Past-Presidents aren’t generally invited to speak formally anyone at AVMA, much less such a distinguished and early-rising group as the people here today, and I appreciate it.

This could be an opportunity for thanksgiving, and I’ll get to that.

But, for now, I’d like to talk about our profession, our association and the future.

I’ve been thinking a lot about the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company, who opened a little tea shop on Gold Street in New York City in 1859, just a few years and a few miles from where we first opened the doors at AVMA. They did well, and by the end of the 19th century they had become the first chain grocery store, became vertically integrated, and, in 1930, had over 16,000 locations all across America.

Why this story matters for me isn’t their start; it’s about their end.

A&P is a case study of what can go wrong with a business, regardless of how strong their initial position. It took them less than 50 years to fall from being the world's largest retailer - the Walmart of their day - to a small regional chain, and bankruptcy.

This didn’t happen because they were stupid people; they knew their business. It didn’t happen because they didn’t care. The fundamentals of the business were strong - the potential customer base grew, the Depression ended and there were plenty of opportunities. But the world changes – constantly in ways both obvious and subtle – social norms and customer habits change, and competitors don’t stand still.

Of course, I’m making a point about our profession.

We’re clever people, too, we care about and know our business but, much like A&P, we’re worried that this may not enough to secure our future.

I know one thing for sure: our future doesn’t lie behind us. Our success won’t rest on recapturing some imagined golden age of veterinary education, or returning to an America of small farms or by recreating the world of James Herriot.

It just doesn’t serve us to complain about the world we’re given, and it seems to me, in the years since the Great Recession started, that that’s pretty much what we’ve been doing.

We’re alarmed about student debt, for good reasons, and AVMA has been working to help new graduates manage their debt – take a look at the new budgeting tool on our website. But I’m sorry; students understood the deal going in. How we pay for higher education is a societal problem, no question, and perhaps a bigger one for veterinary graduates than for many others, but it isn’t where we should focus our concerns, or solutions for the profession.

We know now that the market for veterinary education is only loosely tied to the market for veterinary services, but it isn’t entirely divorced from it, either. If there’s a correction - decreasing demand tied to income potential - the adjustment will be painful. Just as the profession won’t succeed in the future by looking to the past, veterinary colleges won’t either. They need to find new, more sustainable, models.

Modern agriculture has yielded efficiencies that make food plentiful and inexpensive, and veterinary medicine has contributed materially to their success. Nevertheless, they face social pressures on issues ranging from the environment to worker safety to animal welfare. From my perspective, these are big businesses that can choose and fight their own battles. We don’t need to be fighting proxy battles for
them. Please, let them make their own case to the public on any of these issues – and do it without fracturing our profession.

Of course, companion animal medicine is also under pressure; capitalism is relentless. In the end, more efficient and profitable systems always eclipse the less – and veterinary medicine can’t expect to be protected from these forces by the practice act. Consolidation in the industry will continue, as practice chains grow, and move into integrated clinical, laboratory, software, marketing and distribution systems. It’s another place in the profession that will experience pain if we don’t adapt.

Wealth accumulation has historically been tied to practice ownership, but lately all the Boomers have been talking about are our exit strategies, and these rarely include a handoff to the next generation – especially for the most successful practice. Sometimes, I think we’re our own worst enemies.

We’ve embraced the concept of One Health way more than we’ve worked to make it an employment reality. It’s critical to our future that veterinarians find new roles to fill, to enhance our value to society beyond clinical care. It starts with recruiting students for whom clinical practice isn’t what led them to veterinary medicine. We need to change the definition of “veterinarian” inside the profession before we can expect to change the perceptions of employers on the outside.

The challenge to make our profession prosper in the 21st century won’t be met because we’ve fought a successful rear-guard action, but because we’ve exploited the possibilities that the future offers.

I wish I had the all answers for you today. If I did, I’d be running for president again.

What I do know is that AVMA will help us meet that future more successfully, but we need to be a united profession inside our association. Every AVMA leader, probably for the last 151 years, has told you this, and we’ve said it because it’s true. We’re too small and too vulnerable to not understand the value of a bigger tent.

But AVMA needs some attention if it’s to continue to deserve the support of the citizens of Vetlandia. It needs to be better aligned with member needs, more contemporary in structure and welcoming to a new, more diverse, generation of active members. It needs champions.

It needs leaders with vision and determination to manage the changes that really must occur. We would benefit from more honesty. As leaders - and everyone is the room this morning is a leader in our association – as we debate our future governance, I ask you to consider not what’s best for you or your “other” organization, but what would make for a stronger AVMA in the future. Be champions for AVMA.

And, finally, thank you for a chance to speak to you this morning, and for all the other opportunities I’ve been offered as an AVMA volunteer and particularly as President. It’s been the experience of a lifetime to represent AVMA and our profession across the county and around the world.

People tell you it’s a lot of work, but I’ll tell you it’s been a joy.

It’s been an honor to get to know so many wonderful people, members and volunteers, and to work with such a dedicated, expert and hard-working staff.

I can’t thank you enough.