

Love's Labors Found

By Nancy Lawson

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After leaving the unemployment office in downtown Buffalo one day in 1954, George May strolled past a building labeled "SPCA" and wondered what those letters stood for. Forty-six years and countless rescue stories later, he leaves behind a legacy of compassion that epitomizes what animal sheltering is all about.

George May is standing nose to beak with his loyal workmate, a curious-eyed cockatiel named Ricky who's spent the last few minutes lording protectively over the cowbell attached to his cage. On the wall behind the unlikely pair is some standard office decor—plaques, framed certificates, and the traditional snapshots of May cozying up to the influential figures of his time.



Influential, that is, if you consider Morris the cat, Lassie, Benji, and a goose from the movie *Fly Away Home* part of the jet-setting crowd. They've been among the more well-known visitors to New York's SPCA Serving Erie County in the five decades May has worked there, and May isn't one to miss an opportunity to hobnob with beastly bigwigs.

George May has never been bitten by a dog in his nearly five decades of shelter work, but Ricky the cockatiel likes to give May a good talking-to.

But his excitement is not reserved for just the rich and famous of the animal kingdom. To May, the shelter's longtime superintendent and right-hand man to the executive director, every creature deserves celebrity treatment. Ricky, for instance, became May's self-appointed peanut gallery after May walked through the shelter one day and heard the bird whistling to him from one of the cages. "I said, 'You're coming with me,' " May remembers.

"You a good boy, Rick," May is saying now in a soft babytalk that belies his deep, 66-year-old voice. "Da pretty bird. Yeah, Rick's a *pretty* bird."

#### If Animals Could Talk

In the 46 years since May first walked through the doors of the SPCA in downtown Buffalo, he's never been bitten by a dog—even when the sum total of his equipment consisted of a leash and a homemade snare. He's rescued cows from icy rivers and guinea hens from dangerous streets. He's rounded up wayward bears, parakeets, and ponies, and he's developed close friendships with a monkey and a skunk.

But try to get George May talking about how he's honed his affinity with animals, and you might think he's not interested in such musings. "Just good luck, I guess," he'll tell you haltingly, as if his legendary magic touch with the furred and feathered is all a matter of coincidence.

May doesn't really need to do the talking, though; the animals at the shelter, now a few miles outside of Buffalo, tell the story for him. While Ricky utters little more than a "hello" at random moments, the bird lets on more than he knows about his attachment to May, answering May's whistles and having face-to-face chats with him. When May used to set up a ramp from Ricky's cage to the desk, Ricky would walk the plank to pay his big friend a visit.

Other animals in the shelter are no less enamored of May's ways: Spot the goat can barely contain himself when his two-legged buddy enters the farm area, sidling up to May to get his dose of George hugs. Bo Jangles, a 30-year-old Shetland pony and permanent SPCA resident, also leans lovingly into May; May found the pony 23 years ago in a field, thin and suffering from rope burns where someone had tied his legs together with clothesline. Even the more timid stray cats seem to smile for May's camera when he tenderly lifts them from their cages to snap photos for the shelter's stray-animal Web site listings.

"Oh gosh, I don't know," May says in response to the question of what he's done most for the animals during his tenure at the SPCA. "I've tried to make them all as comfortable as I possibly can, in one way or another, and have treated them the best way possible. I've instructed my investigators to do the job well, which I'm sure they are doing from what I can see, and I try to answer any questions I can, just be a help to anybody with animal questions."

### From Windows to Kennels

There was a time when May didn't have any of those answers, when he saw the letters "SPCA" on the original building in Buffalo and didn't even know what they stood for. But his passion for animals dates back to his childhood in Canada, where he once interrupted nature to perform what he thought back then was a necessary rescue mission.

"I was up there in a friend's cottage, and I see this snake," he says, chuckling at the memory. "He was about a quarter of the way to swallowing a frog, which was normal, but I had to ... get the frog out of there. Deprived the poor snake of a meal. Sent the merry frog on its way without any skin on half his legs."

