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PRAGMATISM, PROFESSIONALIZATION, AND PRIVATIZATION IN THE  
ADMINISTRATION OF THE MEMPHIS ZOO, 1906-2016

by

Rita M. Hall

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Major: History

The University of Memphis

May 2016

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## **Dedication**

To the people of the City of Memphis,  
who love their city but too often forget its history

## Acknowledgments

I alone conceived and composed this dissertation, but doing so and living to tell about it without question took a village, for whom I will be eternally grateful. First and foremost I would like to thank my wise and interested dissertation committee members Dr. Beverly G. Bond, Dr. James Fickle, and Dr. Leslie Luebbers, and especially my committee Chairman, Dr. Charles W. Crawford, whose unwavering excitement for this project kept me going through many long hours of slogging through archives and sources. Those hours were made much less tedious through the dedicated professionalism of the staff of the History Department at the Memphis Public Library and Information Center; many thanks to Wayne Dowdy, Verjeana Hunt, Gina Cordell, Robert Cruthirds, Marilyn Umphress, and Chip Holliday. I was disappointed to find little information available at the Shelby County Archives, but I nonetheless thank Vincent Clark for thought-provoking discussions and Frank Stewart for giving me all that he had on hand with apologies that it wasn't more, but particularly for his fascinating, funny stories of unreported human-animal encounters during zoo acquisitions he personally witnessed. At the University of Memphis Special Collections Department, my friend Brigitte Billeaudeau has for years listened, brainstormed, and shared vital resources at a moment's notice. She is my superhero. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Chuck Brady at the Memphis Zoo, whose interest in this project encouraged me and unlocked the doors to materials I might not otherwise have known about, and to Laura Doty, the zoo's Marketing and Communications Manager, who literally opened those doors to the archive for me and was always gracious even when hundreds of schoolchildren demanded her attention at the same time.

To my supporters and colleagues in the University of Memphis History Department, I extend my thanks for your interest in my project and your support in general. Without the trust Dr. Jim Blythe, Dr. Dan Unowsky, and the Graduate Studies Committee over the years have continually shown by regularly rehiring me as a graduate teaching assistant, I would have been unable to attend in the first place, much less could I have afforded the time to research and write such an ambitious project. I want to thank Andrew Shilling and Daniel Smith, whose insights into Egyptian history were invaluable early on, as was their perhaps misguided willingness to find my work-in-progress far more fascinating than reading Hegel. Discussions with Troy Hallsell, whose work on Overton Park overlaps my own research, have been, I hope, mutually beneficial. Dr. Nancy Parrish provided invaluable insights as she read through first the trickle and then the onslaught of chapter drafts—Nancy, you are a wealth of wisdom and words cannot express my gratitude. Karen Bradley and Karen Jackett have always kept me in line and clear on the expectations. Thank you, ladies. You are what keeps the department running, and most (if not all) of us couldn't function without your knowledge and support. Jenni Nettleton, though not a historian, is the primary reason I made it here in the first place; thanks for not letting me give up on myself or settle for “close enough”!

Although I had originally envisioned this project to be built upon a plethora of oral history interviews, in reality the untouched archival sources were so overwhelming that only three brief telephone calls contributed materially to the finished product. Jay Brown of the Northwest Tattoo Museum provided invaluable and otherwise unobtainable insights into Memphis's own tattooed man, “Professor”/Superintendent N. J. Melroy. Although a discussion with Connie Wadlington Douglass disproved the erroneously

printed idea that she was the zoo's first female zookeeper, it proved to be extremely helpful in many other ways, too. Finally, a brief fact-checking exercise led to a chat with Larry Thompson of Memorial Park Cemetery that was not only mutually informative, but also suggestive of new avenues of inquiry I hope to pursue in the near future.

Finally, I must thank profusely both my “upline” and my “downline.” To Mom, whose enduring support is endless, who finds everything I write fascinating and enjoyable—great praise from one of the smartest women I know, who doesn't hand out kudos lightly!—thanks just doesn't cover it. Leland, your incredible encyclopedic knowledge, as always, has been quick at hand to debate or dissect just about any musing or serious question I could throw your way. Dad, by reminding me that taking care is still priority one, you have wordlessly kept me humble while I climbed the ivory tower. Carolyn, thanks so much for making time, listening patiently, advising wisely, and always, always encouraging me. My children, Victoria and Nick Thornton and Melanie Hall, I know you enjoyed turning the tables on me, reminding *me* to tend to *my* homework—I'm glad you've learned the lesson that it's more fun to play when you don't feel guilty for not doing what you should be doing instead. Now, let's play!

Finally, to my “mainline,” my long-suffering Matt, who knew and didn't know at the same time what he was getting himself into when he married me thirteen years ago. Thank you for the meals I would have missed, for the moments of relaxation and fun I would have deprived myself of, for steadfastly keeping a roof overhead while I did what I had to do, and for so very much more. You've been my rock and my shelter from the storm of insanity. The nest is empty, the assignments are done, the dissertation is finished, so here's to some quality time building on the foundation we've laid.

## **Abstract**

Hall, Rita M., Ph.D. The University of Memphis. May, 2016. Pragmatism, Professionalization, and Privatization in the Administration of the Memphis Zoo, 1906-2016. Major Professor: Dr. Charles W. Crawford.

The Memphis Zoo was founded in 1906 and has developed over the past 110 years through three distinctive administrative paradigms. This paper examines the power structures in a semi-biographical, top-down historical approach to seek answers as to why the zoo developed in the ways that it did. The earliest superintendents were pragmatic choices by the Park Commission, selected for their availability, willingness, and interest in or experience with wild animals. Many of them gained this experience through circus work, lending a showmanship air to the presentation of the zoo in its first several decades. The opening of higher education possibilities to veterans following World War II contributed to a trend of professionalization through combined qualifications of related education and experience. Accordingly, the expectations of zoos as learning environs rather than merely recreational venues increased as the educational turn resulted in the rise of the closed system for staff and the diffusion of knowledge to visitors. Simultaneously, the Memphis Zoo joined other zoos in establishing conservation of species as a primary mission as more highly educated staff began to use the zoo as a laboratory for scientific study, a field for anthropological and sociological study, and a basis for scholarly publication. From the public perspective, though, the Memphis Zoo remained a tourist attraction more so than a classroom, and the zoo accordingly incorporated into its mission meeting the expectations of the public. A long-standing realization that the country's top zoos were made so through the support of a strong zoological society led to the most recent iteration of the Memphis Zoo as a privatized,



multi-million dollar institution and attraction. This paper examines not only the evolution of the zoo through these phases, but considers the implications of operating a public space as a business, replacing its long history with “living history” memorials to financial supporters and its respect for that history with a profit motive. The historical evolution of the Memphis Zoo and its potential future direction raise the questions: to whom does the zoo “belong,” and what does that suggest for its potential?

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## **Introduction**

### **Pragmatism, Professionalization, and Privatization in the Memphis Zoo**

This paper is a first academic look at the development of the Memphis Zoo, particularly in terms of the various administrators, managerial paradigms, and operational hierarchies responsible for its first 110 years of growth. To date, the only historical literature pertaining to the Zoo are a handful of catalogs, souvenir books, and guide books published by the Memphis Park Commission for sale or distribution to visitors, and a pictorial history compiled and written by Memphian Robert W. Dye. Through careful analysis of nearly a century's worth of Park Commission minutes and newspaper articles, this paper attempts to extract the major developmental processes that shaped the Zoo while considering how the backgrounds of the various administrators reflected and reinforced three major managerial trends. From a half century of pragmatism in the selection of suitable zoo superintendents, through the professionalization trend beginning in the mid-century, to the privatization that has most dramatically changed the face of the Zoo since the mid-1980s, this study aims to open new avenues of inquiry into the historical democratization of one of Memphis' most treasured public spaces.

This project arose from a lifelong interest in the Memphis Zoo, coupled with the surprising discovery that no extensive history of this institution had been attempted. Growing up just four blocks from the zoo, attending Snowden School directly across North Parkway from the zoo's northern fence line, and visiting the zoo regularly (including every possible behind-the-scenes opportunity) with two schoolmates whose fathers were zoo keepers made this project rise above all other options as a natural intellectual extension of lived experience. For many zoo visitors, zoos are ahistorical.

They exist as they are in the present, and fascination with the animals and, increasingly, with the immersive quality of the exhibits themselves, occupies the attention and keeps the visitor in the moment. But all zoos have a history that exists beyond the boundaries of nostalgia and memory, if one cares to search for it. One purpose of this paper is to make that search easier for future researchers who will, hopefully, find plenty of areas for further study into the processes that make a zoo and the public and private intersections that make it personal.

The Memphis Zoo is not old in comparison to some American zoos, but neither is it new. It is more than thirty years younger than America's oldest zoo in Philadelphia, which began to organize in 1859 but did not open until 1874. It has been modeled after and served as a model for the construction and renovation of other American zoos and exhibits. Trends both positive and negative have shaped its forms, functions, and public meanings across the traditional intersections of race, class, and gender. As a living collections museum, it has grappled with the same questions as other, more traditional museums. Questions of mission and purpose, funding, ethics, maintaining interest, security (of collections and personal safety), and balancing capacity and attendance are as important to zoos as they are to museums. Yet this study will show that the answers to these questions have evolved and changed over time in response to shifting paradigms about the role of zoos, the ethics of animal captivity, and the cultural, educational, and recreational significance of the zoo.

The archeological record suggests that mankind's efforts to manage and display wildlife extends thousands of years into the past in such diverse regions and cultures as China, Egypt, India, and Assyria. The practice spread throughout the Roman Empire and

across the European continent in the centuries leading to the Age of Discovery. In America, practical issues of establishing an independent nation preempted any early ideas about establishing zoos until 1859, but the Civil War forestalled any immediate action. Only during the Reconstruction Era, where it overlapped with the fledgling Progressive Movement, did the American zoo finally emerge. Then, as now, the development of zoos in America—either individually or collectively—was primarily a matter of progress rather than one of history. The philosophical examination of zoos remained for the rising second generation of zoo-goers to ponder.

Roscoe Guernsey, a doctoral candidate at Johns Hopkins University in 1901, opened the discussion of the human-animal-environmental triad with his dissertation, “The Greek Views of the Influence of Environment Upon Men and Animals.” Another decade would pass before Hugh S.R. Elliott and A.G. Thacker released *Beasts and Men: Being Carl Hagenbeck’s Experiences for Half a Century Among Wild Animals*, introducing the German animal man who would most influence the design of American zoo exhibits for the next century. For the next half century, little was written relative to zoos apart from the occasional pamphlet printed with the dual aim of raising revenue and educating the public about a particular zoo’s collections. John Patrick Diggins, in *The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority* (1994), distills the philosophy of American pragmatism down to that which “advises us to try whatever promises to work and proves to be useful as the mind adjusts to the exigencies of events.” This appears to have been the guiding principle of the first several decades of building the Memphis Zoo, although it is but subtly reflected in the scant literature produced for the Zoo. The 1908 *Catalogue of The Memphis Zoo at Overton Park* proved

more informative about local commercial support for the zoo than it was about the small but growing collection of animals caged there. The 1937 *Souvenir View Book: Memphis Zoological Garden* was “Dedicated to animal lovers everywhere that enter its gates,” who could later turn back to the preponderance of photographs in this thirty-five cent booklet to remember the “noteworthy” advances the zoo had accomplished throughout the Great Depression and New Deal eras. These documents only hinted at the pragmatic issues of organizing a menagerie, the challenges of maintaining animals and suitable exhibits, and striking a balance between knowledge, authority, and presentation.<sup>1</sup>

The *Memphis Zoological Garden Souvenir Zoo Guide* (1955) exhibits the civic sentiment of that era by beginning its visual tour of the zoo with an introduction to the political and management hierarchy responsible for the zoo. City Mayor Frank Tobey’s photograph stands alone above the smaller band of photographs of the members of the Memphis Park Commission. General Superintendent of Parks H.S. Lewis is depicted below. The relative significance of the zoo’s first director (as opposed to the earlier “superintendents”) is suggested by the first and only appearance of his name and image on the twentieth page of this 35-page booklet. The text claims that the director’s most important task is “to keep the ever-changing collection of animals up-to-date.” Changes to exhibits “continue gradually,” but are not deemed worthy of discussion. Perhaps a remnant of pragmatism disinclined the writer(s) to consider the “buildings, cages, and pens” as anything more than a boring necessity. The balance of the book is comprised of photographs and general interest information about the various types of animals on

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<sup>1</sup> John Patrick Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 2; Memphis Park Commission, *Souvenir View Book – Memphis Zoological Garden* (Memphis: C. A. Davis Printing Co., Inc., 1937), 1.

display, a brief and incomplete history that ignores every development between 1909 and 1955, a pledge card for donations to the zoological society, and perhaps its most historically compelling feature, a two-page map. The map is notable for its rare reminder of the midcentury layout of the zoo and the preponderance of attractions geared toward the Baby Boom generation, like the “Kiddie Zoo,” “Circus Ring,” “Kiddie Land,” “Roto Whip,” merry-go-round, and “miniature railroad.” A true artifact of its era, the map even denotes the separate restroom facilities for “Colored” men and women. But as with the earlier versions of the zoo’s guide books, there is little real indication of the professional, educated management trend that was beginning to take root.<sup>2</sup>

By the 1960s, intellectuals finally turned their attention to zoos, their meanings and missions, and their pasts and futures. At the University of California at Berkeley in 1961, James F. Downs studied human-animal interactions in “Domestication: An Examination of the Changing Social Relationships of Men and Animals,” which was really less applicable to zoos and how visitors perceive and relate to animals than it might have been. Still, Downs’ work has informed some of Nerissa Russell’s views of *Social Zooarchaeology* (2006). Russell points out that for any animal to exist within close proximity to humans, a certain measure of taming is necessary to establish human dominance over the animals. Zoo animals, though not tamed, are “idealized as...representations of the wild” despite a necessary level of inurement to the proximity of humans in the ways that squirrels in a park or deer in the woods will tolerate the presence of people if present often enough. Few midcentury scholars addressed zoos

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<sup>2</sup> EMASSOC, *Souvenir Guide: Memphis Zoological Garden* (Memphis: EMASSOC, 1955), 4, 18-19, 20.

directly, though. In 1966, as the concept of strategic planning first began to blossom, Peter E. Kellogg of Texas Tech University considered a 60-year plan for “A Museum of Natural History and Redevelopment of the Albuquerque Zoo for the Year 2025 A.D.” Three years later, at Texas Christian University, Paul Pearce completed his masters’ work by looking 60 years into the past in “The Fort Worth Zoological Park: A Sixty-Year History, 1909-1969.” Pearce’s thesis may well be the first expansive written history of an American zoo.<sup>3</sup>

Lee S. Crandall was perhaps the most significant contributor to zoo literature in the 1960s. An ornithologist and General Curator of the Bronx Zoo, Crandall wrote *The Management of Wild Animals in Captivity* in 1964. The book proved to be a valuable resource to wild animal veterinarians and caretakers interested in the scientific and social details pertinent to an array of captive animals, but is of little use to the lay reader or historian. Crandall’s *A Zoo Man’s Notebook* (1966) corrected this deficiency, condensing the previous work into anecdotal discussions of acquisition, adjustment, breeding, care, and exhibition of zoo animals that appealed to the biologist as well as to the general wild animal enthusiast. The American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums sponsored William E. Meeker and William Hoff’s *Zoos and Aquariums in the Americas including Roster of Membership, Association History, Purposes and Objects* and Lawrence Curtis’ *Zoological Park Fundamentals*, both in 1968. These added to the professional literature but also proved that the history of zoos remained an academic exercise.

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<sup>3</sup> Nerissa Russell, *Social Zooarcheology: Humans and Animals in Prehistory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 13, 266-267.



It wasn't until the 1970s that scholars really began to embrace the potential diversity of academic inquiry in regard to zoos. In 1971, David Hancocks explored the intersection of *Animals and Architecture*, while in 1974 two studies emerged examining the intersections of horticulture and zoology (*Plants in the Zoo: Their Use and Interpretation*, by Richard G. Turner) and the question of "place" in the human-captive animal dynamic (Bernard Livingston's *Zoo: Animals, People, Places*). Livingston's book was one of the first to address the issue of captive breeding on a readable level. The growth of research and captive breeding programs in the late 1970s set the stage for the flood of scientific reports that would issue from the Memphis Zoo in the coming decades. The January 1977 edition of *International Zoo Yearbook* featured Don Anderson's findings regarding the "Gestation period of Geoffroy's cat *Leopardus Geoffroyi* bred at Memphis Zoo." But for the purposes of this study, it is far more significant that two more historical studies appeared in this period. In 1974, William A. Austin and the Detroit Zoological Society published *The First Fifty Years: An Informal History of the Detroit Zoological Park and the Detroit Zoological Society*. Three years later, Judith Spraul-Schmidt published her more tightly constrained thesis, "The Late Nineteenth Century City and Its Cultural Institutions: The Cincinnati Zoological Garden, 1873-1898."

Throughout the 1980s, more scholarly attention was given to the history and significance of the zoo as an institution. London Zoological Society President Lord Zuckerman released *Great Zoos of the World: Their Origins and Significance* in 1980, providing a broad global perspective. The significance of zoo architecture was one topic of Diane Maddex's 1985 book *Built in the U.S.A.: American Buildings from Airports to Zoos*. The same year, two microhistories told the stories of the *Yellowhouse Canyon*

*Zoological Park, Lubbock County, Texas* and of a beloved East Tennessee lion in *A House for Joshua: The Building of the Knoxville Zoo*. Academic studies grew more diverse than ever. Michael Dean Phillips examined the digital management of American zoo animals in “A Systems Analysis of Exotic Animal Inventory Management in American Zoos: A Data Base Query Language in Application with the International Species Inventory System (ISIS)” in 1982. In 1986, Barbara Ann Birney explored cultural institutions as extensions of the classroom in “A Comparative Study of Children’s Perceptions and Knowledge of Wildlife and Conservation As They Relate to Field Trip Experiences at the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History and the Los Angeles Zoo.” In 1988, Lee McMaster provided “An Historical Perspective of Landscape Design in the Development of American Zoos,” and James Arthur Sellers considered attrition among cultural guides in his study of the “Dropout of Volunteer Teachers (Docents) in Zoos and Natural History Museums.” At the close of the decade, William Woodford Snowden’s “Bourgeois Cultural Influence at Work: The Zoos at Berlin and London” examined the social divide in two of the world’s most famous zoos while Annette Angela Rounseville explored zoological park evolution in “The Changing Role of Zoos: The Latest Metamorphosis, the San Diego Wild Animal Park.”

By the beginning of the privatization era, studies of and books about zoos focused less on the practical considerations of zoo management, construction, and programming and more on the people and animals who made them possible and necessary. Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar opened the dialogue of the decade with *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* in 1992. Stephen Bostock responded the following year with an eye toward the animals rather than the people in his book *Zoos*

*and Animal Rights: The Ethics of Keeping Animals*. Five years after the institution of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Mark A. Trieglaff undertook an “Assessment of Zoo and Aquarium Programs and Services for Visitors with Disabilities.” In 1996, R. J. Hoage and William A. Deiss’s *New Worlds, New Animals: From Menagerie to Zoological Park in the Nineteenth Century* addressed the early history of the National Zoological Park. But still the study of zoo history remained a predominantly scholarly pursuit. Theses and dissertations from 1996 to the end of the century tended toward the specific, rather than taking a broader approach. William Humphreys Hutcheson laid out the rise of a northern attraction in “Can We Have a Zoo in Boston?: The Gardens and Aquaria of the Boston Society of Natural History, 1887-1894” while Michele Alcaraz focused on the opposite shore with “Saving Wild Nature: An Environmental History of the San Diego Wild Animal Park.” Elizabeth Hanson’s doctoral dissertation, “Nature Civilized: A Cultural History of American Zoos, 1870-1940,” was one of the first to take a broad look at a zoo form that, in a sense, became endangered with the professionalization of the zoo and went extinct altogether with its privatization. Jeffrey Nugent Hyson examined the urban anthropology of zoos in “Urban Jungles: Zoos and American Society” as the century came to a close.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the study of history through the lens of the zoo has become much more common. Vernon Kisling’s *Zoo and Aquarium History: Ancient Animal Collections to Zoological Gardens* (2001) contributed a much-needed overview of the global development of the human-animal relationship. Hanson’s 1996 dissertation grew into the 2002 book *Animal Attractions: Nature on Display in American Zoos*, a useful study of the cultural and physical natures of the zoo as reflective of how Americans

understand their place in nature. Nigel Rothfels' *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo* (2002, 2008) is significant for placing the responsibility for the "American" open-enclosure design where it belongs, with Carl Hagenbeck and his German *Tierpark*. In 2010, Jesse Donahue and Erik Trump delivered an in-depth look at the challenges and successes of a nearly forgotten era in American zoo history. While Hanson and others have examined zoos in the early formative period, *American Zoos During the Depression: A New Deal for Animals* remains the only available secondary source on this critical formative period when aging American zoos of the first half of the twentieth century grew increasingly homogeneous. Vicki Croke's 2014 digital release of her 1997 book, *The Modern Ark: The Story of Zoos*, suffered from the same occasionally overemotional, journalistic tics that were present in the first edition, but even these are forgivable considering that zoos do indeed evoke emotional responses from visitors. Lisa Uddin's 2015 *Zoo Renewal: White Flight and the Animal Ghetto* is at times depressing and disturbing in its descriptions of "the naked cage," the neurotic responses of captive animals to their situation, and the surprisingly visceral reactions such scenarios can rouse in visitors.

But if the publication of zoo history has become more common and even more fractured, it has also become increasingly less stringent. When Satch Krantz, the only two-time president of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and president and CEO of Riverbanks Zoo and Garden in Columbia, South Carolina, penned the preface to his zoo's history in 2013, he boldly incorporated the caveat: "this book is not meant to be an exact history of Riverbanks Zoo and Garden." Granted, Krantz is a zoologist, not a historian, but the message is there: public appeal takes precedence over depth and accuracy when it

comes to writing the histories of zoos. Since its 2002 launch of *The Central Park Zoo*, Arcadia Publishing has produced thirteen pictorial histories of American zoos, including Robert W. Dye's *Memphis Zoo* (2015). Dye's book is useful as a work of public history published for its nostalgic value, and it serves that purpose well. The limitations of readily available sources make it less useful as a source of critical inquiry, however.<sup>4</sup>

But in all of this development of historical scholarship on zoos, one angle has been consistently overlooked. Scholars and authors and experts have examined the zoo from the perspective of the animal and of the visitor, through the architecture and horticulture and scientific and educational programs. No American zoo history to date examines the development of the zoo through its historical administrations. Why did American zoos develop in the ways that they did? How did the intellectual and labor paradigms of the past century contribute to the choices of zoo leadership, and how did those choices shape the direction of zoos in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? The administrative structures of the Memphis Zoo offer a vehicle for analytical consideration of these questions on the micro level, with the hope that similar perspectives applied at the macro level can offer some new insights into the history of American zoos.

Perhaps it is fortunate for this reason that the Memphis Park Commission was dissolved in 2000 under then-Mayor Willie Herenton; otherwise, the complete surviving records of this organization might not be accessible. This project draws heavily on the Memphis Park Commission Minute Books, which date from 1901 to early 2000. Especially for the zoo's earliest years, these records are the primary framework upon

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<sup>4</sup> Satch Krantz and Monique Jacobs, *Riverbanks Zoo and Garden: Forty Wild Years* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2013).

which a chapter is built. Through the Commission minutes, timelines of growth and development can be ascertained, as well as details regarding zoo management that are often obscured from public view. Examples include superintendent resignations, employee salaries, contract details for concessions and carnival rides and other attractions, and nearly forgotten “Jim Crow” attitudes toward visitors and staff. Of particular interest are the polite appeals by church groups and professional organizations for access to the zoo on unauthorized days, and the increasingly direct requests and demands for access that developed as the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum.

Other major primary sources this project relies upon are newspapers, professional journals, and genealogical resources. While the *Memphis World* and *Tri-State Defender*, both newspapers published by, for, and about the African American community are essentially silent on the Memphis Zoo, local mainstream Memphis newspapers *The Commercial Appeal* and the now-defunct *Press-Scimitar* have proven to be a wealth of information about the zoo’s public, animals, exhibits, finances, employees, and administrative paradigms. Unfortunately, like many newspapers, they have also proven to be a source of misinformation, inaccuracy, bias, and confusion as the competing papers vied to present the most popular version of newsworthy events. Other newspapers and journals from around the country, as well as census, military, and educational records when available, have supplied reasonably reliable leads for piecing together the biographical information on the various zoo leaders. Particularly in the earliest chapters, the deep connections between the Memphis Zoo’s staff and various circuses have made *The Billboard* supremely valuable in tracing not only people but also animals whose

circus careers ended at the gates of the zoo. Other insights have been extracted from early editions of the professional journal *Parks and Recreation* as well.

Although the “Great Man” philosophy of history has largely gone by the wayside, this project incorporates a top-down approach for two reasons. First, because no academic history of the Memphis Zoo exists, no examination of the visible historic power structures of the Zoo exists to enable an understanding of how and why the zoo developed the way it did. In fact, a number of the early administrators of the Zoo have been lost to history and memory altogether, and are here revived only because their names appear in the Park Commission Minute Books. In at least two cases, tenures were so brief that very little beyond the name can be derived from the available sources. These structures are important because, despite increasing strides toward democratization, zoos were and are *for* the people (and animals, of course) but have never been operated *by* the people, even when funded by municipalities. Second, an understanding of the family background and rearing environment, educational duration and focus, and pre-Zoo employment history can shed some light on why a director made the decisions he did in attempting to create or re-create the zoo during his tenure. Accordingly, the backgrounds of these men are as extensively researched as possible in the hope that the effort will convey whether each man was a product of or ahead of his time, as well as suggesting why the zoo developed along the lines that it did. The point is that the zoo did not organically and spontaneously evolve; its development was intentionally guided along certain paths and not others, directed by visionaries whose backgrounds shaped those visions, either directly or indirectly.

In describing these visionaries and their paths, three major stages of development have become clear. The first half century of the Memphis Zoo was the era of the “animal man,” and the earliest superintendents were hired for purely pragmatic reasons. They were experienced with animals and daring enough to take the risks inherent to working with wildlife. Most of these men had circus backgrounds, whether as animal handlers and trainers or as performers. Following World War II, greater access to higher education contributed greatly to the rise of the era of professionalization. The first “Director” (as opposed to the earlier title, “Superintendent”) was also the first and only “Zoo Man,” whose family, work and educational backgrounds all had centered on zoo management. From 1953 to the present, every succeeding director has been college educated in a field directly related to the job. Professionalization has trickled down, as well. By the 1970s, even the animal keepers increasingly held college degrees. Today, the zoo world is a closed credentialist system, one as difficult, or even impossible, to access without an advanced degree as academia or the corporate world.

It is from the corporate world that the third, current era of privatized zoo management has evolved. As the city of Memphis continued to expand in the last two decades of the twentieth century, administration of the zoo’s needs became increasingly bureaucratic and inefficient. A twenty-year delay in progress caused by a protracted legal battle to protect Overton Park and the Zoo from an unwanted interstate construction project primed local businessmen to raise the interest and the capital necessary to revive the neglected zoo. Under privatization, administrations at the Zoo have been longer and more stable than those of most of their predecessors. The first privatized administration was led by a businessman with no wild animal training whatsoever, with a separate



directorship handled by an animal expert. The second and current administrator, Dr. Chuck Brady, in some ways was as pragmatic a choice as was the first superintendent: he was available and willing to do the job. But he was also a zoo professional, with a doctorate in a related field and decades of practical experience. In stepping up to the presidency of the privatized Zoo in 2003, Brady became the first to achieve the trifecta of pragmatism and professionalization within the realm of privatization.

Zoos have been a part of civilization for eons. Until 2009, it was widely believed that the Theban Queen Hatasou “created the first known zoological gardens” during the Thirteenth Dynasty (1773-1650 BCE). An archaeological discovery in 2009 established that a much earlier “zoo” existed at Hierakonpolis, Egypt as early as 3500 BCE. Whether in response to a growing “fascination with exotic beasts,” or as displays of power and wealth, or in pursuit of knowledge, advanced societies have maintained wild animals for various reasons and in various ways at least since Tennessee’s forests were still inhabited by nomadic hunters.<sup>5</sup>

Chinese emperors beginning at least as long ago as the 14<sup>th</sup> Century BCE have maintained personal menageries on the grounds of their palaces and, later, within the confines of hunting parks. Indian princes utilized large carnivores and pachyderms for hunting, for harvesting valuable teak wood, and for warfare. Assyrian, Persian, and Babylonian royalty in the first millennium BCE used wild animals for various practical, aesthetic, and religious purposes. In the Mediterranean, domestication remained limited

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<sup>5</sup> Eric Baratay and Elisabeth Hardouin-Fugier, *Zoo: A History of Zoological Gardens in the West* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 17; Mark Rose, “World’s First Zoo – Hierakonpolis, Egypt,” *Archaeology: A Publication of the Archaeological Institute of America* 63, no. 1 (January/February 2010), [archive.archaeology.org/1001/topten/egypt.html](http://archive.archaeology.org/1001/topten/egypt.html) (accessed March 1, 2015).

to “birds, other fowl and monkeys” among the Greek and Roman elite until the time of Alexander the Great, who introduced a “taste for big cats and elephants” as marks of diplomatic strength.<sup>6</sup>

It was at Alexandria that the Greeks developed the concept of the menagerie as a democratic educational venue open to all. Alexander’s successor, Ptolemy I, constructed the first public zoo. The zoo at Alexandria was expanded under Ptolemy II and continued as one of several “centers for study and experimentation” for use by disciples of Aristotle and others “as part of their education.” It was this democratic push that eventually converted Rome’s elite menageries from private amusement arenas to public displays incorporating “circus games,” the prominent parading of captured pachyderms and carnivores.<sup>7</sup>

From the Roman Republic to the Holy Roman Empire, the “most important... monarchies, monasteries, and municipalities maintained animal collections.” Emperor Charlemagne’s menagerie was a result of tribute and homage, as other monarchs sent him animals as gifts. Following the Norman Invasion of 1066, William the Conqueror established a menagerie at his manor, where his son Henry I later “enlarged the collection, which included lions, leopards, lynx, camels, and an owl considered to be ‘rare’.” Henry III moved the family collection to the Tower of London in 1235. In England, Italy, France, and Spain, as well as in China and Africa and the Americas, the practice of keeping animals grew throughout the Middle Ages and the Age of Discovery.

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<sup>6</sup> Eric Baratay and Elisabeth Hardouin-Fugier, *Zoo*, 17-18.

<sup>7</sup> Deborah Noyes, *One Kingdom: Our Lives With Animals: The Human-Animal Bond in Myth, History, Science, and Story* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 22.

In time, wild and exotic animals became “a delicate colonial commodity.” By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “a rising tide of public interest in the understanding and ordering of the natural world” encouraged the growth of zoos in America and around the world.<sup>8</sup>

In America, the first zoo would not arise until after the Civil War, although the occasional menagerie did exist earlier. Some of these became quite large. For example, the menagerie at Central Park in New York existed as early as 1859, the same year the Philadelphia Zoo was chartered. The Civil War put the Philadelphia zoo project on hold until 1874, though, by which time the Central Park Menagerie had grown to include 626 animals. Long before these major urban centers began keeping animals for public purposes, westward expansion moved an increasing percentage of the American population to smaller towns and outlying lands. The challenges of establishing new population centers took precedence over the establishment of civic luxuries like parks and zoos until the rise of the Parks Movement in the late Victorian age.<sup>9</sup>

The chapters that follow examine the course of the Memphis Zoo’s development from the first discussions and final decisions to establish a zoo in the late Victorian age to the present. Chapter 1 examines the establishment of the Memphis Zoo, considers how the earliest zoo leaders were selected pragmatically based on sometimes little more than an interest in animals, and explores the challenges of establishing a zoo “from scratch” including the questions of what animals will be displayed and who will be able to see

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<sup>8</sup> Vernon Kislring, Jr., ed., *Zoo and Aquarium History: Ancient Animal Collections to Zoological Gardens* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2000), 22-25; Eric Baratay and Elisabeth Hardouin-Fugier, *Zoo*, 19-24, 117; R. J. Hoage, Anne Roskell, and Jane Mansour, “Menageries and Zoos to 1900,” in *New Worlds, New Animals: From Menagerie to Zoological Park in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by R. J. Hoage and William A. Deiss (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 16.

