It's a good day for a writer when one story leads to another and brings relief from rummaging around in her own life for material. It's unusual, however, when the story comes through a horse.

The Winter issue of this magazine published a photo taken in the late 1800s of a blacksmith shoeing a horse in front of his shop. Photographer Joe Renckly and I were determined to duplicate the photo with our neighbors playing the “extras.” We were obsessed with finding a horse, and a friend suggested we call the Western Pennsylvania Humane Society.

“I've got a horse for you, and a story, too,” said Gretchen Fieser, director of public relations for the Society. Duke, a beautiful palomino, was rescued from an abusive situation by the Humane Society a year ago and adopted by Randy Cinski, who along with her daughter Spencer spent many hours winning this horse's trust. Fieser also told me that the Society receives about four horses a year. That was a surprise. Then came the story.

“I'll bet you didn't know the local Humane Society was founded in 1874, the very time when the blacksmith shop was operating, to care for horses, children, and the elderly.”

Reflecting a little, it makes sense: horses were common work animals at the time, pulling trolleys and wagons. Children and older people who needed aid had no voice, often lived in abysmal conditions, and could
not take advantage of the network of social services available now.

The story of the society is well laid out in *The Imperative Duty of Man*, written by Barbara Golden, public relations director of the Western Pennsylvania Humane Society when it was published in 1999. According to Golden, the modern humane movement began in England 180 years ago with the simple message that kindness was better than cruelty in addressing our relationship with animals and others. The “kindness” doctrine came to the United States through Henry Bergh in 1866 when he founded the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), propelling this philosophy into activism.

In 1872, an effort to form a branch of the Philadelphia SPCA in Pittsburgh had little impact, but when a Humane Agent Edward Ladley, from the Philadelphia group, spent four weeks observing stockyards, railway yards, and pubic transit, he wrote that he “found much cruelty being practiced in Pittsburgh,” and entered a number of citations, making sure that the facts were published by a “friendly press.” The news and a letter from Carolyn White of the Philadelphia SPCA chiding the mayor for the poor conditions brought results.

The letter read in part, “Perhaps your people were not ready for the movement, that they now are, so we firmly believe ... that from this time forth Pittsburgh may be able to sow, in the matter of protection of animals, a record not unworthy of the great and flourishing city which she is.”

In November 1874, The Allegheny County Humane Society was founded with Zadok Street as the first superintendent and Michael Dean, the first agent. They began issuing citations under the laws concerning animal cruelty. Street concentrated on streetcar companies where poorly shod, overworked horses often fell and were injured. Private haulers were cited for using lame and overworked horses, and horse traders and butchers were accused of mistreatment and deceiving the public. Stockyard issues focused on lack of food and water during transit and overloading of railroad cars.

In the second year of operation, the society handled over 1,600 cases and, according to Golden, filed extensive reports detailing the cruelty:

We have endeavored to prevent beating, overloading ... tying the legs of sheep or of calves together, overloading street cars ... neglect of shelter, and driving without shoes, plucking feathers from live fowls, or crowding them too closely in coops, or carrying them with the heads down ... bleeding calves or beves (the plural of beef), burning lampas (inflammation of the mucous membrane) in the horses mouths and ... driving animals into the river and letting them stand there while loading the wagons, when the water is cold and freezing.

In 1877, the society, receiving reports of cruelty to humans, took on the cause of abused and neglected children. In 1879, they took the elderly under their protective wing.
as well, although it strained their already meager budget. According to Golden, they used intervention and counsel, shown to be successful in animal cases. The Society relied heavily on local charities to provide aid and take in those who were abused and neglected while suitable arrangements could be made.

For 75 years, the Society was involved with the protection of children, longer than they intended if they were to believe their optimistic annual report of 1901:

Political and social scientists declare the new century to be "The Century of Light," predicting a four hour work day; flying machines for every family by 1914; a disappearance of disease and poverty; large airy housing for the common man; cars that will race over gigantic road systems at 120 miles per hour; plus absolute peace and no more wars.'

We all know what became of those predictions, but the Society did see a reduction in cruelty to horses, mainly because the animals were replaced by automobiles. Although even in 1940, 90 percent of their animal cases dealt with horses.

In 1975, the Children's and Aged Division of the Humane Society were discontinued, but with mixed feelings. The Society felt it had done a good job with protective services, but was persuaded by the rise of other agencies created to deal with family problems, as well as an always precarious financial situation.

The Society faced its own crisis in the last half of the 20th century, and it is surely the most telling part of Golden's history. Postwar prosperity made ownership of animals a reflection of the "good life," and the increasing number of shelters provided a passive option for the disposal of unwanted pets, who few thought to neuter.

The ensuing "pet explosion" defined the future direction of the Western Pennsylvania Humane Society.

The humane movement, in general, and the local group, specifically, were well-intentioned but misdirected, according to Golden:

Euthanasia was rarely discussed beyond shelter doors. Instead, a deadly silence ensued. Gone from the yearbooks and publications were the photographs of neglect, abuse and cruelty. Instead, behind a façade of professional supplied photos of cuddly puppies and kittens, shelter staff struggled with a burden that took its toll in personnel and finances.'

A walk through the relatively new and better-equipped (but still overcrowded) shelter shows the results of these transgressions. The Society is open-door, which means it takes in all animals qualifying as pets—none turned away—24 hours a day (35 to 40 daily). Birds, rabbits, snakes, dogs, cats, guinea pigs, and horses are all welcome, but the society is not licensed to take in wild animals. Fieser said that while most cities have only one shelter, Allegheny County has three, including Animal Friends and the Animal Rescue League.

The society has changed its location several times within the city, marching the animals along with them. Since 1960, they have been on Western Avenue on the North Side, with a second location, Fallen Timber, in
Preserve Pittsburgh’s rich history for generations to come

To learn more about our planned giving and bequest program, call Audrey Brouman, Fundraising Counsel, at 412-454-6404.