

Veterinarian routinely went beyond the call of duty

Doc Eames: An old-time Vet

Henry P. Eames was the last of the old-time veterinarians in the Manchester area. He was a special personality in a special era. His memory persists as a pleasant and positive influence on the people whose lives he touched. And he touched a lot of lives.

One time I told Doc a sad story about a good vet I know who accidentally poisoned a sick calf on his first call in his own home community where he had



Henry P. Eames

returned to practice. He had included strychnine in a drench he administered to the calf, and later found from his textbook that while that works on older cattle it's deadly to young calves. When it happened he was so distraught from the effect of his mistake on the calf, and on its owner, and so upset by thinking about the inevitability of embarrassing publicity, that he did not reveal his error to the owner, swearing painfully to me that he would make it up to her later. He did that, and eventually he made the whole thing public. He was a close friend of mine. I not only was on the first call with him, I was also there when he described every aspect of the unfortunate event to a group of his neighbors.

When I related this story to Doc Eames, he looked at me for a while and then said, "Let me tell you something I did when I first arrived in Manchester!"

It seems a young farmer encountered him on the main street of the village and asked if he could bring his dog over to have it fixed. Doc said sure, come ahead, and in a few days the fellow drove in with all his kids and the dog in the back of his pickup truck. He brought the dog inside, and Doc was surprised to see that it was a fine-looking animal, and a young one too. But he decided he shouldn't start his life as a vet by questioning the decisions of his customers. So he merely asked the farmer if he was sure about doing this. Getting an affirmative answer he sighed, took the leash, and put the dog up on the table. He paused to tell the man he didn't have to stay and watch, but the fellow said he would actually like to. A little taken aback by this, Doc reluctantly went ahead. He gave the dog the necessary shot, and it closed its eyes and quietly died.

The fellow seemed startled, and finally said in a puzzled voice, "What have you done to my dog?"

It was Doc's turn to be upset. He replied that he had "fixed" it, saying in alarm, "That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

Then and there Doc, who was

from Missouri, learned to his sorrow that in Michigan, "fixing" an animal has only to do with its future reproduction, not

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its future life - or absence thereof.

Doc said that, like my vet friend, he was not only devastated by his terrible mistake, but also completely humiliated. He felt sure the young farmer would tell everyone in Manchester, and that rather than starting his career with some positive publicity he would be the laughing stock of the community. Sure enough, he said, the next time he saw the owner of the deceased dog the man yelled at him from across the street and came directly over. Doc winced as the man clapped his arm on his back and told everyone within hearing how Doc had "fixed" his dog.

But, Doc said, to his surprise and gratitude the fellow told the story in a way that was sympathetic to Doc rather than a nasty reflection on his ineptitude. When he finished telling me this story, Doc shook his head in remembered pain and embarrassment, remarked on the perils of beginning a veterinarian's kind of life, and said I should understand that he worked extremely hard to find a new puppy for that family very, very quickly.

One year Lorrie and I were raising and feeding a large Holstein steer. Somehow he became bloated. Even though I grew up on a livestock farm, together we had zero experience with bloat in cattle. But we dug out our home veterinary book and were soon in the steer's box stall trying to insert a garden hose down its throat so that we could pour all the Wesson Oil we had down it. That friendly 1,200-pound steer and I went around and around the stall, locked together like Siamese twins; the steer trying to get loose and me trying to stay on my feet, keep my arm around its neck and shove the hose down its throat with my free arm.

The struggle and the noise were unbelievable - me trying to stay against the steer, both of us slamming into the wall and the hay bunk and everything else.

Lorrie watching and yelling advice - to me, I think, but maybe to the steer as well.

After an exhausting half-hour or so of pandemonium, the hose and I managed to prevail, and some of the Wesson Oil went down the steer. Nothing happened right away, and I removed the emptied hose. Disappointed, and still scared, we hurried to the house and called Doc. He listened to our frantic plea and replied regretfully that he simply could not come. It seems he had been kicked by a horse that day and was under strong medication for the pain. He said he was virtually immobile and couldn't even think of coming. He also said we were doing the right thing. But he reminded me that if it didn't work we would have to vent the steer by cutting a hole in its side right into the rumen or stomach responsible for the bloating.