<sup>9</sup> New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, “History of Zoos in Parks,” [www.nycgovparks.org/about/history/zoos](http://www.nycgovparks.org/about/history/zoos) (accessed February 16, 2016).

them. Chapter 2 reflects how the circus backgrounds of zoo directors were inextricably linked with the development of the “modern,” open-enclosure zoo exhibit first popularized by German animal trader Carl Hagenbeck in the Victorian era, and how intimate knowledge of and dreams about the ends but a chronic lack of the means frustrated zoo leaders in the World War I and interwar eras. Chapters 3 and 4 examine the growth of the zoo during the flush times of the 1920s, the contractions of the Great Depression, and how a free circus and the New Deal brought the zoo back to life, all under the leadership of the last of the zoo’s pragmatic superintendents.

Chapter 5 delves into the intersections of affluence and civil rights, professionalization, and the changing role of the zoo as managed by Memphis’ first “zoo man.” Chapter 6 examines the special challenges that faced the professionalizing directorate during the 1960s and 1970s, including grassroots activism and thwarted plans, the realization of thriving volunteer and education programs, and the difficulties of balancing human resource management, public expectations, and the best interests of the animal collection. Chapter 7 concludes the study with an exploration of the vastly expanded limits privatization has created, along with a consideration of the future of the zoo as public perceptions and expectations continue to evolve.

## Chapter 1

### Pragmatism in the Zoo: Superintendents Horner, Reitmeyer, and Lewis, 1906-1913

As early as 1896, it had been suggested that Memphis might benefit from having its own zoo. The idea was that East End Park would make a good site. The private entertainment area known as East End Park was located across Poplar Avenue from the northern boundary of the tract known as Lea's Woods, which would eventually become Overton Park and the Memphis Zoo. The idea seems to have originated from an animal showman who called himself "Colonel E. Daniel Boone." Boone quartered his show at East End Park in August, 1896, but his stay was curtailed by the demands of citizens after "Romeo, said to be the largest male lion in captivity," escaped his cage and killed a steer and a calf at a nearby slaughterhouse before he was recaptured. But although a zoo for Memphis was still a decade off, the seed had been planted.<sup>1</sup>

On March 9, 1904, Memphis Park Commission Chairman Colonel Robert Galloway, who served in that capacity from 1901 to 1916, moved that the Commission allot \$500 to create "a nucleus for a Zoo at Overton Park." Park Commissioner Judge Louis B. McFarland's "nay" created a tie vote, and the question was tabled for the time. The question was taken up once again at the Commission's June 7, 1905 meeting. It was conceded that the Commission was in favor of establishing a zoo, but lacked the funds to do so. The compromise plan was to "tender a piece of ground in Overton Park, fronting on Poplar Street about Midway between Cooper and Trezevant Avenues on which is

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<sup>1</sup> "75 Years Ago: Aug. 4, 1896," *Commercial Appeal*, August 4, 1971; Elizabeth Hanson, *Animal Attractions: Nature On Display in American Zoos* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 83; "Lion Loose In A Cattle Pen – Romeo Breaks Out of His Cage and Has a Feast," *Scranton [Pennsylvania] Tribune*, August 18, 1896.

located an old house, for a Zoo Garden.” But by November, the Commission reversed its earlier position, voting to “dispose” of animals already received by public donation and to focus instead on the parkway system designed by George Kessler, which included North Parkway or “the Speedway.”<sup>2</sup>

But Galloway would not be deterred, and would eventually be successful in getting a zoo not only approved by the Commission, but built essentially in his own backyard. Galloway lived within sight of the Speedway, in a large, stately Greek Revival home built between 1908 and 1910 to embrace a spectacular view of Overton Park, which Galloway had helped create. Galloway called the house “Paisley Hall” in honor of his father’s hometown of Paisley, Scotland, but the luxury estate would long be known to Memphians as the Galloway Mansion. The three-story, 12,000-square foot residence occupied by itself an entire city block, across McLean Boulevard from the western edge of Overton Park.<sup>3</sup>

Galloway lived the high life, embracing all things cultural and exotic. His love of music was apparent in the design of the home, where high ceilings were an acoustic boon to listeners. When no music was playing in the mansion, through open windows visitors could hear the tunes wafting across the park from the pavilion Galloway had installed in 1904 on the east end for that purpose—although neighbors would later request that the Park Commission restrict performances from including brass instruments that disturbed

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<sup>2</sup> Memphis Park Commission Minute Book 1, 50, 60, 72, 99 (hereafter “MPC Minute Book” and book number).

<sup>3</sup> Kelly Sowell, “Col. Robert Galloway,” *Elmwood Cemetery Blog*, [www.elmwoodcemetery.org/blog/col-robert-galloway/](http://www.elmwoodcemetery.org/blog/col-robert-galloway/) (accessed October 17, 2015); Peggy Burch, “Living in a Landmark,” *South Coast Today*, [www.southcoasttoday.com/article/20000116/News/301169915](http://www.southcoasttoday.com/article/20000116/News/301169915) (accessed October 16, 2015).

some. The globe-trotting Galloway “installed a Japanese-themed tea room” at Paisley Hall, which was so popular “that in 1914 he decided to build a Japanese garden in the park.” His Japanese garden in Overton Park would be dismantled after Pearl Harbor amidst much anti-Japanese sentiment, leaving the zoo alone standing as Galloway’s major contribution to the Memphis parks system. Despite a several-year history of turning down offers of animals and winding up with some donations regardless, Galloway was no doubt pleased that the Commission could not ignore the petition of more than 2,000 citizens who adamantly insisted on a zoo. On April 4, 1906 the Park Commission finally appropriated \$1,200 annually for maintenance of the newly authorized zoo. As his requested “nucleus” grew into a full-fledged zoo, its westernmost reaches would line McLean Boulevard just one block from the Colonel’s home. Galloway delighted in an “almost daily visiting” of the zoo and park properties that lay just beyond his estate.<sup>4</sup>

Once authorized, the first order of business was pragmatic: the zoo would need someone willing to take care of the animals and someone suitable to supervise. Memphian Will Flynn, a black laborer, filled the first bill. (More about Flynn appears in later chapters.) But as few black supervisors existed in public positions at the turn of the century, white California native George Horner was unceremoniously named the first superintendent. Very little is known about Horner. He was born in California in January 1880 and obtained a fourth-grade education. He was 26 years old when hired to oversee

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<sup>4</sup> Kelly Sowell, “Col. Robert Galloway,” *Elmwood Cemetery Blog*, [www.elmwoodcemetery.org/blog/col-robert-galloway/](http://www.elmwoodcemetery.org/blog/col-robert-galloway/) (accessed October 17, 2015); Peggy Burch, “Living in a Landmark,” *South Coast Today*, [www.southcoasttoday.com/article/20000116/News/301169915](http://www.southcoasttoday.com/article/20000116/News/301169915) (accessed October 16, 2015); Vance Lauderdale, “Goodbye, Garden,” *Memphis Magazine* (October 2007), [www.memphismagazine.com/October-2007/Dial-N-Smile/](http://www.memphismagazine.com/October-2007/Dial-N-Smile/) (accessed October 17, 2015); MPC Minute Book 3, 53-54.

the zoo. In 1907, he married Susie Maria Hall. Their daughter Ruth was born in 1909, the year after Horner's employment with the zoo came to an end. He spent the next several decades in Memphis refinishing furniture and painting houses.<sup>5</sup>

But while Horner was superintendent, the business of building and maintaining a zoo got underway. In the first quarter of 1907, Horner was responsible for overseeing general expenses of \$6,419.87, cash receipts of \$45.50, and \$5,379.54 which comprised "virtually the entire expense at Overton for the new animal houses, keepers-house, new cages, grading and gravel, etc." By that summer, Mr. W. C. Dutlinger, Chairman of the Citizens Zoo Committee, appealed to the Park Commission that efforts be made to increase the zoo's animal population. In August, the Commission paid \$25 cash to Fred Campbell of Kosciusko, Mississippi for a female baboon. More significantly, the Commission undertook to "open correspondence with Cincinnati, New York, New Orleans, and other places" to determine "what animals can be purchased, quotations, and the seasons same could be delivered, etc." Clearly, even the basics of building an animal collection were outside the expertise of those Memphians interested in doing so.<sup>6</sup>

What was clear to all was that acquiring animals and maintaining them would require money. Dutlinger and Galloway, who formed the Citizens Zoo Committee, had organized a benefit ball game to raise an animal fund. The game was held August 18, 1906, between the Business Mens' Club and the Merchants and Cotton Exchange teams.

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<sup>5</sup> MPC Minute Book 1, 118; Robert W. Dye, *Memphis Zoo* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2015), 126; 1920 Federal Census, Memphis Ward 25, Shelby, Tennessee, Roll: T624\_1765, Page 21A (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operation, Inc., 2010); 1930 Federal Census, Memphis, Shelby, Tennessee, Roll: 2277, Page: 3B (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2002); 1940 Federal Census, Memphis, Shelby, Tennessee, Roll: T627\_3962, Page: 8A (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012).

<sup>6</sup> MPC Minute Book 1, 157-158, 162, 171.



Proceeds of \$3,628.85 were surrendered to the Park Commission. The Citizens Zoo Committee expressed the consensus of the “citizens in charge of the benefit game that [the fund] should buy large animals,” particularly an elephant, a leopard, a tiger, a pair of elk, and a pair of buffalo. Dutlinger, having researched the costs of the desired animals, presented the Commission with a price list. The elephant should cost \$1500; the tiger, \$500; the leopard, \$175; the pair of elk, \$75 each; and the pair of buffalo, \$175 each. The balance of the fund, Dutlinger stated, should “be sufficient margin to pay all freight on the animals.” After discussion of the current and projected expenditures, the Commission agreed to purchase an elephant, then a pair of buffalo and a pair of elk, and then whatever animals on the proposed list the balance of funding would allow, adding that the contingency was stipulated by the need to provide funding for the care of the new animals. In a cautious, forward-thinking move, the Commission required that any new animals must first be examined and approved by “an animal expert.”<sup>7</sup>

Another citizen-led fundraiser was proposed and approved, to be held the evening of October 14, 1907. Mrs. John A. Cathey had arranged for the Lyceum Theatre to “give an entertainment for the benefit of the Memphis Zoo.” In the meantime, although Horner was technically the superintendent, Galloway’s involvement remained high. Galloway continued to focus on the needs of the animals the zoo currently held and hoped to soon acquire. He had ordered plans for buildings to house the new animals, as well as plans for a hot water heating plant to keep the animals warm. Those plans, Galloway promised, would be delivered to the Commission when completed. Meanwhile, he recommended waiting to purchase the proposed animals until after the Barnum and Bailey Circus came

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<sup>7</sup> MPC Minute Book 1, 179-182.

to town in late October. “It might be,” Galloway suggested, “that animals could be purchased from them to advantage,” stretching the allotment by eliminating freight costs, in hopes of being able to cover the purchase of all the desired creatures. On November 6<sup>th</sup>, the Commission approved the expenditures of \$275 for a pair of elk and \$468 for two buffaloes and eight monkeys. The monkeys were unplanned, but the gain of a pair of endangered buffalo was undoubtedly a boon to the new zoo.<sup>8</sup>

The American buffalo had once roamed the North American wilderness by the millions. By 1889, though, just over a thousand were estimated to exist on the entire continent. More than half of those were in Canada, and estimates put the number as low as 85 of the animals roaming freely about the American wilderness. Some 200 were to be found in Yellowstone National Park, and approximately 256 more lived in captivity elsewhere in the United States. Among the vocal advocates for saving this species from extinction at the close of the nineteenth century was Dr. William T. Hornaday, future head of the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. The New York Zoological Society and the Canadian government were also among the vocal advocates who formed the American Bison Association and seized upon the promise of conservation awareness that was coming to a head under the auspices of President Theodore Roosevelt. By 1920, the American Bison Association’s efforts had increased the buffalo population to “8,473 pure-bred buffaloes in North America,” including 90 in the American wild, 500 in the Canadian wild, and 3,303 in captivity across the United States. The Memphis Zoo, in 1920, had a trio of these. While Kentucky had a pair, St. Louis’ Forest Park had six, and

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<sup>8</sup> MPC Minute Book 1, 182-183, 185, 186.

North Carolina had thirteen, the American buffalo remained a rare visual treat for the eyes of Mid-Southerners.<sup>9</sup>

In the late winter of 1908, the city of Memphis became aware that humans continued to be as much a threat to animals, even one-on-one, as their forebears had been to the millions of buffalo. Natch, the black bear who had launched the “nucleus” of the zoo, was found dead. Park Commission Chairman John Willingham ordered an autopsy of the beloved mascot. An analysis of Natch’s stomach contents determined that the bear had been poisoned by an unknown assassin. The Commission offered a reward of \$100 for the arrest and conviction of the guilty party (or parties), and to this reward fund, outraged Memphians contributed another \$450. Nevertheless, the culprit was never found. It was perhaps about this time that George Horner stepped down or was released from his duties. Whether he felt or was deemed responsible for the bear’s death, or whether he was perhaps frustrated that the public and the Park Commission seemed to have more say in the zoo’s development than he did, remains unknown.<sup>10</sup>

Natch’s murder encouraged the installation of a perimeter fence where previously there had been no barrier to public entry. Mr. Thomas, the acting Parks Superintendent, reported that by March 1908 some six- to seven-hundred shrubs had been planted inside the new fence, as well as 700 honeysuckle plants set along the outside of it. Sod had been laid “where not too shady.” Ditches had been sloped and grading completed, and once potentially muddy walkways were covered with crushed granite throughout the park as

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<sup>9</sup> H. O. Bishop, “Can the American Buffalo Stage a Come-Back?”, *The Dearborn Independent* (September 25, 1920), 3.

<sup>10</sup> MPC Minute Book 1, 198.

well as from the entrance to the streetcar platform outside the zoo. New hitching posts had been set for equestrian visitors to secure their steeds while enjoying the sights, which included new ponds for the ducks and seals and an enlarged alligator tank.

Colonel H. C. Moore of Corinth, Mississippi had “donated to the Park Board a magnificent collection of birds and animals, collected by him in South America.” Commissioner Willingham called Colonel Moore “an ardent friend” of the Memphis Zoo, and noted the extraordinary value of this donation, which “consisted of birds and animals never before exhibited in America” and which “of course could not be purchased at any price.” In addition, the Lumbermens Club of Memphis had donated to the zoo four sea lions. Children attending the Idlewild School had taken up a fundraising effort to help add to the zoo collection; ultimately the children delivered \$60 to Commissioner Willingham for the purpose of buying “some animal or animals for the zoo.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet it would fall to Horner’s replacement to follow through on the purchase of the animals the children had collected money for. It remains unclear how George Horner had been qualified for the job and perhaps, in fact, he was not, which may explain his short tenure as superintendent. His replacement, Elmer K. Reitmeyer had a long history of dealing with animals. For years, Reitmeyer had worked “in the animal department of a number of large circuses.” His hire initiated a trend in Memphis toward zoo leadership by former circus men that would continue, almost unbroken, until 1953.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> MPC Minute Book 1, 198-201, 207.

<sup>12</sup> Circus Historical Society, “Excerpts from *Billboard* – 1911-1914,” s.v. “*Billboard*, March 15, 1913, 22, 23, 43, 58, 59,” [www.circushistory.org/History/Billboard1911.htm](http://www.circushistory.org/History/Billboard1911.htm) (accessed November 8, 2015).

Reitmeyer's ancestors had emigrated from Germany in 1758 to Berks County, Pennsylvania, where some of them joined the U.S. Army during the American Revolution and others during the Civil War. Elmer Reitmeyer was born sometime between 1863 and 1866, two counties to the northwest of Berks County. Two counties to the southeast of Berks County lay Philadelphia, home of America's first zoo. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, on March 21, 1859, had established the first American Zoological Society. The turmoil of the intervening war years, however, prevented any progress toward developing a zoological garden. Finally, the Philadelphia Zoo held its grand opening on July 1, 1874. There is no way to know if young Elmer Reitmeyer, who would have been barely into his teen years, attended that grand opening event. Yet it is entirely likely that, at some point before his move to Alabama, he did visit the country's first zoo. Perhaps his interest in working with animals was inspired by such a trip.<sup>13</sup>

The son of a boot- and shoemaker, Reitmeyer was accustomed to labor. In his teen years, he worked as a general laborer, while one brother worked in a paper mill and the other as an office clerk, all to help support the family. Sometime in his early twenties, Reitmeyer married and started a family. It is likely that he started touring with circus shows during this time. He was probably away on tour when his first wife died. The Reitmeyer children, nine-year-old Elizabeth and seven-year-old Truman, resided at the Loyalsock Township Home for the Friendless until his return. This may have been the turn of events that ended his circus career. By 1907, he was settled and working as a

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<sup>13</sup> Montague Spencer Giuseppi, ed., *Naturalizations of Foreign Protestants in the American and West Indian Colonies* (Manchester, England: The Huguenot Society of London, 1921, 1964, 1979), 55; Pennsylvania Veterans Burial Cards, 1777-2012, Series I (French and Indian War to WWII), Records 319, 321; Philadelphia Zoo, "History of the Zoo," [www.philadelphiazoo.org/About-the-Zoo/History-of-the-Zoo.htm](http://www.philadelphiazoo.org/About-the-Zoo/History-of-the-Zoo.htm) (accessed November 9, 2015).

laborer in Birmingham, Alabama with Cora, his second wife of four years, their three-year-old son, Thomas, and his two older children whom he had rescued from the Pennsylvania orphanage. When the call came for him to take the superintendent job at the Memphis Zoo, the entire family moved into the superintendent's cottage located on the zoo grounds.<sup>14</sup>

The oldest known surviving catalogue of the Memphis Zoo introduced Reitmeyer to the public. The *Catalogue of The Memphis Zoo at Overton Park, Season 1908* is highly informative in regard to what Reitmeyer inherited from Horner and the Park Commission after only two years of zoo development. It is immediately apparent that the city was deeply invested in the zoo's success and that local company owners both supported the zoo and understood the profit potential for themselves in association with the attraction. Both covers and nearly every page of the booklet carry the names of advertisers; the total of 181 advertisements in the 50-page booklet leave little space for the catalog of animals the title claims is the focus of the publication. No industry wanted to miss its chance for such widespread notice.<sup>15</sup>

Many of the advertisements give important insights into the lives of Memphians in 1908. First and foremost, above the title, was the reminder that G. S. Perkins was prepared to meet the demand within the park for refreshments. Household and personal services advertised included coal and ice delivery, dry cleaning, lumber, plumbing,

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<sup>14</sup> 1880 Federal Census, District 143, Chillisquaque, Northumberland, Pennsylvania (Record 34 of 35, lines 11-15); 1900 Federal Census, District 0053, Loyalsock, Lycoming, Pennsylvania (Record 30 of 41, lines 79-80); Ancestry.com, *Alabama, Select Marriages, 1816-1957* (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014); *R. L. Polk & Co.'s Birmingham, Alabama City Directory* (1907), 938.

<sup>15</sup> Chickasaw Bureau of Publicity, *Catalogue of The Memphis Zoo at Overton Park, Season 1908* (Memphis: E. H. Clarke, 1908).

roofing, electric contracting, lime and cement and dirt deliveries, home decorating, photo finishing, doctors and sanatoriums, dentistry, pharmacies, barbers. Advertising for consumer goods suggests a certain demographic these businesses hoped to attract, despite the fact that the zoo was a free, public attraction open to all. Advertisements for buggies and harnesses and even motor cars (both for sale and for rent) and their consumable requirement, rubber tires, are a reminder of the slowly but steadily increasing presence of urban mobility. The Age of Excess was evident in the sales of shoes and hats and clothing, and the custom-fitting of those items. It was also evident in the rise of a solution for shedding the old to make way for the new, as in the one advertisement for a store that purchased second-hand clothing for resale. Department stores like Bry's and smaller specialty shops enticed zoo-goers to consider their household needs for china, art, rugs and furniture, pianos and organs, wallpaper, paint, glass, cabinets, hardware, and even silver, jewelry, and diamonds. Consumables like ice cream and butter, produce, molasses, seafood and game, meat, baked goods, "Stafford Water" and "Waukesha Silurian Water" ("Cures Bright's Disease, Dyspepsia, Etc.!"), Pepsi-Cola and Coca-Cola—each just five cents a bottle—appealed to women and men alike. For the men in particular, advertisements abounded for tobacco products, guns and sporting goods, D. Canale's "Old Dominick" line of domestic bottled brews, and Canale's competitors, A. S. Barbaro's Jas. E. Pepper Whiskey and Miller "High Life" bottled beer.<sup>16</sup>

Advisors for all life's needs clamored for zoo visitors' business in the legal, banking and loan, real estate, fire and life insurance, undertaking and cemetery

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<sup>16</sup> Chickasaw Bureau of Publicity, *Catalogue of the Memphis Zoo at Overton Park, Season 1908*, 1, 2, 5-10, 12-17, 19-38, 40-46, 49-50.

monument markets, as well as the veterinary needs of the family pets. Business and farming needs could be met by Underwood Typewriters, Frank Ellis's rubber stamps, Anderson-Tully's packing and shipping supplies, George Guthrie's supplies of show cases and fixtures, Hatley Brothers' tents and awnings, and Nolen Signs. Business could be facilitated through the services of the Cyclone Messenger Boys, Bluff City Abstract Company, or various hay and grain dealers, stenographers, auditors, notaries, and bondsmen. The "Pastime" Billiards Room wanted zoo visitors, especially the menfolk, to remember them in the evening hours after the zoo closed. Tourists were reminded to stay at one of several hotels, to call on Star Boarding Stable for carriage and livery services, to stop in for lunch at various eateries, or to remember Garibaldi's, which catered "to Refined People." Nelson's Business College and Christian Brothers' College sought students in the pages of the zoo catalog. Even politicians seized this opportunity to remind voters of their re-election bids, including Tom Taylor and Sheriff Frank L. Monteverde, or their election hopes, such as J. W. Palmer for Criminal Court Judge, Z. N. Estes for Attorney General, and James H. Barret for County Register.<sup>17</sup>

More than likely, the vast majority of zoo-goers in 1908 paid little heed to the myriad of advertisements. They may or may not have given much attention to the introduction, which contained photographs of Superintendent Reitmeyer and his "able assistant," J. Wynn Cullen. The Chickasaw Bureau of Publicity declared the catalog was printed to "assist in promoting an intelligent interest in the Memphis Zoo," and in its animal residents who were partially responsible for "Memphis' advance toward

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<sup>17</sup> Chickasaw Bureau of Publicity, *Catalogue of the Memphis Zoo at Overton Park, Season 1908*, 1, 5-7, 9-11, 13, 15-21, 23, 24-25, 27, 29-35, 38, 40-45, 49-50.



metropolitanism.” The numerous advertisers had made it possible for the zoo to distribute the catalogs at no cost to visitors. Those who bothered to peruse the body of the catalog did so to learn about the exhibits, which numbered forty-three.<sup>18</sup>

Reitmeyer’s charges were displayed around a course in which each cage was numbered and could be visited in an orderly fashion without missing any of the exhibits. First were the elks, which Galloway had recently purchased from Horn’s Zoological Arena in Denver, Colorado. Eight white-tailed deer were next, including one donated by the Business Men’s Club of Memphis and one purchased from Dyersburg, Tennessee resident J. W. Carr; Carr’s buck had grown violent and was separated from the rest. The third “yard” displayed the pair of American buffalo Galloway had recently purchased from the Cincinnati Zoo; these had been purchased, in part, to replace the one that had died the year before. The December 7, 1907 edition of the *New York Times* spread the word far and wide of the loss of “‘Buffalo Bill,’ the only Buffalo in ten Southern States,” detailing how the animal’s unpredictable charging habit had led to the assignment of Reitmeyer, then a keeper, as a “special guard” to watch over the creature and protect bystanders should Buffalo Bill break free. In “a final effort to conquer” the beast, Reitmeyer had entered the pen. “The big animal reared and Reitmeyer was cornered, but escaped” when he “sidestepped a vicious rush from the animal which crashed into a solid fence, dropping dead in his tracks.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Chickasaw Bureau of Publicity, *Catalogue of the Memphis Zoo at Overton Park, Season 1908*, 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> “Buffalo Killed In Fight—Memphis Zoo Animal Missed Keeper in Rush and Broke His Neck,” *New York Times* (December 7, 1907), ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index, 1.

Next to the buffalo enclosure were housed two “very vicious” carnivorous Texas badgers, followed by four Arkansas opossums and eight Arkansas raccoons. The opossums were noted to comprise “a rare dish with sweet potatoes,” while the raccoons were “considered a dainty dish by hunters.” A family of white rabbits in cage 7 and an albino Arkansas opossum in cage 32 had been donated by interested ladies and children. The next two cages contained bears. A four-year-old Cinnamon bear, named Teddy after President Roosevelt, had been purchased from Horn’s Denver location. Two female Black bears occupied the next cage. They had been donated by J. H. Smith of Water Valley, Mississippi. The first of these, Nancy, was “captured as a cub in a canebrake in Tallahatchie County, Miss., and subsequently reared as a household pet” until her donation to the zoo in 1906. Nancy was to have been Natch’s mate. By the time Reitmeyer took over, though, Natch had died and only his head remained, preserved by a taxidermist.<sup>20</sup>

Flight cages held five American eagles, five barn owls, seven horned owls, and a Tennessee Eagle “better known as [a] Chicken-Hawk”. Cage number thirteen held a pair of Mexican peccaries, or wild hogs, also purchased in Denver. The large animals came next. On November 9, 1907, the Park Commission purchased a female African elephant from the Ringling Brothers Circus, for \$1,700. She was named Margarite, the winning selection of a children’s voting contest sponsored by the *News-Scimitar*. Margarite was described as a “perfect pet,” docile enough to “be ridden by any one.” She was the special

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<sup>20</sup> Chickasaw Bureau of Publicity, *Catalogue of the Memphis Zoo at Overton Park, Season 1908*, 5-11, 12-13, 36; “50 Years Ago—July 21, 1906,” *Commercial Appeal* (July 20, 1956); Henry Mitchell, “Your Zoo—Golden Anniversary Of Zoo Will Be Observed This Week,” *Commercial Appeal* (April 1, 1956).

charge of Wynn Cullen, Reitmeyer's assistant, who had come to the Memphis Zoo from the Hagenbeck Circus and would in the future be a superintendent of the Memphis Zoo in his own right. A Shriner, better known as "the famous scout, 'Pawnee Bill,'" had donated a male Bactrian camel to the Al Chymia Temple in Memphis when his circus show passed through the city in 1906. Named Al Chymia, "America's most famous Bactrian camel" was so desired that "the great showman" himself, Carl Hagenbeck, offered the zoo \$2,000 for him—an offer which was politely declined. The rare, two-humped, white camel captured the public interest and appeared in "every public affair of the temple, ceremonials, street parades, tableaux and pilgrimages," including Louisville, New Orleans, Dallas, and Rochester and Buffalo in New York.<sup>21</sup>

The next five cages were dedicated to cats. The Hoadley Ice Cream Company of Memphis had donated the funds for Polly, an African lioness purchased from Horn's Zoological Arena in Denver. Of a pair of cubs she delivered at the Memphis Zoo, only the female survived. The Park Commission paid \$500 for a female Bengal tiger, captured in the wild, and named Samantha; like Margarite, her name was chosen through a contest in the newspaper. A bobcat captured in Mississippi, a pair of "Mexican tigers," or ocelots, and a pair of African leopards purchased in Denver completed the cat exhibits, with the exception of Dwyer, the famous, black-maned Nubian lion, who was housed separately. Dwyer was one of Carl Hagenbeck's first African lions, and was fully grown when he came into the possession of the Barnum and Bailey Circus. For more than two decades, that circus had exhibited Dwyer before a railroad accident left the poor animal

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<sup>21</sup> Chickasaw Bureau of Publicity, *Catalogue of the Memphis Zoo at Overton Park, Season 1908*, 14-19. ; "Al Chymia, Famous Two-Humped White Camel of Zoo Is Dead," *Memphis News-Scimitar* (May 14, 1919).

with a broken back. It was reported that Dwyer's back was "broken 14 inches below the base of the skull, between the fifth and sixth dorsal vertebrae," an injury that made any further travel with the circus impossible. Reitmeyer rescued the lion from the circus and restored him to health through "a long and hard fight," during which Dwyer and Reitmeyer "became fast friends." The lion was "very gentle" and "had enjoyed more petting than any other inmate of the zoo" since the death of Natch the bear.<sup>22</sup>

Of monkeys, the Memphis Zoo had no shortage. Three cages exhibited "Miss Koozie," a Java monkey purchased from W. C. Ward of Memphis; six Madagascar monkeys imported from the Madagascar Islands by Carl Hagenbeck for the Memphis Zoo "at a great cost," particularly considering they had achieved half of their expected lifespan of two years by the time they arrived; and four spider, or ring-tail, monkeys which "abound in great numbers" in "Old Mexico." A tiny "Mamozett," or Marmoset monkey had her own cage, number 36, and an interesting backstory. The catalog describes her tale:

Cage holds a female Mamozett Monkey, is a native of South America and very rare. She, being the only one of the kind known in the United States, was brought to Memphis by a sick sailor who died in the Marine hospital here, and his little friend for many years found his [*sic*] way to the Zoo, through the kindness of Miss Cora Mivelaz, daughter of the proprietor of the Waldorf Café, of Memphis. This monkey is fed on sweet milk and celery three times daily.<sup>23</sup>

As noted earlier, Colonel Moore of Corinth, Mississippi had donated a number of specimens. Among these was a pair of storks, housed in cages 28 and 29. The "only pair

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<sup>22</sup> Chickasaw Bureau of Publicity, *Catalogue of the Memphis Zoo at Overton Park, Season 1908*, 20-24, 30; "Old Dwyer' Dead—Former King of Jungle Succumbs to Old Age at Zoo," *Commercial Appeal* (March 23, 1913), [www.circusnospin.blogspot.com/2011/05/zoologicalcircus-history.html](http://www.circusnospin.blogspot.com/2011/05/zoologicalcircus-history.html) (accessed November 8, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Chickasaw Bureau of Publicity, *Catalogue of the Memphis Zoo at Overton Park, Season 1908*, 25-27, 40.

in the United States” of African Long-tailed Coons was kept in cage 38. A pair of Banana rats, or pacas, occupied cage 40, for which it seems certain some fruit plantation in British Honduras was likely grateful, as these creatures “infest” such environments. These were neighbors of the wild chickens in cage 41, also captured in British Honduras and described as “very rare” and “the only pair of the kind in captivity.” Finally, Moore’s collection contained “one very handsome specimen of the South American Opossum,” which, like its American counterpart, is “hunted by the natives and considered very fine eating with a sweet potato stuffing.”<sup>24</sup>

Cages 30 and 31 housed two pairs of Alaskan sea lions, purchased “at great cost” from Horn’s in Denver, and “Bill” the pelican. Bill was described as “very intelligent, knows the feeding hour perfectly and will not permit you to be late with his meals.” Bill received his daily three pounds of fish precisely at 10:30 a.m., which he desired to have hand-fed to him. His neighbors, the sea lions, received their eight pounds of fish portions twice a day. Cages 33 through 35 contained reptiles, including three rattlesnakes from Mississippi; six native blue racers, which hibernate half of the year and were captured and donated by Wynn Cullen; and two poisonous spreading adders captured and donated by Overton Park “florist” Jack Shively. In cages 24 and 25 lived a pair of rat- or monkey-faced owls, native to Florida or Virginia, and a variety of parrots. In the parrot cage lived a magpie donated by one of Galloway’s friends, a Macaw, and three yellow-head or Mexican parrots considered to be “extremely fine talkers.” Nearby, a pen held three Mississippi alligators, whose “extremely vicious temperament” may have stemmed from

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<sup>24</sup> Chickasaw Bureau of Publicity, *Catalogue of the Memphis Zoo at Overton Park, Season 1908*, 32-33, 42-43, 44-46, 49.

their sparse diet of three pounds of raw beef fed once every three weeks. Armadillos, no longer in much danger of extinction as they were described in this catalog, were allegedly so threatened in 1908 that it was deemed “a rare case when you will find them on exhibition.”<sup>25</sup>

Of course, particularly with former circus men in charge, attention to rare and endangered species was more a “step right up” type of showmanship strategy to draw crowds than any particular effort to preserve, protect, or reverse the status of endangered species. That would come much later. During the first half of the twentieth century, though, entertainment was the central focus of the Memphis Zoo and many others. For five years, Reitmeyer supervised the zoo. In 1909, he did so on a budget of a mere \$3,265. Noting that Dr. J. W. Scheibler had been providing veterinary services to the zoo free of charge, the Park Commission agreed to officially title him “Veterinarian to the Zoo,” although no compensation was included in the budget. Rather than spend budgeted funds for human food stands, a contract was issued in March to James Avdalis and Company to operate two concession stands in the zoo. The twenty-year-old Avdalis had immigrated to Chicago from Greece in 1891 before moving to Memphis. His marriage in 1903 was the first Greek wedding in Memphis and, when he died in 1941 after 38 years of operating zoo concessions, his widow remained proud of his earned appellation, “Dean of the Zoo.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Chickasaw Bureau of Publicity, *Catalogue of the Memphis Zoo at Overton Park, Season 1908*, 28-29, 31, 34-35, 37-39, 41.

