Celebrating Marin Humane and its impact on our community
By Nancy McKenney

As I get older, I appreciate birthdays more. They mark time and provide a chance to reflect on one's accomplishments over the past year. At Marin Humane, we're approaching an important date, and it prompted a bit of reflection on how far the organization — and the field of animal welfare — has come over the past century. We're also thinking about where we're heading, given the challenges faced by animal organizations and by families with pets.

On Dec. 17, 1907, California Secretary of State Charles F. Curry made the establishment of the Marin County Humane Society, now referred to as Marin Humane, official. A small group of individuals, led by San Anselmo resident Ethel Tompkins, made history. Marin Humane was one of the earliest nonprofit organizations in Marin County and one of the county's first to be dedicated to animal welfare. Like many early humane societies in the United States, issues around overworking and lack of care for horses and livestock were a top concern. Tompkins herself blocked the road and forced livestock haulers to stop and provide water to the cows being moved through Marin from the Central Valley.

As horse carriages gave way to automobiles, more homes were built, which meant more dogs and cats were added to the family. Many were now allowed inside the house and even slept on the bed. (Kitty litter was invented in 1947!) Marin Humane provided our community with programs focused on humane education, reuniting lost pets and animal adoptions from its campus, then located in San Rafael.

Marin Humane undertook the responsibility of animal services, formerly called animal control, for the cities and county of Marin starting in 1946. After operations were moved from San Rafael to Novato in 1968, the organization expanded again — offering innovative programs for seniors with pets, animal-assisted therapy and dog training classes.

Now, with 94 million United States households owning at least one pet, according to the American Pet Products Association's 2025 State of the Industry Report, economic and public policy changes have an impact on animals as well as people. The pandemic may have increased the number of pets adopted, yet the shortage of veterinarians and limited access to affordable veterinary care have created an increase in the number of unaltered (not spayed or neutered) animals in our communities.

Marin resident Ethel Tompkins founded the Marin County Humane Society, now referred to as Marin Humane. (Courtesy of Marin Humane)Marin resident Ethel Tompkins founded the Marin

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With the rising costs of having a pet coupled with the rising cost of living, many pet owners struggle to prioritize what pet services they can afford. Of note, an estimated 29 million dogs and cats in the United States live with families that participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance program (SNAP). Locally, Marin Humane has seen a spike in the number of requests for assistance in our Pet Safety Net program in the last few years.

The future of Marin Humane and animal welfare will see a continued evolution of programs and services to help people with their pets and prevent animals from ending up in shelters in the first place. Marin Humane has a three-year strategic plan with goals that include enhancing partnerships with human and health service organizations, advocating for pet-inclusive housing policies and improving access to affordable veterinary care, and animal disaster preparedness in our community.

The work of humane societies is more than running an animal shelter for unwanted and lost animals — we help transform lives. As we blow out 118 candles on our (imaginary) birthday cake, our wish is to continue to meet the needs of animals and the people who love them.

Nancy McKenney is the president and CEO of Marin Humane, which contributes Tails of Marin and welcomes questions and comments. Visit marinhumane.org, find us on social media @marinhumane, or email lbloch@marinhumane.org.