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Report on Present Condition of the Humane Movement

By R. J. Chenoweth, Kansas City, Mo.,
Chairman of The HSUS Board of Directors

This is the ninth successive convocation of this kind over which I have been privileged to preside and to which I have had the duty of reporting on behalf of the Board of Directors and the officers of The HSUS.

It may be that I can serve some useful purpose at the beginning of this important three day conference by stating some of the fundamental premises that underlie our meeting and by outlining the condition in which the humane movement is today.

Perhaps I should say right at the beginning that I can find just as many sad, discouraging, and frustrating things as the next man in the daily routines of humane work but about the humane cause and the humane movement I am an incorrigible optimist. There are problems, but we have a record of solving and surmounting problems. There is cruelty and there is suffering, demanding of us unremitting work, but I do solemnly believe that we are steadily, exhilaratingly making progress.

I think, in fact, that the first great premise of this meeting, a conviction implicit in the fact that we are here, is that cruelty can be substantially prevented, kindness can be usefully taught or encouraged, and suffering significantly decreased. We start our deliberations today, as we always do in these meetings, with a reiteration of that faith and a determination to make reality of those possibilities.

I think that we all feel, too—some of us articulately, some of us intuitively and perhaps vaguely, but all of us strongly—that the cause which we serve, the goals at which we aim, are enormously important to mankind. Nothing at all, in my opinion, is as important, as mandatory, as that the human race achieve a meaningful realization of the brotherhood of all life and that we accept deeply in our subconscious the ethical implications of that relationship.

I think often of the idea expressed by the Baron d'Ohlbach:

“I feel, and another feels like me; that is the basis of all morality.”

The most fundamental task of the humane movement is to move mankind in that direction.

All of us, everyone who works in this field, experiences moments of enormous frustration. Many who are in this room, and tens of thousands

of men and women not here, have given unselfish lifetimes to this work and are unable to see progress. Our animal shelters overflow and bulge with homeless and unwanted animals while at the same time the alleys of our cities and the roads of our countryside teem with abandoned and neglected cats and dogs; vast numbers of animals suffer from man's inhumanity in laboratories; the shackles and power hoists of the packing plants still torture cattle, hogs and sheep; twenty million American men, women and children continue each year, calling themselves "sportsmen," to slaughter and maim wild animals—for pleasure. Our women still decorate themselves with furs produced by agony. We have rodeos, roadside zoos, dog fights and cockfights, surgery on animals in high school classrooms.

It is understandable if some become discouraged; it is defensible if at times *all* of us become discouraged. I am not myself immune. There is little excitement in watching the motion of a glacier; it is hard to see that drops of water are wearing away a stone.

But glaciers do move, the hardest granite gives way ultimately to erosion. And every once in a while there is a moment when, after long periods in which the human eye perceives no motion, a great section of a glacier breaks thunderously from the stream in which it seemed so unmoving.

I believe that in our own work we are approaching such a time.

Let me explain why I so think.

The American humane movement approaches its centennial anniversary. Henry Bergh founded the first American humane society, the ASPCA of New York City, in 1865. That was a time when glaciers did break, progress was visible. In a period of only two or three years New York State's legislature enacted the first anti-cruelty law in American history, the legislatures of a dozen or more other states quickly followed that example, humane societies sprang into being and into effective activity in scores of cities.

There was a long period of rapid and broad growth of the humane movement, a period when the morality of the humane movement was woven into law throughout the country and was recognized publicly as important.

Then, as was perhaps inevitable, there came a period—not of decline but of lowered acceleration—when it again became difficult to see progress. One might date the beginning of that period at about 1912. New humane societies were organized continually in the later years, new and better laws were enacted to define and control cruelty, a steadily increasing number of humane societies and municipalities built animal shelters. Perhaps the greatest boon of all was the replacement of horses by automobiles.

But by and large, in general, for approximately 40 years our progress was slow, unspectacular, and over long periods virtually undetectable. In some ways, in truth, the mid-years of the first half of this century brought retrogression. Humane societies, in more than a few communities, became “big business.” They achieved wealth—endowment wealth. They acquired “professional” management—not inherently a bad thing but too easily perverted, as experience showed, into sinecures for mere jobholders under boards of directors more concerned with management of securities portfolios than with management of humane work.

The movement slowly lost its original crusading spirit. It forgot its moral motivation. Little by little, so slowly that few humanitarians noticed the changes, more and more humane societies converted their facilities into mere dog pounds—or, to put it in the most charitable and optimistic light—into mere dog and cat shelters. In the very city where Henry Bergh went personally into the streets and horsewhipped a man who was beating a horse, the SPCA that he founded supported the enactment of a pound seizure law and itself sold animals to laboratories.