<sup>26</sup> MPC Minute Book 1, 237, 241; Sara A. Frey, “A History of the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Community in Memphis,” *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* 18 (1964), 73-75.

In June of 1909, Memphis social circles were abuzz with plans for a grand social event to celebrate the “ceremonious christening” of a baby elk born at the zoo. The elk was rumored to be named “Mary” in honor of the wife of Park Commissioner J. T. Willingham. Reitmeyer’s announcement that the infant would not be so named threw high society into an indignant uproar, until demands for his reasoning prompted the succinct reply, “It isn’t that kind of an elk.” The little elk was instead named “Joe Cella” in honor of the secretary of the Memphis Elks lodge, and Reitmeyer promptly returned to his budget concerns. In July, talks began about architectural plans for an animal house, as well as about negotiating the purchase of a number of animals that had been “left at the Zoo as boarders.” The necessity of separate buildings to house the carnivores and the elephants also came under discussion that summer, and the Park Commission appropriated \$25,000 for the purpose. In August 1909, contracts were awarded to L. M. Weathers Company to draw up the plans and specifications, and to J. A. Omberg, Jr., for the construction and installation of the necessary iron work. The Commission also allotted another thousand dollars for Reitmeyer to travel to Little Rock or Hot Springs, Arkansas to purchase a pair of ostriches. That autumn, Reitmeyer purchased another lioness, and the Al Chymia Shriners donated a female companion for Al Chymia, the camel.<sup>27</sup>

In 1910, Henry Loeb donated one hundred dollars for the purchase of some pheasants. Loeb was a friend to the zoo and grandfather of a future mayor of Memphis who would bear his name, Later that year, Loeb appeared before the Park Commission

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<sup>27</sup> “Invitations to Christening of Elk Recalled; Society In Memphis Gets Awful Shock,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 16, 1909; MPC Minute Book 1, 277-278, 281-282, 285, 289, 299.

Board with a special plea. Stating that he “was very much interested in the progress of the Zoo...a subject very dear to his heart,” Loeb expressed his desire to help “make the Memphis Zoo known far and wide as the best in the country.” As evidence of his sincerity, Loeb explained that he had written to “literally the four corners of the earth in search of information as to how to best extend” the current zoo situation. He shared with this Commission responses he had received to his inquiries “from Australia, Canada and various other points.” Ultimately, Loeb proposed to purchase some rare animals for the zoo, to display them for a few weeks as a special exhibit requiring a nickel for admission, and then to turn the animals over to the zoo as regular exhibits when he took the money to pursue the purchases of more rare animals with which to repeat the process. The Commissioners took the matter under advisement, thanking Loeb “for his evidence of public spirit and generosity.” As a good will measure, the Commission accepted Loeb’s offer to purchase a male zebu, a type of South Asian humped cattle. Ultimately, Loeb’s interest would evolve into the establishment of a Zoological Society that would play an ongoing role over the next two decades. Following his death, the Loeb interest in the zoo would be reprised through his grandson’s involvement with a later incarnation of the Zoological Society beginning in the early 1950s.<sup>28</sup>

In the meantime, though, Reitmeyer continued about the daily business of supervising a zoo. He moved hitching posts to suitable locations and added fire extinguishers and lights where appropriate for safety and convenience. During his tenure, Reitmeyer oversaw the construction and installation of aquaria in Galloway Hall, the zoo’s first completed building. Commission Chairman Galloway, for whom the building

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<sup>28</sup> MPC Minute Book 1, 313, 335.



was named, was disturbed at the architectural asymmetry the proposed aquaria would create in the structure. The aquaria were being constructed on the west side of the building, and plans included the eventual construction of aquaria on the east side to balance the first set. Galloway argued for, and achieved, an agreement to alter the east exterior of the building “to correspond with the west side,” which would not interfere with the future plans for additional aquaria on the east side. Eventually, these aquaria would provide homes for the zoo’s growing reptile and aquatic animal collections.<sup>29</sup>

New bear dens were planned and built in 1911, situated on what one Commissioner described as “a very attractive location just east of the elephant house along the creek,” although later discussion between Galloway and Reitmeyer resulted in the selection of “a much more desirable location.” At Galloway’s suggestion, Parks Superintendent Thomas and, presumably, Zoo Superintendent Reitmeyer traveled to Chicago and Cincinnati to see their bear pits. This exhibit design typically called for a deep well with a large tree trunk inserted vertically into its dark reaches, which the bear could climb to get a view of its surroundings. Up into the light, then down into the dark, and little else; at least one critic declared it “a fiendish idea...to keep heavy-coated fellows like these in the bottom of a well!”<sup>30</sup>

By April 1911, the growth of the zoo under Reitmeyer had made his worth as a superintendent apparent, and the Park Commission agreed to increase his salary from a paltry twenty-five dollars per month to \$150 per month. Galloway justified the raise by

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<sup>29</sup> MPC Minute Book 1, 318, 319, 335, 339, 343, 346, 349; MPC Minute Book 2, 55.

<sup>30</sup> MPC Minute Book 2, 3, 16, 23-24, 36; Monte Reinhart Hazlett, “Life Prisoners In Our Zoos,” *Parks & Recreation* 1, no. 2 (January 1918), 16.

reminding the other Commissioners that Reitmeyer “was a very valuable man, and that the responsibilities of his position, together with his ability made him worth that much to the Park Commission.” An additional policeman for the zoo was also hired, at \$65 monthly salary, indicating an awareness that the animals thus far invested in were also worth protecting. Maintenance of the grounds had also exceeded capacity, and another employee was added “for sprinkling the beds at the Zoo at night, as it was impossible to get this done in daytime.”<sup>31</sup>

The ongoing needs of the current animals required balancing against the desire for continued growth. Parks Superintendent Thomas had learned that the Chicago zoo had begun to receive from the City “a large number of calves, which were condemned by the health department” because they had been “marketed under the age required by law.” The Memphis Board of Health reported that similar arrangements could be made for the Memphis Zoo, and Reitmeyer was instructed to handle the logistics of collecting this “condemned” beef to feed to the carnivores. Dietary descriptions from the 1908 catalog reveal that upwards of 140 pounds of raw beef per day was required to feed the meat-eaters. In terms of growth, Galloway reported to the Commission that the Memphis Zoological Society desired to add significantly to the bird collection in 1911, which would require winter quarters. Galloway recommended these quarters be built on the east side of Galloway Hall. In late 1912, Mr. George R. James donated three grizzly bears to the zoo, adding to the demand for adequate enclosures as well as provisions. In some cases, though, meeting these needs required a reduction in the animal population, whether

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<sup>31</sup> MPC Minute Book 2, 24, 37.

for safety, space, or profit. One such instance is the sale of some of the eight male deer in order to avoid the deaths or injuries of some due to “daily fights among them.”<sup>32</sup>

As with public spaces throughout the South in the early twentieth century, the Memphis Zoo was originally a racially segregated space. In 1911, with summer approaching, the Park Commission began to grapple with the issue. A “Negro Park” had been planned to provide “separate but equal” accommodations, but realization of those plans did not appear to be a high priority. A group of “prominent negro educators” petitioned the Commission for the “privilege of allowing the negro school children, under proper supervision and under conditions which the Park Commissioners might prescribe, to visit the Zoo.” Reverend A. M. Hildebrand and Attorney Dabney M. Scales spoke on “behalf of the better element” of the petitioners, “urging that some plan be devised whereby this could be accomplished.” Reverend Hildebrand had only two years earlier become the first black archdeacon of the Colored Convocation of the Diocese of Tennessee, and had been placed “in charge of ‘colored work’ in Tennessee.” Dabney Minor Scales was a white Civil War Naval hero who began practicing law in Memphis in 1870 and who served as a vestryman in Grace Episcopal Church. Professors J. M. Jones and L. E. Brown, both principals of African American schools in the city, also addressed the Commission on the matter. A unanimous motion carried, laying out the following terms, which were then conveyed to Professors Brown and Jones:

...that the negro school children be allowed in Overton Park and the Zoo from 8.00 A.M. to 1.00 P.M. each Tuesday during the month of June next, when accompanied by their teachers; the schools to divide their scholars as they deem

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<sup>32</sup> MPC Minute Book 2, 29-30, 116, 131; Chickasaw Bureau of Publicity, *Catalogue of the Memphis Zoo at Overton Park, Season 1908*.

proper; provided that they go to and return from the park in special cars provided for this purpose.<sup>33</sup>

Thus the zoo was first officially opened to African Americans, but the fight for equal access was far from over. In June 1911, Mayor Edward Hull Crump urged the Commission to set about making “a park for colored citizens” a reality. Crump’s letter to the Commission included a resolution drawn up by interested citizens. Drawing heavily on accommodationist ideals, the resolution declared that African American citizens “are undoubtedly entitled to Park privileges” and that there was little question, apart from *where*, that a mutually acceptable location for such a park could be found “where its occupancy by the colored people will not lead to friction between the races.” Vice-Chairman Willingham responded to Crump’s letter on behalf of the Commission, stating that the “Park Board is on record as favoring a park for negroes; it is simply a question of a suitable location.” Willingham acknowledged that such a park could be financed out of the Commission budget, and he urged Crump to “appoint five citizens...to co-operate with us in going into the matter of location, terms, etc.” In essence, Willingham shifted the matter back onto the Mayor, giving the appearance of cooperation while refusing to undertake any proactive measures.<sup>34</sup>

Still, even these small victories were encouraging to Memphis’ black community, which began to test the newly granted freedom. In September 1912, Reverend W. M. Cooper of Hopewell Colored Baptist Church spoke to the Commission. Reverend Cooper

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<sup>33</sup> MPC Minute Book 2, 37; Michael Jay Beary, *Black Bishop: Edward T. Demby and the Struggle for Racial Equality in the Episcopal Church* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 42, 45; “SCALES, Dabney Minor,” *Who’s Who in Tennessee: A Biographical Reference Book of Notable Tennesseans of To-Day* (Memphis: Paul & Douglas Company, 1911), [tngenweb.org/whos-who/scales-dabney-minor](http://tngenweb.org/whos-who/scales-dabney-minor) (accessed January 6, 2016).

<sup>34</sup> MPC Minute Book 2, 47-48.

requested that his Sunday school classes be allowed to visit the zoo the following Tuesday. Cooper received no immediate reply, but after his departure the matter was approved and a letter sent granting his request. The approval, however, was not without stipulations. The group would be required to “go and return from the park in Special Street cars and remain not later than 1:00 P.M.”<sup>35</sup>

By the spring of 1912, a very wet season made apparent a drainage problem that would take much time, money, and attention to resolve. Commission Chairman Galloway reported that drainage at the Zoo entrance was grossly inadequate. With every heavy rain, he said, the water “overflowed the street car tracks and caused much damage in the Zoo grounds.” Galloway’s plans for a \$390 correction to the problem were approved but ultimately proved insufficient. The problem was far larger than Galloway anticipated, as neighborhoods throughout the Lick Creek drainage basin regularly flooded. The Horn Brothers, who managed a subdivision on North Parkway near the Zoo, had similar issues and petitioned the Commission to provide some relief.<sup>36</sup>

Reitmeyer, however, would not live to see the drainage improvements completed, or the eventual desegregation of the zoo, or any of its other developments. In the late winter of 1913, Reitmeyer fell victim to an illness which left him “in wretched health.” The Park Commission, “in view of his long and satisfactory service,” granted Reitmeyer a paid leave of absence. Hoping a change of climate would be beneficial, Reitmeyer and his family departed for Tampa, Florida. Unfortunately, he never recovered. His two oldest children moved to Ohio, where they both died young. His widow remarried, and

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<sup>35</sup> MPC Minute Book 2, 115.

<sup>36</sup> MPC Minute Book 2, 99-100.

remained in Florida until her second husband died. By 1930, she had moved to Los Angeles, where she worked as a music teacher. Tommy Reitmeyer, who had once helped his father at the Memphis Zoo, died in Los Angeles. Cora Reitmeyer Bullock died six years later in Sacramento, California at the age of 81.<sup>37</sup>

Reitmeyer's replacement, Henry W. Lewis, continues to hold the record for the briefest tenure as superintendent. Lewis held the job for just under three months. Little is known of him, and records are hard to come by. From his former home in Jackson, Tennessee, Lewis had moved to Nashville around 1911. There he vigorously inserted himself into high society and local lore, calling attention to himself and his preoccupation with nature by being regularly "seen on the streets with a pet bear, a raccoon or a gila monster in attendance." Coupled with his outspoken calls for forestry protection laws in Tennessee as well as the development of a zoological garden at Nashville, Lewis' reputation as a naturalist quickly earned him entry to Nashville's political and social circles. He was considered by some to be "a first-class publicity man" as well as "a studious and concise writer," although little of his work is readily available. More than thirty articles in Nashville's *The Tennessean* provide the only real information on Lewis to be found and offer some insights into his hire and his plans for the Memphis Zoo.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> MPC Minute Book 2, 129-130, 155; Circus Historical Society, "Excerpts From *Billboard* – 1911-1914," s.v. "*Billboard*, March 15, 1913, 22, 23, 42, 58, 59," [www.circushistory.org/History/Billboard\\_1911.htm](http://www.circushistory.org/History/Billboard_1911.htm) (accessed November 8, 2015); Ancestry.com and Ohio Department of Health, *Ohio, Deaths, 1908-1932, 1937-2007* (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2010), 7063 (Ancestry record 235 of 635); 1920 Federal Census, Seminole Heights, Hillsborough, Florida, 5A; 1930 Federal Census, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California, 9B; Ancestry.com, *California, Death Index, 1940-1997* (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2000); Ancestry.com, "Thomas L. Reitmeyer," *U.S., Headstone Applications for Military Veterans, 1925-1963* (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012), Ancestry Record 457 of 4262.

<sup>38</sup> "Mr. Frank Ellis of Cincinnati and Mr. Henry W. Lewis of Jackson...", *Nashville Tennessean*, January 20, 1909; "Goes to Memphis As Curator Of Zoo," *Nashville Tennessean*, April 13, 1913; "Lewis

On March 9, 1913, Lewis arrived in Memphis to speak to the Memphis Lumbermen's Club. His topic was the current state of Tennessee forestry and "a synopsis of the proposed act" which he had written to secure conservation laws that would ensure the protection and improvement of "riparian lands" around Memphis as well as throughout the state. Such a topic certainly would have been of interest to the Memphis Park Commission, which managed the forests at Overton Park and other wooded parks throughout the city. Lewis' bill proposed "a number of forest reservations in the three grand divisions of the state, for the establishment of nurseries for the propagation of forest seedlings. . . . [and] for the establishment of an academy where foresters can be trained." Upon passage of the bill, a five-member board would be comprised of "the governor, the state geologist, the professor of horticulture and forestry in the University of Tennessee, one timberland owner and one lumberman," to whom an appointed state forester would report. That appointee was to be "a graduate of a recommended forestry school," with "a practical as well as a theoretical knowledge of forestry work." The scope of the proposed bill proved that Lewis was capable of conceiving and achieving grand ideas and was truly dedicated to naturalism. It is likely that Colonel Galloway saw something of his own younger self in the bespectacled lad who, at 26, lobbied so passionately for zoos and forests, and it is probable that he first approached Lewis about the superintendent position following this meeting.<sup>39</sup>

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In Charge Of Memphis Zoo: Well Known Nashville Man Probably Goes to the Bluff City at an Early Date," *Nashville Tennessean*, March 24, 1913.

<sup>39</sup> "H. W. Lewis at Trezevant," *Nashville Tennessean*, March 10, 1913; "Forestry Reserves In Volunteer State – Henry W. Lewis Addresses Memphis Lumbermen's Club, Advocating Passage of Bill," *Nashville Tennessean*, March 16, 1913; "Lumbermen Endorse The Forestry Bill – Measure Will Be Introduced Soon In General Assembly—Pinchot Coming," *Nashville Tennessean*, March 23, 1913.

The Nashville *Tennessean* announced on March 24, 1913 that Lewis was considering an offer from the Memphis Park Commission, which desired him to act as interim superintendent during Reitmeyer's leave of absence. While Lewis was only one of several applicants for the position, his application included "a mass of recommendations from Governor Hooper and other officials of the state," as well as his own declaration of intent to both increase interest in the zoo and to expand it. While Nashville celebrated Lewis's dedicated efforts to establish a zoo there, they could not deny that such a move seemed a natural step for Lewis. "As a naturalist," *The Tennessean* opined, Lewis's "knowledge of zoology has made him a local authority on things pertaining thereto. He has compiled a number of bulletins on the fauna and flora of Tennessee, as well as of other states, for the national department of biology, as well as for the state department." In addition, Lewis had "prepared much of the literature used by Duke C. Bowers in his fight against capital punishment," perhaps further endearing him to certain supporters of the Memphis Zoo. In 1913, Bowers used funds from his chain of 114 Memphis groceries—which would be bought out by Kroger in 1928—to install a wading pool for children in Overton Park. Moreover, with the help of Lewis' "literature," Bowers successfully led Tennessee to become the first and only former Confederate state to legislatively abolish the death penalty. The death penalty in Tennessee was outlawed from 1913 to 1919 when the "Bowers Bill" was repealed, thanks in part to Lewis' writings.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> "Lewis In Charge Of Memphis Zoo – Well Known Nashville Man Probably Goes To Bluff City at an Early Date," *Nashville Tennessean*, March 24, 1913; "H. W. Lewis As Zoo Manager," *Nashville Tennessean*, April 9, 1913; Margaret Vandiver, "Duke C. Bowers (1874-1917)," *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, Version 2.0 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1998, 2002-2016), [tennesseencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=1560](http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=1560) (accessed January 6, 2016).



Following news of Reitmeyer's death in Florida, Lewis was officially hired to fill the superintendent position on April 8, 1913. Lewis assumed his duties at the Memphis Zoo on April 16. Just three days earlier, the *Tennessean* published the single most informative article about Lewis to be found. Below a photograph of a young, dark-haired man with wire-rimmed eyeglasses and a clean-shaven face, the editorial described Lewis as an "intimate friend of various bugs, snakes, and animals of especial interest to naturalists." More importantly, though, was a description of Lewis's plans for the Memphis Zoo. These included "breeding and cross breeding of animals," which Lewis intended to "specialize in" in order to increase the animal population of the zoo without the need for expensive captures and transports of wild creatures. In the course of this breeding program, he intended to aid both the zoo budget and the needs of the scientific community by providing "guinea pigs and other small animals for the purpose of testing disease germs and poisons" as well as for the study of comparative physiology. Such a proposal in the present would undoubtedly elicit a great furor among animal rights activists, who were as yet such a small minority as to be of no concern to Lewis's plans. His intentions to expand the scope of the zoo, classify and label the taxonomy of the flora and fauna *in toto*, and to establish educational outreach programs were also revealed, but almost as an afterthought.<sup>41</sup>

A particularly avant-garde aspect of Lewis's plans would lead to two addresses to the Tennessee Academy of Science meetings at Nashville's Carnegie Library Hall in 1914, one on *Animal Life in Early Tennessee* and the other on the *Economic Ophiology of*

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<sup>41</sup> MPC Minute Book 2, 155; "H. W. Lewis As Zoo Manager," *Nashville Tennessean*, April 9, 1913; "Goes To Memphis As Curator Of Zoo – Henry W. Lewis Leaves for Bluff City Tuesday to Accept a Responsible Position," *Nashville Tennessean* (Nashville, Tennessee), April 13, 1913.

*Tennessee*. Of ophiology, or the study of serpents, it was the venom of the poisonous varieties that interested Lewis the most. While at the Memphis Zoo, he intended to research various venomous reptiles in an effort to discover “a vaccine fluid which will prevent death from the bite of a venomous snake.” Until well into the 1930s, no effective antivenin was widely available in America, and vigilant avoidance of snakes was urged in the meantime. During the generation it took to develop an effective antivenin program, zoos tended to store available antidotes. This arrangement seemed logical since herpetologists at zoos tended to be in the most regular danger of snakebite and also the most capable of accurately identifying the need for the precious antivenin as well as the correct one to use when a citizen was bitten.<sup>42</sup>

It appears that Lewis kept himself too busy to become much of a braggadocio, which may help explain why his background and education remain unknown. Apart from a lone entry in the journal of the British Avicultural Society, a bird-lovers and -dealers organization, and a scattered few mentions elsewhere, what can be found about Lewis seldom includes any official title or detailed description of his qualifications. Yet apparently he was known and, for all his youth, respected far and wide. The June 1913 edition of *The Avicultural Magazine* included in its “Candidates for Election” a proposal by Mr. C. Lovett for the election of “Mr. Henry W. Lewis, Superintendent Memphis Zoo., Memphis, Tennessee, U.S.A.” His four competitors were all Englishmen, and his sponsor would undoubtedly have been embarrassed to know that Lewis had been fired

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<sup>42</sup> Tennessee Academy of Science, *Transactions of the Tennessee Academy of Science, Volume Two: January 1, 1914, to May 5, 1917* (Nashville: Tennessee Academy of Science, 1917), 9, 10; “Goes To Memphis As Curator Of Zoo – Henry W. Lewis Leaves for Bluff City Tuesday to Accept a Responsible Position,” *Nashville Tennessean*, April 13, 1913; Jesse C. Donahue and Erik K. Trump, *American Zoos During the Great Depression: A New Deal for Animals* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010), 4, 116, 120.

from the superintendent position before the edition of the magazine went to print. What Lewis does appear to have been was impetuous and prone to “ask forgiveness rather than permission.” Lewis’s overzealous seizure of incompletely vested authority became more fully apparent after his return to Nashville, when photographers Northrup and Company reported to the Park Commission that Lewis had ordered photographs of the zoo without Board approval. Having hired a known publicity man, the Commission should perhaps not have been surprised at the concept. Yet the Commission refused to pay Northrup’s invoice and referred it back to Lewis. They did, however, later pay a hospital bill Lewis incurred during the events that led to his dismissal as superintendent.<sup>43</sup>

Despite one journalist’s declaration that Lewis was “on intimate terms with serpents of all kinds,” it was his antivenin research that led to his downfall. Just eleven days after he assumed his post, Lewis was bitten by a rattlesnake while trying “to make friends with the reptile.” From the beginning, Lewis visited the herpetarium frequently, “picking up rattlers and copperheads with his bare hands.” When the Park Commission next met two weeks later, Chairman Galloway informed the other Commissioners that Lewis “was in the habit of going into the cages of dangerous animals.” The Board unanimously agreed that Lewis must be forbidden from continuing such behavior.

Apparently Lewis was not so easily dissuaded, and he was soon bitten again.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> “Candidates For Election,” *The Avicultural Magazine*, Third Series, Vol. 4, no. 8 (June 1913), inside back cover; MPC Minute Book 3, 188, 281.

<sup>44</sup> “Lewis In Charge Of Memphis Zoo – Well Known Nashville Man Probably Goes to the Bluff City at an Early Date,” *Nashville Tennessean*, March 24, 1913; “Mid-South Memories: April 28”, *Commercial Appeal*, April 28, 2013; “Henry W. Lewis Is Bitten By Rattler,” *Nashville Tennessean*, April 29, 1913; MPC Minute Book 2, 162; “Henry W. Lewis Back In Nashville,” *Nashville Tennessean*, June 21, 1913.

The announcement on May 24, 1913 that Nashville's Belle Meade park had offered land on which to establish the zoo Lewis had championed must have softened the blow when the Park Commission decided soon after that Lewis must be replaced. Exactly how the Commission first came into contact with Phil Castang, Lewis's replacement, is uncertain. But by the tenth of June, "upon instruction of the chairman," the Commission secretary had introduced Castang individually to the Commissioners, who had interviewed him and "severally agreed" to hire him. Eleven days later, Nashville announced it had reclaimed its pet publicity agent. Within a month Lewis had been named "chief expert of the department of game, fish and forestry" for the state of Tennessee. Within a year, he had married Miss Ruth Rowena Pearce in Nashville and had delivered his papers on early Tennessee animal life and the economy of Tennessee serpents to the state Academy of Science. The last record located pertaining to Henry W. Lewis after his brief tenure at the Memphis Zoo came in a 1921 report that a business venture he called the Salvage Company was bankrupt. What happened to the Lewises subsequently is unknown. As for the Memphis Zoo, the next several years would involve mounting tensions stemming from an underfunded budget and a chronically frustrated visionary.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> "New Park At Belle Meade," *Nashville Tennessean*, May 24, 1913; MPC Minute Book 2, 168; "Henry W. Lewis Back In Nashville," *Nashville Tennessean*, June 21, 1913; "Society – A Recent Bride – Mrs. Henry W. Lewis," *Nashville Tennessean*, May 17, 1914; "Academy of Science," *Nashville Tennessean*, April 8, 1914; Tennessee Academy of Science, *Transactions of the Tennessee Academy of Science, Volume Two: January 1, 1914, to May 5, 1917* (Nashville: Tennessee Academy of Science, 1917), 9, 10; "In the Matter of Henry W. Lewis, Trading as the Salvage Co., Bankrupt," *Nashville Tennessean*, October 8, 1921.

## Chapter 2

### The Hagenbeck Challenge to Pragmatism: Superintendents Castang and Cullen, 1913-1924

Charles Philip “Phil” Castang was the fourth superintendent of the Memphis Zoo. He was the second circus man to hold that role, but his family background had long included zoos as well. Animals were in the family’s blood; as early as 1750 one Philip Castang operated “a menagerie in the New Road, Tottenham Court, now called Euston Road,” while a “great-great-uncle” was credited with a peculiar skill for large-animal veterinary care. Phil was named for his Huguenot grandfather, Philip Castang, Sr., who had been “the first Superintendent of the old Royal Surrey Zoölogical Gardens, the forerunner of the present Regent’s Park Gardens.” It was within this “City Garden” that Phil’s father Harry had been raised, and he in turn raised his own family around animals. Legend has it that Phil was born August 8, 1870 in London’s Ship Tavern Alley at Leadenhall Market in a circus wagon owned by his father, Harry. More careful research, however, indicates that while the date of August 8<sup>th</sup> seems correct, Phil was instead born at Shoreditch, Middlesex, England about 1866, where his father operated a bird shop.<sup>1</sup>

Harry Castang’s professional interest in animals was made manifest through a booming business in birds and exotic animals, through which his eight children were

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<sup>1</sup> Circus Historical Society, “People – Brief Information, Biographies, Obituaries C-E,” under “Philip Castang,” [www.circushistory.org/History/BiosC.htm](http://www.circushistory.org/History/BiosC.htm) (accessed October 14, 2015); *Kansas City (MO) Star*, June 11, 1913; *Fort Wayne (IN) Sentinel*, February 4, 1908; *Marshfield (WI) Times*, July 13, 1910 and July 27, 1910; 1871 England Census, Class: RG10, Piece: 472, Folio: 6, Page: 5, GSU Roll: 823367 (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com, 2016); Ancestry.com, Tennessee Death Records, 1908-1958, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee, Roll #7; *Billboard*, April 27, 1918, 29; R. W. Thompson, *Wild Animal Man: Being the Story of the Life of Reuben Castang* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1934), 17-18; Ancestry.com, 1851 England Census, Class: HO107, Piece: 1501, Folio: 116, Page: 35, GSU roll: 87835.

exposed early to the mixed-species life. Many of these species were supplied to the zoo where Harry had grown up and later to his shop by the world-famous German animal traders and showmen, the Hagenbecks. As Harry Castang's children reached employable ages, Carl Hagenbeck, Jr. employed Phil, the eldest son, and Reuben, the youngest, as animal trainers. Over the years, Reuben would become world-renowned for his work with goats, elephants, and chimpanzees. Reuben's biographer, R. W. Thompson, noted that Phil "took to the animals," and, according to Reuben, his brother proved to be "good with cats." From 1893 until young Reuben came of age, Hagenbeck fostered the boy in Hamburg, and Phil surely kept a close eye on his sibling as they worked with the animals in various venues. The traveling Hagenbeck shows that introduced the Castangs to the circus life were an offshoot of Hagenbeck's *Tierpark*, a menagerie based in Hamburg, Germany. It was at the *Tierpark* that Hagenbeck in 1896 "conceived the idea which was to herald the cageless zoos" – an idea that would inspire Phil Castang's later work in Memphis and other zoo directors and designers at zoos around the world. Hagenbeck's Arctic panorama displayed not only animals which naturally lived together in the frozen wilds but also incorporated the Eskimo people who lived amongst them to create as authentic an experience as possible. The various species were "separated by a wide cutting" which, through careful design, was not visible to the audience. Thus the audience saw only a variety of animals and people in a panoramic simulation of their natural surroundings.<sup>2</sup>

America's initial introduction to Hagenbeck's traveling shows took place at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, where the "animal acts quickly became famous." The acts

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<sup>2</sup> R. W. Thompson, *Wild Animal Man*, 19, 56-57, 159.

returned to Germany after the exposition until shortly after the turn of the century, when Hagenbeck took his shows on the road. The movements of large circuses are such “triumphs of organization that great generals of several nations” have allegedly studied their coordination “in order to learn about the control and management of an army on the march.” Reuben Castang told his biographer that the Hagenbeck involvement with the World’s Fair in St. Louis began with “a tour of the [European] Continent first.” Howard Fielding was the New York representative of the Old Hamburg-Amerika Line that had transported Reuben Castang and the circus animals across the Atlantic on the *Patricia* in 1902 and other members of the troupe, including Phil Castang, on the *St. Louis* in October 1903. When he arrived in New York, Phil had in his pocket just ten dollars and Fielding’s address, 49 Broadway, New York. Phil Castang was bound for Madison Square, where the circus was to perform before moving along to the opening of Luna Park at Coney Island in May 1903 and then westward to Missouri for the 1904 World’s Fair.<sup>3</sup>

Aside from the Chicago World’s Fair a decade earlier, Hagenbeck had steadfastly refused “to undertake anything on a large scale” in the United States for most of his life. In June 1902, perhaps by a subtle appeal to his vanity, Frank R. Tate had convinced him to change his mind. Tate was the manager of “the Columbia Theater, and other St. Louis enterprises.” A New York *Herald* reporter whose brother was Secretary of the Foreign

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<sup>3</sup> 1910 Federal Census, Wonewoc, Juneau, Wisconsin, Roll T624\_1714, Page 5A (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2006); U.S. Federal Census, 1920, Rockford Ward 3, Winnebago, Illinois, Roll T625\_417, Page 83A (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010); R. J. Hoage and William A. Deiss, eds., *New Worlds, New Animals*, 58; R. W. Thompson, *Wild Animal Man*, 81, 82, 89, 91, 96. “Year: 1903; Arrival: New York, New York; Microfilm Serial: T715, 1897-1957; Microfilm Roll: Roll 0405; Line: 26; Page Number: 129,” *New York, Passenger Lists, 1820-1957* (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010).