Little did May know then that his interest in protecting wild animals would one day lead him to start rehabilitating them at the SPCA, long before many shelters even addressed wildlife issues. And yet May's path toward humane work began inauspiciously: His emigration to the United States landed him in a factory job, where he became an apprentice doing spot welding for diesel bulldozers. "At that time it was \$1 an hour to do the work of a full-fledged mechanic," May says. "And I couldn't stand the fact that you just blow the whistle for this, blow the whistle for that. Go to lunch. Blow another whistle and come back. I said, 'I'm outta here!' So that's when I went to the unemployment office and ended up here."



Though May started as a window washer at the SPCA, it wasn't long before he was cleaning the kennels, which had been converted from their original function as horse stables. As he began to learn more about animals and animal care, May was invited along on calls to pick up strays. Bill Sullivan, May's longtime boss, would also take him to stockyards and poultry houses—places where chickens were slaughtered on the spot for customers—and teach him how to inspect the establishments.

In the old days, May often got called "the mean old dogcatcher"—a description Spot the goat would clearly take issue with.

In 1956, May was drafted into the Army and had to serve in Alabama for two years, but he preferred serving the animals and returned to his job at the SPCA as soon as he came back home. He became a "driver," picking up stray and injured animals and retrieving pets from people who called to say they could no longer keep them. At that time, most animals were not spayed or neutered, and the laws allowed dogs to run loose as long as they were muzzled. May had no form of communication in his vehicle, and had to stop at a police station every half-hour to call the shelter for messages or new requests.

Despite the SPCA name on their uniforms, May and his colleagues were universally hated, he says, adding, "Thank goodness it's gotten better as people are more educated as to what we do here now. It was terrible. They would say, 'Here comes the mean old dogcatcher.' "

### When Dogs Ran Loose

Those were tough days, say May and his friend of more than 40 years, Ed Fairbairn. The shelter's superintendent of maintenance, Fairbairn introduces himself with gusto: "Ed Fairbairn's my name; dogs and cats are my game!" He was also a driver, and he and May would respond to as many as 20 to 30 calls a day. Easily twice as many cats came into the shelter back then, and there were only 30 cat cages and seven dog kennels. (Today the SPCA has about 100 dog kennels and 60 cat cages.) Dogs were separated only by days of the week: Dogs picked up on Monday were kept in one kennel, for instance, while those picked up on Tuesday were kept in another. Two of the kennels were reserved for dogs up for adoption—one for males and one for females.

Adoptions were free; people just signed their names and went home with any animal of their choosing. May remembers the day when he and other shelter employees realized that rabbits were being taken home as food, not pets; that put an end to the bunny placements for a while.

Legal protection for animals was sorely lacking; May is still saddened by the case of the dog he spotted in the broken window of an abandoned house in the early '60s. After taking the dog to a veterinarian, May tracked down the owners and took them to court. But the judge threw the case out because the people denied owning the dog, and their name was no longer on the mailbox. "After everything was dismissed, they called me up here at the SPCA and said, 'Where's my dog?' " May remembers. "I couldn't do anything about it. ... Nowadays things are a little stronger—I'd say, 'Take a walk.' "



Agent George May put a post-foot ending to this special delivery case.

In the absence of sterilization and leash laws, the population of homeless cats and dogs was so high in May's early days that SPCA employees had no choice but to euthanize many more animals than they do today. The methods were primitive, but it was all they knew. Before May started, the shelter had used natural gas. After an employee injury, however, the SPCA switched to electrocution. Dogs were placed in a big box with a copper plate on the bottom, and cats were placed in a smaller box. Employees had to hose the animals down and then end their lives by flipping a switch.

When May started his career, he rescued dogs, cats, and even a lion cub using nothing more than a leash and a homemade snare. Later, as the shelter's superintendent, he scrimped and saved so he could buy his agents the best, most humane equipment available.

