established a food pantry 25 years ago. Two weeks after her death it was dedicated to her memory.

Schimoler notes, too, that his wife was always looking for ways to build up interest in the Auxiliary. “She worked hard to bring in men, to broaden the base of the Auxiliary,” he says, adding that it was she who recruited the group’s first male officer, Scott Campbell.

In tribute to his wife, Dr. Schimoler made a generous gift last summer to the Auxiliary Scholarship Fund and followed it up another in December. Auxiliary president Ann Hancock encourages others wishing to honor Bea Schimoler’s memory to consider contributions of their own to the scholarship fund.

When the Auxiliary to the New York State Veterinary Medical Society met last October in Saratoga Springs, president Ann Hancock asked the assembled members the question she has asked every year since 2001: should the Auxiliary continue to function? No one leaped to her feet with a ready answer, but after some subdued discussion the consensus was that it should, at least for the time being. There were eleven women present, out of a membership that on paper looks robust: more than 350 people paid dues last year.

Those dues and the Auxiliary’s fund-raising activities — which have included the assembling of three excellent cookbooks, exceptional quilts, accomplished artwork, and many other creative projects — have meant a lot to the College and its students over the years. In the 50 years from 1948 to 1998, the Auxiliary donated $178,000 for scholarships, fellowships, emergency student loans, furnishings in the Hagan Room and the James Law lobby, hospital equipment, and library books. Since 1998 they have contributed in excess of $50,000 more, including a gift for the linear accelerator that was matched by the Kresge Foundation. In addition to their Cornell giving, the Auxiliary has worked to promote responsible pet ownership and secondary science education. They also lend financial support to the State Society’s Political Education Committee.

But this year no one was interested in coordinating the silent auction that had been a fixture of the annual meeting of the State Society. Motions made last year were never followed through...
on, because no one volunteered to do the work. Hancock spoke for several of the women present — Doris Smith, Carroll Manning, Hannah Cook, Dee Dee Warriner, Lucille Saunders, Rae Hart, Mary McCarthy, Bertha Guild, Heidi Kallfelz, and Kitty Mancuso — when she said that she had already taken on all she could handle herself. She has a family and a demanding job in special education. Many of the members who were there, like many of the members who were not there, could tell much the same story. Still, Hancock and her fellow officers have agreed to serve in their posts for a third year. If they do not, it is not clear who will.

It used to be that officers rotated annually through all the posts in the same order from treasurer to past president. “That way there was always somebody who knew the position you were going into and could help you through it,” recalls Doris Smith, wife of Dean Donald Smith. The vice-president used to be in charge of organizing a yearly raffle, which Smith remembers as a very popular and successful fund-raiser. “For the women who did it, it was a lot of fun,” she says. But fewer and fewer wives were interested in running for office or taking on such a time-consuming project. “It got to be that the same people were doing it over and over, and that’s when it stopped being fun.”

Smith, who works as a reference assistant in Cornell’s management library, served for several years as the Auxiliary’s treasurer and liaison with the College.

When the Women’s Auxiliary to the American Veterinary Medical Association was formed at the Kansas City Veterinary College in 1917, it was the first auxiliary established in connection with any of the healing arts, and it shook up the status quo. While some veterinarians had always taken their wives along to the annual convention, many felt that women had no place at a men’s meeting. As is still true today, however, many of the women who joined the national and state auxiliaries worked in their husbands’ practices, and they were confident that they belonged at their husbands’ sides. They stood up to vocal opposition and even some intimidation to meet at the 1918 convention, by which time five state auxiliaries had formed. The next year there were fourteen, and by 1921 the national organization was well established, although attempts to dissolve it would continue for several years.

By the time the Ladies’ Auxiliary to the New York State Veterinary Medical Association, as the members used to refer to themselves, was established in 1948, the national auxiliary had long been fully accepted. New York was one of the later states to form an auxiliary; by 1950 only four of the contiguous states — Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, and Montana — had not organized on the state level. Auxiliary membership grew steadily, and the annual meeting of the New York State Society became a much-anticipated vacation destination for the wives and children of the state’s veterinary practitioners, and an opportunity to form and nurture lasting friendships.

But traditional conceptions of women and their roles in the workplace and American culture were stood on their ears amid the societal transformations of the 1970s. Women’s auxiliaries began to be seen by some as vestiges of a narrowly prescribed past. In response to changing realities, in 1979 the New York group dropped “Ladies” from the name of the organization and began referring to their meeting activities as the “spouse program”. By then three of the four veterinary classes attending Cornell were composed of equal numbers of men and women; the balance would soon begin to tip significantly in favor of women. (The current DVM classes are approximately 80 percent female.) Auxiliary membership peaked at over 600 in the mid-1970s but by 1990 had declined again to something over 400. On a national level the trend was much the same; membership stood at 10,000 in 1976 but had declined to less than 7,000 by 1985. According to Bev Richardson, secretary to the Auxiliary to the AVMA and a member of the Kansas auxiliary, membership was tallied at only 1,340 last year, with approximately 25 state auxiliaries still in existence. Two of those are in the process of merging.

The goals of the Auxiliary—to support the advancement of the veterinary profession, help students in financial difficulty, and encourage friendship among its members—will never go out of style or lose their importance. All that’s needed are a few energetic new members with a flair for thinking outside the box.
The New York auxiliary has had one male officer in the past and currently has at least three male members. The number of dues-paying members has been bolstered in recent years by the addition of an Auxiliary check-off to the dues form for the State Society. No one knows how many dues payers consider themselves part of the Auxiliary, but there is no doubt that it still has broad financial support.

“I think people are voting with their money,” observes Smith. “People like the idea and they want to support it, but they don’t want to lead it.” Ironically, this financial support creates an increasingly difficult bind for the core membership; as long as the Auxiliary continues to bring in dollars for its favorite causes, there have to be officers to manage the money and decide how to disburse it. Recognizing that the burden might become untenable, in 2000 Smith recommended the creation of an endowed scholarship that would serve as a lasting tribute to the Auxiliary. “We designated the money for the scholarship fund, knowing that even if we folded that day, we would have enough dues support to fulfill our commitment to the endowment,” she explains.

Smith sees hope for the Auxiliary in the same social forces that have brought it to its present crossroads. “People are beginning to feel extremely isolated all the way around. We’re stuck on a computer. Our holidays and spare time have to be organized around our children’s school schedules,” she points out. “In the cycle of things, I wouldn’t be surprised if the organization starts figuring out that people who go to professional meetings want to go with their families and have some time together. It’s going to cycle again. I’d be surprised if the Auxiliary continues to take the form it has, but I still think that the husbands will be there with their veterinarian wives, and they’ll be interested in the other husbands, and people will just start enjoying each other again. That need is still there; it doesn’t matter if you’re male or female.”

“We are currently looking for ways to change our organization,” Richardson concurs. “To be truthful, we haven’t determined just what changes to make. If the Auxiliary is going to be an organization of the future, we must become an organization in which the male spouses will be more comfortable. At this point, we are looking for ‘a few good men’ who are willing to come in and help make changes in an effective way.”

Its concept may have to evolve, but the goals of the Auxiliary — to support the advancement of the veterinary profession, help students in financial difficulty, and encourage friendship among its members — will never go out of style or lose their importance. All that’s needed are a few energetic new members with a flair for thinking outside the box. So how about it, men?