

Early History of Oak Ridge Municipal Animal Control

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on September 8, 2009)

Jim Harless has again provided me a wealth of information on the history of Oak Ridge Public Health, this time focused on Animal Control.

Jim came to Oak Ridge in 1973 from LaFayette, Georgia, where he had been a senior Environmentalist with the Georgia Department of Public Health. He worked as the city's Environmental Health Supervisor in the City of Oak Ridge Municipal Public Health Department from 1973 to 1985. It is this experience that allows him to be able to write this unique history of Oak Ridge's Animal Control efforts. Jim has gone on to serve in increasing levels of responsibility as an Environmental Specialists. Today he is the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation's Department of Energy Oversight Environmental Monitoring Program's Environmental Program Manager.

The following information is written by James D. Harless:

The Oak Ridge City Health Department was the sole independent city government funded health operation in all of the State of Tennessee, by request of TN Public Health Commissioner R. D. Hutcheson, January 29, 1958 in a Nashville meeting with Oak Ridge officials. Animal control was directed by the Oak Ridge City Health Department for 25 years.

In the early days of Oak Ridge, as a federal contract operation, there was one or two veterinarians that worked to provide animal control oversight, rabies control, and in the 1940's to 1950's there were some local incidents of rabies in either wildlife or domestic pets, so the use of annual Rabies shots for pets was a priority and was done by and within the City of Oak Ridge. Rabies clinics were held at school sites, and continued after city incorporation in 1959 as a duty of the Oak Ridge Municipal Health Department.

In 1973, the animal shelter was located in the old rail road shop on warehouse road. The old building was an inferior site, had no insulation, had holes in the walls, was not vermin proof and the chain link fence cages were showing the wear and tear of years of use. The work to plan a new shelter had been underway for some time in 1970 with City Public Health staff working with the Oak Ridge Kennel Club, the American Association of University Women, and a newly formed East Tennessee chapter of the Humane Society. The city and these organizations took pride in the new shelter, opened by late 1974.

Our staff turnover was an ongoing challenge for Oak Ridge Animal Control, as our staff members had to directly perform euthanasia using equipment approved by humane associations, but it has always been hard to put to sleep up to 60 to 70% of animals received, when only a small fraction were injured or ill, or otherwise not suitable for any adoption by any family. So we were glad to see new focus upon spayed and neutered pets, and assistance in funding coming from some local sources.

Don Russell was an exception to the rule. He came to City Health in animal control some 30 - 35 years ago. Only this past summer has this Animal Control officer with over three decades of service retired.

I can recall Don's help not just in routine shelter operations, and in field patrol and operations, but also in helping to build a solar heat collector for our shelter. Don also helped us all give away many hundreds of free flea collars we had received as a gift to our shelter. We would give these collars and responsible ownership pamphlets to those who reclaim pets, or adopt pets from Oak Ridge Animal Shelter.

We would stop when we might see a good example of responsible ownership, and the field officer would thank the citizen for having a good fence to keep dogs in accord with leash law, or if a citizen were otherwise demonstrating good care and ownership, some free dog flea collars were offered. It was not unusual, when on patrol, for a citizen to get a little nervous when an officer would slow down our truck and stop, and get out. The citizen would worry they had done something wrong, when we only stopped to thank them for being a good example in their neighborhood.

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Mr. Russell worked with me to handle the animals and he also helped educate local citizens. We wanted to offer clean shelter facilities and good cages, a sanitary facility and a focus on animal care as well as animal rights. We also wanted to focus upon people, since if any problems existed regarding animal control within the community, it was almost always the dog owner or cat owner not giving total responsible care, there were hardly ever any animals at fault.

Even animal bites were mostly preventable, and usually caused by a lack of supervision by pet owners. I can recall people who joked "they had to go and bail their dog out of jail at animal shelter," like the dog should know better than to run at large in the community. That view is part of the reason we, in City Health animal control, moved from one at a time small numbers of court citations, and special typing of warrants for citations to a new City Court citation system to authorize and enable field officers to write field citations, a bit like a traffic ticket issue book. This system put the focus upon an owner who did not comply that day. They had to appear in city court. We did not take the pet animal to the shelter, unless we did not know to whom the pet animal belonged.

I want to sincerely express my appreciation to Don Russell for over 30 years of excellent public service. He was bitten several times over the years, and at times citizens were not always helpful, as they would become emotional or angry because they were facing a city code violation.

A view I have long held about animal control laws is that code violations were not always considered a real crimes by citizens. Society did not always support uniform compliance. We thought that more and better education about the reasons for the need for compliance with the laws might help us move from this commonly held view to a more responsible view. An issue of the newsletter for the *National Animal Control Association* was noted in the *Appalachian Observer* issue of April 13, 1983, pointing out that we need to respect and comply with all laws including animal control codes and laws for health & safety.