At that time, as many as 35 to 40 feral cats would come to the shelter at once—more than the shelter could handle on an individual basis. In these cases, the cats would be placed into cat carriers and then loaded into a big box; a tube was attached to the box on one end and to the tailpipe of the truck on the other. There was no way to cool the air, so hot fumes surrounded the animals. "I didn't like the carbon monoxide at all. You would actually hear the animals, and it wasn't fun to listen to it," says May. "You kind of put them in there and left. I mean, that was the only way you knew how. You left."

#### The Hardest Part

When the SPCA moved its shelter to the Buffalo suburb of Tonawanda in 1962, the shelter made a switch again—this time to the decompression chamber. Although employees thought this method was the most humane one available, it drew its share of protesters who picketed outside the building. "I remember thinking, 'These people are nuts!' " says May. "Why were they doing this when they didn't know anything about how it had been done before, how bad it was. And then injections [of sodium pentobarbital] came along, which are so much better than the decompression chambers."

Looking back is not usually difficult for May because he can see the steady progress made by the SPCA and by the animal protection movement as a whole. Overpopulation, he says, is not what it once was; spaying and neutering really has changed the face of animal homelessness. Cases of severe, intentional cruelty seem more common in some ways, but society in general is more humane and takes better care of its animals. The formalized adoption process helps ensure that animals go into good homes, and May is proud of the SPCA's spay/neuter clinic, humane education initiatives, and off-site adoption programs.

But the one thing May still doesn't like talking about is how he and his coworkers had to handle euthanasia of puppies and kittens in the old days. Carbon monoxide could not be used on the young ones because they are resistant to inhalants. To ensure baby animals would not wake up in the back of a truck or in a crematory, shelter workers would have to put newborn puppies and kittens, as well as small animals such as birds, into a bucket of water. They'd place another bucket on top, and the animals would drown.

"I hate to even think about that," says May. "And I did it many times because it was the only way we knew to do it. We didn't have technicians; we didn't have anybody giving us needles to put animals to sleep. And even in the 60s, we still did the same thing—we didn't have technicians till after a while."

As heartbreaking as the work was for them, May and his coworkers persevered. "There were so many times, day in and day out, that we helped an animal, we rescued an animal, we saved this one or we saved that one," says Fairbairn. "It made everything worthwhile. ... We used to get animals off the ice floes all the time. We used to get tons of cats out of trees, and people were crying to get their cats down, so you always felt that. There was always the good part, so it just sort of evolved that you stayed—because, you know, George loved the animals. Still does. ... I don't think George has a mean bone in his body. He's a very gentle man; he always was."

#### Cats on Candid Camera

Back in the shelter, May is talking to his friends again, taking their mug shots for the SPCA's Web site. "Look at me and smile!" he says to a black Lab mix. "Some just don't like their pictures taken," he confides when another dog retreats shyly to the back of his kennel.

After getting pictures of the three new pooches in the stray area, May moves on to the stray cats. "You're a pretty kitty," he says, extending his hand toward a tuxedo cat. "We got plenty of you in here today."

He reaches in swiftly and gently, lifting cat after cat up above his head and snapping photos of their faces. Without warning, he starts to tell one of his classic jokes that elicit affectionate groans from his coworkers. "There's two cats, Josie and Matilda," he says as he goes along. "Josie says, 'Hey, have you heard from your boyfriend lately?' Matilda says, 'I just got a litter from him the other day.'"

May is adept, managing to take photos of three dogs and 12 cats—all the new strays of the day—in less than 15 minutes. Soon he'll walk back to his office, sit down at his computer with the John Wayne screensaver, download the pictures from his digital camera, and write up descriptions of each animal. With the help of a Webmaster in downtown Buffalo, who manipulates the photos for Web use, May updates the stray-animal listings three times a week. "I love doing it," he says.



