The Humane Movement: Past and Present

In 1861 the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony enacted the first statutory measure protecting domestic animals from mistreatment and overwork. Entitled "Liberties of Brute Creatures" the Puritan rules were not in the form of laws, but were a code of conduct not intended to be enforced by law enforcement.

It is difficult to comprehend the abuses to which living creatures were subjected in 18th and 19th century America. Many citizens were indifferent to or unaware of the cruelties which were routinely inflicted upon animals. The most visible animal in the 1800’s was the horse, the backbone of commerce and an important mode of transportation. Horses, harnessed to public conveyances, were regularly overloaded with passengers. Exhausted horses, unable to pull the cars, were frequently beaten to death on the streets and received not a murmur of sympathy from their passengers. In New York City an estimated 25,000 horses suffered from poor care, overwork, and abuse.

Working horses found a champion in Henry Bergh, a New York socialite and caring diplomat. While on assignment in Russia, Bergh was alarmed at the mistreatment of animals there. Vowing to help animals everywhere, Bergh left the diplomatic corps and resolved to dedicate his life to the prevention of cruelty to animals. On February 8, 1866 Bergh gave a moving presentation before the New York State Legislature to insist upon the enactment of a law to provide "every person who shall, by his act or neglect, maliciously kill, maim, wound, injure, torture, or cruelly beat any horse, mule, cow, calf, cattle, sheep, or other animal belonging to himself or another shall, upon conviction, be adjudged guilty of a misdemeanor". This Act, the first enforceable statute containing specific criminal sanctions for animal abuse, was to be the forerunner of contemporary state animal welfare laws which remain remarkably similar in wording to Bergh’s original draft.

On April 25, 1866, only six days after enactment of the Animal Welfare Act, a Brooklyn butcher was convicted in court and fined $10.00 for piling calves and sheep into a cart. In the first twelve months of operation Henry Bergh and the ASPCA were to prosecute 119 persons and obtain 66 convictions for the mistreatment of animals.

Bergh was an athletic and yet a dignified man ideally suited for his mission. Bergh did not hesitate to use his impressive physical strength to throw a halt to mistreatment of an animal. On a stormy evening in 1871 Bergh stepped in front of an overloaded streetcar pulled by two exhausted horses. A cursing driver ignored Bergh’s admonitions, was lifted into the air, and tossed into a snow bank. Bergh unharnessed the horses and watched as enraged and startled riders walked off through freezing snow.

Henry Bergh was a zealot who worked from dawn to dark of each day seeking to halt animal cruelty. His advocacy was relentless. Penn. SPCA. First electric powered horse ambulance. Penn. S.P.C.A. 1900

Despite its laudable beginnings, many obstacles remained before the American humane movement. Plagued by a perpetual shortage of funds and dominated by strong-willed, aggressive moralists, humane societies were faced with internal disputes which led to the division and dissolution of several animal welfare agencies. In 1877 a national federation of animal welfare agencies was formed in an effort to bring unity and cohesiveness to animal welfare programs. In 1954 that federation was to experience a division which resulted in the formation of The Humane Society of the United States. The founders of The HSUS sought a means of attacking national animal welfare problems which were beyond the capabilities of local societies or state federations. Assuming the role of the national animal welfare agency originally envisioned by Bergh, The HSUS spearheaded campaigns which led to federal humane slaughter and laboratory animal welfare legislation.

Today there are almost 2,000 local, state, and national animal welfare organizations in the United States. These groups are known by several generic names such as humane society, SPCA, animal welfare league, and a variety of other titles. Some agencies operate shelters and employ professional staff. Others operate out of private homes and continue to exist only because of the persistent efforts of dedicated volunteers.

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French fur trader. The trader, having reflected upon the animal suffering which had enabled him to amass a fortune, decided to bequeath to the ASPCA the "small sum" of $150,000. Shortly thereafter, the issue of a letter which had been unintentionally sealed behind the archplate of a new building turned public sentiment in favor of the ASPCA. The American humane movement was firmly established.

Bergh’s efforts were to have a lasting impact upon the American humane movement. Drawing upon Bergh’s experiences in New York, animal welfare organizations were independently established in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and California. By the time Bergh died in March, 1888 there were 31 animal welfare agencies in the United States and his own ASPCA had 35 state branches employing 230 workers.

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Some societies are concerned primarily with the operation of shelters, others with cruelty investigations, and several concentrate on human education. Although different in programs and structure these groups are bound by a common goal, the prevention of animal suffering.

While the American humane movement reflects upon its first century of service to animals during this Bicentennial year, some of the same cruelties against which Henry Bergh labored are still witnessed. Nevertheless, HSUS pledges to continue its endeavors so 1986 is truly the beginning of a new era for animals!

(Material for this article was gathered by Guy R. Hodge, HSUS Director Research and Data Services with the assistance of Massachusetts SPCA, ASPCA, and Pennsylvania SPCA.)