

Protecting Hollywood's animal stars

By MAURA REYNOLDS

LOS ANGELES (AP) "Jesse James" was being filmed in 1939. A stuntman rode a horse off a 21-meter cliff into raging white water. The stuntman lived. The horse did not.

The American Humane Association reacted to the animal's death by establishing a Hollywood office dedicated to tracking the welfare of animals in the entertainment industry.

Five decades later, animal rights activists say the AHA has lost sight of its purpose, and even accepts money from the industry it claims to monitor.

According to court documents obtained by The Associated Press, the AHA has received regular donations over the years from several industry groups, including the Motion Picture Association of America.

"The relationship between the AHA and the industry certainly presents the appearance of a conflict of interest," says Nancy Burnet, who heads the Coalition to Protect Animals in Entertainment. "I think it's unethical of them to accept money from the people they are supposed to be watching."

AHA officials say the arguments are groundless.

"There is absolutely no amount of money in the world that would allow me to allow anyone to harm an animal," says AHA staffer Barbara Sand.

She suggests the issue can be seen as a conflict between activists for animal welfare and activists for animal rights. While the AHA works to protect animal welfare, she says, others would prefer that animals never be used in entertainment.

Such groups as People for the Ethical Treatment of Ani-

mals have stated that using animals for human entertainment is exploitative — a charge that has gained some following among Hollywood activists.

"Animals don't have careers," says Burnet. "Animals don't have any choice."

More and more animals are being turned into movie stars. In 1988, animals appeared in only 10 percent of all film productions. Six years later, with shrinking production budgets and a demand for family films, they can be found in about 50 percent, the AHA said.

Movies such as "Free Willy," about a boy and a killer whale, and "Beethoven," about a family and a St. Bernard, have proved to be box-office successes.

But the warm, cuddly feeling inspired by animal movies can mask a harsher truth, some contend.

"Things are not as rosy as they would lead the public to believe," Burnet said.

The latest dispute centers on last winter's Disney movie "Iron Will."

The film tells the story of a 17-year-old who sets out to save the family farm and earn money for university by winning a \$10,000 dog-sled race. At one point in the movie, one of his dogs fights with a dog from a rival team.

When the scene was filmed last year in Minnesota, one of the dogs was injured, receiving a cut under his eyelid that was mended with stitches.

The trainers on the set bristle with irritation when asked about the incident. For them, the injury was a rare accident, the kind of thing that happens from time to time even with the best of precautions.

"We've never had an accident before," says Joe Camp,

"Iron Will" head trainer. "I'm really upset with the animal-training community. They are taking an incident that is very small and are making it much larger."

As Camp explains it, the two dogs were trained separately to wrestle. One was taught to assume the dominant position, and the other to assume a submissive position. As a precaution, the dogs' mouths were bound with a plastic strap that prevented them from biting each other.

Camp calls it a "simulated" dog fight. But other trainers disagree.

"That's not a fake fight," says trainer Clint Rowe, whose recent credits include scenes in "Wolf" and "Lassie."

"It's very real to the dogs," he said.

Rowe says it doesn't matter to the dogs if they are wearing a string muzzle. They are still in a physical and emotional state of agitation and fear. The "Iron Will" accident only proves the argument that the method is inhumane.

Rowe prefers a technique called "play fighting," in which two dogs who like each other are trained to rough-house on command. Rowe says the dogs think they are playing, but with the right camera angles and editing, it can look on screen like a vicious battle. It is a technique Rowe used on the highly acclaimed Disney film "White Fang."

The AHA has not taken a position on muzzled fights. Los Angeles director Betty Denny Smith says the organization's guidelines require dog fights to be "simulated," but does not prefer one technique over another.