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The Trial Of Old Drum

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The Trial Of Old Drum: A Landmark Case in American Legal History

In the annals of American jurisprudence, few cases have captured the public imagination quite like **The Trial Of Old Drum**. This historic 1870 court case, which unfolded in Warrensburg, Missouri, transcended its origins as a simple property dispute to become a defining moment in the legal recognition of the emotional and intrinsic value of companion animals. More than a century and a half later, the case remains a touchstone for animal rights advocates, legal scholars, and anyone who has ever loved a dog.

The story of Old Drum is not merely a dry legal proceeding; it is a deeply human drama involving loyalty, loss, and the power of eloquence. At its heart lies a beloved hunting dog, a family's quest for justice, and a closing argument so powerful that it has echoed through generations. This article explores the full narrative of **The Trial Of Old Drum**, from its humble beginnings in rural Missouri to its enduring legacy as a cornerstone of animal law and a testament to the bond between humans and their canine companions.

The Background: A Dispute Over a Dog in Rural Missouri

To understand **The Trial Of Old Drum**, one must first appreciate the setting. In 1869, the rural landscape of Johnson County, Missouri, was a place where a man's livelihood often depended on his livestock and his land. Charles Burden and his uncle, Leonidas Hornsby, were prosperous farmers living in close proximity. Their relationship, however, was strained by a recurring problem: stray dogs. Hornsby, who raised sheep, had grown frustrated with dogs roaming his property and threatening his flock. Like many farmers of the era, he issued a standing order: any dog found on his land without its owner could be shot.

Charles Burden owned a black and tan hound named Old Drum. This was no ordinary dog. Old Drum was renowned throughout the county as a superior hunting dog, celebrated for his intelligence, endurance, and loyalty. Burden valued Old Drum not just as a pet but as a working partner, a companion on countless hunting expeditions that put food on the family table. For Burden, Old Drum was irreplaceable.

The conflict reached its tragic peak on the night of October 28, 1869. Old Drum had wandered from the Burden property, as dogs were wont to do. According to the evidence presented later, the dog was not threatening any livestock. Nevertheless, he was found on or near the Hornsby property, and a farmhand named Dick Ferguson, acting on Hornsby's orders, shot and killed the dog. The news devastated Charles Burden. For him, the killing of Old Drum was not the lawful dispatch of a nuisance animal; it was the malicious destruction of a beloved family member and a valuable asset.

The Legal Battle Begins: A Case of Principle

Burden was determined to seek justice. He filed a lawsuit against Hornsby, seeking damages for the loss of his dog. The case was initially heard before a justice of the peace, who ruled in Burden's favor, awarding him $50. Hornsby, equally determined not to pay, appealed the decision. The case then moved to the Johnson County Circuit Court, where it was assigned to be heard before a jury.

The Trial Of Old Drum was deceptively simple: what was the value of the dog? Under the common law of the time, a dog was generally considered personal property, no different from a piece of furniture or a farm tool. The measure of damages, therefore, was the dog's market value. However, Burden and his lawyers sought to argue for something more: the dog's special qualities, his unique relationship with his owner, and the emotional harm caused by his loss.

To make this case, Burden needed exceptional legal representation. He found it in the form of George Graham Vest, a prominent Missouri attorney and future United States Senator. Vest was known for his forensic skills and his ability to connect with juries. He understood that this case was about more than just money; it was about the principle that a dog is not just property but a living being deserving of respect and protection under the law.

The Trial: A Clash of Wills in the Courtroom

The trial itself was a heated affair. The courtroom in Warrensburg was packed with spectators, many of whom were local farmers and townspeople who had known both Burden and Hornsby for years. The atmosphere was tense, divided between those who sided with the sheep farmer's right to protect his flock and those who mourned the loss of a beloved hunting dog.

The prosecution, representing Hornsby, presented its case on the basis of property law. They argued that a dog was a chattel, and that its value could be determined by its market price. They produced witnesses who testified to Old Drum's hunting abilities, perhaps hoping to limit the damages to a reasonable sum. Their strategy was to keep the case narrow, focused on the letter of the law, and to avoid any appeals to sentiment.

The defense, led by George Graham Vest, took a different approach. While acknowledging the legal framework, Vest sought to broaden the jury's understanding of what was at stake. He called witnesses who spoke not just of Old Drum's hunting prowess but of his character, his loyalty, and his place in the Burden family. These testimonies painted a picture of a dog that was more than an asset; he was a friend.

The turning point of the trial came during the closing arguments. After the evidence was presented, the judge instructed the jury on the law. The verdict seemed all but certain to favor Lee Hornsby, whose legal position was technically sound. It was at this moment that George Vest rose to deliver what would become the most famous closing argument in American legal history.

The Eulogy of the Dog: A Masterpiece of Oratory

George Graham Vest did not deliver a traditional legal summation. Instead, he offered a eulogy. His address to the jury, now known universally as the "Eulogy of the Dog," was a spontaneous and deeply felt tribute to the unique bond between humans and their canine companions. Lasting only a few minutes, its words have resonated for over 150 years.