Relations Committee of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition happened to be in Hamburg when Tate visited Hagenbeck there, and was highly interested in the meeting of the two men. One reporter was surely pleased to break the news that Hagenbeck had agreed to exhibit “one of the most wonderful shows of trained animals the world has seen.” The particularly compelling aspect of Hagenbeck’s exhibitions lay in his belief in commingling species commonly considered incompatible. The reporter told of witnessing the simultaneous performance—and “banquet...when [Reuben Castang] feeds the animals with raw meat from his hand”—of lions, tigers, polar bears, leopards, panthers, and Great Dane hounds. Even more significantly, Hagenbeck and the Castangs had proven that certain animals like the polar bears, “thought hitherto impossible to tame,” could in fact be trained to perform. Phil Castang and his brother had firsthand proof of the feasibility of this controversial idea which would eventually challenge the trend of isolation and de-socialization of naturally social creatures in zoos and animal exhibitions everywhere. But Phil Castang was still several years away from a career as a zoo man, and the little bear tied to a tree in Memphis’ Overton Park was only beginning to spark conversation about the feasibility of a zoo there.<sup>4</sup>

Castang worked in America with Hagenbeck’s animals from before the opening of the World’s Fair on April 30, 1904 through its closing on the last day of November. Like most circuses in America, when the Fair ended the troupe retired to winter quarters. Castang returned to Europe for a time but returned a year after his first trip to America. This time, he meant to stay and tour the country with the Hagenbeck circus. When the

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<sup>4</sup> “Hagenbeck’s Animals – Frank R. Tate Will Bring the Great European Show to World’s Fair,” *World’s Fair Bulletin* 3, no. 10 (August 1902), 27.



1905 season got underway, Hagenbeck's eldest son, Heinrich, managed the American tour. The Hagenbeck Famous Trained Animal Show was renamed the Carl Hagenbeck Greater Shows in 1906, and it was this incarnation that ultimately went bankrupt while touring Mexico. Ben E. Wallace of Peru, Indiana bought out the Hagenbeck holdings and toured the combined Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus during the 1907 season. Castang remained with Hagenbeck-Wallace for four years. He briefly trained chimpanzees for the J. E. Edwards Circus, then left the circus world to become superintendent of the Swope Park Zoo in Kansas City, Missouri in 1911.<sup>5</sup>

Not only did Castang have an interest in educating the public about animals, he longed to apply to animal exhibition in America the Hagenbecks' principles for constructing open, barless, cage-less animal enclosures. The Hagenbeck Revolution, as it came to be known, was deemed "so nearly perfect in every detail" that within a century most of the major zoos in the world were employing similar ideas. Hagenbeck's goal was to create "Panoramas," interspecies exhibits carefully designed to provide a rich ecological snapshot of distinct habitats while, unseen by patrons, hidden moats maintained separate enclosures for the different animals.<sup>6</sup>

In America, Carl Hagenbeck's sons Heinrich and Lorenz would prove invaluable in spreading such design principles. By the time of Heinrich's death in 1945 the brothers

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<sup>5</sup> Naturalization petition of Phil Castang, Memphis Petitions 1913 Sep-1919 Nov (Volume 3), *Tennessee Naturalization Records, 1907-1991*, 63; "The Final Curtain - Heinrich Hagenbeck," *The Billboard* (March 3, 1945), 27; Circus Historical Society, "People – Brief Information, Biographies, Obituaries C-E," under "Philip Castang," [www.circushistory.org/History/BiosC.htm](http://www.circushistory.org/History/BiosC.htm) (accessed October 14, 2015); *Kansas City (MO) Star*, June 11, 1913; *Fort Wayne (IN) Sentinel*, February 4, 1908; *Marshfield (WI) Times*, July 13, 1910 and July 27, 1910; *Billboard*, April 27, 1918, 29.

<sup>6</sup> Vernon N. Kisling, *Zoo and Aquarium History*, 102-104. Monte Reinhart Hazlett, "Life Prisoners in Our Zoos," 15.

were considered to be “responsible... for the construction of barless cages and grottoes in zoos, which later was adopted by leading zoos throughout the world.” As with many early zoos in America, however, no funding existed to make such innovative changes to the Swope Park Zoo. At \$85 monthly salary, Castang certainly could not contribute directly to such an undertaking. When the Memphis Park Commission offered him a salary of \$1,800 annually, plus a house and “all living expenses for himself and family,” he seized the opportunity to advance his career and his citizenship.<sup>7</sup>

While still in Kansas City, Castang had officially declared his intention to become an American citizen. By that time, he had resided in America more than five years, much of that time with his American wife, Pearl, and his stepson, Luther J. LaFont. The processing of his petition was protracted. When Castang moved to Tennessee in June 1913, his petition had remained unapproved for two years. Castang appealed to the Park Commission for assistance. Memphis Attorney Harry H. Litty, for whom one of the System’s parks had been named, intervened on his behalf. Still, another two and a half years passed before the U.S. District Court acknowledged Castang’s petition and the affidavits of L. M. DeSaussure, Secretary of the Memphis Park Commission, and C. W. Davis, Superintendent of the Parks. Finally, Judge John E. McCall agreed to make a determination on the second of February 1916, assuming no objections from the Division Naturalization Examiner, M. R. Bevington. Bevington confirmed that the St. Louis,

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<sup>7</sup> “The Final Curtain – Heinrich Hagenbeck,” *The Billboard* (March 3, 1945), 27; Circus Historical Society, “People – Brief Information, Biographies, Obituaries C-E,” under “Philip Castang,” [www.circushistory.org/History/BiosC.htm](http://www.circushistory.org/History/BiosC.htm) (accessed October 14, 2015); *Kansas City (MO) Star*, June 11, 1913.

Missouri, branch of the U.S. Department of Labor was amenable to Judge McCall's intercession. At long last, Castang signed an Oath of Allegiance on February 2, 1916.<sup>8</sup>

After twelve years of residence in the country, three in the state of Tennessee, the Memphis Zoo's superintendent was finally an American, even if he didn't sound like one. His cockney inflection, along with "the jaguar claw scars across the left side of his face and the straight stem briar pipe always between his teeth," surely fascinated some Memphis zoo visitors. At five feet, eight and a half inches tall, and weighing 165 pounds, the black-haired, black-eyed zoo man was not particularly remarkable, stature-wise. But a rare drawing of Castang wearing a bowler hat, with his shirt sleeves rolled up and narrow tie not quite reaching the waistband of slacks held up by suspenders, clenching his smoking pipe in his mouth and cradling a long-tailed monkey in one arm, makes him seem not only confident, capable and comfortable in his role, but approachable—all excellent qualities for a public educator. By employing the skills learned during his time with Carl Hagenbeck, who has passed away in Hamburg on April 14, 1913, Castang could honor his mentor's memory by offering Memphis' captive animals a greater measure of security and comfort and their audiences a greater measure of showmanship.<sup>9</sup>

While he waited for his citizenship to be approved, Castang had gotten right to work surveying his new domain. A month after his hire in June 1913, he penned a letter to the Park Commission enthusiastically recommending the purchase of a number of

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<sup>8</sup> Naturalization petition of Phil Castang, Memphis Petitions 1913 Sep-1919 Nov (Volume 3), *Tennessee Naturalization Records, 1907-1991*, 63.

<sup>9</sup> Naturalization petition of Phil Castang, Memphis Petitions 1913 Sep-1919 Nov (Volume 3), *Tennessee Naturalization Records, 1907-1991*, 63; Circus Historical Society, "People – Brief Information, Biographies, Obituaries C-E," under "Philip Castang," [www.circushistory.org/History/BiosC.htm](http://www.circushistory.org/History/BiosC.htm) (accessed October 14, 2015).

“urgently needed” animals. He began with a proposal to trade one pair of lions, along with \$900 cash, for a pair of 6-year-old breeding lions. He also sought to add two binturongs; a jaguar, puma, and Canadian lynx; a pair of beavers; a female white camel and a horned yak; two each of blackbuck antelopes, axis deer, nilgai antelopes, and sambur deer; a red kangaroo and a pair of wallabies; a pair each of emus and llamas; two pythons, one yellow and one reticulated; and two sea lions. He proposed to sell three wild boars, three elk, six peccaries, three Virginia deer, and a buffalo bull “at the best possible price” to help pay for the requested animals.<sup>10</sup>

His specifications of gender for many of the animals indicate his attention to potential natural increase, while the species he intended to swap out suggest he viewed the current collection as too provincial or common for a world-class zoo. The Park Commission was more restrained in their views toward development, although they did soon afterward approve Castang’s request to sell a male Bengal tiger whose “health was not of the best,” in order to replace him with a healthier specimen. The natural death just three months earlier of “Old Dwyer,” the beloved Nubian lion Reitmeyer had nursed back to health, surely had the Commission interested in acquiring a new popular attraction.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, Henry Loeb’s interest in the zoo had not diminished from his expressive enthusiasm during Reitmeyer’s administration, and he seized upon this opportunity to help. Loeb was one of the founding members of the Memphis Zoological Society (MZS), which he helped to officially incorporate on October 25, 1910, along with

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<sup>10</sup> MPC Minute Book 3, 176.

<sup>11</sup> MPC Minute Book 3, 204; ““Old Dwyer’ Dead – Former King of Jungle Succumbs to Old Age at Zoo,” *Commercial Appeal* (March 23, 1913), [circusnospin.blogspot.com/2011/05/zoologicalcircus-history.html](http://circusnospin.blogspot.com/2011/05/zoologicalcircus-history.html) (accessed November 8, 2015).

C. P. J. Mooney, Ernest R. Parham, Mitchell H. Rosenthal, and Sam E. Scharff. By 1913, as President of MZS, Loeb had facilitated a public collection of \$3,000 toward the purchase a pair of hippopotami. The Park Commission agreed to contribute the other thousand dollars needed, and an order was placed for the animals. At the same time, Loeb ordered Castang's requested llamas and blackbuck antelopes as well as a zebra stallion, and he convinced the Al Chymia Shriners to purchase a female white camel for the collection. This increased traffic in importations for the zoo caused some consternation for Customs Surveyor C. B. King, who needed an authorized signature for all shipments coming into the port of Memphis. Park Commission Secretary L. M. DeSaussure was authorized to sign all necessary paperwork to facilitate the importations.<sup>12</sup>

The pair of hippos was ordered from Hamburg, Germany through Lorenz Hagenbeck in May 1913. They arrived in Memphis on April 1, 1914. The agreement was made with a one-year term for full payment from the acceptance of the animals. It is a long-standing practice among zoos to reserve full payment until acceptable animals have been received, usually after a period of quarantine. This ensures the right to return unhealthy animals or any who do not meet expectations for whatever reason, and to avoid financial loss in the case of animals who do not survive the transport; such tragedies are the shipper's, not the receiver's, liability. Hagenbeck soon wrote to the Park Commission, pleading for an acceleration of payments. He stated that "on account of the European War...he was very hard pressed for money." The Commission agreed to send \$2,700, the amount which had been collected to that point, to Hagenbeck's agent in Cincinnati, Mr.

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<sup>12</sup> W. Mallory Chamberlin, "Zoological Society Takes Definite Shape: Reorganization of Former Body for Promotion of Memphis Zoo Successfully Launched—Zoo Recognized as an Educational and Publicity Asset," *Memphis Chamber of Commerce Journal*, April 1923; MPC Minute Book 3, 236, 251.

S. Stephan. Stephan requested that the balance of \$1,300 be paid immediately, “in view of the terrible conditions existing in Germany.” The Commissioners proved sympathetic, and by December 1914, the matter was settled. This war-time acquisition of hippos was the soon-to-be famous breeding pair, Venus and Adonis.<sup>13</sup>

For two years after their arrival in 1914, the two lived in Galloway Hall. A dedicated building for housing the semi-aquatic animals would not be ready until 1916. Will Flynn, an African American man hired as one of the zoo’s first keepers back in the days of “Old Natch,” was assigned to care for the hippos. Flynn cared for Venus and Adonis from their arrival in 1914 until his retirement in 1954. The original dedicated hippo house would be replaced in 1955, but would be home to Venus only briefly, as she died soon afterward. Perhaps the stress of the construction, the move to new quarters where nothing but the outdoor pools was familiar, the recent retirement of her longtime caretaker, and her advanced age proved too much for her to bear. Adonis’s storied life continued until 1965. When he died at age 54 as the world’s longest-living captive hippo, he had fathered 25 offspring (16 with Venus and 9 with Josephine) and earned the Memphis Zoo the title “Hippo-Breeding Capital of the World.” Flynn’s lengthy employment with the zoo would prompt *Jet Magazine* to name him “Zoo Keeper of the Week” in 1953.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> MPC Minute Book 3, 260, 274; it was during this period that Castang’s younger brother, Reuben, also an animal dealer and trainer, had been interned at the Ruhleben Camp at Berlin. John D. Hamlyn, editor of London-based *Hamlyn’s Menagerie Magazine*, reported in Vol. 4, no. 4 (page 8): “That I hear that Reuben Castang, so long a civilian prisoner of war at Ruhleben, and who was so well known to the British public as the trainer of “Max” and “Moritz,” the highly educated Chimpanzees, has now been allowed to return to his former employment in Hamburg. Returning to Germany from Switzerland with “Max” and “Moritz” in August, 1914, he was promptly interned.”

<sup>14</sup> Charles Nicholas, “Mid-South Memories: Aug. 24”, *Commercial Appeal* (August 23, 2015), <http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/midsouth-memories/mid-south-memories-aug-24-ep->

Such a future, however, grew increasingly difficult to envision as the war waged on. Memphis and other American cities would soon enough have to tighten their own budgets due to the war, but journals and newsletters were quick to offer examples of how it could be done. The director of the Minot, North Dakota zoo argued that even during a war economy, a zoo was no “unwarranted extravagance.” Animals there, he explained, were “well fed on refuse table matter” obtained from a local cafeteria for a mere eight dollars a month or on meat scraps from a local butcher for even less expense. In an effort to gather ideas for new budgetary strategies, the Memphis Park Commission sent Secretary DeSaussure and Parks Superintendent Davis to the Annual Shaw Banquet at the Mercantile Club in St. Louis in September 1917. Among the “informal after-dinner remarks” was DeSaussure’s suggestion that parks “ought to back up the government some way.” In what way precisely, he was unsure, but DeSaussure felt that if the various Parks Departments “would go on record of backing Hoover and using unused acreage for growing food, it would be a patriotic act.”<sup>15</sup>

For meeting “small bills and incidental expenses” incurred during the course of animal trading and the day-to-day operations necessary to maintain and advance the zoo, the Park Commission had established a petty cash fund of \$25. After years of working with Hagenbeck’s large shows, Castang was undoubtedly accustomed to things being done a certain way, and this small expense account quickly proved inadequate. Chairman

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[1242304956-328214341.html](https://www.arkansas.gov/1242304956-328214341.html) (accessed November 13, 2015); “Zookeeper of the Week,” *Jet* 4, no. 17 (September 3, 1953), 27; “A Bit of Hippo History,” *Exzoobrance* (July-August 2011), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Will O. Doolittle, “The Zoological Display as a Leading Feature of a City Park,” *Parks & Recreation* 1, no. 2 (January 1918), 14; George T. Moore, “The Annual Shaw Banquet (Held at the Mercantile Club, St. Louis, Wednesday Eve., Sept. 12, 1917.) (Extracts from informal after-dinner remarks),” *Parks & Recreation* 1, no. 1 (October 1917), 65.

Galloway, who continued to visit the zoo daily, was alarmed at the “excessive” rise in maintenance costs. To alleviate some of these expenses, the Commission agreed to Castang’s request for another full-time employee to handle the grounds keeping. The new man would replace the “other forces” who, as parks employees rather than zoo employees, gave only part-time attention to “cleaning up and policing the Zoo.”<sup>16</sup>

Another unanticipated expense was the purchase of an incubator in which to hatch the numerous eggs being laid by various birds in the zoo. The Commission approved the expense, as it would ultimately save the zoo on replacement fowl as the current birds died. Castang also was authorized to purchase wire for an expansion of the aviary to accommodate the increase. When the Tri-State Fair requested an exhibit of pheasants, Castang was directed to make the arrangements, although the Commission insisted that the Fair bear all expenses for cages and other costs. When Memphis Fish and Oyster Company requested a share of the business in supplying zoo feed, Castang, now mindful of the Commission’s frugality, reported that their prices were higher than he was currently paying. The Commission directed him in future, when “all things were equal,” to consider all of the “various merchants of the City, of course patronizing the lowest bidder.”<sup>17</sup>

One of the few Hagenbeck-like advances Castang was able to accomplish during this time of economic contracture was the monkey mountain. Hagenbeck himself had created the prototype at his Tierpark Zoo at Stellingen, Germany in 1913, shortly before his death. Like Hagenbeck’s moated baboon exhibit, Castang’s exhibit consisted of a

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<sup>16</sup> MPC Minute Book 3, 177, 204.

<sup>17</sup> MPC Minute Book 3, 242, 245, 260, 279.



manmade “mountain” of concrete with various ledges and footholds for the inhabitants to climb or sit on, surrounded by a wide moat. Near the top of Memphis’ “Monkey Mountain,” several pairs of columns supported small swings for the monkeys to play on. Pathways around the enclosure made it “possible to walk and catch glimpses of the little animals peering through openings in the tropical jungle.” A proposition from a New York dealer was taken up by the Commission, and Castang was ultimately authorized to populate the exhibit with twenty-five monkeys, five of them female. The approved voucher amounted to \$1,000, provided that Castang could negotiate payment no earlier than the following October as well as delivery of the monkeys to the Park Commission at Hoboken, New Jersey. The “only one of its kind in America,” the completed Monkey Mountain exhibit opened in 1914 at a cost of \$4,775.71.<sup>18</sup>

Memphis was among the few American cities by this point which had “attempted anything along this line.” Like other zoos who had installed open enclosures, the results were shared “in enthusiastic terms” with regard to “the increased popularity of the zoos.” Too late, the Park Commission would come to realize that a concrete habitat, coupled with a period of cold Memphis winters, was detrimental to the health of the animals. The concrete mountain was removed only a decade later, after “the majority of monkeys died from pneumonia brought on by dampness in their concrete homes.” In 1936, New Deal

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<sup>18</sup> Vernon N. Kisling, *Zoo and Aquarium History*, 103; Monte Reinhart Hazlett, “Life Prisoners In Our Zoos,” 20; “Zoo’s First Monkey Mound,” *Press Scimitar*, November 9, 1936; “Monkeys At Zoo Will Frolic On An Island Costing \$14,000,” *Commercial Appeal*, February 9, 1936.

funding would pay for a grassy “Monkey Island” or “Monkey Mound” (discussed in a Chapter 4) to take the place of this exhibit.<sup>19</sup>

Like its later replacement, the original Monkey Mountain was wildly popular. Yet only certain people were allowed to enjoy it regularly—and certain people were determined to keep it that way. In an effort to retain some sort of peaceable race relations in the city, the Commission had agreed several years earlier to allow black students and their teachers and, later, Sunday school and church groups to visit the zoo for a few hours each Tuesday. In June 1914, members of the Evergreen Club appeared at a Park Commission meeting to raise “a vigorous protest” to the practice. A Mr. Rudisill began with assertions of “the dangerous consequences which might ensue.” Evergreen Club members Barbee, Newton, and Calhoun were “very pronounced in their opposition,” and argued that the city now had a park specifically for black Memphians to use. Clearly, some of the zoo’s closest neighbors wanted to keep the zoo segregated.<sup>20</sup>

Drawing on the nearly twenty-year-old *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) ruling that legalized “separate but equal” accommodations, critics admonished the Commission that as “the Board of Education, in its wisdom had seen fit to separate public schools,” so should the parks be fully segregated. They claimed that “public sentiment was almost unanimously against” the continued admission of black visitors to the zoo and to Overton Park in general, warning that without an immediate end to the arrangement “a serious clash between the races” would certainly ensue. “The negroes,” they insisted, “were

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<sup>19</sup> Monte Reinhart Hazlett, “Life Prisoners In Our Zoos,” 20; “Zoo’s First Monkey Mound,” *Press Scimitar*, November 9, 1936; “Monkeys At Zoo Will Frolic On An Island Costing \$14,000,” *Commercial Appeal*, February 9, 1936.

<sup>20</sup> MPC Minute Book 2, 250.

gradually demanding more and more privileges in the public parks.” To further emphasize their point, they made allegations of “cases of gross immorality” among those who did visit the parks. Just what behavior constituted gross immorality is not recorded. The absurdity of claiming such behavior was occurring among church groups and schoolchildren seemed irrelevant, as did the fact that the park and zoo were policed outside of the strict weekly five-hour window to prevent entry by any black visitors apart from nannies in the company of white children or chauffeurs waiting for their employers. The Commission had long adhered to a policy of appeasement—to “agree with thine adversary while thou art in the way with him”—but to refuse action without further private deliberation of the board. Some discussion ensued, but Chairman Galloway agreed only to receive the Evergreen Club’s petition “for future consideration by the Board.”<sup>21</sup>

At the same meeting, a petition to hold a picnic in Overton Park was received and filed on behalf of the congregation of Avery Chapel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, West Tennessee’s first AME church. It is unclear whether the request was approved, but if so, it would have marked the last such permit for some time. At a special called meeting on June 22, the Commission passed a unanimous resolution on the matter. Allowing that a lack funding for “necessary improvements” at Douglass Park (the city’s only “Negro Park,” acquired August 1, 1913) had historically led to the issue of several permits for picnics in Overton Park, but reporting that Douglass Park improvements were complete, the Commission resolved to issue no more permits to black groups for picnics in Overton Park. Furthermore, no picnics in any Memphis park would be allowed without

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<sup>21</sup> MPC Minute Book 2, 250-251, 255.

a permit from the Park Commission, and at the zoo, any refreshments served must be obtained from the park concessionaire. “Colored children, when accompanied by parent or teachers,” would continue to be allowed to visit the zoo from 8:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. on Tuesdays. The Commission, perhaps hoping to soften the blow, further committed to installing a playground and wading pool at Douglass Park within the next year “for the exclusive use of colored children.”<sup>22</sup>

While the Commission debated the rules of access, at the zoo Castang continued to focus on the growing collection of exhibits. Travel played an important role in building the collection, as did community donation. At one point, Castang and his wife traveled to Cristobal in the Canal Zone to purchase animals for the zoo. While vacationing in Florida in early spring, 1915, Colonel Galloway purchased three crocodiles for the zoo and asked the Commission to pay to have them transported to Memphis. Galloway also sought permission from the Commission to install new duck ponds within the zoo and to convert the Duck Lake in Overton Park into a Japanese garden. The Commission approved an appropriation of one thousand dollars for the purpose. In a period of flourishing exoticism, particularly when Japanese culture was in high favor, it comes as little surprise that this request was approved.<sup>23</sup>

Long-seated Japanese isolationism had given way to burgeoning global capitalism in 1853, when Commodore Matthew C. Perry sailed U.S. Naval vessels into the Tokyo

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<sup>22</sup> MPC Minute Book 2, 250-251, 255, 312, 313; Avery Chapel Church, “About: History,” [www.ourchurch.com/member/a/averychapel/index.php?p=1\\_2\\_About](http://www.ourchurch.com/member/a/averychapel/index.php?p=1_2_About) (accessed November 14, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> MPC Minute Book 2, 314, 315; MPC Minute Book 3, 30, 34; National Archives at Washington, D.C., Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New Orleans, Louisiana, 1903-1945, NAI Number 4492741, Record Group Title: Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Record Group Number 58, *New Orleans, Passenger Lists, 1813-1963* (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2006).

harbor to demand a trade treaty. With no navy of their own to defend against Perry's demands, the Japanese had had little choice but to agree to his terms. American expansionism following the closing of the frontier by 1890, spurred in part by the industrial revolution, opened a gateway between Japan and the American West Coast. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 made room for Japanese laborers, especially in California, where mounting ethnic tensions eventually resulted in litigation. San Francisco's 1906 decision to segregate Oriental schoolchildren from American schools offended many Japanese and provoked discussion with the American government. President Roosevelt's approval of the Gentlemen's Agreement (1907-1908) resulted in Japanese-imposed limits on immigrants, but did not limit an increasing American interest in Oriental goods. It may be that Galloway hoped his Japanese Garden would exemplify the Commission's willingness to work with Japan's Ueno Zoo to help advance both to world-class status in the future. Opened in 1882, Ueno Zoo was still small, but nonetheless "was the first modern zoo in East Asia." At least one historian claims there is a particular significance in the origins of the Tokyo Imperial Zoo as "the first zoo [in] the world not built under the sway of a Western imperial regime." In the years following World War II, however, Memphis and other zoos would in fact form reciprocal relationships with Ueno and other international institutions that would further the evolution of zoo exhibits on a global scale.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ian Jared Miller, *The Nature of the Beasts: Empire and Exhibition at the Tokyo Imperial Zoo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 2, 27; Columbia University, "Commodore Perry and Japan (1853-1854)," *Asia For Educators*, [afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/japan\\_1750\\_perry.htm](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/japan_1750_perry.htm) (accessed November 14, 2015).

But meanwhile, Castang's administration suffered in the same ways as those of his predecessors had. The job of the zoo superintendent, it seemed, was to do the bidding of the Park Commission. Little room for autonomy existed. Beyond increasing the scope of the collection, Castang's only major successes in terms of development were the construction of the Monkey Mountain and a dedicated hippo house. He had argued that the hippos would be at greater risk of illness if they remained in Galloway Hall, and eventually convinced the Commission of the value of such an investment. Of a Park Commission budget in excess of \$204,000 in 1916, the zoo expenses alone amounted to over \$27,000; of that, just \$59 had been spent on the existing "Hippo Tank." A plan for the dedicated hippo house was approved and \$6,000 appropriated for its construction from "pick-ups from the Chancery and Circuit Court." Commissioner Abe Goodman dissented to the appropriation, reasoning that the Park Commission had "no legal right to make contracts that necessitate anticipating revenue." Goodman was overruled and by mid-summer the new hippo house had been built on promised funds. The Commission, however, deemed the work by contractors Lanning and Liebkamann "unsatisfactory" and referred their invoice to arbitrator W. B. Boone for resolution.<sup>25</sup>

Goodman's dissent on the hippo house project would not be his last effort to thwart Castang's plans. The first sign of trouble between the Commission and Castang had arisen with Galloway's concerns about expenditures. Then, in May 1914, Commissioner Willingham noticed the disappearance of signs showing the names of donors to the collection. Castang was put on notice that these signs "must be replaced at once" and that such incidents must not occur again in the future. The Commission was all

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<sup>25</sup> MPC Minute Book 3, 1-2, 18, 30.

too aware of the widespread public support that had made the zoo possible, to which they paid homage through such signage, while Castang's experience was among a menagerie largely paid for by Hagenbeck. Complicating matters further, by the end of 1916 the zoo's expenses had exceeded \$59,000, a significant increase from previous years.<sup>26</sup>

Castang's monthly reports over the winter of 1916-1917 only exacerbated matters. His November 1916 report detailed the purchase of 12 small alligators and the donations of two timber rattlers and 3 coot ducks, increases offset by several deaths that occurred in the zoo that month. One black snake swallowed another on the first of the month. On the fifth, an armadillo died of dysentery. A male porcupine succumbed to tetanus on the 16<sup>th</sup>, and on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, an albino squirrel lost its battle with intestinal parasites. The report for December activities showed the purchase or donation of 29 various birds, a white rabbit, two wildcats, and four baboons, as well as the deaths of three birds (one from dysentery and the others from "Fits") and a boa constrictor who fell victim to canker disease. In January, donations included a black rabbit, a pair of Javanese apes, a snake, and three each of raccoons and flying squirrels, along with 108 birds. However, canker disease took an Indian python on January 5<sup>th</sup>, and the next day a canary died. On the 11<sup>th</sup>, intestinal parasites killed a crocodile. An African porcupine died of natural causes and a tree boa succumbed to gastritis mid-month. Between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>, a young capuchin monkey (one of Castang's favorites) froze to death, and a gray fox and a deer were both killed fighting their cage-mates. In early February, two tamanuwas (a type of anteater) froze to death, a Coati Mundi died of old age, natural death took a Japanese robin, a sea lion died of pneumonia, a male jaguar's kidneys failed,

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<sup>26</sup> MPC Minute Book 3, 246, 475; this page is an interleaf between pages 46 and 48.

and a male ostrich gave in to “throat trouble.” On February 16, a yellow Hangnest bird was “dead when received,” and on February 24 a boa died of starvation, while the paltry total of donations that month amounted to 11 birds. These reports prompted the Commission to demand a full census of the zoo animals, including all acquisitions and losses.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps certain Commissioners wondered if Castang was intentionally pushing the limits of his position or if he was giving insufficient attention to his job. On Castang’s part, simple things like a lack of authority to have heating repairs made to the superintendent’s cottage on the zoo grounds during the winter of 1915-1916, without first obtaining and submitting to the board several bids, had to be frustrating. Being forced to defer to Parks Department Superintendent Davis on the issue of converting half of Galloway Hall into a reptile house, or to Galloway himself on the matter of building a Palm House in the summer of 1916, surely encouraged the looming discussion over the role and value of the zoo superintendent.<sup>28</sup>

By March of 1917, these mounting tensions came to a head. A bitter disagreement arose between the Park Commissioners when Castang first attempted to resign in response to a denied pay raise. Only Chairman Galloway came to his defense. Galloway argued that Castang’s salary of \$1,800 a year should be brought in line with other zoo superintendents across the country. William Temple Hornaday, director of the Bronx Zoo, earned \$25,000 annually. Even Hornaday’s assistants earned significantly more than Castang; one assistant earned \$3,000, while the assistant in charge of the aviary earned

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<sup>27</sup> MPC Minute Book 3, 37, 41-42, 46, 50.

<sup>28</sup> MPC Minute Book 2, 332, 337, 340; MPC Minute Book 3, 32.



\$5,000. Chicago's zoo, though much smaller than the Bronx Zoo, nonetheless paid its superintendent as much as the aviary assistant superintendent in New York. Despite his opinion that the Chicago Zoo would never equal the Memphis Zoo in quality, Galloway sought only to raise Castang's pay by \$600 a year, to \$2,400. In fact, Galloway had felt so confident that this request would be received favorably that he had more than once told Castang that he "hoped to get his salary up to that figure."<sup>29</sup>

When the Commission denied the request and a vote to accept the resignation was favored two to one, Castang refused to return to his post. Shocked and dismayed, Galloway tendered his own resignation from the board, although the other Commissioners refused to accept it and unanimously reappointed him Chairman on the spot. Ultimately, Galloway did resign his post as Chairman of the Commission. His resignation letter, dated April 13, 1917, expressed his belief that with the other commissioners giving increased attention to the emergent Tri-State Fairgrounds, he had become "out of line with the present Park Commission." The zoo and Overton Park had long been Galloway's pet projects, and Galloway felt that not only had the others had grown to have "very little confidence in [his] judgment," but that their "visions were no longer compatible." He vowed that he "most positively will have nothing to do with" Castang's expected departure that night, the thought of which left Galloway "fearful of results." Galloway had earlier admonished against replacing Castang with any person who was "not a Naturalist of experience and amply able to handle and care for the animals in the Zoo," noting that zoo work was "very dangerous, both to [the] public and [to the] employees" of the zoo. Though Galloway's stated expectations for future

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<sup>29</sup> MPC Minute Book 3, 53-54.

superintendents remained rooted in pragmatism, they also suggested a view toward more professional qualifications that would inform the decisions of search committees for at least the next half century.<sup>30</sup>

After Galloway's resignation, John Willingham took over as Commission Chairman. One of Willingham's first acts was to separate from the Parks System a new department, to be called the Zoological Garden Department. He then appointed Galloway Chairman of the Zoo Committee. This new department was to fall under Galloway's "exclusive direction and management," removing the zoo from the jurisdiction of Parks Superintendent Davis "and all his force." The new Zoological Garden Department was declared to be bounded on the south by the street car tracks, on the west by McLean Avenue, on the north by North Parkway (formerly the Speedway), and on the east by "the road just east of the bear dens, running northwest to the Speedway." In later years, this road would lead to a new east entrance and parking lot before being absorbed into a future expansion as an access road to the zoo maintenance area.<sup>31</sup>

The April edition of *Billboard* magazine announced—prematurely, as it would turn out—that Castang had resigned "to take charge of the animal performances for the Jungle Film Company at Los Angeles." The E & R Jungle Film Company had commenced in July 1914, and would continue for a decade; J. S. Edwards, for whom Castang had once trained chimpanzees, was among the firm's proprietors. The firm was best known for its production of *Tarzan of the Apes* (1918) starring Gordon Griffith, and for "a series of over forty one-reel comedies starring the chimpanzees Sally and

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<sup>30</sup> MPC Minute Book 3, 51, 53-54.

