

# Animal Control: A Century in Review

By Ed Boks

**T**he best way to understand animal control today is to look at it through the lens of history. Animal control programs developed, or rather, evolved over the last century into the state we find them today.

During the first quarter of the 20th century, most communities were rural and sparsely populated. Dogs and cats were valued for what they contributed to this rural lifestyle. Dogs, for the most part, were working dogs earning their keep on a local ranch or farm, or they were used for hunting to help put dinner on the table. Some dogs, as well as cats, were used as mousers to help keep small rodents out of home and barn. All dogs were permitted to run at large.

By the third decade of the 20th century, free-roaming dogs created a dog overpopulation problem, and with it came an increase in the incidence of rabies – a very real threat to public health. The seriousness of the problem is graphically depicted in a masterpiece of American literature entitled *To Kill a Mockingbird*. At one point in the novel, Atticus Finch, a small Southern town lawyer shoots a rabid dog in the middle of a neighborhood street as residents watched fearfully from their homes, behind locked doors. The context of this account suggests that Atticus had been called upon to dispatch rabid dogs before. In fact, shooting



rabid dogs had made Atticus something of a local hero. He had come to be respectfully referred to as “one-shot Atticus” because of his ability to take out a rabid dog quickly and humanely.

As a result of these all too common scenarios, state legislators across the country began to establish county animal control programs. Their charge was to ensure that dogs were confined, vaccinated against rabies, and licensed. Cats were not included in this mandate because they were not a proven vector for the rabies virus. In fact, animal control licensing programs have effectively reduced the incidence of rabies in dogs to a level that naturally occurs in cats, that is, we’ve made it very, very rare.

It is easy to forget the terror the very word “rabies” evoked in our communities. The fact that scenes like that depicted in *To Kill a Mockingbird* are a thing of the past is a tribute to animal control professionals across the United States. Like Atticus, we are true heroes! And we do it without firing a shot! We do it by implementing a proactive rabies vaccination program that works!

Because cats don’t pose a significant rabies threat, few laws were passed to regulate their impact on our communities. In fact, a silly and erroneous notion was promoted

that cats are “free-roaming animals,” suggesting that communities don’t need to regulate cats. An exploding feral cat population is the consequence of this shortsightedness. Today, feral cats have become a significant public health concern.

As a result of a dog population explosion and the related threat of rabies in our communities, animal control programs were further charged to “get these unlicensed dogs off the streets.” Unfortunately, little thought was given by our legislators to what we were to do with these animals once they were removed from the streets. So “catch and kill” shelters were built to warehouse dogs until they could be “disposed of.” As cats became more and more of a problem, “dog pounds” built to warehouse dogs started to be used to house cats as well. Most animal control programs still use these antiquated and poorly designed shelters. I just returned from Los Angeles County where they are using a shelter built in 1938 as their main shelter.

During the decades when animal control agencies were developing effective rabies control programs throughout the United States, the unique relationship between humans and pets was quickly and significantly changing. As we fast forward to the 60s, many of us in the animal care and control field were among the first Americans to bring the family pet indoors. I remember discussing this societal shift with my father in 1960 or 1961. I was about 10 years old. I had been allowed to “buy” my first dog with money I saved from cutting the neighbor’s lawn. I was the happiest kid on the planet.

My father had grown up in a rural Michigan community. He tried to explain to me that he too had a dog when he was a boy,

and his dog lived in a doghouse in the backyard. The idea of having a dog in the house was as incomprehensible to him as keeping the dog outside was to me. “Dogs don’t belong in the house,” I was told. However, I persisted, and Skipper, a black Lab mix, was finally allowed in the house, albeit in the basement, where I spent many a night comforting him through the anxiety caused by his separation from mother and siblings. Eventually, Skipper earned his place under the kitchen table during meal times, and at the foot of my bed at nights. He became the delight of the entire family.

All across the United States, similar scenes were taking place. As our communities continued to urbanize, dogs and cats found their way out of the barnyard workforce and into our hearts, our homes, and, for some of us, into our beds. Pets were no longer staff; they had become part of the family. Unfortunately, most animal control programs did not keep pace with this societal change and continued to implement catch and kill methodologies right up until the last decade of the 20th century and even into this first decade of the 21st century.

Some community animal control programs did take notice of the greater value people were placing on their pets, and responded sooner, but most of us only began our aggressive adoption, spay/neuter, and feral cat management programs in the 1990s. Some animal control programs are still turning the corner on implementing some of these innovative life- and cost-saving programs.

What is the future of animal control? Interestingly, in Arizona we recently reviewed the state statutes governing our program. We found as much emphasis on developing humane shelter programs as we found on developing rabies and animal control

programs. The reason so many humane animal-welfare organizations sprang up across the United States during the 20th century is that most of us in animal control missed this equal emphasis. Animal welfare organizations filled a gap in our animal control programs. Not that we in animal control were not dedicated to providing humane programs – we were. But because of inadequate funding, the threat of rabies, and a misguided focus, most animal control programs became more adept at developing catch and kill methodologies than humane, nonlethal solutions.

We were forced to fight symptoms rather than causes. Dogs and cats running at large is a symptom of a dysfunctional community. The cause is irresponsible pet owners who allow their pets to run at large, intact, to breed indiscriminately. Government contributes to this dysfunction by developing the most costly and ineffective response to the problem – chase and impound animals, warehouse animals, kill and dispose of animals.

What would happen if we in animal control shifted our focus? More importantly, what could happen if those who control the purse strings saw the light? A study conducted in the state of Minnesota found that every \$1 invested in spay/neuter programs saved over \$19 in animal control costs over 10 years. In the state of New Hampshire, a targeted spay/neuter program designed to assist its indigent citizens resulted in a 90% decrease in the state's euthanasia rate over 10 years. Right here in Maricopa County, we have seen nearly a 50% reduction in our euthanasia rate since we began neutering adopted animals prior to releasing them. All across the country, a feral cat management program, called trap/neuter/return

(TNR), is having a dramatic impact on solving neighborhood feral cat problems.

The future of animal control is proactive, innovative programs, as opposed to the reactive programs of the past. Animal care and control professionals need to join together in espousing and promoting programs that solve the problems associated with irresponsible pet ownership, rather than continuing programs that only exacerbate those problems. If we are successful, perhaps in a decade or two, euthanizing a healthy, well-tempered animal will be as rare as shooting a rabid dog in the street is today.

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