**SOGGY SARGE**—SPCA Agent George May looks over Rags, a somewhat soggy victim of a Fenton dog, who was dug from a board floor in Acropolis Creek near Fox Ridge Rd. in Cheektowaga yesterday. Area residents said the cat had been sitting for four days. *C-E Post*

**25-Foot Crawl** August 4, 1959 Courier

### SPCA Man Rescues Dog in Drain Pipe

**SQUEEZE PLAY** — SPCA attendant George May crawled 25 feet into a cast-iron drain pipe only 18 inches in diameter yesterday afternoon to rescue a stray dog.

The dog, which might have heard about the country's anti-rabies quarantine, but more likely became frightened by a passing car in Delaware Ave., had spent most of the day in the pipe a foot underground. The pipe is in a lot next to the new Federal Reserve Bank. The lot is being cleared for construction.

**BARKS HEARD** — Bank employees and other neighbors heard the dog barking and growling. The SPCA sent attendants May, Tom Collins, Edward Fairbairn and Hank Biskowski to see what could be done.

"We decided only George was thin enough to get through the pipe," Collins said. "We dug a hole to give him a chance to get started, handed him a pole with loop, and tied a rope around his left leg."

**UNABLE TO TURN** — May found the pipe came to a dead-end after about 30 feet. And the dog was covering there, unable to turn around or stand upright.

He worked the loop around the dog. Then his companions pulled May and May pulled the dog, a brindle-and-white mongrel about 18 months old.

**STATE OF NERVES** — "It was a most unhappy dog, too," Collins said. "For the first couple of hours, it was too nervous to eat or drink. But it began to calm down after that."

The dog had neither collar nor license.

"Anything that will get an animal back home, I love."

May learned photography in the army and has been the paparazzi to the shelter stars for years. But the Internet was like a foreign land to him until Barn Manager Sheila Foss showed him what a wealth of information he could get just by typing one of his favorite topics—"country music"—into a search engine. "Next thing you know, he's the first one to think of the Internet before I do," says Foss, who's looked to May more than once for support and inspiration in her 25 years of shelter work. "It's like this whole reversal. He's always been willing to change with the times."



A stray cat poses for May, who pioneered the idea of posting photos and descriptions of stray animals online.

May was only four years away from retirement when Executive Director Barbara Carr decided it was time for him to build a Web site. At first he protested because he'd never touched a computer, says Carr, but then he became one of the first—if not the first—person in the country to set up a shelter site that displays photos and information about all the animals in its stray kennels. "He just stepped up to the plate and did it," Carr says, "and got more interested and more interested."

Carr credits much of the SPCA's progress to May's willingness to evolve. "The whole idea of tranquilizing animals rather than killing them when they're dangerous—he was doing that pretty early on," says Carr, "and consequently, we have a staff very well-trained in tranquilizing."

#### The Coffee Coffers

May's love of wild animals also spawned the beginnings of a wildlife rehabilitation program at the shelter. "It was kind of my own little thing," he says. "We didn't have a department here or anything; I'd kind of do it on the side here myself. I didn't know beans about fixing animals." Some of his efforts—like the homemade splints he tried to fashion out of matchsticks—were less successful than others because he lacked training in rehabbing at the time. But even so, May helped many wild animals who were tamer than they should have been; unfortunately, even in the early days, people tried to keep wildlife as pets, he says.

For the cats and dogs, the basic necessities were considered luxuries—and May had to fight for them. When the board of directors and other powers-that-be didn't see the need for air conditioning in animal-transport vehicles, it was May who convinced them otherwise. "It was a very expensive item at the time," says Fairbairn. "Today it's almost a given ... but back then it was an add-on. So we had to find ways to get it done."

