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All creatures at the Barre fountain

By Paul Heller For The Times Argus

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Today the fountain is used as a planter.

Paul Heller photo

Herman Lee Ensign had a higher purpose in mind when he donated 125 granite fountains to cities throughout the United States.

The watering troughs were an undertaking of Ensign's foundation, The National Humane Alliance, an animal welfare charity. While 124 of the fountains were crafted of pink Maine granite on Vinalhaven Island, the one given to Barre in 1911, was fashioned from the local gray stone quarried on Millstone Hill.

The citizens of the Granite City were happy to accept the five-ton watering trough from the National Humane Alliance, but their innate pride in Barre granite, made them insist that no other stone should grace City Hall Park.

Ensign was the founder of the National Humane Alliance and an animal welfare advocate. He had made a fortune in the advertising business and upon his death in 1899 his philanthropic charity was used to provide drinking fountains for animals to towns and cities that made application to his foundation.

In Vermont there were three: in Burlington, Bennington, and Barre.

The fountains were crafted from two similar designs by the Bodwell Company of Vinalhaven, Maine, using a pink granite quarried in nearby Rockland. The completed fountains had a value of about \$1,000 at the time they were made, or about \$25,000 today. The most common version supplied by the Alliance was, according to the National Register,

“Six and a half feet high and made of polished Maine granite originally trimmed with bronze. Designed as an animal drinking fountain, the Humane Alliance fountain’s major element is a large, heavy bowl placed at four feet above the ground to allow horses to drink from it; at ground level, at the base of the supporting pillar for the large bowl, are four small water bowls for dogs, cats, and other small animals. Rising from the large bowl is a square pillar displaying on it four sides three lions heads and a commemorative plaque.”

The lions’ heads contained spigots from which humans could drink from a constant stream of fresh water. The order was deliberate. It represented Ensign’s symbolic hierarchy in which humans cared for horses and lesser creatures.

The complete fountain was therefore comprised of five components: cap, die, bowl, plinth and base. The National Humane Alliance had a few stipulations for grant recipients. The site for the fountain must have “a large passing traffic where the fountain can be approached from all sides. The city must also place the fountain on a good foundation, put in good water, guarantee continuous water supply and proper permanent care.”

Ensign had witnessed the mistreatment of animals, especially horses, in the cities in which he worked — primarily New York and Chicago — and vowed, one day, to use his fortune to alleviate their suffering. He also had a strong belief that, if humans could learn to treat animals with kindness and compassion, they would do the same for their fellow citizens.

Ensign had been born in 1849 in Pennsylvania and moved with his family to Illinois where he became a telegraph operator. Following advancement in his career, he relocated to Chicago where he witnessed the great fire in 1871. Ensign became manager of a newspaper, where he discovered an innate gift for advertising and organized a company specializing in this field. An innovator in the development of “headline reading” advertising, within twenty years he had acquired a substantial fortune.

To advance his career, Ensign moved to Rochester, New York, in 1882. From his childhood he evinced a love for animals, and abhorred any manifestation of cruelty toward pets and working animals. A biographical sketch in the *Courier-Tribune of Kansas*, noted, “to him animals were companions and friends dependent on man for their lives and happiness.”

Accordingly, he started the National Humane Alliance with the goal of improving the lives of domestic animals. Soon after its inception Ensign died, leaving his considerable fortune to the organization which undertook placing the fountains in selected cities that had applied for them.

It was Barre's good fortune that Lewis M. Seaver, secretary and treasurer of the National Humane Alliance, lived in Williamstown. He had been born there in 1848 but he and his mother moved to Chicago upon the death of his father. He, too, made a fortune in advertising, and returned to Williamstown when he retired.

As an officer of Ensign's foundation, he was able to shepherd Barre's application for a fountain through the competitive process employed by the National Humane Alliance. His help would have been especially useful in obtaining permission to have the fountain made of Barre granite and fashioned at a local stone shed.

In his 1911 letter to the Barre City Council, Seaver announced in February the intended gift of the fountain for the following summer. According to the Barre Daily Times, "Mr. Seaver stated that through the influence of many of the prominent citizens of Barre, The National Humane Alliance had decided to present a fountain to the city, providing that the council would agree to several conditions."

These conditions were that the city should take the fountain from the Marr and Gordon plant where it is being cut and set it up in the city square in a location that will be 25 feet from any curbing or car tracks, supply it with good running water and take good care of it.

An additional requirement, was that the city move the existing fountain from the park and position it elsewhere. It eventually was placed at the intersection of Hill and South Main streets.

The new fountain was not installed until Dec. 4, 1911. The Barre Daily Times noted,

"Workmen have finished installing the new drinking fountain for horses and dogs at the junction of Washington, Elm, and Main Streets. The granite work was set by Mr. Turner of Jones Brothers shed. Other details necessary to complete the work have been carried out by the water superintendent and the superintendent of streets. The stone used in its construction was quarried by Boutwell, Milne, and Varnum of Graniteville and cut and polished by Marr and Gordon."

It had been decided to alter the northern point of the park triangle to make the turn around that corner easier for automobiles and wagons. The fountain was placed near the newly curved apex and domestic animals were permitted to drink from the basin that afternoon. According to the Times: "Horses familiar with the old fountain, formerly located near the site of the new one, were sometimes shy of drinking from the polished granite bowl, but drivers say this timidity disappears once the

animal touches his nose to the water. ... Saturday afternoon and all day yesterday the fountain was visited by many persons and the handsome structure received much favorable comment on all sides.”

“Herbert Rugg’s Shetland pony Colonel had the distinction of being the first equine to drink from the fountain. The following year it was reported that Arthur Pierce’s St. Bernard, Brutus was large enough to use the horse basin, rather than the ground level one for dogs,” it went on.

Another incident that was considered newsworthy was the near drowning in 1917 of Ward Luce of Williamstown who was rescued by Police Chief Sinclair. “Rescued from a watery grave might well be the epitome of an experience which ended in city court for Ward Luce after acknowledging an intoxication offence. Had it not been for the timely arrival of the rescuing party from police headquarters, no one knows how the man’s bath would have terminated.” Luce paid a fine and signed an abstinence pledge for one year.

The fountain occupied a place of honor at the northern corner of City Hall Park until 1919 when it was moved to allow the installation of a victory arch erected to celebrate the end of World War I. It was restored to the park years later albeit in a different corner. A landmark of Barre’s historic downtown park, the fountain has long been disconnected from the city’s water supply. Ironically, not long after its installation, the advent of the automobile rendered its use obsolete.

Still beautiful, the fountain has become an annual summer project of the “Granite Center Garden Club,” which fills the basin with colorful annuals each spring.

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