I do not mean to imply that there was nothing good in the movement, even in the years of lowest vigor. On the contrary, the great majority of local humane societies have always been nobly motivated and selflessly served by a great army of devoted humanitarians. There has never been a shortage of idealism and I know, personally, scores and even hundreds of individual workers and philanthropists who have quite literally given every ounce of their energy and almost every dollar of their material goods to the work of preventing suffering and cruelty.

It is true, nonetheless, that in the several decades preceding 1950 there was little appetite in many of our most prominent societies for controversy, for battle, for sacrifice. Very few ordinary humane societies ever even mentioned, in the period between 1940 and 1955, the scandalous cruelties being increasingly and openly perpetrated on laboratory animals. Nothing was being done for agricultural livestock. Only a few faint voices denounced the cruelties of fur trapping, of sport hunting.

Speaking of the humane movement as a whole: for too long we devoted ourselves chiefly to taking dogs and cats into our shelters, finding homes for perhaps ten per cent of the animals we took in, killing the rest.

It sounds dreary, doesn't it? It was. It was a discouraging period.

But in the last ten years a new ferment has been at work.

Since 1954 more than 100 new humane societies have been organized in the United States. Humane societies have built more than 60 new animal shelters, costing over eight million dollars, in this single decade. Scores of older shelters have been enlarged, remodeled, modernized. More important—a great number of cities, towns and counties have substituted

humane animal shelters and humane animal regulation programs for the traditional dog pound on the city dump, run by the old-type dog catcher.

Most important of all—by far the most important fact of our recent history—the humane movement seems to have been recapturing, or regenerating, its original spirit. In the last ten years we have lifted our eyes and looked at far horizons. While we have been rapidly expanding and improving our physical work we also have broadened our concept of our mission.

Consider:

In the four years between 1954 and 1958 the American humane movement really united, for the first time in its century of existence, to achieve enactment of the Federal humane slaughter law that now, every year, is saving more than 100 million animals from torture. The mere fact that we so united was an excitingly significant development. Hundreds and hundreds of big and little societies, supplemented by great numbers of special committees outside our normal organizational structure and by tens of thousands of volunteer workers, worked harmoniously and unremittingly together for four years.

We were vigorously fought by the billion dollar packing industry, by the politically powerful Farm Bureau Federation, by every national organization of livestock growers, by the Department of Agriculture, by the Pentagon, by the Bureau of the Budget, by the White House itself. And still we won.

The victory was an enormously important achievement. But the fact that we could unite, that hundreds of local societies could lift their eyes from local problems to a great national cruelty, the fact that we had the power to win such a victory, was and is the most significant and important fact about the humane movement today.

Today, this year, we are engaged in a new national campaign against a cruelty greater and enormously more horrible than that of the packing plants—the cruelty inflicted on scores of millions of animals every year in our research and manufacturing laboratories. I feel safe in saying that twenty years ago there were not two dozen humane societies in the entire United States that were willing even to discuss this subject in their meetings or in their publications. The subject was “controversial” and the humane movement, in those days, was almost universally avoiding controversy.

Because the subject *is* controversial, we have not yet achieved in this campaign the complete unity that carried us to victory in the campaign for the Federal humane slaughter law. It is all the more remarkable and encouraging, therefore, that the issue is being frankly and thoughtfully debated throughout the humane movement and that the overwhelming majority of humane societies are again rising above their local problems,

reaching out beyond their local horizons, and making a reality of the concept of a national humane movement.

I shall speak more, in just a moment, about the status of the campaign for legislation to protect laboratory animals. At this moment I aim only at making the point that something new is stirring, that there is a *national* humane movement, that the national movement has awakened from a long lethargy, and that great possibilities and great responsibilities lie before us.

The humane movement, in my opinion, is ready today for a development and for great achievements of which we have heretofore barely dreamed.

This meeting, this National Leadership Conference, can provide, if we will it so, the spark that will fire great new forces into motion. This is a relatively small meeting—purposely so—but in this meeting there is latent power, waiting only to be used. This is a meeting of leaders, of people who have influence in many places.

Today the American humane movement has approximately 860 incorporated humane societies. No one knows the total membership of these societies, but it is conservative to estimate that they have an active, close constituency of more than one million persons. They exert very strong influence over many millions of other persons and by their very existence they subtly but visibly and tangibly affect the ethical attitudes of the entire public.

Whatever this Conference agrees upon, whatever this Conference resolves to do, *can* be accomplished.

Our movement has many weaknesses. There are bad apples in the barrel. A bit later in this meeting we will self-critically examine, in considerable detail, some of our most conspicuous faults.

But from my own position in the humane movement, as Chairman of the Board of Directors of The HSUS and as a member of the Board of Directors and former President of a local humane society that is fairly typical of all such societies, the American humane movement looks vigorous, healthy, and inspiringly progressive.