

HISTORY NOTE: The History of Service Dogs and the Protections They Have

by Access Press Staff // January 9th, 2019

During the many national tribunes to the late former President George H.W. Bush, one photo stood out for many people. They were moved by the sight of Sully, Bush's longtime service dog, beside his master's casket.

It's not known how long dogs and other animals have served people with disabilities. Some histories note that a fresco in which a blind man is led by his dog was discovered amid the ruins of the ancient Roman city Herculaneum. It dates to the first century A.D. European wood carvings and Chinese scroll paintings from the Middle Ages also show dogs leading people who were blind. We know little else about their early dog helpers.

In the United States, service dogs weren't legally recognized until the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990. The ADA initially defined a service dog as any guide dog, signal dog or other animals individually trained to provide assistance to a person with a disability.

Before that, the only service dogs with specific legal protections were seeing eye dogs or dog guides for people with visual disabilities. These dogs first appeared in the United States in the 1920s.

One master-dog team often cited in histories is Morris Frank and seeing eye dog Buddy. A familiar historical picture shows Frank and Buddy safely crossing a busy street in New York City in 1928, as a large crowd looks on and marvels at the team.

The Seeing Eye, a New Jersey nonprofit which works with people who have visual disabilities, describes Frank and Buddy on its website. Frank was frustrated by his own lack of mobility and isolation as a young, blind person. He learned about dogs being trained as guides for blind veterans of World War I. Dorothy Harrison Eustis was an American training German shepherd dogs in Switzerland. After she received a letter from Frank, Eustis agreed to help him.

In June 1928, after Frank completed his training in Switzerland, he and Buddy crossed the street before a large crowd. Many news reporters were on hand to see the duo demonstrate how man and dog could work together. After the event, Frank sent Eustis a telegram with just one word: "Success."

The Seeing Eye was founded in 1929 by Eustis and Frank. Other service dog organizations soon followed. One well-known organization is NEADS, formerly known as National Education for Assistance Dog Services and Dogs for Deaf and Disabled Americans. The nonprofit was founded in 1976 and now trains dog-human teams for a wide variety of disability assistance programs.

In Minnesota, the service dog training organization Can Do Canines is marking 30 years in 2019.

It's amazing to realize how animals can provide such a wide range of services and supports to people with disabilities. From emotional support to operating a light switch, animals have taken

on many tasks to make their humans' lives much easier and help them be integrated into the community.

Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles written by Luther Granquist and other contributors. Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota's disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of disability topics, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota. Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Contact us at access@accesspress.org or 651-644-2133 if you have questions. The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities.