

Brief History of Rabies in Altadena and Los Angeles by Jane Brackman, Ph.D.

The Los Angeles area, including Altadena and neighboring foothill communities, suffered through two serious rabies outbreaks, one in the 1930s, the other in the 1950s. In 1937 alone, 21 cases of canine hydrophobia were confirmed in Altadena. The same year, a local veterinarian died after treating a rabid dog, as did a man in a neighboring community who went to the aid of two children under attack.

Although an 1872 city ordinance directed dog owners to register and license animals, and an 1895 county law established impound districts, there was no place to house animals (the county shelter in Downey wasn't built until 1946) and few employees to enforce directives. In some cases staff sheltered animals in their own homes.

Between 1900 and 1938, 86 Californians died from rabies, most in the greater Los Angeles area. By 1934, with lax laws, no cash (during the teens and twenties the ill-advised city spent its rabies funds on roads and lighting) and 20,000 stray dogs, Los Angeles was looking down the barrel of a loaded gun.

The first confirmed rabies death occurred in 1899 when a Los Angeles man was bitten on the nose by his rabid pet cocker spaniel. After police officers shot more than 7 rabid dogs within five blocks of each other in June 1909, a muzzling ordinance was passed by the board of health. Un-muzzled stray dogs were often shot on site. Outraged pet owners launched a crusade to oppose such a broad-brush approach. Some believed there was no definitive proof that dogs carried the disease. In most cases symptoms usually showed within two days of the dog bite. But incidents in which symptoms might hide for up to 18 months, depending where on the body the bite occurred and how much time it took the virus to infect the spinal chord and brain, called into question the source of infection.

Additional opposition came from area humane animal organizations that feared the situation would be made considerably worse by a muzzling ordinance. In New York and London, hydrophobia hysteria, both real and imagined, resulted in the slaughter of thousands of animals. Increasing fees for dog licenses and muzzling requirements mostly affected dog owners too poor to keep their pets. Dogs

that weren't killed were left abandoned, brutalized and starving. Small makeshift shelters common at the turn of the century had no way of caring for the hundreds of dogs dumped on their doorsteps every day. To put the numbers in perspective, current day Los Angeles city shelters process about 4,000 dogs a year. Between 1885 and 1886, 65,000 dogs were disposed of at London animal shelters. The debate resulted in a repeal of L.A.'s 1909 muzzling ordinance, after which rabies spread rapidly throughout the greater Los Angeles area.

A person bitten by a rabid dog experienced excruciating pain and certain death. The rabies "cure," a series of up to 25 daily inoculations, each one containing the virus in gradually increasing strength, was discovered by Louis Pasteur and Emile Roux in 1884. At first it was available only in Europe. By 1900, victims could get treatment in New York and Chicago. When hydrophobia reached epidemic proportions in Los Angeles, local treatment was fortunately available. But in cases where dogs were not caught, many bite victims chose to take their chances in hopes the dog was not rabid. Some people resorted to using homemade treatments such as a poultice of partially digested contents from the stomach of a cow or deer. It worked! But only in cases where the dog was not rabid.

In 1938 the county finally clamped down, enforcing a strict 90-day quarantine. *The Altadenan* reported, "All dogs must be confined on the owner's premises at all times. Dogs cannot be taken out on a leash or in automobiles. All dogs, whether licensed or not, will be picked up by patrol wagons cruising the district." Five quarantine officers were assigned to Altadena. Impounded dogs were swiftly euthanized and examined for evidence of rabies. The Department of Health issued progress bulletins, "so that anyone having been in contact with such an animal can be made aware of the fact and report to clinics for treatment." On July 8, 1937 the newspaper reported that rabid dogs had been picked up at 151 Woodbury, 462 Archwood, 200 East Las Flores and one in the 800 block of Mariposa.

Dog owners were required to secure license applications annually from the Altadena sheriff's sub station. The fee

was \$1 for males, \$2 for females and \$1 for spayed dogs. Hard to believe now, but at the time dog immunization was not required for licensing. Even though the Pasteur inoculation that cured people was sufficient to make a dog immune from rabies, suspicious anti-regulation proponents fought successfully against government intervention for the next 18 years. In 1938 Altadena Rotary along with Animal Control sponsored rabies clinics at Farnsworth Park. The director, Mr. Miller said, "[He] hoped that dogs would be on their best behavior." The fee for vaccination was \$2 to cover the cost of supplies, fairly pricey considering the average annual income in 1938 was less than \$900.

As the epidemic waned the quarantine was eased. Dogs were allowed on leashes and in automobiles but could not run at large. However stray dogs off property or without licenses identifying owners continued to be euthanized indiscriminately. Pet lovers protested again, accusing the county of rewarding dogcatchers with a \$1 bounty for each impounded dog. Some dogs were stolen or even held for ransom. The county denied the rumors, but "ruled that stray dogs must be impounded at least ten days before destroying them thus giving owners time to reclaim them. As a result, dog catchers must keep off private property in their roundup of canines."

The epidemic subsided through the war years but came back with a vengeance in the mid 1950s. The final showdown in the long battle over compulsory dog inoculation finally ended. In 1956 vaccinations were required. The county paid for and vaccinated over thirty thousand dogs. The ordinance worked so well that the state legislature followed suit and passed a similar law. Following mandatory rabies vaccination of dogs, within ten years the disease had all but disappeared from the pet dog population.

Sources

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