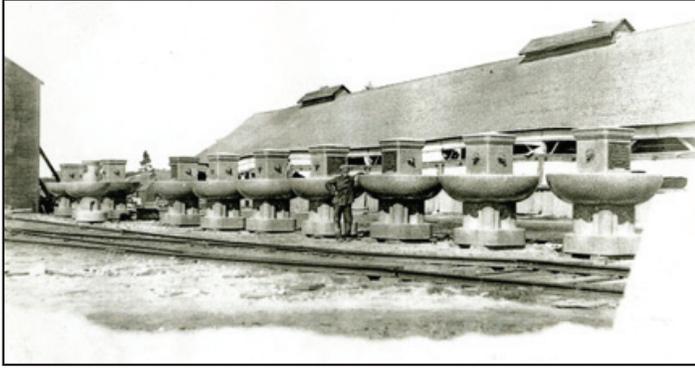


Fountain one of few in the United States



This photo, courtesy of the Vinalhaven, Maine Historical Society, shows a line of granite horse fountains waiting to be loaded up for rail shipment in the early 1900's.

By Clara Reinecke

You've surely seen it. Walked by it. Admired it. Even possibly wondered what it is. Few, though, know the history or the real importance of the majestic six foot tall granite fountain that graces the Seneca City Park.

The fountain was one of an estimated 125 donated to cities around the country, beginning in 1906, by the National Humane Alliance, with the purpose of providing drinking water to horses as well as dogs and cats.

An article in the Courier on September 15, 1960, marked the 50th anniversary of the gift. "In the east part of the Seneca City Park, there stands a granite fountain of ornamental design...on one side is a bronze plaque with this inscription: *1910 Presented by the National Humane Alliance, Hermon Ensign, Founder.*"

The article continues, "Older Senecans know, this is the Ensign fountain, the famous 'horse fountain' of Seneca history. Once it proudly stood at the east end of Main Street at the Seneca Theater and Gilford Hotel intersection. When the fountain was torn out, the place where it stood was cemented in and the cement circle now marks the spot."

Hermon Lee Ensign, a wealthy bachelor philanthropist, founded the National Humane Alliance in 1897 as a way to "spread about humanitarian efforts among people". When Ensign died in 1899, he left his fortune to funding the order with the hope of instilling the idea of humanity to animals.

The first horse watering fountains or troughs were distributed between 1906 and 1911 and it is thought that each state had at least one. Produced

in Vinalhavan, Maine the fountains are made of granite from that area.

Jake Cohen, Mayor of Seneca at that time, worked for a year to obtain one of the fountains. Louis M. Seaver, executor of Ensign's estate, wrote back in regards to Cohen's request, "Referring to the donation of one of our drinking fountains to your city, which donation has been very persistently solicited for many months by his honor the mayor. We now state, the writer having visited your city for the purpose of inspecting the proposed site of the fountain. We have decided to deliver one of our second size fountains to the City of Seneca, free of charge freight prepaid, provided we are officially informed of the following conditions: that the city will take fountain from (railroad) car and place it on a good foundation at the intersection of Main and Wayne Streets, put in good water connection and guarantee a constant water supply and provide permanent care to said fountain."

In 1910, consideration of the fountain placement centered around one thing only; the convenience to horses. The 1960 Courier article states, "There were motor cars in 1910, but noisy vehicles that would never replace the horse. The horse was permanent."

But, cars became more and more popular and horses on Main Street became less common. The controversy began and the big fountain in the middle of the street was thought to be a handicap to traffic. The fountain was removed from the intersection sometime before 1927. It would be several years before it was re-erected in the park. "The present editor missed this era of controversy," further states the 1960 article. "When I arrived on



Seneca's horse fountain stood at the corner of 3rd and Main Street when it was first received as a gift from the National Humane Alliance in 1910. The fountain now stands in the City Park.

the Seneca scene 30 years ago the fountain had been torn out and lay in sections in the city park near the old pump station. We understood that the horse lovers had said the fountain must stay and others said the city had accepted it on the condition of permanent care, but by that time the champions of progress and open traffic ways had won. The fountain, once the pride of the town, lay like a broken column."

Today, interest in restoring our heritage and an appreciation for the unique attributes in our community has spurred a movement to restore the fountain. "Bringing it back to Main Street would reinforce the historic theme of our downtown shopping district," states Linda Honeyman, Seneca Downtown Impact Executive Director.

As we approach the 100th anniversary of the gift to Seneca, restoration of the fountain can be done with little effort. "Clinton, Missouri has the original brass molds for the lions head spickets that are missing from our fountain," adds Honeyman. "They will loan

them to us if we wish to use them. Our granite fountain is still in great shape and with a little polish and a recirculation pump we can have it functioning again."

Only a small number of the original fountains can still be accounted for. An article in the Texarkana Gazette references the Seneca fountain as one of the few. "About 125 fountains, scattered across the United States, were dedicated in Ensign's honor in the early 1900s...Ensign fountains also can be found in Carson City, Nevada, Seneca, Kansas and Abbeville, South Carolina."

Though the fountain's use has become a way of times past, the beautiful granite structure is a part of Seneca's history and one more feature the town can boast in its uniqueness.