

TALES OF TROUBLES WITH ANIMALS

By Ellen Knight¹

In February and March of 2014, several mountain lion sightings were phoned into the police station. Unversed in mountain lions, local police turned to experts. State officials decreed that the only evidence, tracks left in the snow, belonged to a coyote or dog and dismissed the eye witnesses as mistaken. Some wildlife experts disagreed. The sightings ended.

But not so animal stories. Over time there have been countless reports of odd happenings and unexpected encounters. In 1942, for example, Judge Curtis Nash hastened to the Police Station to report a bull moose on the loose. He had seen it amble across Lawson Road. While Chief Rogers went to investigate, the judge had some trouble getting his friends to believe the story until another townsman said he saw it, too. Meanwhile, Rogers heard that it had crossed a Highland Avenue property and entered the Fells.

“Later the moose was spotted in the Gem at the Reservoirs where Supt. Harry Dotten [of the Water Department] and Officer James Halwartz with a posse were trying to round him up when the air raid alarm was sounded. The animal was last heard of in Melrose with game wardens on his trail,” *The Winchester Star* reported.²

ALLIGATORS AT LARGE

“Alligator at Large on West Side” was one an unusual headline in 1936. It greeted readers on May 2, 1936. “According to the ‘blotter,’ a resident of Salisbury Street notified the Station House shortly after 2 o’clock last Sunday afternoon that there was an alligator at large in a new house on that street.

“Officer Dolan, on desk duty, could find nothing in regulations concerning the duties of the department with respect to alligators, and after a hasty conference with certain of his confreres, decided that the matter rightly belonged within the province of the dog officer, M. J. Foley. The Police had, it was true, handled horses, cows, skunks, and cats, with an occasional pig or goat, but alligators on the hoof seemed a bit out of their line, at least as the representatives of the force concerned viewed the matter.

“Dog Officer Foley was not overjoyed at his commission, but considering some of the dogs he had faced in the past, felt that after all a mere alligator could hold little terrors for him, and so repaired to the house indicated.

“He returned to headquarters with the saurian, but minus the toecap of one of his shoes which the alligator removed painlessly, with a single snap of his singularly facile jaws.” The alligator was estimated to be nearly two feet in length. “To a couple of gentlemen who chanced to be in the station when Officer Foley returned, the alligator doubtless appeared larger. At least their haste

in clambering to the top of the bench outside the jail would prompt one to believe that their thoughts ran in that direction.

“The ‘gator went places and saw things about the station and readily accommodated himself to a bed in the drawer of the desk. Of the two he was the much more composed when Officer Dunbury, uninformed of the creature’s presence, opened the drawer and found the alligator grinning up at him.”

The story concluded with Officer Foley taking the creature to his home, but the eventual fate of the alligator was not reported. But that was not the end of alligators in town. “Salisbury road seems to be the Mecca for alligators in Winchester,” the *Star* reported four weeks later under a new headline announcing “Another Alligator on West Side.” Alligator number 2 was discovered when a Salisbury Road resident opened the doors to his garage. This time Officer Foley, with some experience behind him, managed to remove the animal without harm to his shoes and presented it to the Stoneham Zoo.³

Over the years, the police have been called upon to deal with a number of other animal problems, capturing runaway horses, chasing loose pigs on exciting running sprees through the center of town, rescuing dogs in the water, frightening away swarms of birds contaminating the sidewalks, exterminating a nest of wasps under a front porch, and more. But there is a limit to what they have been willing to do.

In October 1929, the *Star* reported, “the local police, who thought they had experienced every request possible for their services, had to revise their opinion last week when two young men arrived at headquarters with what they claimed was a poisonous adder which had fallen from a bunch of bananas. The reptile was confined in a bottle and was estimated at about three feet in length. Would the police give any advice as to the best way to kill the snake? They would! But advice was their limit. The young men were obliged to seek an executioner outside the membership of the force.”⁴

WAYWARD FARM ANIMALS

Farm animals, once common around town, became rarer as the 20th century progressed. Headlines like “Anti-Rooster Crusade” in 1906 indicate that lifestyles of the farms were conflicting with those of the suburbanites. However, through the mid-20th-century, farms on the outskirts of town continued to keep farm animals—and experience the occasional odd problem.

Goats, being a wayward breed of animal, required a roundup from time to time. For example, on Jan. 5, 1949, a resident of the Highlands reported that a couple of goats were having a go at the family garbage and, fearing worse, asked for police help. “As a consequence, Officer Cassidy was sent out in a cruising car with full equipment, billy, gun, twisters and a two-way radio,” the *Star* reported.