This was a horrible prospect that I had read about as a 4-H kid, and confidently expected would never, ever become a reality in my own life. Doc explained in great detail where and how to cut the hole, expressed his regrets again, and hung up. We went back to the struggle, fought the hose down again, and continued pouring various recommended liquids into the steer. At some point the steer began letting out huge stinking belches and I removed the hose again. This time the steer kept right on blasting out enormous quantities of unbelievably foul-smelling air. The belly started to recede. Lorrie and I cheered because we knew we had won. As soon as the steer's belly had returned to a semblance of normality, we dragged wearily into the house, cleaned up, and went to bed.

Next morning the telephone rang painfully early. I answered it groggily. It was Doc. He literally yelled into the phone, "Dick, did you cut that steer's belly?"

I said no, we hadn't had to do it because the hose worked. "Oh," said Doc in a normal tone of voice and obviously relieved, "I'm glad! I told you

the wrong place to cut!"

Then he explained that all he could figure was that he had been on so much medicine the night before that he had somehow gotten confused and directed us to the wrong side of the steer! That unnecessary, straightforward admission was the act of an old-time vet.

Once, when I was on a working trip, one of our mares required

Doc's attention. This was the only time any such thing had happened without me there. Doc came out and treated the mare, told Lorrie what to watch for, and what to do and when, and went on to see other patients. The

next morning early, Lorrie was surprised to see his car drive into the barn lot.

She went out and said, "I didn't know you were coming back this morning!"

"Well," said Doc a bit sheepishly, "I didn't either. I was pretty sure the mare would be all right. But I wasn't so sure you would be."

Of course he was exactly right. Lorrie appreciated his reassuring presence beyond her ability to explain. That, too was the act of an old-time vet.

One afternoon I was working near my barn and suddenly became aware of a long, terrible, keening horse sound of a sort I had never heard before. I rushed toward it and discovered a young gelding holding his hind foot shakily off the ground while a huge amount of blood was spurting from it rhythmically. I grabbed a cloth and wrapped it tightly, trying to reduce the bleeding. But in the process I found to my dismay that the foot just hung loosely and flopped. I

figured correctly that not only an artery but a big tendon had been cut, and I later discovered that the horse had done the damage by kicking a downturned sharp piece of tin roofing that someone before me had placed over the water tank.

I was in despair, but I called Doc. While he was looking at the foot I said I supposed we'd have to put the gelding down. But Doc just went ahead treating and rebandaging the foot.

Then he said, "Why don't we just wait and see. Whatever tendons remain could just thicken up to the point where the horse is better than you might have expected."

As usual, he was right. The foot healed without further

attention. The gelding always had a little limp but eventually it wasn't apparent except when he trotted. I expected to keep him as a horse for beginners to ride, but a neighbor family that knew all about the accident and Doc's verdict liked him so much that they kept insisting that I price him. When I finally did they took him, and more than 20 years later they still have him. Doc's experience and good sense paid off for the horse and everyone else involved.

Doc even treated me one time. One summer morning I was in the kitchen, changing the bandage on a thumb I had caught in the table saw earlier in the week, when Doc drove in to do

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some work on my horses. The thumb looked awful. It had swollen immensely and the sausage like portions that the unfortunate physician had tried to stitch together had swollen outward and split, such that the entire wound looked as though it had never been sewn together at all. I shoved the old bandage back down over the thumb, and went outside to help Doc.

He had brought with him that day a brand-new graduate of his alma mater, Michigan State University. She was a tall young lady with a confident expression on her face. On the way out to deal with the horses, Doc saw the bandage and asked me what I had done to my thumb. I explained, pulling the bandage off to show exactly what I was talking about.