In February, 1981, *The Oak Ridger* carried an article entitled *Animal booklet is bestseller*. This article featured the Oak Ridge Field and Animal Shelter Operations Manual, titled, *Animal Control in Oak Ridge, Tennessee*. The booklet was assembled by the animal control staff from standard operating practices.

This 60-page booklet remains on file in the Oak Ridge Public Library. The University of Tennessee used the booklet as a model program manual for statewide distribution in 1981. Eventually it was requested by other states and even outside the United States.

Another applicable article created by the animal control staff was first published in August, 1978, by the American Humane Society's magazine. This article, titled, *A Problem Still Unsolved* could be published today with regard to continued leash law violations within our community. In 1978, the point was that education needed to be in the form of both positive education by outreach, talks, tours of the animal shelter, and other positive approaches, but also to educate by enforcement of laws and codes.

The main point was, and still is, that the animal control organization never had enough time to do all of the needed education. Help was needed from many other organizations. In February, 1977, we put a new officer emblem and slogan into use, **Dogs, Love 'em, License 'em, Lease 'em.**

One of the most unique forms of education in the history of Oak Ridge animal control was the use of Dog Tag Art. Creatively designed dogs, turtles, owls, sculptures, even flowers were used. The Oak Ridger carried an article, titled, *Dog Tag Art Has Dual Purpose*. The art was made from old expired license tags left over in animal control. The message was one of responsible pet animal ownership.

We had displays in the animal shelter, and in display windows of the Oak Ridge Public Library. On March 19, 1981, Jefferson Junior High students made posters for Oak Ridge Health Department about animal control. Under direction of art teacher Cindy Pickett, submissions came to the health department with

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first, second, and third place prizes being awarded to the students. The posters promoted rabies vaccinations and responsible pet ownership.

Robertsville Junior High shop teacher built a dog house by American Humane standards one year. Shop students also mounted older city dog tags to red wood boards, some of which were given to those who adopted pets at the city animal shelter. The dog house was a prize to one new owner on a pet adoption, thanks to the Shop class project.

One of the most useful articles, *Animal Problems are People Problems*, was published by *The Oak Ridger* on August 13, 1980. Dogs do not read, they do not know what the leash law is or the other city codes on responsible ownership. So owners have to be responsible.

Here are some of the Oak Ridge Animal Control Statistics from 1977, 1978, 1979 and 1980:

Fiscal Year:	1977	1978	1979	1980
Destroyed:	1847	1904	1514	1369
Apprehensions:	1100	882	763	1029
Reported bites:	109	92	79	72
Court Actions:	88	127	178	269
Total Animals:	2885	2879	2637	2370

There are some conclusions that can be drawn from these city statistics: The focus on public health (bites) and on dealing with animal owners (court actions). It seems to show that if you keep field apprehensions high, and keep needed court actions level at respectable levels, then a reduced need to destroy animals might be experienced as well as reduced bites, or even reduced euthanasia.

We destroyed 60 to 65% of the animals in those years. Today euthanasia is reaching 70%. After all the spaying and neutering, and focusing on being more responsible, too many pets are still being born.

Perhaps it is worse in the communities outside Oak Ridge, as there may not be as much emphasis placed on education. I am not aware of the manpower other communities give to animal owner education or enforcement. We, in Oak Ridge, did cooperate with Anderson County and Oliver Springs in these early years of Oak Ridge animal control. I am under impression that the cooperative effort still does exist.

The very early days of Oak Ridge community saw animal control being phased down about 1959 with city incorporation and formation of city health department. The animal control program became part of City Public Health.

The city Health organization was being phased down by 1983 to 1985 and your author, Mr. Don Russell and Mr. Ken Glass, were transferred to City Public Works from the base of City Health in City Hall. Former city Health offices were all turned over to Anderson County Health Department for several years. Oak Ridge health service was first relocated from City Hall space and then from the Anderson County Daniel Arthur space on Emory Valley Road.

The Anderson County government did build a new Public Health Department, just east from the city of Clinton, which now houses all Health work & field services. The Animal control program of Oak Ridge transferred to the Oak Ridge Police Department.

The animal shelter was expanded several years ago with some new cages. The main facility, however, is now about 35 years old, and according to the Oak Ridge Animal Control web site statistics, the total animals handled in 2008 is up to around 4,000 per year, or a 30% growth from 1980. This growth of needed animal handling is of interest given Oak Ridge citizen population is about same as 1980 citizen

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populations, so the ownership of pets by Oak Ridgers might not be expected to have increased by very large numbers, since the number of possible owners is little changed.

Kristin Olsen of Oak Ridge and Anderson County Humane Society still does a very good work to help both animals and animal owners. The same can be said about a program I read about in local newspapers that works to raise funds toward responsible animal care and ownership, called SARG (Shelter Animals Rescue Group). Each organization has its own web site.

