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A cruel jungle tale in Richmond

Published January 13, 2005

Her agency's Web site makes clear Illinois Treasurer Judy Baar Topinka's soft spot for animals. The site includes a link called "Treasured Pets Program," which has found homes for 129 dogs and cats.

Topinka's latest crusade involves far larger critters--12 elephants owned by Hawthorn Corp. and kept at a farm in the McHenry County town of Richmond, amid evidence of abuse and neglect.

Last year this sad tale seemed headed for a happy ending when the owner agreed to surrender the animals. But the majority of the herd remains in Richmond, while the federal bureaucratic gears grind on. How long will it take for the U.S. Department of Agriculture to take decisive action and enforce federal animal protection regulations?

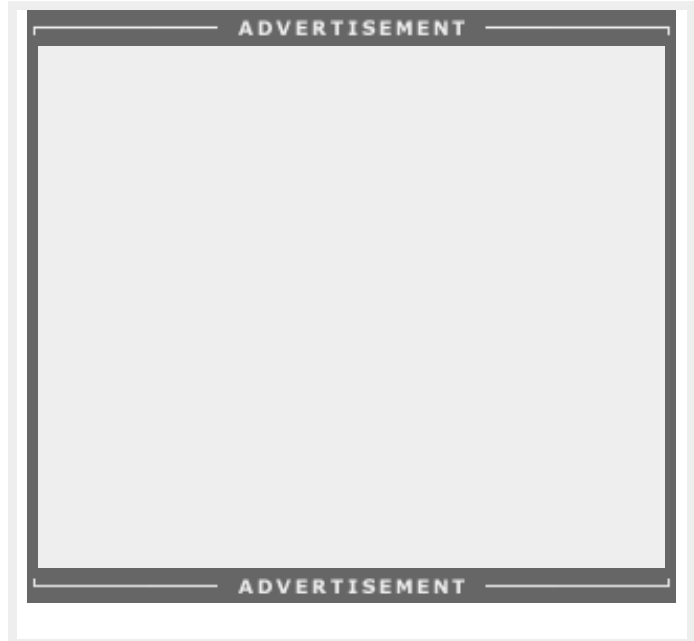
At the center of the case is Lake County millionaire John Cuneo Jr., head of Hawthorn Corp., which rents out elephants and tigers to circuses and other entertainment venues from Hawaii to Puerto Rico. Hawthorn's record in handling the elephants is filled with charges of shocking mishaps, cruelty and neglect.

In 1994, Tyke, a 21-year-old female that had been rented to a circus in Hawaii, went berserk during a performance and trampled its handler to death. She took off for downtown Honolulu, where she was shot to death by police. The incident triggered 93 lawsuits.

Animal rights activists blamed Cuneo for Tyke's behavior because the elephants were chained most of the time. According to a USDA report, in 2001 two touring elephants charged through a window into the World Life Church in Charlotte, N.C. Two church members allegedly were nearly trampled.

In addition to these mishaps, USDA has brought several cases against Hawthorn for abuse, neglect and improper care, under the federal Animal Welfare Act. The USDA list of violations reads like a horror story of a dozen animals suffering from infections, malnutrition, skin lesions and other abuse. Last year, Cuneo surrendered three elephants, Misty, Lota and Delhi, to the Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee.

Carol Buckley, executive director of the sanctuary, says the pathetic state of the three animals



illustrates conditions at Hawthorn. Misty and Lota were infected with the human strain of tuberculosis, which in time could have killed them. Lota was 4,000 pounds underweight--a fully grown elephant weighs in at about 10,000 pounds and lives as long as 70 years--and suffered from infections and painfully overgrown toenails. Delhi limped from chemical burns she suffered in one foot.

Throughout this process, Cuneo has maintained that USDA officials were conspiring with "animal activists" to take his elephants.

Last March, the USDA and Cuneo entered into a consent decision to settle the litany of abuse charges. Hawthorn admitted 19 violations of the Animal Welfare Act, paid a \$200,000 civil penalty and agreed to surrender the entire herd of elephants by Aug. 15 to people qualified to take care of them. Cuneo says the agreement gave his firm the right to pick where the elephants would go; an official from USDA's Animal Plant Health Inspection Service says that is not so.

Hawthorn failed to meet the deadline and, two days later, filed motions to vacate the consent decision. Since then, the case has been caught in bureaucratic tail-chasing over whether Hawthorn's license to keep and exhibit animals should be revoked. In November another elephant died, leaving 12 in the herd. The Tennessee sanctuary has offered to take them, if Hawthorn gives them up.

USDA says it continues to conduct unannounced inspections of the Hawthorn menagerie, to be sure that the animals are receiving proper care. The agency needs to get off its bureaucratic fanny and finally find a safe home for these grand but vulnerable animals.

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