

Harold Present—Missouri's Canine Cave Rescuer

Joe Light

Harold Present was an employee of the Missouri Humane Society with a passion for rescuing animals. He was involved in the rescue of thousands of pets that had gotten themselves into precarious situations, but his legacy is the numerous dogs that he rescued from various Missouri caves.

In the town of Hematite, MO, 40 miles south of St. Louis, a small dog became trapped in a cave under a rock in the summer of 1948. The owner of the farm discovered the dog, raised the alarm, and notice was sent to the Missouri Humane Society in St. Louis.

Harold did not wait. He immediately traveled to the cave, arriving at 2:30 AM. He promptly began digging. Over the next couple days, volunteers including Harold used picks, shovels, crowbars, and an air hammer. While they dug, they fed the dog raw hamburger to keep it alive. After several days of work, the dog was freed.^{1,2}

This wasn't the first dog that Harold freed from a cave. Several years earlier, he was involved in rescuing a dog deep inside an Ozark hillside near Munger, MO. Drive, a 10-year-old coon dog, had become trapped in a cave. When the owner of the dog, Jake Light, put out the call for help, 75 men from neighboring farms arrived to help including Harold from St. Louis, over 90 miles away.^{3,4}

Hound Rescued From Ozark Cave By Farmers Who Dynamited Bluff

Humane Society Man Off on Cave Rescue Trip for Dogs

Two More Polio Deaths in Area

Left: St. Louis Post Dispatch, July 13, 1944.
Center: St. Louis Globe Democrat, June 18, 1949.
Right: St. Louis Globe Democrat, September 16, 1948.

Jake the dog, had fallen into a pit and the only way to rescue the dog, was to dig and blast through 25 feet of limestone. While Harold and the rescuers dug, the dog was fed bacon attached to the end of a stick to keep its strength up.^{3,4,6}

After 10 days and removing 100 tons of limestone, the dog was pulled from the cave. Harold wanted to take the dog to vet, but the owner of the dog, while crying, wrapped his dog in his shirt and took

him home.^{3, 4, 6} As the owner left with Jake the dog, he stated, "I'll take care of the dog myself, and the day I get him well, I'll go out and get drunk to celebrate."⁵

Harold's final canine cave rescue occurred in September of 1948 near the town of Cyrene, MO. Two dogs had entered a cave and could not get out and in true Missouri fashion, a massive rescue began. Harold used a chisel and hammer to break away rock in hopes of freeing the dogs. Eventually, one of the dogs became so emaciated that it was able to exit the cave on its own.^{7, 8}

Desperation to free the remaining dog was so great, that a \$200 reward was offered to anyone that could do it. Fifteen men turned down the reward and four failed. A 19-year-old housewife tried for three hours to rescue the dog but was unable to get to the dog. Unfortunately, the fate of the remaining trapped dog is unknown. There are no follow up stories in the newspapers, but we know the fate of Harold Present.^{7, 8}

Harold's job as Missouri's canine rescuer ended the next year when he was unexpectedly fired from his job of 16 years with the Missouri Humane Society. The shock and outrage of the termination was reflected in St. Louis newspapers. Saving animals above and below ground was his life. When he lost his position, he lost his reason to live. Within a month of losing his job, he committed suicide.^{9, 10}

References

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3. "Coon Dog in the Ozarks," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, July 14, 1944.
4. "25 Mine and Boys Trying to Save Hound Trapped in Ozarks Cave," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, July 12, 1944.
5. "'Old Drive' is Rescued after 10 Days in Cave," *Tulsa Tribune*, July 13, 1944.
6. "Hound Rescued from Ozark Cave by Farmers Who Dynamited Bluff," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, July 13, 1944.
7. "Woman Risks Life in Cave Vainly Trying to Rescue Dog," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, September 20, 1948.
8. "Dog Trapped in Cave for 11 Days Freed," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, September 17, 1948.
9. "Harold Present's Widow Believed Death Was Accident," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, July 19, 1949.
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