May's ways have been quiet but ingenious. Years ago he began charging employees 25 cents for their morning coffees; inflation has since raised the fee by a dime. With the funds from the coffee coffers, May has managed to not only replenish the caffeine supply but also purchase needed tools for his employees. The small change has added up to gloves, nets, catch poles, tranquilizer equipment, VCRs for investigators, and even a fancy pair of binoculars that enables officers to judge their distance from animals prior to field tranquilization. "That's a very expensive piece of equipment that we couldn't have normally gotten," says Carr, "but George has his coffee thing."



May (right) and Michael Armatys, now the SPCA's senior investigating agent, bring two abused dogs to the shelter.

"We have well-maintained trucks that are well-equipped with everything that everybody needs," says Carr. "That's George's doing, and it doesn't say 'George' all over it, but it's George's doing."

May's signature is stamped on more than just the shiny vehicles and modern equipment; it's ingrained in how his employees care for the animals and how they handle the sometimes monumental tasks associated with shelter work.

"When I look and see what George faced when he came into the field versus what I faced, his challenges were 5,000 times more difficult than mine," says Carr. "He's had the patience and the wisdom to work them out, rather than just fight them. So patience is a big thing he's taught me. ... I know George has taught me a lot, but I

never realized I was being taught. He would tell stories, which would always beg more questions. And he's got these little gems of wisdom that he just thinks everybody knows."

Carr recalls a time when someone in the shelter was trying to handle feral kittens and kept getting bitten and scratched. "George came over and said, 'What are you doing? All you've got to do is take one kitten in one hand and approach the other kitten ... because they're not afraid of the other kittens,'" Carr says. "Nobody knows that. George made that up. I've since told people all over the country."

At an animal care conference in California a few years ago, May and Carr went on a whale-watching trip together in their down time. When it was time to turn back, they still hadn't seen any whales, and the guide was apologizing profusely. "All of a sudden, we come upon two whales that were right at the surface, and they're courting and rubbing and twirling on each other and twirling together," says Carr. "The guy who was driving the boat had never seen this and was about coming out of his skin with what we'd come upon, he was so excited. And I remember thinking at the time that we were seeing this display because George was with me ... that this was some display for George just to thank him for all the animals he'd helped."

#### A Monkey Named Rosemary

Those animals ranged from pets with names like Tiger to much larger creatures who actually do belong in the jungles. May once had to use a dog snare to take a lion cub off the streets of downtown Buffalo as police officers watched from afar. He had to swim in icy waters to save dogs from eventual run-ins with Niagara Falls. He corralled cows from the river and lured runaway horses with carrot sticks. He stopped the Irish Day Parade because the horses didn't have the right shoes on. He babysat elephants whose owner had brought them to a town carnival in a falling-apart tractor-trailer; the owner was reluctant to fix the trailer, so May and his fellow agents took turns sleeping nearby to make sure the man didn't take off before the job was done.



A younger May (left) and longtime friend Ed Fairbairn rescued this dog and many other animals from the Niagara River.

May counts among his best buddies a monkey named Rosemary, brought to the shelter at a time when more people had monkeys as pets. "She was about three, three and a half feet when she was on her hind legs, and she'd walk with you hand in hand," says May. "We used to go for rides in the car ... and stop and visit everybody."

Rosemary was at the shelter for a year, but her penchant for grabbing onto people wearing glasses scared the bookkeeper too much, so the little monkey went to an animal refuge where she could live more like her own kind. "Rosemary was here probably a good year or so," says May. "She was a good friend."

In the '50s and '60s, it was legal to buy and sell skunks as pets, says May, and someone surrendered one to the shelter. Since he was already descented, he couldn't possibly be reintroduced into the wild. May kept the skunk in the shelter's barn for a while. "He would follow me all over the place, and I named him Eau de Cologne," says May. "He was a great pal to have." Eventually, after May realized he couldn't provide the care his little buddy needed, Eau de Cologne went to the Buffalo Zoo.

