

BUILT ON THE SHOULDERS OF VETERINARY GIANTS ANIMAL FILM STARS

BY: DR. STEVE JOSEPH, KCVMA HISTORIAN

Believe it or not, outstanding animal actors are not eligible for Oscars. Nonetheless, Francis the Talking Mule starred in seven films during the 1950s. The series focused on Francis and a young soldier. The mule identified himself as “Francis, 123rd Mule Detachment, M52519.” Donald O’Conner received top billing, but the true star was Francis. Somewhere along the way O’Conner quit saying, “When a mule gets more fan mail...” Well, you can guess the rest. The distinctive voice of Francis was provided by actor Chill Wills.

Francis received the first Picture Animal Top Star of the Year (Patsy Award) from the Animal Humane Society in 1951. Ronald Reagan was the presenter.

Rin-Tin-Tin (1918 – 1932) was whelped in a litter of shell-shocked pups found by an American soldier in France during World War I. The pup was named for woolen dolls French children gave to GIs as good luck charms.

According to legend, the dog received the most Oscar votes in the Academy’s first year of voting. But rather than cause embarrassment, the Best Actor Award went to thespian Emil Jennings.

By 1926 Rin-Tin-Tin was the biggest box office draw, earning \$6,000 a week. At age 14 he died in the arms of a neighbor. The neighbor was Jean Harlow.

Lassie (1940 – 1958) was introduced to film after his owner asked trainers to “cure” him of chasing cars. Initially, the Collie was a stand-in, but when Lassie performed better than the lead dog he took over the starring role.

Terry was the Cairn Terrier who played Toto in *The Wizard of Oz*. Terry made her debut in the 1934 Shirley Temple film *Bright Eyes*. At the time, Judy Garland was still in vaudeville. Terry was paid \$125 a week, which was more than many human stars received.

Roy Rogers paid \$2,500 for Trigger (1932 – 1965). Formerly known as Golden Cloud, Trigger first appeared in the Rogers’ film *Under the Western Stars*. Their relationship covered 80 movies and numerous television roles. Trigger was said to be “the smartest horse in the movies.”

Morris was an orange tabby adopted from a Chicago shelter in 1968. In less than two years, Morris landed a gig as spokescat for *Nine Lives* cat food. He even penned three books.

Orangey is said to be the feline Meryl Streep. The red tabby played Cat in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. Her first role was in *Rhubarb* and she won a Patsy. Orangey portrayed Minerva in *Our Miss Brooks*.

Other stars include Babe, Old Yeller and Popcorn Deelites who played Seabiscuit.

There are no animal Oscars, but there should be. Nonetheless some have stars on the Walk of Fame, including Rin-Tin-Tin and Lassie.



Picture is a courtesy of the Burbank Animal Shelter where PATSY markers are located.