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Built on the Shoulders of Veterinary Giants: Man's Best Friend

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When Old Drum barked, folks claimed it sounded like thunder.

In October 1869 it's said the hound wandered onto the property of a neighbor who claimed his livestock were being killed by dogs. Leonidas Hornsby vowed to kill the next dog found on his property. The following morning, Old Drum was found shot to death. Hornsby denied the shooting. It was alleged a relative of Hornsby, Dick Samuel Ferguson, was the killer.

Old Drum's owner, Charles Burden, promised justice for his prized dog. Justice was not swift. It involved several lawyers and four trials and appeals starting at the Johnson County courthouse in Warrensburg, MO, and ending in the Missouri Supreme Court nearly a year later.

Old Drum's death inspired Missouri lawyer and later US Senator George Vest to deliver an elegant eulogy about a dog's loyalty, and so coined the phrase, "man's best friend". Vest's final remarks made no reference to the evidence or to Old Drum.

Instead, he delivered a tribute to dogs and their masters. Many years later Poet Ogden Nash wrote about "man's best friend". Following are excerpts from Vest's eulogy. For more, Google Old Drum.

The only absolutely unselfish friend a man can have...is his dog.

A man's dog stands by him in prosperity and poverty, in health and sickness. He will sleep on the cold ground when the wintry winds blow and the snow drives fiercely if only he can be near his master's side. He will kiss the hand that has no food to offer, he will lick the wounds and sores that come in encounter with the roughness of the world. He guards the sleep of his master as if he were a prince.

When riches take wing and reputation falls to pieces, (the dog) is as constant in his love as the sun in its journey through the heavens.

When death comes... there by his graveside will the noble dog be found, his head between his paws and his eyes sad but open in alert watchfulness faithful and true....

For the record Vest won the case. Burden was awarded 50 dollars. There was no ill will between Hornsby and Burden either before or after the trials. Time heals all wounds. Although both men had sufficient means, it took years to recover the financial losses of the trials. They are buried near one another in Kingsville, MO. Ferguson was shot and killed in an altercation in Oklahoma.

If you have ideas for historical articles email stevejosephdvm@sbcglobal.net.



CREDIT FOR PICTURE: Statue of Old Drum at Warrensburg Courthouse courtesy of Jack Dentimiglia (pen name Jack Miles) editor of Warrensburg Daily Star Journal.