May did get to keep Tinsel, a cat who came into the shelter flea-bitten and bedraggled. Tinsel quickly adopted May, whose eyes go soft at the mere mention of her name. He points to a photo of her on his wall. "See how small she is there with me? She was full-grown. She was a good little girl," says

#### TWO SPCA AGENTS RESCUE DOG FROM NIAGARA RIVER ICE

SPCA officials are looking for the owner of a German shepherd dog that two of its agents waded into the icy Niagara River to rescue.

David C. Mayer and George I. May, who made the rescue, said it is apparently a valuable animal.

The dog was aboard a chunk of ice floating down the river Tuesday afternoon. Agents found it lodged against an ice jam about 50 feet off shore.

They tied ropes about each other and waded out as far as possible. Mr. Mayer swam the rest of the way and grabbed the dog, then was pulled to safety by his partner.

May. His attachment is apparent in his attention to the details: "I didn't take that picture, and whoever did the coloring is all off—she was a gray, silver-gray."

It sometimes seems the cat's got his tongue when May's talking about the animals he's loved and lost, but there's no question about it: The cats have his heart. While May is happy about the progress of the humane movement, he laments that the laws still do not do enough to protect his feline friends. "A cat can be a wonderful animal," he says. "I like preaching on cats because I like cats—I think they should have as much protection as dogs."

When the area was completely overrun with homeless cats in the early 70s, May went to the animal control officer in a nearby farming community with a proposal. One day a week, May suggested, he could drive an SPCA truck out to the town so people who no longer wanted their cats could surrender them. The ACO agreed and started placing weekly notices in the town newspaper. "And that worked out great," says May. "We'd take as many as we could in the vehicle ... and there were that many less that would be running the streets or be abandoned somewhere."

"We did it for so long as they would bring the animals, and then it started to dwindle off, and we could see that we'd probably gotten as many as we were gonna get for a while," May says. "We could probably do it today and get just as many now, but we deal with a lot more responsible people, I think, in this town today."

#### A Peanut for Them All

It's almost June when May is saying this, and he's just a few days from retiring. But there'll be little rest for the weary; May's already got his first post-retirement assignment from Carr, who's asked him to take pictures of the graduating "TLC" (Teaching Love and Compassion) class—a program that gives at-risk youths the chance to help train shelter dogs.

As they prepare an issue of the SPCA's magazine devoted entirely to the man they call their own "super-legend," May's friends are joking that he'll return as the volunteer cat room monitor. Gina Browning, the public relations director and a friend of May's for the last 10 years, eyes the extra chair in her office where he often sits and says, "I always told him the day that he retires is the day that I'm going to retire." She reminisces about the time he donned a Cher wig when a board member sat a few offices away; the time he rang her phone and blasted Sinatra into the receiver in protest of a recent Barry Manilow remake of Sinatra's songs; the time he struck a serious pose in a photo with Ernie, Bert, and the Cookie Monster to discuss the many facets of the letter "M."



"He keeps us laughing back here," Browning says. "I don't know what we're going to do without him."

For his part, May's pretty sure it's time to go, even though he'll never completely tear himself away. "I'm not going to disappear. I'll probably come in and bug a long time," says May. "I don't know how to explain it now: I feel like I love it here, but I feel like if I don't want to get up that morning, I don't want to get up that morning. Or if I want to do something else, I can do something else, and I want to do it before it's too late. ... But, no, I'm not going to forget this place at all; it would be very difficult to do."

It's not likely his wife would let him forget his duties; she always makes him patrol for pets in hot cars when they go to the store. His cats will keep him busy, too, particularly the one who enjoys walking on a leash in the backyard. And then there's the little squirrel who's been coming around lately for peanuts. "He does everything but knock on the door," says May. When May hears the banging sound of his hungry buddy, he goes and gives him a peanut, leaving several more for the more timid critters who hang behind.

"I love 'em all," says May.



May, pictured here with his beloved cat Tinsel, hopes the future will bring more legal protection for his feline friends.

a peanut, leaving several more for the

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