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The ASPCA® (The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals®) A History

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals®, or the ASPCA® as it is known, was North America's first humane society and was founded by Henry Bergh on April 10, 1866. Shortly after its founding, the ASPCA began serving as the inspiration and model for the formation of SPCAs and humane societies across the country.

Bergh was the son of a wealthy New York City shipbuilder who enjoyed travel and the theater. While serving as a diplomat in St. Petersburg, Russia, he was inspired to dedicate the rest of his life to the protection of animals. On his return to the United States, he stopped in London, England, to meet with representatives of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to learn how their organization functioned.

Shortly after his return to New York City, he organized a meeting of influential business and political leaders at Clinton Hall on February 8, 1866. Bergh gave a speech enumerating the many terrible deeds done to animals, the important role that animals played and the need for a society to protect them. The original charter for the ASPCA listed the names of many prominent New Yorkers, including Horace Greeley, members of the Rockefeller family and the mayor of New York. Just nine days after the charter was granted by the New York State Legislature, Bergh convinced the Legislature to pass an anti-cruelty law that gave the new Society the authority to enforce it.

From the very start, the ASPCA was actively publicizing the plight of animals, and intervening on their behalf. One of the first cases that Bergh and the new ASPCA brought before the court was that of a cart driver beating his fallen horse with a spoke from one of the cart wheels. This event would eventually be depicted in the seal adopted by the ASPCA, showing an avenging angel rising up to protect a fallen horse.

Within its first year of existence, the ASPCA and Bergh would address many of the same questions that occupy the efforts of his successors at the ASPCA and other humane societies, including the treatment of farm animals, dog fighting, horses used to pull trolleys, turtles transported for food and vivisection.

Recognizing the difficulty of coordinating the efforts of a far ranging national organization, Bergh encouraged and helped others to start independent SPCAs across the country. The ASPCA became the model for hundreds of other societies, with many of them using a variation of the SPCA name, the charter and even the seal. The first such society was founded in 1867 in Buffalo, New York and included Millard Fillmore, C. J. Wells and William G. Fargo among its supporters. Boston, San Francisco and Philadelphia soon followed.

Bergh's aggressive tactics soon earned him a host of enemies. The carting and transportation companies that depended on horses, butchers, dog fighters and gentleman fox hunters soon sent up an outcry that the ASPCA was interfering with their business and affairs. In 1870 Bergh and the ASPCA were hard pressed to defeat efforts to limit its charter and weaken the anti-cruelty laws. The issues in these early years were frequently played out in the pages of the newspapers. Stories about the ASPCA's arrests, court cases, and rescues of animals were given great attention. In addition, Bergh wrote many letters to the papers to explain the actions of the ASPCA and to point out problems that needed to be addressed. The newspapers were soon in the middle of a long feud between two of America's most famous men, Henry Bergh and P.T. Barnum. Bergh would attack Barnum on the care provided for the animals in his menagerie or performing in his shows. Barnum would defend his practices and use the publicity from the dispute to attract even larger

crowds. Over time, Barnum would become a grudging admirer of Bergh and the work of the ASPCA and eventually helped to form an SPCA in Connecticut.

In 1873 Henry Bergh and the ASPCA's attorney, Elbridge Gerry, helped to rescue a young girl from an abusive home. The "Mary Ellen case" would lead to a myth that Bergh claimed she deserved at least the protection provided for animals. The case did, however, lead to the formation of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and the movement for child protection.

The ASPCA helped to change the way that Americans thought about animals. The organization also helped to introduce a number of innovations that provided for their care and protection. Bergh helped to design and introduce an ambulance for horses, and promoted an early version of the "clay pigeon" as a target for shooters instead of live pigeons. This innovation continued in the 1950s when the ASPCA helped with the design and implementation of equipment for the humane slaughter of animals for food.

The ASPCA's hands-on services in New York City would grow to include an animal hospital and animal shelters. For one hundred years—from 1894 to 1994—the ASPCA would provide animal control services for the City of New York. During this time hundreds of thousands of animals would be rescued by ASPCA ambulances, treated in clinics, sheltered and placed in new homes when possible. Before the ASPCA assumed the animal control duties for New York City, unwanted dogs were drowned in an iron cage lowered into the river. During the following century, the methods employed to euthanize unwanted dogs and cats would evolve from the use of gas, to decompression chambers and ultimately to sodium pentobarbital injection. At the same time the promotion of responsible care of companion animals, including spaying and neutering helped to reduce the numbers of animals euthanized by 90 percent.

Today, the ASPCA continues to function as one of the world's largest humane societies. It operates the Bergh Memorial Animal Hospital and a shelter in New York City, and its humane law enforcement agents enforce the anti-cruelty laws in the five boroughs of New York City. The ASPCA also promotes education and legislative activities that fulfill the original mission described for the organization by its founder Henry Bergh, "...to provide effective means for the prevention of cruelty to animals throughout the United States."

During the ensuing decades, the ASPCA continued to lead the way with a wide variety of innovations from horse ambulances to the cardboard boxes that people use to carry home the pets they adopt (this was devised by an ASPCA shelter clerk). Bergh Memorial Animal Hospital was an early leader in radiation therapy for cancer in animals and the Bergh bandage provided a secure and safe support for orthopedic injuries. During World War I, ASPCA veterinarians helped care for the horses used by the U.S. Army.

Legislative efforts have helped to provide enhanced legal protection for animals throughout the country. The development of the Web of Life humane education program now provides teachers, children, parents, and librarians with integrated and up-to-date materials to foster the growth of the humane ethic.

The 1996 addition of the Animal Poison Control Center to the ASPCA's family provides an important service to pet owners and veterinarians everywhere. Its location in Urbana, Ill., provides the ASPCA with a strong presence in the Midwest to complement the New York City Headquarters and regional staff located throughout the country.

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