

# Animal fountain to get new life as plant habitat

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A 90-year-old granite fountain, erected to ease the lives of animals, will be resurrected as a habitat for plants.

The Herman Lee Ensign memorial fountain, a dignified and imposing northwest side landmark, was designed as a watering trough for horses and other animals.

The fountain is believed to be one of many similar animal drinking fountains built around the country shortly after the turn of the century, thanks to the philanthropic instincts of the fountain's namesake.

Perched near the curb of Lincoln Way West, just east of the Colfax Cultural Center, the fountain was dedicated solemnly in 1909. It has been virtually forgotten since automobiles replaced horse-drawn vehicles.

By spring, the six-foot granite fountain will be moved several hundred feet west to the entrance of the Colfax Cultural Center, where its wide basin will serve as a planter, said Neil Gilbert, development coordinator for South Bend Heritage Foundation, a neighborhood revitalization group that owns the former school building.

The South Bend Park Department has donated the old fountain to the foundation.

Moving the historic fountain to a safer and more useful location was the suggestion of John Oxtan, a lifelong resident of the near northwest side who always has been fascinated by the fountain.

"For a long time I thought it was a fountain that people drank from. Then my mom told me, 'That's a horse trough,'" said Oxtan.

"Where it is, sooner or later that thing is going to get hit," said Oxtan, who plans to have the fountain declared a local historical monument after it is moved.

No one seems to know when the fountain last operated.

It was a grand occasion on a Sunday afternoon, Nov. 8, 1909, when the fountain was dedicated, according to newspaper reports of the time.

A crowd of 500 to 700 people gathered, speeches were made and a quartet sang.

"The fountain is designed for the use of horses,

See FOUNTAIN /Page A11



This historic fountain will be moved to a safer location, where it will serve as a planter.

## FOUNTAIN

from Page A1

dogs and other animals and is the finest in the city. It is of granite and presents a striking appearance at its location at the intersection of three prominent streets," said The Tribune.

Ensign was born in 1849 in Pennsylvania, moved west to Iowa, later worked for a Chicago bridge company and helped victims of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, according to files of the New York Historical Society.

Ensign later moved to New York and made a fortune in the advertising business, which allowed him to retire. He founded the National Humane Alliance, a group dedicated to protecting the welfare of animals, and published a newspaper dealing with the group's interests, according to historical records.

When he died, Ensign left the largest share of an immense fortune for the building of animal fountains around the country, according to historical records.

"By so doing, he (Ensign) has perpetuated his name and it will be remembered for hundreds of years and he will be rightly looked upon as a friend of the dumb animals," H.A. Pershing, secretary of the local humane society, told the dedication gathering in South Bend.

It is not known how many of the fountains were erected or how many still exist. A pamphlet indicates one such fountain was placed in Council Bluffs, Iowa, in 1907, and many already were in existence by that time.

Ironically, Ensign's name is believed to be misspelled on the South Bend fountain. A plaque on the fountain spells his first name "Herman," but newspaper articles and available historical documents indicate his name was Herman.