



Photo/Bill Bresler

by MIKE BRUDENELL

Christmas can be merry for parakeets, piranhas and pack rats, but for a mutt on the run, it's just another day.

While some of us take Christmas for granted, or don't give two hoots about the festivities, it's a season of contrast for the animal world.

Some have it good; others haven't much to crow about.

Stangely enough, our departed pals are probably the best remembered and treated pets around Christmastime. What other animals get flowers and a thick, warm blanket as gifts, as well as a prayer or two for good measure?

If you don't believe people go to these lengths to show they still care, just drive past the VPS Pet Cemetery in Romulus on Christmas Day and you'll probably be in for a shock. Of course, it's all in a day's work for the cemetery's director, Mary Van Der Werken.

"A COUPLE OF hundred people paying a visit to their old friends doesn't surprise me," she said. "Anyone who really loved an animal knows how much its death means. They come here at Christmas to bring flowers, do a little repair work to the graves, and maybe spend some time with their thoughts in the chapel."

Ms. Van Der Werken said most of the visitors to the cemetery are elderly citizens who have lost a longtime friend. "But there are a few younger people who pay their respects, too," she said.

And what about those blankets which are so popular with the mourners at VPS? Well, they cost \$10 a piece and sell like hotcakes.

"We generally sell about 900-1,000 during the Christmas season," said Ms. Van Der Werken. "People like to put them on the graves."

CHRISTMAS, HOWEVER, is a time for celebrating the beginning of life, and what a romp it can be for pups and kittens which find themselves the objects of tiny, inquisitive hands on Christmas morning.

Pet shops everywhere do a roaring trade at Christmas, and dogs and cats are generally considered the wisest purchases. But it can also be relocation time for tropical fish, lizards, hamsters, gerbils, and even tarantulas.

Animals, many think, make the ideal Christmas gift.

It's a dog's life

Yet Kathy Blauet, shelter manager of the Michigan Humane Society's Westland Kindness Center, isn't so sure. In fact, she insists on a screen test for anyone who is looking for a bargain-priced pet for the kids at Christmas, or any other time of the year.

"WE DON'T recommend giving live pets as gifts," said Mrs. Blauet. "The person receiving the gift doesn't always want it, and this leads to the animal being mistreated or abandoned on some occasions."

"Some children don't know how to handle a pet . . . they're too young or afraid. And there is a lot of stress placed on the animal. Christmastime can be hectic, with people running around. A dog, for instance, could chew through a Christmas tree electric cord and nobody would notice."

Although Mrs. Blauet says there is about a 50 percent increase in requests for animals from the center during Christmas, she isn't impressed by the enthusiasm to provide a stray or abandoned dog or cat with a home.

"I think people should give it plenty of thought before coming here. It's not just a cute idea to adopt an animal at Christmas — it's a long-term commitment."

Among other questions asked by the center before it will consider a request are:

- Does your lease allow pets?
- Is there a yard available?
- Do you have a veterinarian?
- Does anyone suffer from allergies to pets?
- Do you own your own home?

But considering the hassles of adopting a pet to give to someone at Christmas, it is done regularly and with a certain amount of success.

EVEN THE DOGCATCHER — or animal control officer as the job is known now — can get caught up in the Christmas spirit.

John Solphis, assistant animal warden in Westland, isn't any exception. "Officially, there's no holiday for stray dogs, but I like to give anyone a break at Christmas."

There are those, many think, who take their pets too seriously. What person in his right mind buys his pet gifts at Christmas or invites his dog or cat to share a sumptuous dinner?

But a lot of people are willing to stick their necks out for animals during December — and spend a considerable amount of money on them.

Speaking of sticking necks out, one place that upholds the holiday tradition is Ropertis Turkey Farm in Livonia.

"We prepare and slaughter about 1,000 birds for Christmas," said manager Christine Ropertis.

And how do the birds feel about it? "They don't know what's going on."

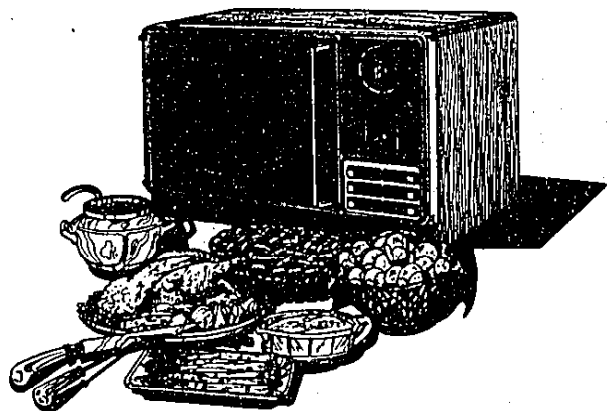
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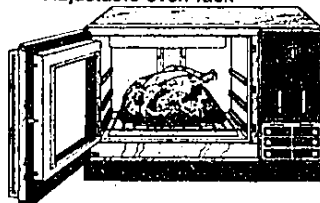
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