<sup>31</sup> MPC Minute Book 3, 58.

Napoleon.” This would not be the last connection between the Memphis Zoo and Hollywood, as will be seen in later chapters. For whatever reason, though, Castang had a change of heart. Perhaps Castang’s family was disinclined to move to California. Perhaps Galloway convinced Castang to remain, for the sake of the animals, assuring him greater protection through Galloway’s new supervisory role.<sup>32</sup>

Whatever the cause, in a letter dated May 1, 1917, Castang petitioned Chairman Willingham to reverse his resignation and to reassign him as superintendent. Galloway moved that Castang’s request be accepted and that he be returned to his position without a raise, but retaining the \$1,800 salary “with use of residence and other perquisites as before.” Again, a debate ensued. Commissioner Goodman argued that Castang had failed to give adequate notice of his resignation, and in addition to being discourteous, “he was incompetent,” inefficient in the discharge of his duties, and, in Goodman’s opinion, the zoo “was in a more sanitary and clean condition under the new man’s management, at less expense.” The records do not indicate who this “new man” was, but presumably he was elevated from within. Goodman blamed Castang personally for the deaths of “a very large percentage of animals especially monkeys within the past year.” However, Goodman had been unsuccessful at finding a “suitable animal man” for the job and was therefore outvoted. Castang returned to his former post for a while longer.<sup>33</sup>

In terms of the accusations of incompetency and inefficiency, it is informative to study the Superintendent’s monthly and annual reports filed to the Park Commission

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<sup>32</sup> Circus Historical Society, “People – Brief Information, Biographies, Obituaries C-E,” under “Philip Castang,” [www.circushistory.org/History/BiosC.htm](http://www.circushistory.org/History/BiosC.htm) (accessed October 14, 2015); Jerry L. Schneider, *Lord of the Jungle Filming Locations of California* (Simi Valley, CA: Corriganville Press, 2012), 73; Tommy Dancil, *Hollywood Studios* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2007), 14.

<sup>33</sup> MPC Minute Book 3, 58-59.

during the last part of Castang's tenure, to which Goodman referred. In 1915, a total of \$27,233.57 was spent on zoo needs. The vast majority of these expenses were for maintenance and feed —\$10,962.53 and \$9,647.10 respectively. A new monkey house added winter quarters for the Monkey Mountain residents at a cost of nearly \$2,500, and expenditures on "Stock" were just over \$1,000. Expenses for buildings, landscaping, and general improvements amounted to less than \$2,300, plus \$258.90 for repairs to the Superintendent's House. Exhibits including the reptile house, Crocodile Lake, hippo tank, pheasant pens, and alligator pen cost \$454.86. Less than \$70 was spent on the zoo's single refreshment stand. As most of the animal deaths during Castang's administration appear unrelated to maintenance issues or feeding, it is difficult to understand why Goodman believed Castang's methods were incompetent. Perhaps there were more efficient approaches to food management that might have reduced expenses somewhat, but perhaps Goodman just didn't care for Castang for some other reason.<sup>34</sup>

Despite Goodman's disapproval of Castang and his management of the zoo, progress continued throughout 1916 and 1917. Galloway Hall was renovated and became the new reptile house. Constructed in 1907, Galloway Hall was a single-story building with the ceiling vaulted above a row of clerestory windows that allowed in ample natural light. Both long walls of the building were lined with cages and pens, inside and out, and for a time this building served as a home for the zoo's entire menagerie including the large carnivores and elephant. The elephant house, Carnivora Building, and "several small buildings and paddocks" had eased some of the congestion as early as 1910. Still, the hippos required more adequate facilities and, in 1916, received them in the form of a

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<sup>34</sup> MPC Minute Book 3, 18.

“magnificent permanent home, constructed of white marble.” Also that year, the Palm House was erected and tropical plants installed. New duck ponds were graded and filled with water and with aquatic birds. In 1917, a “concrete pagoda of Egyptian design” was erected to house “two ancient stones, which were secured after a great deal of trouble, expense and diplomacy by Col. Galloway, from the ruins of old Memphis Egypt.” These stones were moved in the 1960s to the new City Hall building downtown and now stand in the entry of the Art Museum at the University of Memphis.<sup>35</sup>

More than 14,000 plants were transplanted from the city-owned greenhouse to enhance the zoo landscaping. Alligators were added to the lagoon, snakes to the new reptile exhibit, and flocks of birds to the new aviary. Rabbits, raccoons (including a rare white one), and flying squirrels joined wildcats, baboons, “Orang-Outangs” and apes among the zoo’s newest inhabitants. A resident of the city returned from Arizona with a pair of Gila monsters, and others donated an armadillo and a “Hybrid Guinea Turkey.” Even better, two White Fallow deer and an elk were born in the zoo, and two young ostriches hatched. A lioness and two sea lions were purchased. The quarters of the wart hog, wild boars, peccary, wolves, coyotes, and foxes were rearranged to the east of the Hippopotamus House, eliminating neighborhood complaints of “bad odors, noise, etc.”<sup>36</sup>

Not all animals at the zoo belonged to the zoo, though; nor was Castang and his crew technically responsible for their care. On behalf of the Gentry Brother Circus, in the fall of 1916 Castang had requested permission to winter a number of the circus’s animals.

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<sup>35</sup> Henry Mitchell, “Your Zoo: Golden Anniversary Of Zoo Will Be Observed This Week,” *Commercial Appeal* (April 1, 1956); MPC Minute Book 3, 1-2; Memphis Zoo, “Memphis Zoo Welcomes New Hippo,” Blog post July 11, 2013, [www.memphiszoo.org/blog/posts/memphis-zoo-welcomes-new-hippo](http://www.memphiszoo.org/blog/posts/memphis-zoo-welcomes-new-hippo) (accessed October 18, 2015); MPC Minute Book 3, 32, 34, 75.

<sup>36</sup> MPC Minute Book 3, 61, 62, 64, 65, 73, 76.

The Commission granted the request on the understanding that Gentry Brothers would bear full responsibility and expense for “all animals or other stuff that you [the circus] may loan to the Memphis Zoological Association,” which was stipulated to include a dedicated caretaker for the circus animals. When spring approached, the circus offered to perform four shows on the April 4 and 5, 1917 and to donate a quarter of the gross receipts to the zoo’s animal fund. The Commission agreed to arrange the necessary permits and Gentry Brothers agreed to handle the advertising and all expenses. Unfortunately for Castang, who had vouched for the circus, the promised check for a fourth of the profits failed to clear the bank, and the Gentry Circus was not welcomed back the following year.<sup>37</sup>

Despite all this progress, throughout the 1917 season the collection had some contraction, fueling Commissioner Goodman’s contempt. From June to October, 81 guinea pigs were sold and 30 ducks returned to Park Commissioner Willingham. Thirteen birds died of natural causes including 2 young ostriches and a black swan whose head had become trapped in some roots in the lake. A coyote and a gray fox were euthanized, each suffering from a “bad back.” A sea lion’s cause of death was described simply as “Lungs Gone.” A fawn broke its neck, 3 black spider monkeys died of dysentery within a month of each other, a red fox was “killed by others in cage,” and an epileptic “Bay Lynx (Bob Cat)” died. Of perhaps greatest concern to Commissioner Goodman was the death, albeit of natural causes, of a Sphynx baboon he had donated. The year ended with two ducks killed by raccoons, an owl killed by fighting, a second sea lion dead of a “diseased throat,” and the freezing deaths of a mink and two rodent-like agoutis whose fur coats

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<sup>37</sup> MPC Minute Book 3, 38, 45, 57.

proved insufficient against the bitter winter weather that year. Finally, and causing the least distress of all of that year’s losses, Galloway acted as an intermediary between Castang and the Commission for approval to sell two of the old lions.<sup>38</sup>

A true friend to the zoo was lost when Colonel Robert Galloway died January 11, 1918, having lived barely long enough to see his Japanese Garden furnished with “concrete seats, lanterns, dragons and other animals.” Castang was left without an intermediary and resumed his direct reporting to the Commission, however briefly. Two weeks after Galloway’s death, Castang personally approached the Commission to request the addition of a chimpanzee to complement the new orangutan exhibit that was proving to be “a never-ending source of delight to our visitors.” He also explained to the Commission the desperate need for a new feed room large enough to store the single truck assigned to the zoo and the massive quantity of hay and feed supplied annually by the city-owned greenhouses and gardens. In just one year, this included:

Grass Hay	266 bales	Carrots	90 bushels
Grass Hay	28 Tons	Cabbage	41,897 pounds
Pea Hay	350 bales	Turnips	34 bushels
Pea Hay	3½ tons	Sun Flower seed	2,897 pounds
Alfalfa Hay	2½ tons	Sweet Potatoes	155 bushels
Beets	54 bushels	Irish Potatoes	30 bushels
		Corn	50 bushels <sup>39</sup>

With his defender gone and faced with answering to a hostile Commission, Castang’s *raison d’etre* must have seemed more hopeless than ever. He remained at Memphis until April, when he resigned his post for a second, final time. He had approached Mr. A. L. Parker, the new Chairman of the Zoo Committee, with an

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<sup>38</sup> MPC Minute Book 3, 61.

<sup>39</sup> MPC Minute Book 3, 73-74, 77.

ultimatum: an immediate annual salary increase to \$2,400, plus living expenses, or his resignation. Parker did not hesitate, but accepted Castang's resignation on the spot. Castang was replaced by J. Wynn Cullen, who had once served as Reitmeyer's assistant superintendent but was by that time the superintendent of the Kansas City Zoo. The July 1918 edition of *Parks & Recreation* announced that Castang would oversee the construction and management of a new zoo at Freeport, Illinois.<sup>40</sup>

Castang did indeed serve as "care keeper of the Stephenson County zoo" in the palindromic Krape Park, but only briefly. A July 16, 1919 article in the Freeport, Illinois *Journal Standard* noted that he had "severed his connections with the local zoo and gone to Rockford." By January 1920, the Castang family was boarding in a Rockport, Illinois hotel, but soon enough they returned to Memphis. At 2:00 in the afternoon of June 21, 1926, at the age of 55, Phil Castang died at his home at 1386 Faxon Avenue, just a mile and a half from the Overton Park Zoo. He had spent the last few years of his life working as a carpenter, having never realized his dream of creating a fully barless zoo. The coroner, as Castang had done for so many animals in his years at the zoo, recorded the cause of death. Castang died "from natural cause having died suddenly and no marks on the body." He was buried in the then two-year-old Memorial Park cemetery outside the eastern limits of the city, where Pearl, his beloved wife of twenty years, joined him in December 1951. Pearl's son Luther was buried there as well in 1969.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Monte Reinhart Hazlett, "Life Prisoners In Our Zoos," 15; Circus Historical Society, "People – Brief Information, Biographies, Obituaries C-E," under "Philip Castang," [www.circushistory.org/History/BiosC.htm](http://www.circushistory.org/History/BiosC.htm) (accessed October 14, 2015); *Kansas City (MO) Star*, June 11, 1913; *Fort Wayne (IN) Sentinel*, February 4, 1908; *Marshfield (WI) Times*, July 13, 1910 and July 27, 1910; *Billboard*, April 27, 1918, 29; "Phil Castang...", *Parks and Recreation* 1, no. 4 (July 1918), 56.

<sup>41</sup> "Freeport Has Zoo To Be Proud Of, Cy DeVry Says—Chicago's Famous Animal Trainer Pays Visit To Krape Park Today—Gives Expert Advice Free on Feeding and Housing Animals—Phil Castang Leaves Freeport and Is Succeeded by Fred Fortner of This City," *Freeport (IL) Journal Standard* (July 16,



As the new superintendent, Cullen's salary was set at \$130 per month until the first of September 1918 and, "if he made good," he would thereafter receive \$150 per month. He got off to an inauspicious start. It was reported in June that between April 8<sup>th</sup> and April 18<sup>th</sup>, 4 birds and a Chinese goose had died, along with 2 ring-tailed monkeys, a Rhesus monkey, a kangaroo, and a Canadian lynx. Despite this evidence of continuing high mortality, Cullen's performance was deemed satisfactory and his salary raised to \$150 two months earlier than promised. By the end of the year Cullen's salary had been raised again, to \$175 per month, a \$25 increase over what Castang had earned for the same job but still only half of the increase Galloway had envisioned. Even with another raise bringing Cullen's salary to \$200 a month by 1920, his pay remained far below that paid to directors of other major zoos of the era.<sup>42</sup>

The requested census of zoo animals is not reported to have been received in 1917 or 1918 before Castang's departure. In fact, no census was reported received by the Park Commission until the end of December 1923, when Cullen submitted a detailed accounting as part of his final annual report to the Park Commission. Cullen's census of exhibits gives significant insights into the scope of the zoo in the early 1920s. Of a total of thirty primates, the zoo owned 12 Rhesus monkeys from India, 9 Central American Capuchin monkeys and 2 marmosets, a South American brown spider monkey, one orangutan from the island of Borneo, and from Africa, a mandrill, a drill, a Gray Java

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1919), [genealogytrails.com/ill/Stephenson/krape.html](http://genealogytrails.com/ill/Stephenson/krape.html) (accessed November 14, 2015); 1920 Federal Census, Rockford Ward 3, Winnebago, Illinois, Roll T625\_417, Page 83A, Enumeration District 189, Image 134, Ancestry.com (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010); State of Tennessee Certificate of Death, File No. 1868, Charles Phillip Castang; State of Tennessee Certificate of Death, File No. 4830, Pearl Castang; Personal communication with Larry Thompson of Memphis Memorial Park Cemetery, March 15, 2016.

<sup>42</sup> MPC Minute Book 3, 22, 53-54, 91-92, 94, 97, 116, 179.

monkey, and a pair of Javanese apes. The fifty-four carnivores included: from Africa, 6 lions, a pair of leopards, a pair of spotted hyenas and a black-backed jackal; a lion and a Russian Bear from Asia; 2 Indian tigers; 3 polar bears from “Arctic Regions”; three European wolves and a pair of European ferrets; from South America, a jaguar, a margay, two ocelots, and two coati mundi; and from various parts of North America, 2 pumas, 2 grizzly bears, 3 black bears, 2 brown bears, 6 timber wolves (including a pair of black ones), a mink, and 9 foxes of the red, gray, and kit varieties. The zoo at that time possessed only a single elephant, of the Indian variety, but overflowed with Guinea Pigs from South America. These were fully half of the 200 rodents on hand that year, despite regular sales of guinea piglets bred at the zoo. Fifty white mice and 26 rabbits comprised the bulk of the rest of the rodents, with 8 squirrels and a pair each of agouti, muskrat, and woodchucks rounding out the total. Of ungulates, Cullen reported 3 African hippopotami, a llama and peccary from South America, 8 American bison, 2 African zebras and a blackbuck antelope, 3 Indian Zebu Cattle, a Siberian camel, 2 Arabian dromedaries, 8 North American elk, 15 deer, and 3 domestic sheep. The zoo possessed sixteen marsupials, five of which were North American opossums; the rest were all from Australia, including a wombat, 6 wallabies, and 4 kangaroos. The 487 “passers,” 17 “strikers” (owls and eagles), 67 “Galli” (pheasants, turkeys, and roosters), 127 water birds, and 9 large flightless birds filled the bird house, ponds, and flight cages with an array of North and South American, European, Australian, and Asian feathered residents too numerous to elaborate by species. A total of 59 reptiles, all snakes but for 5 South American alligators, 3 American Gila Monsters, and a pair of “Ghoper tartus” [*sic*, Gopher Tortoise] rounded out the total population of 1,115 animals.

Cullen's time in charge of the Memphis Zoo was all too short, and ended tragically. On July 27, 1924, Cullen, his wife and six-year-old son, and his brother, Hugh Cullen, went for an outing on the Mississippi River. They had planned a day enjoying Sigler's Island, some twenty-five miles from Memphis on the eastern banks of the river. Shortly after the ferryman dropped the family at the island, Cullen lifted his son John, Jr. to his shoulders. Cullen's daughter plunged into the water and was nearly lost to the undertow. Her mother hurried to save the child, but was herself swept off her feet. Cullen, still carrying the boy on his shoulder, turned to help and "stepped into deep water," immersing them both. At some point, Hugh also entered the water to help, but the current proved too strong. With the exception of the Cullens' daughter, the entire family lost their lives that day. The shocking loss was reported through the Associated Press in newspapers across the country and in journals of interest to those in the zoological profession.<sup>43</sup>

Six months later, Cullen's obituary would note that he had helped to build one of the largest free zoos in the country—a description his animal census seems to support well. From a single black bear tied to a tree in 1904, the Park Commission and the men chosen to promote and operate the zoo were immensely successful at developing a major attraction for Memphis. Even as the First World War raged, the struggle continued at the Memphis Zoo to balance needs against wants as natural selection and the usually well-meaning actions of the public intervened. Animals were born or bought or donated, while others died naturally or were "Killed," as in the case of the coyote with the "Bad Back"

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<sup>43</sup> New York Zoological Society, "Death of J. Wynn Cullen," *Zoological Society Bulletin* 27, no. 5 (September 1924), 112.

or the sea lion whose “Lungs [were] Gone.” Circuses continued to donate animals who had outlived their performing heydays, as when the year 1918 ended with Ringling Brothers donating an elephant to the zoo. The care and feeding of a growing population of captive animals remained a constant concern. In the “flush 1920s,” zoos around the country debated whether to institute or raise admission fees in order to provide suitable care and fresh exhibits to Americans who were increasingly embracing travel and tourism and expressing plainly an interest in the exotic. It would fall to Cullen’s successor, Nicolaus J. Melroy, to usher the zoo through the coming Depression, economic recovery, and another war that would change American society and the Memphis Zoo forever.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> MPC Minute Book 3, 61, 109; Jesse C. Donahue and Erik K. Trump, *American Zoos During the Depression*, 10.

### Chapter 3

#### Pragmatic Management in the Great Depression: N. J. Melroy, 1924-1937

Early in the twentieth century, newspapers watched for opportunities to report on the growing trend of developing a zoo from a menagerie. From the first report in 1905 that Memphis wished to liquidate its “zoo” to Cincinnati due to overwhelming expenses, to the reports in 1912 and 1913 that a lonesome polar bear had starved himself to death and an elephant had been greatly disturbed by a box of chewing gum fed to her by a couple of visitors, finances, construction, and collections took center stage. Nashville’s *Tennessean*, in particular, took a special interest in the Memphis Zoo under Henry W. Lewis and his successor, Phil Castang, who sent two ostriches and a buffalo to Nashville’s Glendale Park Zoo in 1915. Yet Memphis was mentioned only briefly in a 1916 report explaining how Cincinnati Zoo director S. A. Stephan had managed the transaction when the Hagenbecks sent “two excellent hippopotamus and a number of antelopes” to Memphis. But during and following the First World War, larger concerns occupied journalists’ attention. Throughout Wynn Cullen’s administration, the most prominent journalistic mentions of the zoo were the widely broadcast news in 1924 of the tragedy that ended his term. In the decade before the onset of the Great Depression, zoo oddities and public interest stories dominated the wire services, such as Godwin’s two-headed turtle, society notes of group and individual visits to the Memphis Zoo, and photo features of newborn animals. Yet from 1929 to 1952, the year before his retirement,

Nicolaus J. Melroy and his zoo were featured in more than forty articles that kept the vitality, excitement, and exceptionality of the Memphis Zoo fresh on America's mind.<sup>1</sup>

N. J. Melroy, or "Mel," as he was best known, was the seventh superintendent of the Memphis Zoo. He still holds the record for years served in that capacity. His predecessors, discussed in previous chapters, were George W. Horner (1906-1908), E. K. Reitmeyer (1908-1913), Henry W. Lewis (April 1913-June 1913), Phil Castang (1913-1919), and John Wynn Cullen, Sr. (1919-1924). Ernest W. Godwin, originally a clerk for the Memphis Park Commission with a family and employment background in the sawmill and lumber industries of Alabama and the Florida panhandle, was elevated to the top position after Cullen's untimely death in 1924 and lingered there until his resignation early in 1928. Although Godwin would go on to work at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., the most newsworthy events of his undistinguished tenure in Memphis included one snake eating another; the donation to the zoo of a silver-dollar sized, two-headed, four-eyed turtle captured near Selmer, Tennessee; and the presentation for identification of a four-legged eel-like creature described by Sikeston, Missouri's "various experienced fishermen" who captured and saw it as "a What-Is-It." As first Godwin's assistant and then his replacement, Melroy almost immediately breathed new life into the zoo.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Too Expensive—Is the Memphis Zoo and Cincinnati Can Have It," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, November 6, 1905; "Gum Diet Irks Elephant," *Wichita Daily Eagle*, December 29, 1912; "Three Additions to Nashville Zoo," *Nashville Tennessean*, January 18, 1915; "A very large consignment..." *Janesville [WI] Daily Gazette*, March 4, 1916;

<sup>2</sup> MPC Minute Book 2, 155; MPC Minute Book 3, 31, 91-92, 168; MPC Minute Book 4, interleaf between pages 146-147, 209; 1910 Federal Census, Pollard, Escambia, Alabama, Roll: T624\_13, Page: 24A; U.S. World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918, Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll: 1877692, Draft Board 2; 1940 Federal Census, Washington, District of Columbia, Roll: T627\_567, Page: 15A, Enumeration District: 1-432; "King Snake Eats Its Weight of Copperhead," *Florence [South Carolina] Morning News*, October 1, 1927; "Snappy Stuff," *Chillicothe [Missouri] Daily Tribune*, November 15, 1927; "2-Headed Turtle In Memphis Zoo," *The [Danville, Virginia] Bee*, October 31, 1927; "Tilman Snares 'What-Is-It'," *Sikeston [Missouri] Standard*, June 24, 1927.

Melroy was first employed by the zoo in December 1924 as an assistant keeper. His path to that position was an interesting one. Melroy was a pseudonym he adopted in his mid-thirties while working in various circuses. Born Nicolaus Joseph Kirchen on April 26, 1883 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin to German immigrants Henry and Mary (Gellhausen) Kirchen, he was the youngest of seven children. By the time he was 16, three of his siblings were deceased, his married sister had returned home with her young daughter, and his two brothers were grown and living outside the family home. By then, he was no longer in school and was employed as a stove moulder. J. H. Kaefer, Secretary-Treasurer of the Stove Moulders' International Union of North America at the turn of the century, summarized the job: "the accepted term for assembling a stove is mounting, and the one so employed is termed stove moulder." Another member of the industry described the role of a stove moulder as "a first-class mechanic" in the sense of "mechanic as an artisan," or a tradesman who so desires perfection in his handicraft that "he must follow up the smallest detail of the business." Part of the art was in "grinding and drilling castings" to ensure both beauty and an accurate fit when stove doors were attached to the unit, whether the stove was intended for heating or for cooking. It appears that Melroy was assembling cast iron heating stoves for the Grand Pacific Hotel in Chicago when his life took a fateful turn.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> MPC Minute Book 4, interleaf between pages 146-147; R. L. Polk & Co.'s *Memphis City Directory* (1926), on Ancestry.com, *U.S. City Directories, 1822-1989* [database online], (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011), 824; 1900 Federal Census, Milwaukee Ward 19, District 0170, Wisconsin, Record 11 of 22; J. H. Kaefer, letter to Mr. Wm. J. Knibb of St. Louis, MO, in *Stove Moulders' Journal* 9, no. 12 (December 1904), 360-361; "Atlanta, GA.", *Stove Moulders' and Range Workers' Journal* 10, no. 6 (June 1905), 170-172; "Rome, Ga.", *Stove Moulders' and Range Workers' Journal* 9, no. 9 (September 1904), 271.

At the age of 20, he married a childhood school mate, Charlotte “Lottie” Elizabeth Aupperle. Melroy discovered his love for animals in Louisiana shortly after his marriage. He took pity on a baby raccoon injured by a trap on a plantation there, and his experience nursing the baby back to health helped him decide he wanted to work with animals. The Melroys decided to take an animal act of their own on the road. This was a departure indeed from stove building, but the traveling circus also afforded him an opportunity to practice another interest. The extensive knowledge of casting and finishing that he gained working in the foundry proved profitable in a sideline business that provided Melroy both a creative outlet and a new identity. The 1916 Milwaukee city directory first indicates this shift in focus; “Nichl J” Melroy was described as a “tattoo artist” working out of his home at 598 24<sup>th</sup> Street. The same year, Norwegian immigrant and Dutch Merchant Marine Amund Dietzel moved from Chicago to Milwaukee and opened a tattoo shop at 207 Third Street. Dietzel and Melroy became good friends. Around this time Melroy developed designs for two tattoo machine frames which were later accredited to Dietzel, a name which even now signifies quality in the world of tattoo art and equipment. One of the Melroy machines is in the collections of the Northwest Tattoo Museum in Coeur D’Alene, Idaho. In addition to his mainline work as an artist, Dietzel supplemented his income with animal trading, and it has been suggested that he and Melroy may have worked together with the Reiss Shows. Nat Reiss (often misspelled “Rice”) was Melroy’s boss on the Grand Pacific Hotel job, but he also operated carnivals and sideshows. Mel and Lottie joined Reiss’s tour for a time.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Jay Brown, Curator of the Northwest Tattoo Museum, November 6, 2015; Tattoo Archive, “Amund Dietzel (1890-1973),” [www.tattooarchive.com/tattoo\\_history/dietzel\\_amund.html](http://www.tattooarchive.com/tattoo_history/dietzel_amund.html) (accessed January 7, 2016).



Like many so-called “carnies” of the day, the couple toured with various carnivals and traveling circuses as opportunities arose. “Melroy’s Wild Animal Show” traveled “all over the country and into Mexico and Canada” from 1916 to 1924. In that time, Melroy discovered a particular partiality for monkeys. Show rosters for the Mighty Haag Shows, Bob Straver’s and Clifton Kelly’s shows, and the Al G. Barnes Circus during the World War I years often include images of Melroy with a capuchin monkey. The couple also toured with the “big shows” including Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey, and Hagenbeck-Wallace Shows. During these years, Lottie was a sword swallower and Melroy was the tattooed man when he was not working with animals. Southern cities, with their mild winters, were often selected as winter quarters for traveling circuses, and during Melroy’s winters in Memphis he “helped out for varying periods” at the Memphis Zoo. A lengthy obituary published in 1962 states that one of his odd winter jobs involved helping with the construction of the elephant house as early as 1909.<sup>5</sup>

At 35, with World War I looming, Melroy registered for the draft. His registration card indicates that he was a man of medium height and build, with gray eyes and dark hair. The end of his left thumb had been “cut off under [the] nail”—although whether he lost the tip of that digit to a foundry accident or to a captive animal, as he would lose parts of others later, is not stated. Not surprisingly, considering his sideline interests, tattoos covered his arms and body. Embarking from their winter quarters in East St. Louis, Illinois during World War I, Heth’s United Shows billed him as “Prof. N. J.

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<sup>5</sup> “Colorful, Beloved N. J. Melroy Dies—Superintendent of Overton Park Zoo For More Than 30 Years Was 78,” *Press-Scimitar*, March 21, 1962; “Nicolaus J. Melroy Dies—Circus Man, Zoo Director,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 22, 1962; Jay Brown interview, November 6, 2015; John Beifuss, “Zoo Events Will Celebrate 80<sup>th</sup> Year—Unbridled Enthusiasm For Staring At A Bear Took Chains Off Trees,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 1, 1986.

Melroy, tattooed man.” Melroy was one of no fewer than four men traveling with Heth’s who likewise called themselves “Professor.” It seems not unreasonable that these men should adopt that appellation, as certainly training animals requires a professorial level of dedicated instruction. Perhaps Melroy had spoken fondly over the years of his winters in Memphis as during the war, for whatever reason, Melroy’s brother Peter Kirchen and their sister Marie and her family moved to Memphis. Peter worked in an automotive paint shop run by Marie’s husband, Max Jobst. Shortly after the war ended, Melroy decided to leave his traveling days behind him. He rolled down his sleeves, covered his multiple tattoos (which were never publicized or, apparently, shown to Memphis zoo visitors), and went to work with animals in a more stable environment.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps because of his years of transient labors at the Memphis zoo, after his hire as “Park Keeper” in December 1924 Melroy rose quickly through the ranks. In 1926 he was an assistant keeper, and the following year was promoted to Assistant Superintendent under Ernest Godwin. By the time R. L. Polk and Company released the annual city directory for 1928, the Melroys had taken up residence in the Superintendent’s cottage on the zoo grounds. He would remain in that job and that house until his well-earned retirement in 1953—although the 1930 census taker managed to miss the Melroy family entirely. At some point, Melroy allegedly operated a tattoo parlor out of the cottage as well. The Melroys never had any biological children, but a foster daughter, Amye

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<sup>6</sup> U.S., World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918, Wisconsin, Milwaukee City, Ward 09, Draft Card K, Record 144 of 446; “The Final Curtain,” *The Billboard* (April 16, 1955), 49; Will J. Farley, “Heth’s United Shows Get Under Way in E. St. Louis,” *The Billboard* (April 21, 1917), 28; 1930 Federal Census, District 0123, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll: 2278, Page: 19A.

McDonald, was the only child to grow to adulthood at the superintendent's cottage within the Memphis Zoo.<sup>7</sup>

To a child especially, Amye's life must have seemed magical. Not only did she grow up with a houseful of pets, but her entire "back yard" was the zoo itself. Moreover, thanks to a misbehaving donkey, Amye had front row seats anytime she wanted them to the country's only free daily circus. The circus began in 1926 when Melroy, still Godwin's assistant, purchased "an undersized and unruly burro for \$7.50" for use at a pony track being installed at the zoo. "Pete," the miniature burro, did not take kindly to the idea of being tamed. Children observing Melroy's difficulties with "the stubborn dwarf" were delighted at the antics as Melroy "wrestled with the beast, jumping hither and yon to escape flying heels." Within six years, the daily tussle with "Pete" grew to become a 12-act circus with some forty animals, six professional clowns, and carnival rides. The circus performances ran from early spring through October, and trainers spent the winter months preparing the animals for the next season's shows.<sup>8</sup>

As the Great Depression started and dragged on, the zoo and its daily-and-twice-on-Sunday circus were a bright spot where cares could be forgotten. To keep the animals well nourished, Melroy "would go around to the grocery stores to get old fruits and

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<sup>7</sup> R. L. Polk and Company, *Memphis City Directory* (Memphis: R. L. Polk and Company, 1925), 869; R. L. Polk and Company, *Memphis City Directory* (Memphis: R. L. Polk and Company, 1926), 824; R. L. Polk and Company, *Memphis City Directory* (Memphis: R. L. Polk and Company, 1927), 873; R. L. Polk and Company, *Memphis City Directory* (Memphis: R. L. Polk and Company, 1928), 878; John Beifuss, "Zoo Events Will Celebrate 80<sup>th</sup> Year—Unbridled Enthusiasm For Staring At A Bear Took Chains Off Trees," *Commercial Appeal*, April 1, 1986; 1930 Federal Census, District 24, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee. The zoo was located in District 74 in 1930, and a careful perusal of the entire district enumeration reveals that the cottage in the zoo was overlooked by the census taker.

