

Margaret Megahan: The best friend a dog ever had

Williamsport Women

By JANET McNEIL HURLBERT

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Over the last 125 years, the Lycoming County SPCA has had many women to thank not only for feeling compassion toward animals, but also for using their ability to secure financing to transform that caring into action. Margaret M. Megahan (1894-1993) dominates the more recent history of the SPCA.

The Williamsport mayor proclaimed "Margaret Megahan Day" on Oct. 23, 1991. The citation applauded her life mission of caring for and protecting animals through her dedication to the Lycoming County SPCA. She guided the organization as it grew from a few pens to a shelter that cared for thousands of animals each year.

Early years

Megahan was the daughter of



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Above left is Margaret Megahan during her college years at Wellesley College. Above right is Chief, from the book with the same name, authored by Megahan.

Fairman and Margaret Megahan. She and her siblings, James and Helen, grew up in the family home at 900 West Third Street. Ironically, as a child she was so terrified of dogs that she would spend the night at a friend's house rather than pass a dog on the street.

Advertisements in the

Williamsport Gazette and Bulletin promoted her father's store, Megahan and Megahan, located at 487 Pine Street. "You need to get here frequently to know just how useful this store can be to you," the ads proclaimed.

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The newspaper's social column reported on Megahan's activities: attending events at Covenant Central Presbyterian Church, helping with activities at the YWCA, and returning from Wellesley College during school vacations.

Her time at college she would later describe as "a touch of magic."

The school's alumnae biographical files document Megahan's life after graduation. After a few years of teaching history, she returned to Williamsport in 1941, writing to Wellesley "Job — none."

Volunteerism

But Megahan's volunteer activities were many. In addition to serving on the boards of the YWCA, Crippled Children's Society, and Children's Aid Society, she was president of the Junior League and Wellesley College Club.

Megahan lived in her own home at 780 Belmont Avenue, which she described to Wellesley as a "Cape Cod-type house where our small city runs into the hills."

Her hobbies were gardening, photography, and breeding, judging, and showing her German shepherd dogs.

Lycoming County SPCA

Megahan considered her two most significant achievements to be serving as board president for the Lycoming County SPCA (1946-1991) and founding the Bald Eagle Kennel Club in 1945.

Megahan's "voice" could frequently be heard throughout the community. She warned of the dangers of an increase in the use of animals in school science laboratories, and later lobbied for legislation that would ban bow and arrow hunting of deer as inhumane.

Newspaper articles quoted her discussing SPCA budgets with City Council, fund raising for SPCA building projects, organizing dog shows, planning elaborate ways to celebrate National Dog Week, pursuing animal cruelty cases, and educating pet owners about the correct care of their animals. Generations of schoolchildren remember her coming into classrooms with her dogs.

As Megahan reported to Wellesley, "I have gone to the dogs" with a regular weekly 15-minute radio program, "Keep 'em Barking." This program originally started during World War II as a way to convince people to send their dogs to war to support military efforts. The show continued after recruiting ended. It was so popular that a men's card club changed its meeting time so that members wouldn't miss

the broadcast.

SPCA pet cemetery

The SPCA pet cemetery, established in 1956, was one of Megahan's projects. As she stated in a Dec. 2, 1969, Grit article, "We have to face the fact that pets fill a space in our lives that no other creature can. Their all consuming love and loyalty is unmatched anywhere."

She also saw the creation of such a place as a means to raise additional funding. The grave receiving the most attention was that of a parrot named Loretta, which had been pet to three generations of the same family.

'Letters to Chief: A Dog's Life'

Megahan traveled the country, showing her dogs as well as serving as a nationally recognized judge of German shepherds. She authored a book designed for young readers, "Letters to Chief: A Dog's Life." The letters and poems were "written by his owner . . . to make real and warm the life of a great dog who really lived." She did believe, however, that owners could appreciate and love a fine dog "whether of high pedigree or nameless ancestry."

Not only did Chief digest a razor blade when he was a puppy, but as an adult he ate a seven-

pound ham that had cost 84 rationing points during World War II.

The Place of the SPCA
An article in the Philadelphia Inquirer, on Sept. 11, 1949, shares Megahan's perspective toward her work: "The SPCA does not pretend to compare in importance to the Red Cross, the March of Dimes, or the Christmas Seal drive. But the SPCA has its place."

Megahan is buried in Wildwood Cemetery. Her animal advocacy continues through her perpetual trust to benefit the Lycoming County SPCA.

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