Doc looked at the wound in alarm, and said, "Good grief, Dick, you're not going to lose that thumb, are you?"

I shrank from the suggestion, quickly slid the bandage back on, and said, "Don't even mention it!"

We finished the horses, and Doc returned to his car and started putting away his gear with the new young vet at his side. Suddenly, Doc straightened up out of the back seat of the car, stared at me a moment, and said, "Hey, I know exactly what you need for that thumb!"

Somewhat taken aback, I murmured uncertainly, "You ... do?"

He said emphatically, "Yes I do!" And he named to the lady vet some medicine I had never heard of.

She stared at him in horror, her mouth open and visions of lawsuits dancing all over her expression. But he stuck his face right at her and insisted, "That would work, wouldn't it?"

She reddened and turned away, saying something soft and vague under her breath. Doc wasn't having that. He scurried around in front of her and stepped right up to her face, saying from a few inches away, "That would work, wouldn't it?"

She tried to turn away again.

Her face was crimson. She stammered and twitched, and finally muttered something like, "Yes ... maybe ... I suppose ..."

Satisfied, Doc whirled in my direction. "Have you got a clean jar?"

I said I thought I could find one, and he said, "Bring it!"

I did, and Doc reached down into the darkness of the back seat of his sedan and with his left hand dipped something messy out of a large container. Coming back out he grabbed the jar from me and rubbed his hand across its top edge, leaving a large and nasty smear of some kind of yellow, greasy stuff dangling inside the top edge of the jar.

Handing the jar back to me he said earnestly, "Keep a lot of that all over your thumb and it'll be well before you know it."

I thanked him and stared at the ugly mess in the jar as they drove away. I went into the kitchen and stared at it some more. How could I find out about this stuff? I sure couldn't ask my doctor. Did I dare use it, even if Doc said I should?

Eventually I held the jar up to my nose and sniffed. Something familiar went gliding up my nostrils, and I paused in amazement. I said out loud, "Hey, I know what this is!"

And I did. It was Bag Balm, the same wondrous ointment I had used on the udders of the cows I milked by hand growing up in Illinois 30 years before and hadn't encountered since. I took off my bandage straightaway and smeared that wonderful stuff all over my throbbing thumb. In seconds, the thumb started losing its painfulness.

I kept the stuff on it until the swelling went down and that big cleft wound began to disappear. Then I made a mistake. I went on another trip, and, thinking my wound was healed, I left the

ugly jar of bag balm at home. The thumb swelled up and "burst" again. I could scarcely wait to bathe it once more in that marvelous soothing Bag Balm. I did that, and the thumb got well, just as Doc said it would.

I told Lorrie about all of this when it happened, of course, and swore her to secrecy, explaining that in this litigious age, someone might take umbrage at learning that Doc was not restricting his doctoring to the four-legged kind of mammal. She understood. So she told only one friend, the widow of one of my colleagues at the University of Michigan.

Unfortunately, this widow's daughter had married a local farmer. The widow told only the daughter, the daughter only told the farmer-husband, and the farmer-husband told only one other farmer. Inevitably, and fairly soon, I started hearing farmers and their wives saying to me behind sly smiles, "Hey, Dick; I hear Doc Eames is treating humans now! You know anything about that?"

When I related this story to Doc's wife, Jean, recently, she laughed and told me about a fisherman who rang their doorbell one cold, rainy Sunday morning with a fish hook stuck right through the lower part of his nose. She said he stood there in the door and the little bit of fishing line still stuck on the hook swung out and back in with every breath he took. Doc fixed him up, too.

He was an old-time vet, that's all. Regardless of the wonderful things modern vets might be able to accomplish with all the advances in technology, you'd best not count on them coming through in the particular ways Doc did in these stories.

There won't be any more like Henry P. Eames. And that's just the way it is.

- Richard D. Alexander

Agenda
 Manchester Village Planning
 Commission
 Regular Meeting
 Tuesday, July 11, 2000