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WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND?

What's On Your Mind: Philanthropist's gift to thirsty horses and dogs still stands in Roanoke

By Ray Cox | Special To The Roanoke Times
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The portrait showed a handsome man in profile with a bright eye fixed in an open and friendly way to some distant and no doubt interesting sight.

He was well dressed in formal dark wool, a white necktie with a large Windsor knot tight to his white, wing collar shirt. Another touch of white, a fluffy handkerchief, peeked out of the pocket on the left breast of his jacket.

Well-barbered, sideburns cut straight and smart just below the top of his ear, his hairline was starting to thin and recede as it sometimes does with men as they reach their 40s. A heavy mustache drooped over his upper lip.

Hermon Lee Ensign was described in the introduction to his volume “Lady Lee and Other Animal Stories” as “a genial and personable man, successful in his affairs, light-hearted and satisfied with life.” Those words, published with the volume after Ensign’s death, were written as an introduction to the stories by his friend Francis Fisher Browne.

The portrait of the author on the flyleaf very much lived up to the descriptions in the memoir.

“He had an eager and imaginative temperament, an instinctive love of what is good and true, and a hatred of what is bad and wrong.”

It went on to say Ensign, a lifelong bachelor, was born in 1849 in Pennsylvania and died in 1900 in New York City. A self-made man, he found his fortune as a newspaper publisher and later in the advertising business.

This genial gent had many interests and talents, but most of all, he had a love for animals. Browne wrote that Ensign began this passion in childhood and thereafter harbored “detestation of all that is ungentle and unkind in the treatment of them.”

Which brings us to this week’s query:

Q: What is the story behind some of Roanoke’s old fountains such as the ones in Highland Park, on Salem Avenue, and in front of the Norfolk Southern building?

Anne Poindexter, Roanoke

A: Mr. Ensign no doubt would be delighted you asked.

The fountain in Highland Park was his gift to the city and was one of more than 100 he donated to scattered localities from Mexico City to San Francisco to Roanoke, Richmond, and Bristol, Tennessee, according to the Derby, Connecticut, website, which cited the Vinalhaven, Maine, Historical Society.

Vinalhaven, an island off the Maine coast, appears to be where the granite used for the fountains was mined.

The fountains were produced under the auspices of the National Humane Alliance, an organization founded and incorporated by Ensign in New York in 1896, according to the introduction to his short stories.

A Richmond newspaper clip, exact publication unknown, included on the website with what was said to be a not yet complete listing of the fountains, provided more information.

The Richmond fountain, located at Broad Street and Brook Avenue, was “6 feet 8 inches in height, weighing 5 tons, and costing about \$1,000.” The fountain would be donated, with shipping prepaid, “on condition that the city will give a site therefor.”

In a November 2010 edition of The Old Southwest Net here in Roanoke, it was announced the Highland Park fountain had been restored to working order on its centennial in Roanoke at a cost of \$2,500 after being donated by the city. Joel and Bob Richert were instrumental in spearheading and raising funds for the restoration.

“The fountain’s first location was Commerce Street [now Second Street] and Norfolk Avenue,” said Joel Richert, who has researched its history.

So what was behind the largesse of this society and its wealthy and principled founder?

The fountains, which were said to be similar but not exactly so, featured a huge round bowl set on a pedestal, water issuing from a centerpiece rising from the bowl. More water flowed into small bowls almost at ground level at the foot of the pedestal.

The purpose of the large vessel was the refreshment of the horses that still trod American cities at the turn of the century. The lower and smaller bowls were for thirsty dogs (and presumably cats, too).

We are directed to other notable Roanoke fountains by historian and former Roanoke Mayor Nelson Harris as well as the city's website.

There is the massive Kimball Fountain in front of the soon-to-be-vacant building that has housed Norfolk Southern's offices. That fountain, which once stood on Shenandoah Avenue near Hotel Roanoke, was donated, according to its plaque, by friends of Frederick J. Kimball, second president of the old Norfolk & Western, in 1907. It too featured spigots serving horse, dog and human.

Then there is the Dog's Mouth Fountain, also intended to water horses, which is on Salem Avenue across from the Roanoke City Market Building. According to legend quoted by Harris, "if one drank from that fountain one would return to Roanoke."

Another ornate fountain, the Friendship Fountain, located on Church Avenue and now obscured by a construction fence as a new hotel rises atop the parking garage there, honors Roanoke's sister cities.

The granite fountains like the one in Highland Park weighed 5 tons. The gentle Ensign's heart clearly was way bigger than that.

If you've been wondering about something, call "What's On Your Mind?" at 777-6476 or send an email to whatsonyourmind@roanoke.com. Don't forget to provide your full name, its proper spelling and your hometown.