<sup>8</sup> "Circus Born When Donkey Misbehaves," *Oshkosh (WI) Daily Northwestern*, September 24, 1932.

vegetables and stale bread to feed the animals,” recalled then-trainer and later zoo circus director Tommy O’Brien. To keep the superintendent and his family well nourished, the city allowed Melroy to “raise some pigs and chickens at the zoo for his own use...a common practice in zoos in those days.” A special tax allowed the city of Memphis to avoid instituting admission charges to either the zoo or the circus, which remained open to the (white) public without cost six days a week; African American visitors were admitted without charge as well, but still only on Tuesdays.<sup>9</sup>

Jesse C. Donahue and Erik K. Trump, both Political Science professors at Saginaw Valley State University in Michigan (where Dr. Donahue is Department Chair), co-authored in 2010 the much-needed and extremely insightful book, *American Zoos During the Depression: A New Deal for Animals*. They have pointed out that when the Depression began, many American zoos were less than a decade old. Being “in their physical infancy” left such zoos considerably vulnerable to economic vicissitudes. In places like New Orleans, San Antonio, Tulsa, and Duluth, Minnesota, zoos were in grave danger of collapse. The Memphis Zoo, somewhat more stable at nearly two decades old, continued to grow during this period without instituting admission fees. Such fees could be justified at zoos like those in Philadelphia, Cincinnati, San Diego, and the Bronx, where “large collections and park-like settings were worth the cost of admission.” Melroy’s zoo, with its teeming population nestled into the beautiful Overton Park, was a rare, large, park-like, free zoo both before and after the Depression.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “Circus Born When Donkey Misbehaves,” *Oshkosh (WI) Daily Northwestern*, September 24, 1932; “Nicolaus J. Melroy Dies – Circus Man, Zoo Director,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 22, 1962.

<sup>10</sup> Jesse C. Donahue and Erik K. Trump, *American Zoos During the Depression*, 10-12.

While young zoos struggled to stay open, older zoos like the one in Cincinnati had problems, too. Zoo buildings and features tend to require replacement or major repairs every two to three decades, and some of Cincinnati's buildings were nearly sixty years old. Other zoos, including the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. (now the Smithsonian National Zoological Park) fought to stay solvent when reduced city budgets had to be stretched to maintain vital services. Surprisingly, both the people and the political leaders in many cities argued for the ongoing support of their zoos even during the Depression, and Memphis was no different. As recently as sixteen months before the stock market crashed on "Black Monday," the Park Commission had authorized \$1,180 for the additions of a Zebra mare, two female Wallabys, and twelve Rhesus Monkeys—all while balancing the needs of the city's other parks, the fairgrounds, and the new Pink Palace Museum. In fact, the impact of the Crash on the Park Commission was not immediately apparent, as plans for a miniature golf course in Overton Park continued to be discussed in late 1929. Collections continued for the "Museum of Natural History and Industrial Arts" (so officially named in favor of "Pink Palace," although the shorter, more popular name eventually won out). Tennis courts were authorized for the Fairgrounds and Museum Building some six months after the Crash. Major changes to the zoo, though, would have to wait.<sup>11</sup>

A month after Melroy was hired as a keeper, the Chief "Forester and Constructor, New York Zoological Park" (now the Bronx Zoo), Hermann W. Merkel, surveyed the Memphis zoo. Merkel prepared a report of its current condition and recommendations for

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<sup>11</sup> Jesse C. Donahue and Erik K. Trump, *American Zoos During the Depression*, 10; MPC Minute Book 4, 236, 292, 297, 313, 334-336.

improvements, many of which Melroy would later address. Of the trees, Merkel declared many to be “superfluous,” preventing the “development of full crowned long lived specimen[s].” He noted the problem of the main entrance being so arranged that “all autoists must cross the tracks of an Electric Railway after alighting” from their vehicles. The imbalance and crowding inside the entrance created by a large pavilion with refreshments and “comfort station” on one side and opposite it, a “very small pavilion which shelters a stone column from Memphis Egypt” he deemed “of good design and proportion,” but nonetheless poorly placed. He recommended moving the stone and its shelter and balancing it with a similarly proportioned structure that “might house a drinking fountain.” Rather than a single, central walkway proceeding to and from the entrance, he recommended one divided by a new grass plot with formal landscaping that focused attention immediately on the Carnivora Building and the pool and fountain in front of it. This is essentially the design of the zoo entrance today. Parking was an issue in 1925 as it remains today, and Merkel proposed opening a second entrance on the northern perimeter, where parking along North Parkway might ease congestion. This suggestion was never developed, although an East Gate with additional parking was eventually added.<sup>12</sup>

Merkel, on the whole, was satisfied with the Carnivora Building, although he deemed it “too dark” and recommended “substituting clear glass for the present wire glass,” brightening the paint job, and reflecting electric light into the exhibits. The barwork obscured the views of the animals, who “would be rendered much more visible”

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<sup>12</sup> MPC Minute Book 4, Folder 2, “Report on Memphis Zoological Gardens by Herman W. Merkel, New York, January 1925, 1-2. (Hereafter “Merkel Report”).

if the bars were either painted a flat black or dark green or were replaced with “electric welded netting.” However, he acknowledged that the barwork was in “splendid condition,” deeming replacement at that time extravagant. Merkel also expressed his concern for the safety of children, who could (and surely did) all too easily pass between the guard railings. He suggested the railings of the lion house, the elephant house, and the hippo house be “filled in” with “a simple guardwork of wire.” The elephant house he deemed adequate, although he urged moving the outdoor yard from the rear of the building to the south side where the animals could be seen by visitors instantly upon arrival. Venus and Adonis by this time had already begun to produce their hippo dynasty, and Merkel declared it “too bad” that the outdoor pool was too low for clear sightlines to the animals and so low as to create “an unsanitary condition,” while the building itself featured no public space for visitors to observe the hippos during inclement weather. A recommendation to add a covered extension to the building was eventually completed, although not with the draft-eliminating revolving doors at either end that Merkel suggested.<sup>13</sup>

The glass conservatory building, he asserted, was poorly suited for an aviary although ideal for “palms and other plants.” Merkel’s report debated the merits of the herpetology department sharing this subtropical environment with the plants. The existing reptile house he suggested turning into an aviary with one or two large flying cages or rooms in its interior, to be better stocked with birds than it then was, especially those “of showy plumage.” The ostriches occupied an “unattractive” space “not worthy of occupying what is really the central portion of the Garden.” Merkel recommended

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<sup>13</sup> MPC Minute Book 4, Merkel Report, 2-3.

fencing the entire perimeter of the zoo, letting the pheasants and peacocks roam free, and moving the ostriches to their enclosure. The seal pool he declared “entirely too small to show off even a single specimen to good advantage,” yet ideal for a pool for diving birds like penguins. The existing water fowl pool was found to be “in a rather dilapidated state” caused by an uncontrolled flow of water from Lick Creek, which was sometimes high, sometimes low. The monkey house could be made into “a really fine showplace for primates and other small animals” by rearranging the space to allow a “large central public space” surrounded by indoor cages.<sup>14</sup>

The zoo overall he found cluttered with a plethora of unnecessary cages. Many of the smaller animals could be made more comfortable and shown to better advantage in open yards of varying sizes with proper attention given to suitable fencing by species. For the ruminants, or hoofed animals, Merkel recommended building a barn surrounded by “paved corrals” that would keep the animals off of soft ground in wet weather while helping “to keep the animals’ hoofs in order.” Having inspected the plans for a pony track, Merkel found the proposed site “very well suited for the purpose.” Over the past two decades visitors had developed the habit of wandering the grounds as it suited them, and Merkel strongly urged the laying of prescribed walks, with low fences if necessary to deter wanderers. Finally, he felt that the Superintendent’s cottage proximity to the exhibits should be remedied by moving the cottage “nearer to the street.” Surprisingly, Merkel did not recommend the addition of many expensive buildings, as he foresaw a time when the zoo may need to be moved elsewhere; he suggested a move to a site “no

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<sup>14</sup> MPC Minute Book 4, Merkel Report, 2-3.



less than one hundred acres in extent, 2/3 of which should be in open situations with the remainder sparsely or heavily wooded.”<sup>15</sup>

Soon afterward the Palm House was opened, providing the monkeys a source of “home grown food” from a banana tree by late 1931. Four months later the Park Commission issued an inquiry to Mr. Tutwiler, president of the Memphis Streetcar Company, as to whether that company would pay for fencing the southern boundary as a “safety device” to separate the zoo grounds from the streetcar line. A year would pass before the Park Commission authorized “necessary repairs” including painting and adding a heater to the monkey house. The Commission also called for a feasibility study for a new sea lion pool and alligator pen, which was soon approved at a “total cost not to exceed \$2,500.00.” In addition, Parks Supervisor Davis was “authorized to offer twenty-five cents per running foot for 4,500 feet” of the fence surrounding the Pink Palace Museum to transfer to the zoo.<sup>16</sup>

And so it was with an eye toward future expansion that Melroy’s assistantship under Godwin got underway, but the financial crisis of the century would waylay many of these plans for a time. In addition, certain “prominent contributors” of both money and animals began to express concerns about what they considered unsanitary conditions and an excessive number of animal deaths at the zoo. Many of the deaths, the complainants believed, were “attributed...to incompetence and carelessness on the part of the Zoo Superintendent.” The deaths of three seals and a large python they blamed on “acid or

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<sup>15</sup> MPC Minute Book 4, Merkel Report, 6-7, 10.

<sup>16</sup> MPC Minute Book 4, Merkel Report, 3-5; MPC Minute Book 4, 40, 71, 73, 74, 130; “Bananas For Monkeys,” *Lincoln (NE) Evening Journal*, October 15, 1931.

contaminated water, caused from new concrete used in building [the] Seal Pool.” In the event of an animal death in the zoo, however, a necropsy was always performed and records maintained for research purposes; the “City Chemist” had tested the pool water after the deaths of the seals and deemed it clean. All reasonable measures had been taken to de-acidify the concrete in the new pool and test the fresh water “with Gold fish for four consecutive days, without showing any ill effects upon the fish.” In response to the charges of unsanitary conditions, Commission Vice Chairman A. L. Parker pointed out that “the Memphis Zoo is recognized by prominent Zoo men as one of the most sanitary and best kept Zoos in the United States, and that the animal death rate was not as high, or any higher, than in other large Zoos of this country.” Parker further asserted that Superintendent Godwin was a “very conscientious and capable man to manage the Zoo.” Commissioner Frank N. Fisher, who had brought forth the complaints on behalf of the “prominent contributors,” was directed to “make notations of any mistakes he might discover being made around the Zoo” by the superintendent or any other employee.<sup>17</sup>

By the end of 1926, the zoo itself directly employed only six people: Superintendent Godwin, hippo keeper Will Flynn, pony keeper W. C. Watkins, keepers Ed Kostner and N. J. Melroy, and Melroy’s wife Lottie, cashier. Other parks system laborers were used from time to time to complete larger projects, but these were the primary dedicated zoo staff. Flynn apparently was the only African American person at that time whose job was confined to the zoo; of the 78 black employees of the parks system, Flynn had seniority with a hire date in September 1905, when Natch the bear was the “zoo’s” sole resident. The system employed a black mechanic, two maids, sixty-six

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<sup>17</sup> MPC Minute Book 4, 92.

“laborers” including Flynn, an instructor and a “keeper” at Church Park, one “foreman,” and five chauffeurs. The oldest of these employees was Charles Ware, a laborer who celebrated his fifth employment anniversary and his 94<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1926. The eleven white laborers employed by the system ranged in age from 18 to 59 and were part of the total of 107 white parks system employees. Thirty-five white women worked in various clerical or instructional positions or as pianists for the musical programs, while the only two black female employees were confined to jobs as maids. All administrative and supervisory positions were filled by white employees, who ranged in age from 19 to 78. The eldest of these was 78-year-old Riverside Park policeman J. T. Alexander, while Overton Park policeman G. W. Ferguson was 70. Clearly, with park policemen as old as these, the Commission did not anticipate any major civil or criminal disobedience.<sup>18</sup>

When Melroy took over from Godwin in 1928, he began to push for some of the changes Merkel had recommended. Rearranging the snake and bird house and the Palm House were effected using parks system laborers, who also built two “comfort stations,” or public restroom facilities. Not in Merkel’s report, but nonetheless needed, was a heating system for the Superintendent’s cottage, which was installed in November 1928 by Tennessee Sheet Metal Works at a cost of \$175. Apparently Melroy’s work in his first year as Superintendent was found to be satisfactory, as he was given a raise of \$25 per month beginning January 1, 1929. Animal trainer C. F. Fulton also received a raise of \$10 per month. As 1929 got underway, the Park Commission authorized Melroy to travel to New York to purchase “a collection of birds and animals approximating \$2500.00, for the Zoo.” In April, parks system laborers were tasked to build twelve wood and wire pens

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<sup>18</sup> MPC Minute Book 4, Folder 5, List of Parks system employees dated December 1, 1926.

for pheasants, “at estimated cost of \$850.00.” With no way of knowing what loomed in the near future, the 1929 budget for the zoo was set at \$50,000; for the pony track at the zoo, \$4,000; and for the zoo’s “kiddy kar,” \$275. Together these three line items comprised eleven percent of the operating budget for all of the city parks, including salaries for the entire system, interest and property notes, plus the costs of supervision and supplies for the entire Recreation Department. Included in the zoo budget was a \$15,000 earmark for the purchase of new animals, building construction, and necessary repairs.<sup>19</sup>

The Commission rejected a proposal in May 1929 that would have resulted in the publication of a zoo catalog similar to the one distributed in E. K. Reitmeyer’s first season (1908), to be sold for fifteen cents per copy. Fortunately for future researchers, Merkel’s detailed report provides insights into the pre-Depression arrangement of the zoo. The Commission did approve spending \$375 for architectural firm Hanker and Cairnes to make “a new sketch of the Zoo grounds.” A month later, Hanker and Cairnes had closed out bids, and the construction contract for a new monkey house designed by the firm, including reworking the walkways and driveways to and around the building, was awarded to the lowest bidder. Memphis Construction Company would complete the building for \$13,500 and the walkways for \$1,500. New monkeys would be purchased upon completion of the construction at an estimated cost of \$550. The bird and snake houses were heated as well. Apparently, though, the stock market crash had a swift impact on the Memphis Construction Company, for by the end of November 1929 the

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<sup>19</sup> MPC Minute Book 4, 243, 250, 258, 268, 274, 303; MPC Minute Book 4, Folder 10, 1929 Park Commission Budget.

work remained uncompleted and that which had been done was found to be “very unsatisfactory.” The Hanker and Cairnes firm was instructed to call in the construction company’s bondsmen to complete the work.<sup>20</sup>

The 1929 budget had included some \$15,000 worth of construction to cover the work on the monkey house. Although the 1930 operating budget included no significant reductions, Commission records suggest greater restraint governed improvement plans. New breeding dens for the bears, a new wolf den, and grading and sodding the monkey house were allotted a mere \$500 each. A thousand dollars was earmarked for repairing walkways, plus lesser amounts to repair the hippo house roof and the lion house, and to paint buildings, fences, and the roofs of the refreshment stand and Superintendent’s cottage. The pony track would continue to receive \$4,000 and the Merry-Go-Round (having replaced the “Kiddy Kar” in the budget) was allotted \$250 for annual operations. Still, the overall zoo expenses were marginally higher than 10% of the overall parks system budget for 1930. As 1929 drew to a close, the Commission approved “\$995.00, plus express charges” for purchase of monkeys and baboons for the new monkey house. The requested “purchase of other animals and birds” would have to wait until “later when funds become available.”<sup>21</sup>

Expenses for the wolf den were kept to a minimum by repurposing the old monkey house according to a plan Melroy designed that would accommodate the wolves as well as other mammals. The Commission determined that since “a credit balance of

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<sup>20</sup> MPC Minute Book 4, 278, 280, 285, 298, 307.

<sup>21</sup> MPC Minute Book 4, Folder 12, 1930 Park Commission Budget; MPC Minute Book 4, 326, 338.

approximately \$25,000.00 for maintenance and repairs” existed in the zoo funds, it was feasible to approve the use of \$8,500 of this surplus for several improvements to take place in the summer of 1930. Aside from the old monkey house conversion, a pony barn suitable for the care of 30 ponies was to be built and the yards surrounding the larger hexagonal barn would be rearranged, as Merkel had suggested. The camel house and walkways would be remodeled. Finally, a duck canal and lake, “with coping around it and several boats for same,” was to be installed. The 1931 budget suggests more apparent economic impact on the Commission, which allotted just \$37,500 for maintenance and operations, \$2,500 for paint and repairs, and \$3,000 for the pony track, although the merry-go-round budget was increased to \$300. The 1932 budget decreased the general allotment again, to only \$34,000, but made no further changes to the attractions budgets. Considering that by 1932 the overall budget for the entire parks system had been reduced more than a hundred thousand dollars, these reductions seem slight.<sup>22</sup>

Melroy was in charge of operating and maintaining on this reduced budget a number of buildings and their contents, described in a fire and tornado insurance report by their revised replacement values. James Avdallis’ refreshment stand and its contents, commonly known as the Refectory Building, were collectively valued at \$8,000. The reptile and bird house including the snakes, alligators, and birds living there were valued collectively at \$13,200. The small animal house was valued at \$4,500, although its residents were not separately valued. The hippos were valued at \$10,000, although their house was only valued at \$3,000. The Palm House with its steel skeleton and glass roof

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<sup>22</sup> MPC Minute Book 4, 340; MPC Minute Book 5, Folder 1, 1931 Park Commission Budget, 1932 Park Commission Budget.

were worth \$10,000, and the animal barn with all of its feed, harnesses, and tools were valued at \$2,800. The Commission had decided earlier not to purchase fire insurance for the monkey house, and no tornado insurance was purchased either. In terms of liability insurance on the zoo and its attractions, the Commission carried a \$10,000 policy on the pony track and \$500 against the burglary of the zoo safe, both through Maryland Casualty Company, at an annual premium of \$282.50. The Commission also insured the 1927 Chevrolet Roadster it supplied Melroy for business and personal use and the 1927 Ford Ton Truck kept at the zoo. The vehicles had cost \$550 each, plus insurance in 1930 of \$275 for Melroy's car and \$300 for the zoo truck. Adding a garage to the Superintendent's Cottage for Melroy's vehicle cost another \$125. In 1931, Melroy's car was replaced along with those provided for the Park Commission timekeeper and two superintendents of other departments, at a cost of \$582 each.<sup>23</sup>

Such expenditures must have seemed frivolous to any who might know that the Commission had extended a \$300,000 overdraft against its bank account to pay "interest on bonds, payments on park property, maintenance, pay-rolls and general upkeep on parks and departments" until the 1931 tax allotment could be collected. Building valuations were reconsidered in an effort to reduce insurance costs; only tornado insurance would be carried on buildings that had limited exposed glass (although hail insurance would continue on the greenhouses and Palm House), while fire insurance on all buildings would be dropped as policies expired. Moreover, the announcement that nearly across-the-board pay cuts would go into effect March 1, 1932 could only have

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<sup>23</sup> MPC Minute Book 5, Folder 1, 1932 Park Commission Insurance Valuation Report, 1932 Park Commission Liability Insurance Schedule; MPC Minute Book 4, 327; MPC Minute Book 5, 21, 26.

increased disgruntlement. In fact, Sam Black resigned his post as Caretaker of Animals and Reptiles rather than take a reduction in his pay of three dollars per day, while caretakers John Doyle, Will Flynn, James M. Hunt, Mose Palmer, and James V. Stallings likely saw little alternative but to remain at the reduced rate of \$2.75. Elijah “Lige” Cox had worked his way up from “Chauffeur” in 1922 to caretaker at the zoo, and surely was dismayed to learn he also would lose a quarter a day. Those who worked the pony track had it the worst. Pony track cashier Effie Cullum, already part-time, was reduced to a winter only schedule at a rate of two dollars per day, having lost a quarter daily. Will E. Jones had helped with the ponies at \$1.25 per day, but transferred to the system-wide Maintenance and Construction Department in 1931, only to see his daily pay fall twenty-five cents in that department. Pony leaders B. Black and R. Bennett earned a scant \$1.00 per day on part-time, winter only shifts in 1931 and 1932, but they were the only zoo employees whose salaries did not fall. Joseph Black, who had earned \$3.00 per day as the Palm House keeper in 1931, saw his pay decreased by fifty cents a day while his duties expanded to include acting as watchman over the Palm House after zoo hours. The zoo’s general Night Watchman, W. O. Whitehorn, saw his pay reduced from \$3.50 to \$3.00 per day, while truck driver John Williams’ pay went from \$3.00 to \$2.50 daily. J. E. Jolly, the Bird and Snake House keeper, lost half a dollar daily to \$3.50 in 1932. Animal trainer Frank Cramer’s salary dropped from \$150 to \$140 per month, and Melroy’s salary fell from \$225 to \$200.<sup>24</sup>

Male or female, black or white, nearly every employee of the parks system was affected similarly as the Commission struggled to avoid closing parks and laying off

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<sup>24</sup> MPC Minute Book 5, 26; MPC Minute Book 5, Folder 1, Park Commission Employee Salaries.



staff. The same was true across the city, as elsewhere in the country. Memphis Mayor Watkins Overton, elected in 1928, had inherited a deficit of nearly a million dollars. Two years later, 98 percent of white Memphians were employed and only one percent fewer black Memphians were out of work, although by the end of 1930 “thousands had lost their jobs.” Overton’s response was to establish the Mayor’s Commission on Employment and Relief. Two women obtained temporary positions in the Recreation Department through this program, and within a year the Park Commission was “using about 40 unemployed men in the parks” and seeking more. Ultimately, though, Mayor Overton signed a resolution adjusting the salaries of all city employees, lessening by ten percent all salaries above \$200 per month and all other salaries were to be reduced by an amount “in accordance with the work performed.” The general deduction schedule to be followed effective March 1, 1932, was:

<u>Monthly earnings</u>	<u>Pay change</u>
\$200.00 and up	10% off
\$175.00 up to \$199.00	\$15.00 off
\$151.00 up to \$174.00	\$12.50 off
\$125.00 up to \$150.00	\$5.00 off
Up to \$74.00 monthly	no change. <sup>25</sup>

A year later, city employees’ salaries were reduced further even as job duties expanded. Joe Black had shrub maintenance and general labor added to his duties in the Palm House, yet his salary dropped another fifty cents to \$2.00 a day, as did that of truck driver John Williams. Night watchman W. O. Whitehorn had resigned; his replacement, E. V. Calvery, was hired in at quarter less than Whitehorn had earned, and then Calvery

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<sup>25</sup> G. Wayne Dowdy, *Mayor Crump Don’t Like It: Machine Politics in Memphis* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 58-59; MPC Minute Book 5, 52, 54; MPC Minute Book 5, Folder 4, Mayor Watkins Overton, Resolution adjusting salaries of all city employees.

lost another quarter in 1933, leaving his salary at \$2.50 per day. Bird and snake keeper J. E. Jolly's salary was converted from \$3.50 per day to \$90.00 per month. The remaining animal caretakers' salaries were likewise converted, from \$2.75 per day to \$60.00 per month, although Flynn, Cox, Doyle, Stallings, and Palmer were now also expected to maintain the grounds. The part-time winter pony leaders and cashier were no longer employed at the zoo. Frank Cramer had keeper responsibilities added to his animal training duties, while his pay dropped another twenty dollars to \$120.00 per month. Melroy's salary fell to \$175.00 a month, although this reduction was surely eased somewhat by the fact that his house was furnished by the Park Commission, leaving him only responsible for utilities, phone services, and personal or family expenses.<sup>26</sup>

The 1933 budget had been slashed to less than \$27,000 including the expenses of the pony track, merry-go-round, and Ferris wheel. Still, Melroy had buildings that needed maintenance and collections that needed attention. A total of \$450 was approved for painting of the bird and snake house, Palm House interior, and wolf cages. Another \$89.50 allotted to purchase a number of birds Melroy had requested. In the Refectory Building, Avdalis found concessions sales slumping. The Commission approved his request to discount his 1933 rent from the contracted amount of \$2,500 annually to \$1,500. Although this agreement (and later ones) specified that this reduction would not alter amounts due for the remaining years on the contract, Avdalis annually requested and was granted the same terms for the years 1934, 1935, and 1936, after which time the remaining year on his lease was cancelled and a new lease issued under new terms. In

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<sup>26</sup> MPC Minute Book 5, Folder 5, "Epitome of Minutes of Special Meeting of Memphis Park Commission, March 6<sup>th</sup>, 1933."

1936, Avdalis requested a new three-year lease at the reduced rate of \$1500 per year, in order to offset a thousand dollars' worth of "fixtures and improvements" he deemed necessary for the stand. Avdalis advised that he could not see fit to make these necessary changes under a lease that would soon expire, as any such improvements would then become the property of the Park Commission. The Commission agreed with Avdalis' logic and the lease was altered accordingly. Later, they also agreed to allow Avdalis to sell beer at the stand once Avdalis pointed out that beer was "considered more or less a household beverage" that many customers had requested unsuccessfully, costing him "considerable business." Avdalis was only to sell bottled beer at no more than fifteen cents per bottle. He was never to sell to minors, and he "must not allow the selling of beer to become a nuisance."<sup>27</sup>

The Memphis Zoo, like the rest of the country, was in dire straits. A series of federal relief programs would soon help improve the situation, especially after Roosevelt replaced Hoover in the White House. In 1932, President Hoover established the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) to provide financial support to ailing businesses and government agencies. Bureaucratic issues limited the potential of the agency under Hoover, but under President Roosevelt the program expanded and flourished. The Park Commission estimated that a \$200.00 outlay would allow RFC laborers to paint and repair the fence and hand rails in the zoo. This would be just a very small beginning of the Commission's ultimate reliance on New Deal programming to survive the Depression. As Roosevelt's New Deal program evolved, zoos across the

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<sup>27</sup> MPC Minute Book 5, Folder 5, 1933 Park Commission Budget; MPC Minute Book 5, 105, 110, 114, 119, 149, 192, 221, 250.

country benefited from federal support programs. The most significant of these were the Civil Works Administration (CWA, 1933-1934), the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA, 1933-1938), the Public Works Administration (PWA, 1933-1939), and the Works Progress Administration (WPA, 1935-1939). Initially, meeting payrolls and keeping animals fed were primary goals, but later these programs enabled many zoos to update dilapidated exhibits or add new ones, especially aquariums. Some zoos were completely built by New Deal labor and funding. In pointing out that “at least a score of entirely new zoos were constructed” during the 1930s, Donahue and Trump have declared it “no exaggeration to say that the 1930s were a golden age of zoo construction.”<sup>28</sup>

The Park Commission did not hesitate to participate in this flurry of funding. In addition to RFC laborers working throughout the parks system, the Commission also took advantage of CWA labor. Under a 1934 resolution requested by Mayor Overton and issued by the Commission, the CWA was “responsible for all the labor costs on all projects” plus material costs up to an amount equal to one-third of the labor costs. The Park Commission would pay any material costs “in excess of one-third of the labor cost” as well as the fees of “any Architects employed to do any work of this character.” In 1934, these amounts totaled \$88,899.37 in labor costs plus material costs of \$19,024.55. By including \$40,000 of CWA funding in the 1934 proposed budget as “Contingencies on Account CWA & other Public Work,” the Commission was able to effectively cut the proposed zoo budget to a mere \$22,300 and still realize tangible progress. Of this

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<sup>28</sup> MPC Minute Book 5, 119; Vernon N. Kisling, ed., *Zoo and Aquarium History*, 169; Jesse C. Donahue and Erik K. Trump, *American Zoos During the Depression*, 3.

amount, the zoo pony track was allotted only \$1,500, the merry-go-round \$150, and the Ferris wheel, \$110.<sup>29</sup>

A new “alphabet agency,” the Public Works Administration, or PWA, was created in June 1933 as part of Roosevelt’s National Industrial Recovery Act. The purpose of the PWA was to spur construction of public works projects, thereby reducing unemployment while improving the public welfare and spending power. PWA funds would provide various levels of improvements and additions to zoos during the six years it lasted, such as the construction of a small mammal and great ape house and an elephant house at the National Zoo. In Tennessee, the program funded \$90 million worth of roadways, schools, libraries, hospitals, and government buildings, including Memphis’s juvenile court building, John Gaston Hospital, and University of Tennessee Medical School dormitories. Within the Memphis parks system, the fairgrounds and several parks were improved, and the zoo benefitted from new walkways and a new lagoon. For these projects, Commission approval was contingent upon the guarantee of federal funding of “all necessary labor and material.”<sup>30</sup>

Early in 1934, four new sea lions were purchased at \$80.00 each. Understanding that animal purchases at this juncture must be substantiated and not simply desirable, as the weather warmed Melroy requested a list of animals “needed for mating.” The Commission authorized \$145 for a male leopard, but tabled the request for several other potential sires including a camel, Malay Sun bear, black panther, puma, hyena, and

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<sup>29</sup> MPC Minute Book 5, 129-130, 134; MPC Minute Book 5, Folder 7, 1934 Proposed Park Commission Budget.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas H. Coode, “Public Works Administration (PWA),” *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, Version 2.0, <https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=1086> (accessed January 12, 2016); Elizabeth Hanson, *Animal Attractions*, 109; MPC Minute Book 5, 183.

buffalo. In the autumn he sought permission to buy a male llama from Athens, Tennessee for \$75.00; a male spotted hyena from Camden, New Jersey for \$50.00; a one-eyed, three-year-old male camel from Lancaster, Missouri for \$250.00, and two six-year-old male camels, also from Lancaster, at \$600.00 each. The Commission agreed to order the hyena and llama, but demurred in regard to the camels. Melroy was to take a Park Commission truck to Missouri to observe the camels firsthand. If the younger camel proved to be otherwise “in good condition,” the zoo would gain a one-eyed male. If not, then Melroy was to purchase only one of the older camels. In late November, the Commission tabled an offer from the Milwaukee, Wisconsin Park Commission for a \$70.00 buffalo.<sup>31</sup>

Circumstances began to improve somewhat in 1935. Several members of the Recreation Department, the General Superintendent of Parks, the Director of the Brooks Art Gallery, and a few others received raises for the first time in years. The annual zoo budget had increased for the first time in several years. The operating budget was raised to \$25,000, the pony track budget to \$2,000, and another \$2,000 was earmarked for repairs to the walkways and buildings. The merry-go-round budget was set at \$200, and for a new Ferris wheel the Commission allotted \$175. Still, the overall system budget was just over \$300,000, down from a high of nearly half a million dollars when Melroy took charge.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, Melroy advocated for the ongoing needs of the zoo. Zoo growth had been such that two new employees, J. H. Moselage and Reuben Rock, had been hired.

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<sup>31</sup> MPC Minute Book 5, 129, 137, 167, 171.

<sup>32</sup> MPC Minute Book 5, 205; MPC Minute Book 5, Folder 8, 1935 Park Commission Budget.