These programs are independent efforts, and each has its own mission and funding. The most effective large animal control program in our own East Tennessee area is at the Young Williams Animal Center on Division Street in Knoxville. In a Knox News Sentinel article dated 6/25/2009, and written by Mike Blackerby, it is noted that they also track numbers in that Humane Society operation as animals taken in, animals euthanized, animals adopted, animals reclaimed by owners, and animals released to other organizations.

This type listing of statistics, by accident or by plan, is how Oak Ridge statistics are reported on our web site from 2003 to 2008. If there are numbers on apprehensions, animal bites or court citations, I did not see that information. But from numbers by Young Williams, they euthanized 71% in 2008, a number similar to that of Oak Ridge. Still, far too big a number, and appears too many citizens simply allow excessive pet reproduction.

We have reason to take pride in the origins of Oak Ridge animal control. What started under Federal contractor operations to deal with pet animal needs in our local community continued as the City of Oak Ridge Health operations until being turned over finally to the Oak Ridge Police Department. About half of the focus was upon animal holding, cleaning cages and maintaining proper facilities. The other half of the three man-years of time investment of three officers was for field patrol, education, field enforcement, work to lower animal bites and those pets killed on city streets with an expanded focus on citations, and on enforcement of leash laws in Oak Ridge.

The Oak Ridge Police Department has expanded the facility and added new patrol trucks. They have also increased the respect given to all of the local animal control staff by being recognized as a part of the Oak Ridge Police Department.

During the history of Animal Control in Oak Ridge our program has consistently been of very high quality. That is something in which to take pride and I am personally proud to have been a part of the program in the early years. - Jim Harless

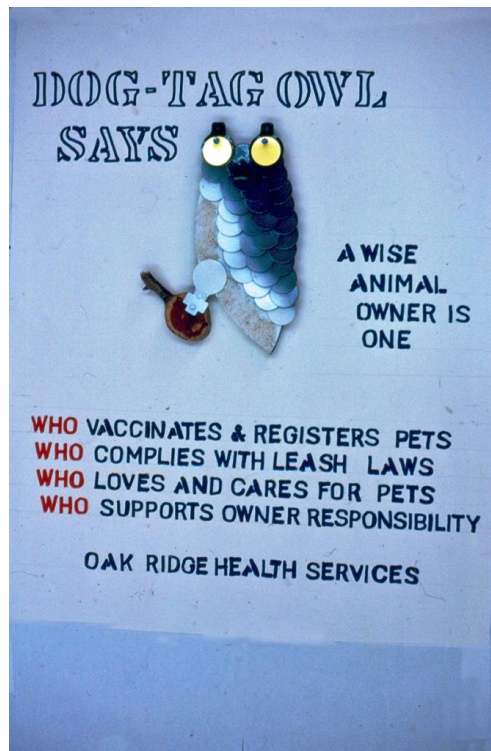
Jim has also written a book that is available in the Oak Ridge Public Library's Oak Ridge Room titled, *Oak Ridge Animal Control*, published by the Municipal Technical Advisory Services of the University of Tennessee in cooperation with the American Municipal League in May 1980. This book goes into detail to describe an effective animal control program.

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Early photograph of Don Russell, Steve Jessie and Rodney Harrison standing proudly by their new animal shelter in 1974



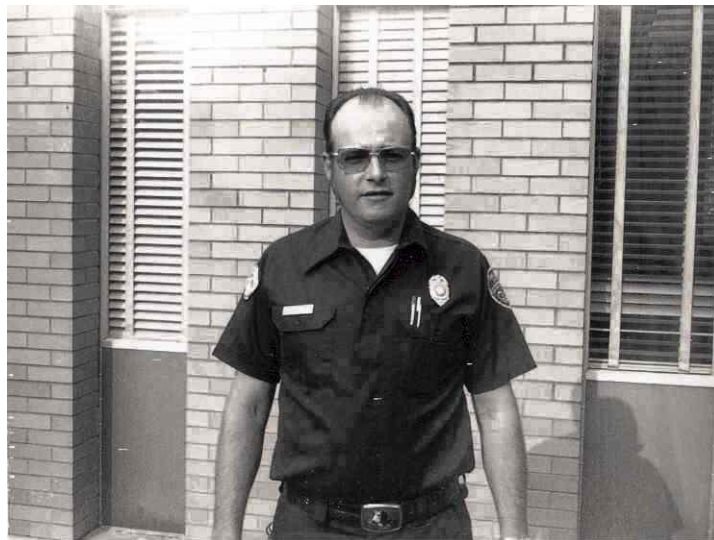
Jim Harless is also a collector of dog tags from which he makes dog tag art such as this owl used to promote proper care and control of animals

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Jim Harless, former Environmental Health Supervisor of Oak Ridge City Public Health Department



Early photograph of Don Russell