At the scene of the crime, he found the goats easily enough. He “advanced toward them with an easy grace and in his best stalking manner, a technique of proved efficiency in driving away dogs, cats, cows or the occasional ‘mushrat.’

“According to Officer Cassidy, goats have nothing in common with any of these. At least, their reaction to being shooed, even by a uniformed representative of the law, is along entirely different lines. Instead of turning tail and starting for the great open spaces, goats, when approached by perfect strangers, in or out of uniform, are more apt to emit loud ‘maa-as’ and advance belligerently toward the intruder with heads lowered and horns ready.”

Having just recently completed a couple of police examinations, Cassidy “was reasonably sure that the ‘blue book’ had nothing to offer in opposition to the theory he had once heard advanced that the best way to handle a fractious goat is to get away from him fast.”



This goat (with no known police record) was photographed about 1919 with Vine Street resident Michael Ambrose and son Ralph.

Cassidy did just that, going to look for the owner. He poured out his problem to the owner’s wife, who, unlike Cassidy, knew just what to do. “Picking up several cigarettes, she started for the place where the goats were in action, with Officer Cassidy bringing up a discreet rear. On the scene, the lady merely offered the goats a cigarette apiece. Immediately all belligerency vanished and they became cooing doves. Even before Officer Cassidy had surreptitiously returned his ‘gat’ to its holster, the animals were following the lady on their homeward way, and it was just a question of butts to get them safely there, Officer Cassidy taking over when the gal’s supply ran out.

“Goats go for ‘ciggies,’ and it’s a thing that may be worth knowing some time. Note it down, just in case!”⁵

MONKEYING AROUND

At other times, residents have had to solve their animal problems without police intervention.

In August 1936, there was a monkey on the loose downtown. It was owned by Edward Lynch of Winchester Place who had brought it home from a cruise with the Merchant Marines “only to have him escape last Saturday and take to the tall timber behind the Fire Station.” As volunteers attempted to catch him, the monkey moved from tree to tree evading them. “He was also no one’s fool was ‘Jocko’ and while he was quite willing to accept bananas and carrots from those who were trying to grab him in the tree tops, he was much too smart to get within reach, nabbing the food on the loop, so to speak, and scrambling to safety.

“A wire trap set by agents of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was ‘duck soup’ for ‘Jocko,’ and he had several satisfying meals from the bait provided while the crowds attracted by his attempted capture enjoyed his antics and offered advice and encouragement to the would be captors.”

Finally, on Tuesday afternoon, an alert, young Elmer Keith pulled a cord as the monkey ventured into the cage again, trapped it, and returned him to his home, “the monkey spending his time munching carrots and making faces at those who were staring at him in his cage.” Thus, the *Star* could headline this story “Escaped monkey finally captured.”⁶

Yet another type of animal caused trouble in April 1910. A Wilson Street resident was returning home with two bundles under his arms when he noted an animal slowly crawling along the gutter. Suddenly a wild muskrat made a bolt toward him. Trying to frighten it, he threw one of his bundles at it and then had the problem of retrieving his property. If he advanced, so did the animal. Finally he went to his house, procured a lantern and a polo stick, and returned to win the battle.⁷

BEES PAY RENT

In 1918, *Star* readers learned that for about six years George Blanchard, a Washington Street resident, had shared his home with “a goodly sized, healthy swarm of bees quartered in a guest room of their own selection, just inside the peak of the roof above the ceiling of the uppermost rooms, where they never came into contact with other occupants of the house.”

In February 1918, “Blanchard decided to eject the tenants for non-payment of rent.” Assisted by a carpenter, he made a hole in the roof and drove the bees into the open air, where they soon perished from the cold. “More than 100 pounds of honey were found in the roof, making up for the loss of rent.”⁸

¹ This article © 2023 by the author Ellen Knight is a revision of earlier articles by the author published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Aug. 1, 2006 and April 19, 2022. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² Reported by Mack McKenzie, *The Winchester Star*, Sept. 28, 1942

³ *The Winchester Star*, May 8 and May 29, 1936.

⁴ *The Winchester Star*, Nov. 1, 1929.

⁵ *The Winchester Star*, Jan. 7, 1949.

⁶ *The Winchester Star*, Aug. 4, 1936.

⁷ *The Winchester Star*, April 5, 1910.

⁸ *The Winchester Star*, Feb. 15, 1918.