These men, like the other zoo employees, wore uniforms contracted by the Park Commission but paid for out of their salaries. In June 1935, the zoo's white employees wore uniforms valued at \$7.75 while black employees' uniforms were \$6.17. Just what qualities set the uniforms apart is not stated in the records, and no photographs have surfaced that might help explain the difference. Perhaps it was as much an economic decision as a quality or segregationist matter, as the system's black employees earned less than their white counterparts. Since employees paid for their own uniforms, this may have been an important factor. The Commission instructed its Secretary to begin deductions from the employees' paychecks of "\$2.00 per month from white employees...and \$1.00 per month from colored employees, as in the past, to purchase winter uniforms for 1935 and summer uniforms for 1936."<sup>33</sup>

As further evidence of the overall financial improvement underway in 1935, the Commission purchased "two cars of hay" to feed the zoo animals, which included Johnson grass at \$12.00 per ton and prairie hay at \$16.00 per ton, followed later in the year by another ten tons of hay at \$120.00. When Melroy submitted a "list of animals to replace animals which have died," amounting to proposed purchases of \$2,166, the Commission did not balk. The zoo soon added a male buffalo and male camel, a pair of pumas, a large python, and a half-dozen each of white-face ring-tail monkeys, cinnamon ring-tail monkeys, African green monkeys, and African Mona monkeys. Later, Melroy appeared before the Commission to discuss a letter he had received from "Mr. Warren E. Buck, Collector and Importer of African Zoological and Ethnological Specimens, Camden, N.J." Buck desired to trade two African Genette cats and a pair of Agoutis from

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<sup>33</sup> MPC Minute Book 5, 201.

his collections for five of the Rhesus monkeys at the Memphis Zoo. He also desired to “ship on consignment one African black cobra and two African Gaboon Vipers at no cost to the Park Commission.” Finally, Buck was interested in obtaining three of the zoo’s emus, although he did not suggest what he might trade for them. The Commission approved the trades and consignments as fully described, and waited to hear from Buck regarding the terms of the emu trade. Meanwhile, former head of the Memphis Zoological Society, Henry Loeb, had returned from a trip to Ecuador with “five turtles, two Rhesus monkeys and one Kinkajou” which he donated to the Memphis Zoo. Later the zoo purchased another two pumas for \$120.00, and paid for them through the sale of three baby leopards at \$50.00 each.<sup>34</sup>

Much of this trend of growth and improvement was a result of the New Deal. The RFC had started the process in 1932, followed by CWA projects completed in 1933 and PWA projects in 1934. In 1935, the Commission began to utilize funding from the newest Roosevelt agency, the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The first WPA projects approved by the Commission were for a “Community House” at Guthrie School’s playground, a “new pavilion in Overton Park opposite [the] Doughboy Monument,” the building of the Memphis Open Air Theatre in Overton Park, the remodeling of the community swimming pool and bath house at the fairgrounds, and, at the zoo, the remodeling of the Refectory Building where Avdalis operated his concessions stand. The new concessions stand would cost the Commission just over \$2600, while the total federal expenditure would contribute nearly another \$6200. It would, in fact, cost the Commission an additional \$500 in reduced rents received after Avdalis complained that

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<sup>34</sup> MPC Minute Book 5, 184, 200, 210, 218, 228, 229.



the construction project had “greatly handicapped” his sales. The zoo would also benefit from a larger project that would entail repairing and oiling the roadways and backfilling an “old Bayou channel” throughout Overton Park and the zoo, plus the installation in the zoo of a new sewer line and the construction of a fence and animal houses, for which the Commission would pay nearly \$5400 and the government over \$7100. A bond issue of \$141,930.81 was approved in September 1935 to defray the debt the system would incur for all of the WPA and PWA projects submitted to the agencies.<sup>35</sup>

Excited by the possibilities the WPA extended, Melroy traveled with Construction Superintendent Athen Jordan to Chicago in the winter of 1936 to observe the Chicago Zoo’s ongoing construction projects. Barless enclosures of the type Castang had envisioned, replete with “imitation rock formations from concrete,” represented the “most advanced ideas about zoo design”—an ironic concept considering that Hagenbeck had first popularized the concept nearly four decades earlier. Thanks to WPA funding, the new bird and snake house Merkel had recommended nearly a decade earlier finally garnered some attention, and the Pidgeon-Thomas Iron Company was awarded a contract to build a flying cage for the eagles. A “dry moat” was built “on the inside of the Zoo in front of the Elk and Deer lots and the Octagon barn,” extending from the northern to the southern boundaries of the zoo. The budget for the coming year increased again, to \$29,000 for operating expenses, \$2,000 for the pony track, \$250 for the Merry-Go-Round, and \$200 for the Ferris wheel. Consequently, not only were new attractions under consideration, but so was beautifying the landscape. Azaleas were to be planted in the

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<sup>35</sup> MPC Minute Book 5, 212, 217, 258-259, 261; MPC Minute Book 5, Folder 9, “Memphis Park Commission Corrected List of W-P-A Projects and New W-P-A Projects.”

zoo, where they “could not be so easily stolen as those planted near the Brooks Art Gallery.” So popular was this idea among the Commissioners that they authorized \$200 for the purpose rather than the \$150 requested. Mr. McKay Van Vleet and his family decided in September 1936 to move two stone lions to the zoo from “the West entrance of the Memphis Technical High School on Poplar Street,” which had formerly been the Van Vleet home. Mrs. Ramelle Van Vleet was then “the only life member of the Memphis Zoological Society.” Park Commissioner Joe Brennan’s daughter, Virginia, a student at the Art Institute of the South, designed the pillars on which the lions were placed, gracing and “guarding” the entrance to the zoo.<sup>36</sup>

More animals were to be purchased in 1936, beginning with a \$1,960 shipment from the Mavfield Kennels and Zoo in Singapore, but when shipping regulations became problematic the order was cancelled. In its place the Commission ordered \$2,465 worth of animals from Louis Ruhe, Inc., a New York animal importer. In anticipation of the opening of the new Monkey Island exhibit, Ruhe delivered to Memphis a pair of chimpanzees, 20 Java monkeys, 40 rhesus monkeys, 1 male and 2 female pig-tail monkeys, the same of Military (or patas) monkeys, and 15 African green monkeys. He also provided a pair of giant kangaroos and a male Malayan Sun bear. Four pair of fallow deer and two pairs of Spotted Japanese sika deer were obtained from the San Diego Zoo along with a pair of polar bears who increased the Memphis collection to three. Mr. J. Everett Pidgeon, manager of the local Coca-Cola Bottling plant, donated \$800 to

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<sup>36</sup> MPC Minute Book 5, 242, 245, 253, 265, 276, 279, 376; Eugene Johnson and Robert D. Russell, Jr., *Memphis: An Architectural Guide* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), quoted in Carroll Van West, *Tennessee’s New Deal Landscape: A Guidebook* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 199; Robert W. Dye, *Memphis Zoo* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2015), 45.

purchase a camel, under the condition that this donation not receive “any publicity whatsoever.” A puma was purchased from J. E. Young of Laredo, Texas for \$60.00. For the new duck lake, new waterfowl included two pairs each of desmoiselle cranes, Austrian black swans and European white swans, Mandarin and pintail ducks, formosan teals, and Egyptian, barnacle, and Orinoco geese. For the “pens behind the moat to be constructed,” the Commission ordered one pair each of ocelots, cassowaries, and aoudads.<sup>37</sup>

Not only were the collections growing again, but labor conditions were beginning to look up as well. Melroy was one of five Park Commission employees to receive a raise in August 1936. His pay was increased \$50.00 per month. In November, certain white employees of the system received pay raises as well, including a forester, the night watchmen at the zoo and the Pink Palace, and 17 laborers. No black employees received raises at that time, but WPA labor at least limited the expansion of responsibilities for those employees while still advancing zoo improvements. When WPA laborers were transferred from the zoo to Riverside Park, the Commission authorized the temporary employment of “twelve or fourteen common laborers” to help finish the duck lake and dry moat construction projects.<sup>38</sup>

Hope and promise were evident in the 1937 budget. The budget earmarked \$32,200 for maintenance and daily operations, \$2,000 for the pony track, \$250 for the merry-go-round, and \$200 for the Ferris wheel. It also allotted \$800 to oil the walkways to keep down dust and \$6,000 for capital expenditures, to be divided equally between

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<sup>37</sup> MPC Minute Book 5, 244, 249, 252, 256, 257, 259, 279.

<sup>38</sup> MPC Minute Book 5, 262, 277, 279.

completing the deer moat and eagle cage and purchasing new animals. By the end of the year, animal trainer Frank Cramer and caretaker John H. Moselage had both been granted pay raises. For Cramer, this increase returned his pay to within ten dollars per month of what it had been in 1931 before the first of the pay cuts occurred. The night watchman also made a half dollar less per day than he had five years earlier. While Melroy's salary had also reached its 1932 level, some ten percent lower than he had originally earned as Superintendent, the zoo's black employees remained at \$60.00 per month, having enjoyed no raises to ease the burden of their six-day work week. Although it would still be a while before the Depression's weakening grip on the economy would be felt by all of the zoo's employees, without question the future of the Memphis Zoo was beginning to brighten.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> MPC Minute Book 5, 310, 357.

## Chapter 4

Free Circus, Free Zoo, New Deal: Nicolaus J. Melroy, 1936-1953

The grandest—and most popular—contribution of the Works Progress Administration to the Memphis Zoo was undoubtedly the exhibit known as Monkey Island. For this project, the Commission contributed just under thirty percent of the \$14,764.68 the project required. The completed project featured in a dedication ceremony at 3:00 p.m. on September 13, 1936. The program for the ceremony noted that “half a million visitors” to “one of the largest free zoos in the world” toured the Memphis Zoo annually, and that Memphis residents “cherished” the zoo “as one of their most prized recreational assets.” The educational benefits of this “Wonderland for Young and Old” were stressed along with the recreational ones. The program brochure described the completed WPA project in detail:

The island is 165x130 feet and consists of a built-up mound which has been sodded and planted, with a surrounding moat containing 30 feet of water. A circular walkway, 12 feet wide, gives crowds an opportunity to view the island from every side. Trees, trapezes, grapevines, a miniature “bath house,” small skiffs, slides, and exercise bars have been placed on the mound so that the monkeys may entertain their visitors in varied ways.

Beneath the mound are concrete dens, entered by cavelike arches made of natural stone. The dens will be properly heated in severe weather and electric lighting has been installed for the use of keepers when entering the dens.

The program reported that zoos in Chicago, Milwaukee, Tulsa, San Antonio, and Cincinnati had similar, albeit more expensive, exhibits. The trend had begun toward

“reproducing their [the animals’] native habitat...giving them a limited freedom.”

Interestingly, zoo Superintendent N. J. Melroy was not named in the program.<sup>1</sup>

Yet Melroy’s work had not gone unnoticed. In the summer of 1937, Mayor Watkins Overton wrote to the Park Commission about the progress he had noted at the zoo. Encouraged by these results of relief labor projects, Overton urged utilizing WPA forces “to do away with some more bars and fences, and build another moat somewhere so that our wild animals will be more in their natural surroundings, and the public will have a better chance to observe them.” Dave Renfrow, the general Superintendent of the Parks, suggested a barless bear enclosure. He desired to go to the St. Louis Zoo and “obtain the correct details of such construction work” by viewing the barless bear pits there. Interestingly, Renfrow’s request for travel funds for himself and the Chief Draftsman of the Engineering Department was approved, but apparently Melroy was not included in this excursion. Soon after their return from St. Louis, Renfrow submitted sketches of the proposed bear pits as well as designs for barless enclosures for the elephants and the buffalo.<sup>2</sup>

Renfrow estimated the total costs of all of these projects, using WPA labor, to be \$50,000. The Commission would be responsible for half of that amount. Renfrow had taken the initiative to get Mayor Overton’s approval to apply for WPA funding even before he presented the designs to the Commission for approval. Lacking the disposable funding to accomplish these improvements, the Commission conditioned their approval

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<sup>1</sup> MPC Minute Book 5, Folder 9, “Memphis Park Commission Corrected List of W-P-A Projects and New W-P-A Projects”; MPC Minute Book 5, Folder 10, City of Memphis, “Program: Dedication Ceremonies – Monkey Island, Memphis Zoological Garden.”

<sup>2</sup> MPC Minute Book 5, 330, 335.

on the Mayor's willingness to pay the Commission's portion. Ultimately, these and other park projects were funded through a \$75,000 bond issue by the City. The Commission proceeded to hire an artist to build a model of the proposed bear pits. The artist, Mr. A. S. Phillips, had created the synthetic rock work for the Tulsa Zoo and agreed to do the same for Memphis at a cost of approximately \$1,000. The Commission also purchased a gunite machine to fill the wire mesh more efficiently, which would make quick work of this project and future projects.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps Melroy's absence from the zoo for any extended period was discouraged as so many projects were nearing completion and other issues demanded his attention. A burgeoning rat infestation in the zoo had necessitated entering into an Orkin Exterminator Company pest control contract. Fifty tons of hay was due to arrive to feed the ruminants, elephants, and other animals. Over four hundred dollars' worth of birds and pheasants were due to become residents of the Eagle Cage and a number of empty cages in the Bird House. Coca-Cola Bottling Company President Everett Pidgeon donated \$1,135 to the zoo to purchase even more birds and other animals. Another \$70 came in from Hugh Street, President of the Memphis Electric Company, so the zoo might purchase a pair of bugle birds. Yet when the announcement came that the 1937 Park Executives Convention would be held in Fort Worth, Texas, Melroy appealed to the Board for permission to attend. Melroy believed that at the convention he would be able to "contact several animal dealers which would be beneficial to our Zoo." Melroy also drove his own car back to his hometown the next year, when the Park Convention was held in Milwaukee.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> MPC Minute Book 5, 336, 347-348, 352-353.

<sup>4</sup> MPC Minute Book 5, 335, 338, 340, 341; MPC Minute Book 6, 10, 36.

Melroy's contacts made at the 1937 convention paid off. Walter and Majorie Kemp, owners of the Marjorie Kemp Lion Motordrome which traveled with the Royal American Shows, donated lions "Sultan" and "Prince" to the zoo in May 1938 on the condition that neither the zoo nor the Park Commission should ever sell or trade them. Prattville, Alabama's Prathoma Park sold to the Memphis Zoo two female aoudads for \$150, and the Board decided to seek the purchase of some Barbary Sheep to share their enclosure. The Jackson, Mississippi zoo offered a pair of Bengal tigers for \$1,400, and the Coca-Cola Bottling Company paid the first \$1,000 for them. Several other species, "formerly the property of a circus," were also offered by a couple of attorneys in the same city, but the Commission politely declined with the reason that Memphis "was not in the market for any of the animals listed in their letter."<sup>5</sup>

Taking care of the animals already on hand remained a top priority. At the request of Commission Chairman J. J. Brennan, Dr. Gillman of Gillman and Mount Dog and Cat Clinic inspected the zoo and reported his recommendations for "improving the health of the animals and prevention of diseases." Gillman's idea of resurfacing the floors in the Carnivora Building had already been considered and was on hold until the weather warmed enough to "permit turning the animals outside" so the asphalt compound would not irritate them. Gillman recommended the zoo purchase a "torch for destroying worm eggs," along with the construction of a "large squeeze cage for handling sick or injured animals" and a "dipping vat in wolf quarters for use in controlling skin diseases and fleas." Controlling intestinal parasites and pneumonia, Gillman asserted, would be the

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<sup>5</sup> MPC Minute Book 6, "Instrument of Gift," interleaf at beginning of Book 6; MPC Minute Book 6, 10, 23, 90, 93.



greatest challenges for the zoo in the future. To that end, he suggested a rat proof feed room be built and, most importantly, “a hospital large enough to take care of all sick and injured animals.” More than another decade would pass, though, before the zoo finally opened its own animal hospital, although in 1944 a policy was instituted requiring a death investigation following the death of any “valuable animal.”<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, WPA projects continued. A project to construct more moats, as requested by Mayor Chandler, had been incorporated into the bear moat project. Unused funds from a swimming pool project elsewhere in the parks system were transferred to this project to add “moats to the elephant and buffalo grounds and buildings” as well as the bear pits. The barless bear pits were scheduled to be completed in time for a dedication in the afternoon of July 31, 1938. The exhibit would contain new animals, including three Java Sun bears, three polar bears, and two black bears, all purchased from New York animal dealers. On the day of the dedication, the Commission distributed five thousand programs and, to the children, the same quantity of apples and popcorn. Tossing such snacks to the bears—a trend that would last at least fifty years—undoubtedly resulted in many a contest of pitching ability on that day.<sup>7</sup>

In Memphis as in the rest of the country, economic recovery remained slow, but steady improvements were apparent. Animal trainer Frank Cramer and caretaker John Moselage both received raises on the first of January 1938. A skilled laborer, Cramer’s twenty dollar raise elevated his pay to \$140 per month, while Moselage, an unskilled laborer, received only an additional \$7.50 per month, bringing his pay to \$67.50.

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<sup>6</sup> MPC Minute Book 6, 16, 287.

<sup>7</sup> MPC Minute Book 6, 27, 30, 31.

Although these two men were both white, to any who might take notice, the wage disparity and employment potential remained sharply defined along racial lines. This would remain the case up to and even beyond the establishment of a federal minimum wage under the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. That Act instituted a minimum quarter per hour wage beginning October 24, 1938. The minimum wage was raised another nickel a year later and to forty cents per hour six years after that. Following World War II, minimum wage hikes occurred in January 1950, March 1956, September 1961, and September 1963; the standards in those years, respectively, were \$0.75, \$1.00, \$1.15, and \$1.25. Unfortunately for the laborers at the zoo, the 1938 Act applied primarily to producers and agents in interstate commerce.<sup>8</sup>

The 1940 Federal Census offers some insight into the economic situation of zoo employees at that time. Despite another raise in 1939 to \$75.00 per month, Moselage had left the zoo to become a tool clerk in an automobile factory. At age 24, he worked 40 hours per week, 52 weeks per year, for which he earned \$840. Will Flynn, an African American, was 58 in 1940 and was the longest continuously employed laborer at the zoo, having been the original caretaker of Natch the bear in 1906. Flynn had only a 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade education. As the keeper of the Hippo House, he labored 64 hours per week with no vacation for \$600 annually. This amounted to about eighteen cents per hour, far short of the thirty-cent federal minimum. Elijah Cox, with only as much education as Flynn, earned \$720 a year driving a truck for the zoo, making him one of the highest paid black zoo employees. Bird and snake house keeper John E. Jolly, a white laborer with three

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<sup>8</sup> MPC Minute Book 5, 357; United States Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division (WHD), “History of Federal Minimum Wage Rates Under the Fair Labor Standards Act, 1938-2009,” [www.dol.gov/whd/minwage/chart.htm](http://www.dol.gov/whd/minwage/chart.htm) (accessed January 21, 2016).

years of high school, worked 70 hours per week with no vacation for \$1,080 per year. Jolly's weekly earnings were less than \$21, and his hourly pay was about thirty cents, in line with the 1938 minimum wage. In 1939, Jolly's pay rose from \$90 per month to \$100, but again no raises were forthcoming for the black laborers.<sup>9</sup>

For all of these employees, purchasing and wearing an approved uniform was required. Earlier, uniforms for white employees had cost twice as much as those for black employees, who earned half as much. Regardless of their pay rates, at the 1930s rolled into the 1940s, the Commission deducted from the pay of all employees two dollars per month to purchase and maintain the requisite clothing; any surplus funds collected would be refunded at the end of each year. When ten of the zoo employees protested this draw against their already paltry paychecks, the Commission ignored their plea. The one employee who wore no prescribed uniform, but who could have best afforded to, was Superintendent Melroy. As seen in numerous photographs from the era, his "uniform" consisted of slacks and dress shoes and, even in the summer, a long-sleeved dress shirt that hid his multiple tattoos. Melroy, himself educated only to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, worked only 40 hours per week for his 1940 salary of \$2,700 plus a Commission car and a house valued at \$50 monthly rental. Three years later, his salary had reached \$3,000. Salaries did finally achieve some parity in 1943, when "All common labor" was elevated to \$0.35 per hour (plus a 2-1/2 cent premium for more than 15 years' service), truck drivers were

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<sup>9</sup> 1940 United States Federal Census, Memphis, Tennessee, Enumeration District: 98-42, Roll: T627\_3961, Page: 7B (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012); 1940 United States Federal Census, Memphis, Tennessee, Enumeration District: 98-273, Roll: T627\_3969, Page 12A (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012); 1940 United States Federal Census, Memphis, Tennessee, Enumeration District: 98-271, Roll: T627\_3969, Page: 7A (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012); 1940 United States Federal Census, Memphis, Tennessee, Enumeration District: 98-117, Roll: T627\_3964, Page 1A (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012).

raised to \$0.40 per hour, and “Zoo Help” was raised to \$3.00 per day. A year later, the Commission learned that “a few of the colored employees at the Zoo Concession were not being paid at the same rate as the others,” and these employees’ rates were increased “to agree with the other employees doing similar work.”<sup>10</sup>

It was not only in labor that African Americans continued to experience discrimination in the zoo. For three decades, the Memphis Zoo had allowed black visitors only on Tuesdays, and prior to that not at all unless accompanied by white employers or the white children they might be employed to keep. This policy was extended to the Pink Palace Museum and the Brooks Memorial Art Gallery as they opened to the public. When the Pan-Tennessee Dental Association, an organization of African American dental professionals, proposed to hold its annual three-day convention in Memphis, the Commission denied the group access on Wednesday, June 26, 1940 to not only the zoo, but also to both museums. The group of “approximately 200” professionals had planned to tour all three facilities the same day, but the Commission declared that would only be possible if they held their tour on the first day of the convention, a day earlier than they had planned. The Commission’s position, that “it would be conflicting to have the day changed,” was certainly no less true for these 200 dentists; in the coming years, the Commission did occasionally reverse its position on the matter when it benefitted or convenience white patrons. By the summer of 1941, complaints began to arise about the intermingling of the races during even those minimal hours when black visitors were allowed in to the zoo. For all this time, the zoo and both museums had remained opened to white visitors every day, including the one day a week everyone was allowed. The

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<sup>10</sup> MPC Minute Book 6, 46, 63, 226, 228, 242, 288.

Commission determined that the only reasonable solution was “to set aside Tuesday of each week as Negro Day in the Zoo to avoid any chance of any difficulty and to exclude white citizens on this day.” A letter from Memphian St. Elmo Newton to Commission Chairman John Vesey in the summer of 1944 called attention to one point that instigated shifting the day of access from Tuesdays to Thursdays:

My dear John:

I notice in this morning’s *Commercial Appeal* that it is the rule of the Park Board, where a holiday falls on a Tuesday, which is Negro Day at the Zoo, for that particular day to be transferred to Wednesday.

May I offer a suggestion - that is, since the negroes throughout the city (I am speaking now of the servants in the home) take off Thursday, that would be the day to set for the negroes at the Park.

When the servants are away the wife takes over for that afternoon, and I am satisfied that is a day that very few whites attend the zoo, while the negroes are walking up and down the streets.

I believe that Thursday would be the ideal day for all of the colored servants in the City of Memphis to visit the Park, and I am calling this to your attention, feeling that you will see it as I do.

The Commission apparently did agree with Newton’s opinion, but also agreeing that “it is not advisable to change the day in the middle of the current season as it would be confusing,” the new policy was set to take effect the first day of 1945. Although no mention of it appears in the *Memphis World* to indicate that the change was announced to the black community, the new policy took effect at the beginning of the 1945 season. “Black Thursday,” as it came to be known, remained the official policy at the Memphis Zoo for the next two decades.<sup>11</sup>

While New Deal programs had enabled some growth and progress during an economically uncertain time, it was the rise of war industries that truly pulled America

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<sup>11</sup> MPC Minute Book 6, 118, 168, 284.

out of the Depression. Even the Park Commission was not exempt from war industry demands. Late in 1942, the War Production Board issued “a request for poplar timber to be cut from Overton Park. Poplar veneer is used in aircraft construction and thirty million feet per month are needed. For this reason, it is necessary to secure timber from every possible source,” the requestor explained. A response to this request was composed by C. D. Shy of H. M. Spain and Company, Foresters. Shy had conducted a cursory study of the matter and determined that Overton Park contained 79 poplar trees “too small to be of much value for airplane stock,” and another 245 which would “cut some logs suitable for airplane specifications.” After consideration of Shy’s report, the Commission deemed the trees more valuable to the park than the “approximately 200,000” feet of lumber they might provide for war industry uses. The Commission “declined to entertain the idea” any further and turned their attentions to buying new zoo animals from other establishments impacted by the war. Brownsville, Texas was the origin of “one pair of Red Kangaroo, one pair of Chacma baboons, and one pair of peccaries” in 1944. The Hershey Estates in Hershey, Pennsylvania had written that “they were closing their gates until after the War and offering their stock for sale.” Melroy and Parks Superintendent Dave Renfrow were authorized to travel to Hershey Estates and purchase a variety of animals, snakes, and birds. Commission Chairman Vesey advised them also to be on the lookout for a pair of camels, which he deemed needed “to keep up public interest” in the zoo.<sup>12</sup>

Locally, the effects of the war became obvious as prices inflated and supplies shrank. M. N. Gammon, from whom the zoo had purchased horsemeat for three decades,

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<sup>12</sup> MPC Minute Book 6, 228-229, 290.

was compelled to raise his prices from four cents per pound to five cents. Gammon agreed to continue furnishing the zoo at that price “for the duration of the War,” ensuring himself at least some certain income. The costs of concessions increased, as the Commission determined that the inflated cost of ice had made selling cold beverages at a nickel each a losing proposition. Peanuts and popcorn price increases were passed along to the consumer, and the charge for a cold bottled drink was to double assuming a favorable response from the Commission attorney in regard to whether “there is a ceiling price on these items.”<sup>13</sup>

But rationing regulations made little impression on children, who demanded entertainment. A new merry-go-round was brought to the zoo from Baton Rouge, Louisiana and added to the zoo’s growing selection of amusement rides, along with a “miniature train” purchased from the Miniature Train and Railroad Company of Addison, Illinois. Beginning in May 1943, the I. G. Chambers Monkey and Chimp Show amused children at the zoo’s free circus through the summer season, securing for Chambers a “space for his truck and trailer” and for his animals some guaranteed meals for at least a portion of the year while the war dragged on. In order to keep the attractions attractive for the children and their parents, the Bird and Reptile House, the Monkey House, and the Octagon Barn were given a fresh coat of paint. A thousand azaleas were planted, and the fences on the northern and eastern boundaries were “set in several feet” so shrubs could be planted “to form a hedge around the pony and buffalo lots, as these spots are bare and unsightly.” A Public Address System was installed in the zoo, which not only aided

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<sup>13</sup> MPC Minute Book 6, 233, 236.

keepers and the administration in communicating broadly to visitors, but undoubtedly helped reunite more than one separated parent with his or her wandering child.<sup>14</sup>

As the end of the war drew closer, the Park Commission looked ahead. The zoo occupied seventh place in its list of projected expansions and improvements. The Commission proposed to “Expand the Zoo to take in the area East, along the North side of the car line, building new moats for the carnivorous animals, and replacing some of the old worn out buildings.” The Commission planned to “also purchase more animal specimens for the Zoo.” A “Kiddie Zoo” plan was approved, where children could interact with “small domestic animals and baby animals in appropriately built small housing.” To make ready for the 1949 season, some four thousand dollars went to new animals. For the herpetarium, a “20 Ft. or better” Regal Python and a “16 Ft. or better” Rock Python, along with several “Small Snakes,” were sought for the collection. New large and small birds and vultures made the Bird House home. One hundred white mice were purchased, although whether for exhibits or for feeding the new snakes is unclear. The circus gained six new ponies, and the Kiddie Zoo, fifty prairie dogs. Two badgers, two “Coypu or Trench Rats,” and four each of porcupines, agoutis, and sea lions rounded out the new exhibits for the 1949 season. Later that year, bidding opened for male lions, a yak, a Russian bear, another python, and several mating pairs including guanaco, green monkeys, wallaroos, and emus.<sup>15</sup>

In April 1949, the Board of Commissioners of the City of Memphis took control over the Park Commission. This entity was commonly referred to as the City

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<sup>14</sup> MPC Minute Book 6, 237, 242, 285, 294, 296.

<sup>15</sup> MPC Minute Book 6, 245, 272; MPC Minute Book 7, 11, 49.



Commission and later as the City Council; hereafter for clarity, to distinguish between the Park and City commissions, the Park Commission will remain “the Commission” and the City Commission will be referred to as the City Council or simply “the Council.” John T. Dulaney has labeled this shift “a watershed in the financial and administrative operations of the Commission.” With this change, the Park Commission lost its autonomy and was forced to defer to the City Council for project approval and funding. A year and a half after this shift, the City Comptroller studied Park Commission records to enable a transition to the City financial systems that would require the Park Commission to deposit all revenues with the City in exchange for a line item in the overall City budget. It was not long until Commission Chairman Vesey protested that the City was not forwarding the full budgeted amount to the Commission, resulting in layoffs, service failures, uncompleted projects, and deferred maintenance throughout the parks system. Nonetheless, certain projects were completed during this transition period, such as the construction of an animal feed room as Dr. Gillman had suggested more than a decade earlier.<sup>16</sup>

To the public, though, the transition appeared seamless. The “Out-Door Arena” and several “old Cages” in the Kiddie Zoo were updated, keeping things fresh for young visitors. The new decade had brought with it a new baby hippo, one of the many who earned Memphis the title “Hippo Capital of the World” in the mid-twentieth century. The Commission voted to name this baby “Abe Plough,” should it prove to be male. Abe Plough served for a time as a Park Commissioner, and would prove instrumental during

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<sup>16</sup> MPC Minute Book 7, 15, 146-147; State of Tennessee, *Private Acts*, 1949, Chapter 494; John T. Dulaney, *Memphis Park Commission Minute Books*, finding aid (Memphis: Memphis Public Library and Information Center, 2014), 76.

the coming decade in establishing the Memphis Zoo's aquarium, discussed later in this chapter. The hippo, however, was sold for \$4,000 to Evansville, Indiana's Mesker Zoo. A year later, another hippo baby was to be named for Commission Vice-Chairman Harry C. Pierotti; if a male, he would be "Harry," and if female, "Harriet."<sup>17</sup>

Behind the scenes at the zoo, though, certain employees felt the change to City management more than others as salaries were brought in line with city pay scales. Concessions manager J. W. Crenshaw and Assistant Manager Billye Hayden both received \$10 per month raises, to \$275 and \$185, respectively. The cook, Queenetta McDonald, was paid an extra five dollars monthly, raising her pay to \$85, while concessions laborer T. J. McDaniel's pay went up from sixty to sixty-five cents per hour. Superintendent Melroy's salary increased to \$325 per month. Keepers W. C. Anderson and Thomas O'Brien (who managed the daily circus), each received an extra twenty dollars per month, while keeper Albert E. Ammons and watchman J. P. Hopper received half that amount. Truck driver James Partee and caretakers Will Flynn, John Todd, Jimmy Stallings, and George Jackson, were all elevated from \$0.75 per hour to \$0.77½, reflecting their longevity. Newer caretakers Jeff Rome, J. E. Brady, Warren Rome, and J. E. Turner each received the same two-and-a-half cents raise as the other caretakers, resulting in the federal minimum rate of \$0.75 per hour, while caretaker rookie Percy Ferguson's raise brought him to just \$0.70 per hour. In 1952, Melroy's pay was raised again, to \$400 per month, while O'Brien's increased to \$290, Anderson's to \$240, keeper

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<sup>17</sup> MPC Minute Book 7, 61, 116, 150, 254.

William H. Frazier's to \$180, and all of the laborers' rates were increased by five cents per hour. The concessions manager and staff received similar increases.<sup>18</sup>

By the spring of 1951, the problems with obtaining the full budgetary allotment from the city became more pressing. When Melroy appeared before the Commission asking for new animals, the Commission had little choice but to decline. The Commission had "no budget for replacing large animals," they asserted. Commissioner Sam Nickey proposed "the formation of a Zoological Society," to which Commission Chairman Vesey responded by appointing Nickey to head a committee composed of himself, Commissioner Chip Barwick, and Mr. Abe Plough "to explore the possibility of forming a Zoological Society." Nickey and Barwick saw no reason to delay. In order to immediately "start the Society off, Commissioner Barwick offered to buy a pair of Pumas and Commissioner Nickey offered to buy a female Chimpanzee." In that moment, on March 15, 1951, the seed of the future direction of Memphis Zoo administration was planted.<sup>19</sup>

A month later, Chairman Vesey "increased the Committee...by adding [City] Commissioner [Henry] Loeb, as an official member." This was Henry Loeb III, grandson of the founder of the original zoological society in Memphis. From 1960 to 1963 and again from 1968 to 1971, he would serve as the the mayor of Memphis, but for the time being he used his political position to advantage to honor his grandfather's abiding interest in the Memphis Zoo. The elder Henry Loeb had founded and was long known as

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<sup>18</sup> MPC Minute Book 7, 161-162; MPC Minute Book 7, "Memphis Park Comission Salary Increases, November 1, 1951," interleaf.