Vest began by acknowledging that his client's case rested on the value of the dog. But then, he pivoted. He argued that the true value of a dog could not be measured in dollars and cents. He spoke of a dog's unparalleled loyalty, a devotion that transcends wealth, status, and even life itself. He contrasted the unconditional love of a dog with the fickle nature of human relationships, noting that a dog remains by its master's side in poverty, in sickness, and in death, asking for nothing but a kind word or a gentle touch.

The most famous passage from Vest's eulogy is a solemn declaration of a dog's virtue:

"The one absolutely unselfish friend that man can have in this selfish world, the one that never deserts him, the one that never proves ungrateful or treacherous, is his dog."

Vest continued, painting a vivid picture of a dog's fidelity: "A man's dog stands by him in prosperity and in poverty, in health and in sickness. He will sleep on the cold ground, where the wintry winds blow and the snow drives fiercely, if only he may be near his master's side. He will kiss the hand that has no food to offer; he will lick the wounds and sores that come in encounters with the roughness of the world. He guards the sleep of his

pauper master as if he were a prince."

The eulogy concluded with a powerful contrast: "When the last scene of all comes, and death takes his master in its embrace, and his body is laid away in the cold ground, no matter if all other friends pursue their way, there by the graveside will the noble dog be found, his head between his paws, his eyes sad but open in alert watchfulness, faithful and true even in death."

The effect on the jury was immediate and profound. The courtroom was silent, with many jurors and spectators openly weeping. Vest had transformed a mundane property dispute into a moral drama about loyalty, love, and loss. The jury was moved beyond the technicalities of the law.

The Verdict and Its Immediate Aftermath

After hearing Vest's eulogy, the jury returned a verdict in favor of Charles Burden. They awarded him $50 in damages, the same amount as the original ruling. However, the value of the verdict went far beyond the monetary award. By finding for Burden, the jury had implicitly recognized that Old Drum was more than just property. They had validated the deep emotional bond between a man and his dog.

Hornsby, still dissatisfied, appealed the case to the Supreme Court of Missouri. The appellate court, however, upheld the jury's verdict. In its opinion, the court focused on the technical legal issues, finding no error in the trial proceedings. The Supreme Court did not comment directly on Vest's eulogy, but by affirming the verdict, they allowed it to stand as a matter of law.

The immediate aftermath of **The Trial Of Old Drum** was a mix of celebration and continued debate. Charles Burden had his vindication. George Graham Vest had his masterpiece. The case became a local legend, passed down through generations in Johnson County. But its influence was only just beginning.

The Enduring Legacy of the Case

The legacy of **The Trial Of Old Drum** is multifaceted and profound. First and foremost, it is a landmark in the field of animal law. While the case did not immediately change the legal status of animals, it planted a seed. Vest's eulogy articulated a philosophy that animals, particularly companion animals, possess an inherent value that transcends their market price. This idea has influenced countless subsequent cases involving animal cruelty, wrongful death of pets, and the recognition of animals as sentient beings.

The "Eulogy of the Dog" itself has become one of the most famous and frequently quoted pieces of American oratory. It has been reproduced in books, recited at funerals for pets, and used in legal arguments around the world. It stands as a timeless tribute to the loyalty of dogs and a reminder of the moral obligations that humans have towards the animals that share their lives.

In 1958, the citizens of Warrensburg, Missouri, erected a bronze statue of Old Drum on the lawn of the Johnson County Courthouse. The statue, which depicts the hound in a proud stance, bears a plaque with excerpts from Vest's eulogy. It serves as a physical reminder of the trial and its enduring message. A second statue was later placed at the Missouri State Capitol.

The case has also inspired legal scholarship and advocacy. It is frequently cited in law review articles and textbooks on animal law. Organizations dedicated to animal welfare often invoke the spirit of **The Trial Of Old Drum** when arguing for greater legal protections for pets. The case has become a symbol of the idea that the law should reflect the deep emotional bonds that exist between humans and their animals.

The Trial Of Old Drum in Popular Culture

The story of **The Trial Of Old Drum** has permeated American popular culture. It has been the subject of books, including both historical accounts and fictionalized adaptations. In 2000, a made-for-television film titled "The Trial of Old Drum" was produced, starring Randy Quaid and Kaitlyn Carter. The film brought the story to a new

generation, dramatizing the events of the trial and the emotional power of Vest's eulogy.

The eulogy itself is often read at memorial services for pets and has been adapted into countless poems and speeches. It is a staple of public speaking courses and is studied as an example of persuasive rhetoric. The phrase "the one absolutely unselfish friend" has entered the cultural lexicon as a shorthand for the unique loyalty of dogs.

Visitors to Warrensburg, Missouri, can explore the Old Drum statue and learn about the trial at the Johnson County Historical Society. The case remains a point of local pride, celebrated annually with events that honor the memory of Old Drum and the eloquence of George Graham Vest.

Conclusion

The Trial Of Old Drum is far more than a footnote in legal history. It is a powerful story about the intersection of law, emotion, and the human-animal bond. The case demonstrated that justice is not always a matter of cold legal formulas; it can also be a matter of the heart. George Graham Vest's eulogy gave voice to a truth that countless people have always known: a dog is not a thing, but a friend, a protector, and a member of the family.

The trial's legacy endures in every courtroom where a pet's value is recognized beyond its market price, in every statue that honors a faithful companion, and in every heart that has been touched by the unconditional love of a dog. Old Drum

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