<sup>19</sup> MPC Minute Book 7, 204.

the President of Loeb's Laundry, but that work never pushed the zoo far from his thoughts. He passed away in 1936, but throughout the zoo's first quarter century he had appeared from time to time at Commission meetings to express his continuing interest in the zoo, even after his own zoological society failed. The newer iteration of the Society grew again in January 1952 when Park Commission Chairman Vesey and Vice Chairman Harry Pierotti joined as members. Vesey had noted appreciatively "the many liberal donations" of the Society in the previous year, and "pointed out angles" which he believed "should increase donations to the Society considerably." Although it would take nearly three decades for this Memphis Zoological Society to reach the necessary level of maturity to seize full control of the zoo, the foundation was in place and the Loeb family was undoubtedly pleased to be included. The Commission was also pleased to learn of the Lions Club's interest and was hopeful that other organizations would follow suit.<sup>20</sup>

The Commission's Zoological Society Committee traveled in the winter of 1952 to study various zoos with an eye toward future improvements in Memphis. Nickey, Pierotti, and Loeb went to Chicago to tour the Lincoln Park Zoo and the Brookfield Zoo, and then they toured the zoos in Toledo and Cincinnati, Ohio. Sam Nickey went on by himself to the San Diego Zoo. In a three-page report to the Commission, this committee laid out a number of recommendations for the Memphis Zoo. First, though, they reported that "the Memphis Zoo was complimented by men that we consider to be the top authorities in this field, on the selection of animals which the Memphis Zoo has acquired

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<sup>20</sup> MPC Minute Book 7, 275; W. Mallory Chamberlin, "Zoological Society Takes Definite Shape"; Death Certificate of Henry Loeb, "Tennessee, Death Records, 1908-1958," *Tennessee Death Records, 1908-1959*, Roll 9, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011).

in the time past,” and “on the remarkable performance of breeding, particularly of Hippos, Hyenas, etc., which Mr. Melroy has accomplished.” They added that they believed “the physical condition of the animals themselves in Memphis is much superior to the condition in the other Zoos,” and they were pleased “to commend and compliment Mr. Melroy on the wonderful record and reputation he enjoys in the Zoo fraternity.”<sup>21</sup>

The committee found that superior zoos “had several things in common.” First and foremost, they were supported by a strong zoological society. All of the zoos visited fit this condition except the Lincoln Park Zoo, which was directed by Marlin Perkins under the aegis of the Chicago Park Commission. Although they did not disparage that zoo in their discussion of the topic, they did point out that the Cincinnati Zoo, founded more than a century earlier and a model for the burgeoning Memphis zoo in the early twentieth century, “had reached a point of decadence so that by 1933 it was in a deplorable condition” only corrected under the careful guidance of “a strong Society.” The Toledo, Brookfield, and San Diego zoos were all the direct results of a similar administrative structure. Financially, all of the visited zoos were supported by a blend of public moneys and some sort of admission fees, and except at Lincoln Park, these funds were supplemented by “the sale of animals, concessions, renting of strollers, etc.” in amounts that, in every case, far exceeded the Memphis Zoo’s operating budget. The committee declared it

worthy of comment and a further salute to Mr. Melroy that the directors of the Zoos visited could not understand how our collection of approximately 800 animals could be fed alone on our operating income of \$80,000 – much less pay

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<sup>21</sup> MPC Minute Book 7, 286-289.

the salaries of sufficient personnel to maintain, clean and sanitize the buildings and grounds.<sup>22</sup>

In terms of personnel, the committee recommended reducing the responsibilities of the existing staff, through both specialization of their assigned tasks and the hire of “additional uniformed personnel.” At the toured zoos, a typical caretaker had responsibility for at most two buildings, and was present and on hand the entire time the zoos were open to the public to tend to the animals, interact with the public, and provide for “the sanitation and absence of odors” the committee observed during their tours. Revenues to offset the expense of more uniformed employees could be realized through more careful promotion of “the concessions, strollers, souvenirs, maps, [and] guide books” already on hand and the installation of “mobile concession units” and “vending machines for popcorn, peanuts, postcards, etc....throughout the Zoo” and other Park Commission facilities. Even as early as 1952, vehicular traffic at the zoo was problematic, and the committee stressed bluntly, “Parking facilities should be improved.”<sup>23</sup>

In addition to construction of “a general office and administration building, located at the entrance to the Zoo,” a number of specific exhibit-related recommendations fell along the lines of what the committee admitted might best be summed up as “a development of more showmanship at our Zoo.” They believed this could be accomplished inexpensively “under the direction of personnel versed or familiar with showmanship.” With Melroy’s circus background, it seems the right man may already be

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<sup>22</sup> MPC Minute Book 7, 286-289.

<sup>23</sup> MPC Minute Book 7, 286-289.

in place; in fact, he was later celebrated as the man who “made the zoo the ‘greatest show on earth’ in Memphis.” But it was the animals that drew people to the zoo, not the zoo director. The committee reported that, unequivocally, the most popular zoo animals were the giraffes, rhinos, gorillas, gibbons and orangutans, exotic birds, tapirs and eland antelopes, and cheetahs, and that purchasing said animals should be given the highest priority. More importantly, though, the Memphis Zoo suffered from what zoologists in the next decade would label as “the Naked Cage.”<sup>24</sup>

Coined by zoologist Desmond Morris in 1968, the phrase referred to a readily identifiable blend of “cramped and dilapidated enclosures, ‘unnatural’ building materials like iron and tile, and a tendency to produce aberrant animal behavior such as pacing” that had and would continue to run rampant through 20<sup>th</sup>-century American zoos. The committee expressed amazement at the progressive exhibit designs they’d witnessed in Illinois, Ohio, and California, noting that “the exhibition of animals has become a science.” To bring the Memphis Zoo up to modern design principles, they suggested that “qualified personnel” coordinate with modernized zoos across the country to help establish what would be the first of several long-term master plans for the zoo. Specific elements addressed were lighting, creative directional and educational signage (a forerunner of 21<sup>st</sup>-century “branding”), limiting overpopulated and mixed-species displays, odor control, and the installation of *trompe-l’oeil* style paintings in otherwise bare cages to create an illusion of the animals’ native habitats. The report also recommended set feeding schedules for the animals and an extension of the existing

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<sup>24</sup> MPC Minute Book 7, 286-289; Lisa Uddin, *Zoo Renewal: White Flight and the Animal Ghetto* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 28; “Nicolaus J. Melroy Dies; Circus Man, Zoo Director,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 22, 1962.

Hagenbeck-type moat system to bring more animals closer to the public. Finally, after noting the equality, if not superiority, of the Memphis Kiddie Zoo, the committee pointed out that a “surprising...number of children” have no pets at home, which they proposed to remedy by adding domesticated animals like puppies, kittens, and rabbits for the children to interact with.<sup>25</sup>

The Zoological Society’s continued vigilance for ways to propel the Memphis Zoo to become one of the nation’s best facilities prompted Commissioner Nickey in February 1953 “to instigate a thorough investigation into the mortality rate, the feeding practices, whether or not prescribed diets for various exhibits are used, if the food is measured or weighed and the types of feed given to the Birds and Animals.” That same vigilance may have prompted a close employee review, as well. At the Park Commission meeting just a month later on March 26, it was noted that Melroy would soon reach his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday; for city employees, this was the compulsory retirement age. The outcome of the Commission’s investigation of zoo mortality and dietary guidelines would become someone else’s concern, as the Melroys turned their attention to leaving the only home they’d known for a quarter of a century.<sup>26</sup>

The cozy cottage where they’d raised the lucky girl with a zoo in her back yard was exchanged for a spacious home at 5541 Bristol Highway (now Summer Avenue). Their new home, built in 1938, was far roomier than the small Superintendent’s cottage, with four bedrooms and three bathrooms comprising the bulk of the one-and-a-half-story home’s 3,788 square feet. The backyard, at just over 2 acres, was smaller than the one

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<sup>25</sup> MPC Minute Book 7, 286-289; Lisa Uddin, *Zoo Renewal*, 28.

<sup>26</sup> MPC Minute Book 7, 385, 387.



they'd enjoyed for two and a half decades, and its upkeep became their concern. The flat lot with its mature trees today is one of the few remaining residential properties on this stretch of Summer Avenue/U.S. Highway 70. The couple had enjoyed their retirement there for a week shy of two years when Lottie had a stroke. She died a week later at St. Joseph Hospital, just one day after Melroy had been retired two full years and less than three months before their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.<sup>27</sup>

After Lottie's death, Melroy left the rambling ranch house and moved in with their daughter Amye, where he remained until post-operative complications in 1962 took his life. A lengthy homage in the local newspaper to the man who'd seen the Memphis Zoo through its worst times revealed that he had seldom returned to the zoo after he retired. He confessed that "it made him sad to go and he did not want anyone to feel he was interfering or in the way." Melroy's long career at the Memphis Zoo had been immeasurably full. He had not known old Natch personally, but he had expressed regret that the bear's stuffed head had not been better cared for in the frenzy of keeping the zoo vital and its other denizens alive for a quarter-century. "It pleased him," though, according to his former coworkers, that all the animals knew him from his early morning walks around the zoo in which he paused only for speaking to and "petting each of the animals." Although he'd always been partial to the big cats, he was also

especially fond of the chimpanzees, and Burma and Olive Oyl were some of his pets. It was said that while he could talk to many of the wild animals, calling them by name and getting responses, he came close to carrying on conversations with the chimps. When he would tell Olive Oyl to clean up the orange peelings she had

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<sup>27</sup> MPC Minute Book 7, 385, 387; [www.zillow.com/homedetails/5541-Summer-Ave-Memphis-TN-38134/42280575\\_zpid/](http://www.zillow.com/homedetails/5541-Summer-Ave-Memphis-TN-38134/42280575_zpid/) (accessed January 18, 2016); Ancestry.com, *Tennessee Death Records, 1908-1958* (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011); "Colorful, Beloved N. J. Melroy Dies— Superintendent of Overton Park Zoo For More Than 30 Years Was 78," *Press-Scimitar*, March 21, 1962.

scattered on the floor of her cage, she would do the chore dutifully and hand the litter to him.<sup>28</sup>

In overseeing the breeding of the hippopotamus pair Venus and Adonis, and the births (and sometimes the deaths) and sales of their offspring, Melroy had brought the Memphis Zoo to center stage of a burgeoning captive breeding program that would change the missions of zoos all over the world as the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed. As if the spotlight of breeding success coupled with his daily showmanship at the zoo through the exhibits and the free circus he established weren't enough, Melroy also reached out to connect the Memphis Zoo to Hollywood. Memphis' lion, known variably as "Volney" and "Slats," achieved fame as MGM Studio's first "Leo." His iconic roar, recorded in the Carnivora Building, would introduce movies for generations to come. Melroy's long-time friend Tommy O'Brien maintained the free circus well into the 1960s, never forgetting Melroy's determination that "the show must go on" even during the Depression. Under Melroy's administration, the zoo had remained free, and although he did not live to see it completely integrated, he did witness many of the improvements first recommended by Bronx Zoo designer Hermann Merkel in the mid-1920s. His own salary had grown from that of the most rookie laborer to nearly \$5,000 a year, and he was surely pleased to know that the finances of his staff had likewise improved greatly. His staff had grown to fourteen caretakers and four concessions employees, although the two women remained confined to the concessions stand and wage parity for black employees remained elusive. The animal collections, attractions, and exhibit and utility buildings had all grown

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<sup>28</sup> Shelby County Register of Deeds, *Death Records, 1848-1964*, Nicolaus J. Melroy, Certificate Number 1402, March 21, 1962, [register.shelby.tn.us/imgView.php?imgtype=pdf&id=140219620321](http://register.shelby.tn.us/imgView.php?imgtype=pdf&id=140219620321) (accessed January 15, 2016); "Colorful, Beloved N. J. Melroy Dies—Superintendent of Overton Park Zoo For More Than 30 Years Was 78," *Press-Scimitar*, March 21, 1962; "Nicolaus J. Melroy Dies; Circus Man, Zoo Director," *Commercial Appeal*, March 22, 1962.

substantially under Melroy's hand, despite a major economic depression and two wars (the Korean War ended just three months after Melroy's retirement). As the Baby Boom began, a new generation of children was poised to enjoy the country's largest free zoo.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> "Nicolaus J. Melroy Dies; Circus Man, Zoo Director," *Commercial Appeal*, March 22, 1962.

## Chapter 5

### Professionalization Begins: Raymond F. Gray, Zoo Man, 1953-1963

American zoos reflected the post-war prosperity and hopeful outlook of the mid-20th century, and continued to strive to meet the changing expectations of their visitors. The rural to urban migration of the previous generation had brought floods of new citizens into cities. War industry work had offered steady, livable incomes to many, some for the first time in their lives. Returning veterans took advantage of the veterans' benefits they'd earned to help them purchase "honeymoon homes," and they started their families in the slew of new urban housing developments and suburban neighborhoods popping up all over the country. Husbands and fathers were expected to be the breadwinners, and the socio-economic structure reinforced that expectation while strengthening traditional gender roles in the family by removing the necessity for many wives and mothers to leave the domestic sphere.

Like schoolhouses of the baby boom generation, zoos experienced record high attendance levels. Greater proximity to zoos afforded easy access for student groups and city dwellers alike. Those who lived within earshot of the zoo's more vociferous denizens had a constant reminder that entertainment was just a short walk or bicycle ride away. Increasingly, a proliferation of personal automobiles allowed suburbanites and out-of-towners to visit zoos in unprecedented numbers. Newspapers kept zoo news in the forefront of people's minds in an age when not every family yet owned a television. Many stay-at-home mothers used the newest animal babies as an excuse to take their children out of the confines of home. On weekends and holidays, fathers joined their families in taking in the sights and sounds of a growing zoo population. However,

American zoos continued to segregate visitors, particularly in the South. With the exceptions of whatever days or times a zoo set aside for African Americans to visit, visitors were predominantly white.

It was on the Silver Screen that many Americans encountered their first “wild” exotic animals, in movies such as Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952), Ronald Reagan’s *Bedtime for Bonzo* (1951), and numerous *Tarzan* movies starring Johnny Weissmuller (1934-1948), Lex Barker (1949-1953), or Gordon Scott (1955-1960). From 1948 to 1963, the average movie ticket price increased from 36 cents to 86 cents. In order to compete for entertainment seekers, many zoos struggled to handle the demands of increasing numbers of visitors without charging admission. Some larger zoos like those in Cincinnati and Toledo, Ohio and in Fort Worth, Texas did institute admission fees. In Memphis, the Overton Park Zoo remained one of the country’s free zoos, and continued to offer youngsters the daily free circus N. J. Melroy had established during the Great Depression.<sup>1</sup>

But by 1953, the Overton Park Zoo needed a new leader to take it into a new era. With Melroy’s compulsory retirement at age 70, the Park Commission ended its search for a replacement with Raymond F. Gray. With chiseled jaw and debonair good looks remarkably evocative of Cary Grant, Gray fit seamlessly with glamorous, midcentury expectations of a “leading man.” After Melroy’s death in 1962, Gray would reflect that Melroy “was probably the last of the great circus men who became zoo directors.” With

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<sup>1</sup> National Association of Theatre Owners, “Annual Average U.S. Ticket Price,” [natoonline.org/data/ticket-price](http://natoonline.org/data/ticket-price) (accessed September 2, 2015).

Gray's arrival from Little Rock, Arkansas on May 1, 1953, Memphis gained its first zoo director who had been specifically trained for zoo management.<sup>2</sup>

Raymond F. Gray was born in 1917 in Arkansas, but his family lived in at least three states in the years before the founding of the first zoo he would call "home." He was a toddler when the family lived in Kirk, Texas, where his father and eldest brother, Ernest, managed a farm while three other brothers attended school. Before he reached adolescence, the family had moved to Kansas, where a sister was born, and then back to Arkansas. By 1930, 12-year-old Raymond was the son of the night watchman and maintenance man at Little Rock's Fair Park. His brother Archie was a ride operator, and brothers Richard and Leonard were park laborers. Their father, night watchman William "Mack" Gray, soon became the first keeper of the zoo at Fair Park. The Little Rock Zoo had opened in Fair Park in 1926 with a timber wolf donated by Mayor Ben D. Brickhouse and a circus-trained brown bear, although an apparently forgotten earlier zoo existed in that city. Contemporaneous with the Memphis zoo, the earlier zoo was in operation as early as 1906, when a Texas man deposited a bald eagle in its collection, followed by a badger in 1907. What became of Little Rock's first zoo is unknown. Although the war would pull him away for a time, it was at the Fair Park zoo that Gray established his zoo career.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Nicolaus J. Melroy Dies; Circus Man, Zoo Director," *Commercial Appeal*, March 22, 1962; Eldon Roark, "Strolling—Tough Promise to Keep," *Press-Scimitar*, June 5, 1953; Henry Mitchell, "Your Zoo—Golden Anniversary Of Zoo Will Be Observed This Week," *Commercial Appeal*, April 1, 1956; "Zoo Director's Wife Dies From a Bullet Wound," *Press-Scimitar*, February 26, 1958.

<sup>3</sup> 1920 Federal Census, District 0085, Kirk, Limestone County, Texas, Roll: T625\_1828, Page: 14B (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, 2010); 1930 Federal Census, District 0035, Little Rock, Pulaski County, Arkansas, Roll: 92, Page 23A (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2002); "Beautiful Overton Park" (n.p., n.d.); Bylander Family, narrative comments, [www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/comments/view-comments.aspx?type=2&entry=2301&KeepThis=true&TB\\_iframe=true&height=500&width=784](http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/comments/view-comments.aspx?type=2&entry=2301&KeepThis=true&TB_iframe=true&height=500&width=784)

Surely it must have seemed pre-ordained that Raymond would join the men in his family at Fair Park when he reached an employable age. By 1940, though, Gray's father and brother Ernest, who had continued farming in Texas until sometime before 1935, were working as laborers on WPA road construction projects. Gray's brother Leonard had left the park for a job in a grocery. Brother Archie had traded operating rides for the married life, and was raising five children on his in-laws' farm in Oklahoma. Richard, too, had given up being a park laborer, and supported his wife and two children as a carpenter in Norfolk, Virginia. Only 22-year-old Raymond remained with the zoo, as a "helper." In 1941, just before entering the war, Raymond married Miss Wanda Adair. Surely it was her devotion to animals that attracted him to her. Edgar Bylander, son of the secretary of the Arkansas State Fair at Fair Park, recalled the young woman:

There was a cougar, panther, or mountain lion, or whatever you want to call it, that was donated to the zoo by a woman from a small town in south Arkansas. She had raised the cat from when it was [a] cub and it was a wonderful pet, always knowing to pull its claws back into its toes when playing with a human. However, as it got bigger, it scared people in the small town where this woman lived, and she reluctantly brought it to the zoo. She would come to see the cat from time to time, always arriving after zoo closing hours, and [Curator] Bill Sprott would go with her into the walkway behind the big cats' cages and let her into the cougar's cage. She would get in the cage and the cougar would rest its head in her lap while she petted it, or they would wrestle and roughhouse together.

This big cat was undoubtedly Sissy, who would make headlines in Memphis soon after the Grays moved into the Superintendent's cottage in the zoo at Overton Park. But first, there was a war to attend to.<sup>4</sup>

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(accessed January 23, 2016); "Badger A Gift To Little Rock Zoo," *Little Rock Daily Arkansas Gazette*, February 27, 1907.

<sup>4</sup> 1940 Federal Census, District 60-72A, Little Rock, Pulaski County, Arkansas, Roll: T627\_168, Page: 1A (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012); 1940 Federal Census, District 60-112, Little Rock, Pulaski, Arkansas, Roll: T627\_169, Page: 12B (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012); 1940 Federal Census, District 53-5, Hickory, Nowata, Oklahoma, Roll: T627\_3315, Page: 8B (Provo, UT:

In November 1943, Gray deployed with the *U.S.S. Thuban* (AKA19) for training exercises at Hawkes Bay, New Zealand. As Petty Officer First Class Carpenter's Mate, he remained with the crew of the *Thuban* when it sailed from Hawkes Bay to Efate in the New Hebrides, where the "final rehearsals for the landings on Tarawa were carried out." It was at Tarawa that the crew of the Andromeda-class cruiser earned the first of seven World War II-era Battle Stars. Gray was present for the 1944 operations at Marshall Islands, the capture and occupation of Saipan and Tinian, and the Leyte landings, as well as the Luzon operation in the Lingayen Gulf and Third Fleet operations against Japan in 1945. After the war, the GI Bill launched a trend of educational specialization that would mark the coming decades, as World War II veterans earned college degrees and established new professions. Gray used his GI benefits to attend a two-year liberal arts program at Little Rock Junior College, which by 1946 had achieved an enrollment of 800 students. The influx of veterans swelled the ranks to 1,350 by 1951, and Gray's *alma mater* became Little Rock University in 1957 before incorporation into the University of Arkansas at Little Rock in 1969.<sup>5</sup>

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Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012); 1940 Federal Census, District 65-14, Tanners Creek, Norfolk, Virginia, Roll: T627\_4279, Page 3A (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, 2012); Arkansas County Marriages Index, 1837-1957, Raymond Gray to Wanda Adair, marriage date 30 September 1941 (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011); Bylander Family, narrative comments, [www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/comments/view-comments.aspx?type=2&entry=2301&KeepThis=true&TB\\_iframe=true&height=500&width=784](http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/comments/view-comments.aspx?type=2&entry=2301&KeepThis=true&TB_iframe=true&height=500&width=784) (accessed January 23, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Ancestry.com, "U.S. World War II Navy Muster Rolls, 1938-1949" [database online] (Provo, Utah: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2011), pp. 141, 152; Ancestry.com, "U.S. World War II Navy Muster Rolls, 1938-1949" [database online] (Provo, Utah: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2011), p. 125; Derrick Wright, *Tarawa 1943: The Turning of the Tide* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2000, 2002, 2004), 15; Naval Cover Museum, "Thuban AKA 19," [www.navalcovermuseum.org/restored/THUBAN\\_AKA\\_19.html](http://www.navalcovermuseum.org/restored/THUBAN_AKA_19.html) (accessed January 23, 2016); Little Rock School District, "Little Rock Jr. College," [www.lsr.org/?q=content/little-rock-jr-college](http://www.lsr.org/?q=content/little-rock-jr-college) (accessed January 22, 2016); Stephen L. Recken, "University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR)," *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, [www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=1157](http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=1157) (accessed January 23, 2016).



After the war, Gray returned to his work at the Little Rock Zoo in Fair Park. The City of Little Rock had acquired the land known as Fair Park during the period when the Gray family was living in Texas and Kansas. The Arkansas State Fair was held on the property from time to time, hence the name of the park. Like in Memphis and elsewhere, building projects at the Little Rock Zoo during and after the Depression were funded by the Works Progress Administration. In Little Rock, those projects included a cat house, primate house, and homes for reptiles and birds. A Chicago firm created a master plan for the space, and the Grays were part of the growth from an occasional fairground to a park that featured, by 1939, “a golf course, clubhouse, swimming pool and bathhouse, 3 multi-purpose buildings, tennis courts, the Traveler’s Field ball park, the zoo, a dance hall, and a small midway area with a merry-go-round.” A stadium was added in 1948, and the entire area was renamed War Memorial Park in 1949 in a ceremony presided over by President Harry Truman.<sup>6</sup>

As is true for the Memphis Zoo, the historical administrative structure of the Little Rock Zoo is not well documented, but Gray’s name appears to be the first incorporating the title “Director” at both zoos. Earlier articles concerning the Little Rock Zoo mention only unnamed “zoo officials” or various governmental agencies like the state game and fish commission rather than the zoo itself in reference to authority, with the rare exception of war-era “Curator” William R. Sprott. But a new, more educated, professionalizing generation was on the rise, and Gray’s youth suited an image of

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<sup>6</sup> City of Little Rock, “Little Rock Zoo,” [www.littlerock.org/citydepartments/lrzoo](http://www.littlerock.org/citydepartments/lrzoo) (accessed January 22, 2016); Little Rock Zoo, “History,” [www.littlerockzoo.com/history](http://www.littlerockzoo.com/history) (accessed January 22, 2016); Rachel Silva, “Sandwiching in History: Herschell-Spillman Carousel, Little Rock Zoo,” tour script created December 3, 2010 for Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, [http://www.arkansaspreservation.com/literature\\_133975/Sandwiching\\_in\\_History\\_-\\_December\\_3](http://www.arkansaspreservation.com/literature_133975/Sandwiching_in_History_-_December_3) (accessed January 22, 2016).

freshness and vitality that fit with the Memphis Park Commission's search for a "Director" to replace Superintendent Melroy. Gray began his administration on May 1, 1953. He spent much of his first year focusing on the day-to-day-operations of keeping animals and pleasing families while attempting to implement some of the suggestions set forth in the last few months of Melroy's administration. Meanwhile, the Commission continued to handle the major business of the zoo. They voted to enclose the structure sheltering the Egyptian stones Colonel Galloway had acquired decades earlier, and made the final payment for completed Palm House alterations. A couple of months later, the Commission had Polar Kraft Metal Awning Company install an aluminum canopy at the pony track.<sup>7</sup>

But the Commission was not solely responsible for all of the improvements in Gray's first year. After nine months, Gray gave his first report to the Commission. The zoo had "made a big showing" during the latter half of 1953, he reported. Employing a butcher had "cut almost in half" the zoo's overall feed budget while providing "the correct diet" for the carnivores. He advised that investment in a feed storage building would allow a substantial savings in hay costs, as hay could be purchased yearly rather than by the maximum 50 tons the zoo could then store. He believed the grain budget could also be reduced by culling overpopulated exhibits, and recommended selling 17 of the 76 ponies on hand. He recommended that the zoo "discontinue raising ponies" and instead replace the older ones as needed, saving two years of expenses per foal before

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<sup>7</sup> "Zoo Will Get Polar Bear If Animal Is Captured Alive," *Fayetteville Northwest Arkansas Times*, November 3, 1951; "Declares Snakes Not the Soldiers Should Be Afraid," *The [St. Petersburg, Florida] Evening Independent*, August 22, 1941; "Yak Dies of Heat In Little Rock Zoo," *Alton [Illinois] Evening Telegraph*, August 13, 1949; MPC Minute Book 7, 294, 389, 406.

they became serviceable. Ten rye cracker dispensers had been ordered to raise further funds.<sup>8</sup>

The Commission was pleased with Gray's efforts. Henry Loeb pronounced the zoo's appearance "very commendable." Commissioner Sam Nickey, who had pressed for investigations just before Melroy's retirement, commended Gray's work and declared that "Memphis is well on the way of regaining the position it once had." "It is well we commence thinking," Nickey continued, that "we will soon have the largest free Zoo in the World." Always looking forward, the Commission then approved the installation of directional signs pointing to the exhibits, as well as signs labelling each exhibit and the countries of origin of the animals therein. To tout all this progress at the fifty year celebration planned for 1956, the Commission finally ordered the publication of a new Guide Book for the zoo. This would be only the third such publication in the half-century of the Memphis Zoo, including the 1908 catalog ushering in Elmer Reitmeyer's administration and the 1937 *Souvenir View Book* issued at the peak of the Works Progress Administration projects.<sup>9</sup>

Gray inherited a zoo vastly grander than the small zoo from which he'd come. The Little Rock Zoo had grown from "about three dozen animals" before the Depression to a collection of buildings and animals worth about \$118,000 in 1936, while the Memphis Zoo had exceeded that value more than a decade before the Little Rock Zoo first opened in Fair Park. The Memphis Zoo had grown in leaps and bounds compared to the Little Rock Zoo's pace of additions, which from 1947 to 1953 amounted to just "two

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<sup>8</sup> MPC Minute Book 7, 459.

<sup>9</sup> MPC Minute Book 7, 459.

lions and two tigers.” In 1954 alone, the Memphis Zoo added 44 traded-for or purchased animals to the 42 captive-born and 145 donated ones, bringing the total collection to 828 animals representing 158 species, even after the deaths, destructions, sales, or trades of 182 animals. In the same period, attendance at the Little Rock Zoo had “climbed from 158,437...to 235,817,” while annual attendance at the Memphis Zoo reached well over a million by the 1950s. But improvements at the Little Rock Zoo aimed at broader appeal to young families was late in arriving, and Gray had already moved to Memphis by the time Little Rock added a children’s area. Coordinating with and pleasing the Memphis Park Commission, the Memphis Zoological Society, the Memphis City Council, and an exponentially larger visitor base would be a new experience for Gray.<sup>10</sup>

Still, Gray was also inheriting an aging zoo, in terms of architecture, animals, and staff. “The carnivora building [and] the elephant building are just as they were decades ago,” wrote zoo correspondent Henry Mitchell in 1956, although these co-existed with “small, relatively inexpensive structures” of more recent vintage while others were “still in blueprints.” Those planned projects included the zoo’s third new home for hippos and a new circus arena, both of which had been approved only a couple of months before Gray arrived, and a new monkey house. Some of the geriatric animals Gray believed “should be destroyed for humane reasons.” The staff was aging as well, and black employees in particular began to retire in rapid succession. Keeper John Todd retired in July 1953, after 37 years. When the zoo’s first keeper, Will Flynn, retired after almost

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<sup>10</sup> MPC Minute Book 3, 477; MPC Minute Book 7, 465; Conor J. Hennelly, “Little Rock Zoo,” *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, [www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?search=1&entryID=2301](http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?search=1&entryID=2301) (accessed January 23, 2016); “People Are Asking,” *Press-Scimitar*, 1956; “1,000,000 Visit Zoo Each Year,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 25, 1956.

five decades—mostly spent caring for the hippos—some thought it was a broken heart that soon afterward killed Venus, the hippo matriarch. A keeper for more than three decades, Jimmy Stallings worked long enough to witness the zoo’s big birthday in 1956, then promptly retired.<sup>11</sup>

By the end of 1954, Gray lamented “a continuous turnover” of staff. But not all of the turnover in staff was due to age. Gray blamed some of the staff turnover on his “determination to build up an organization that will work in harmony with the public as well as with their co-workers.” Gray desired to add a wildlife education program, which he believed was “badly needed here.” While he alluded to a certain disharmony between the predominant visitor demographic and the idea of black staff members in positions of authority or public interaction, Gray was direct in blaming “the past policy of having negro keepers” on the current lack of “trained white employees for key positions.” Among these key positions was the public face of his planned wildlife education program. He was adamant that “this situation should not be allowed to occur again.” This suggests that not only did he believe the public would best respond to white keeper/educators, but also that existing divisions between white staff and black staff could be eliminated by employing only white keepers.<sup>12</sup>

As these human relations issues developed, Gray approached the Park Commission about a disparity brought about by the recent establishment of “a new wage bracket for the Zoo personnel.” Gray himself had been hired in at \$5,000 per year plus

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<sup>11</sup> Henry Mitchell, “Your Zoo—Golden Anniversary of Zoo Will Be Observed This Week,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 1, 1956; MPC Minute Book 7, 463-464.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Mitchell, “Your Zoo—Golden Anniversary of Zoo Will Be Observed This Week,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 1, 1956; MPC Minute Book 7, 463-464.

the use of the Superintendent's cottage, exceeding Melroy's ending salary by \$200. It seems he desired to create a more financially stable staff as well, while attracting more white keepers by offering higher salaries. The new, higher wage bracket had been applied only to newly hired employees, and may explain why newer, predominantly white keepers were paid between \$185 and \$195 per month at the end of 1954, while older, predominantly black employees received only seventy to 82½ cents per hour. Many of these employees had been keepers for decades, but now were classified as "laborers" instead, and paid accordingly. Skilled and administrative employees like the new butcher, C. M. Davis, earned \$220, while Assistant Zoo Trainer W. E. McCarter earned just five dollars less. Long-term employees J. W. Tapp, the curator of animals, Animal Foreman W. C. Anderson, and Concessions Manager J. D. Hanson (soon after replaced by W. T. Shearon) all earned between \$250 and \$300 monthly. Gray's appeal to the Commission on behalf of "the employees of longer years' service" was successful, but came too late for those who opted for or were forced into retirement.<sup>13</sup>

By the time these raises went into effect, Gray could report that the new reptile and gibbon houses were "progressing satisfactorily" and that collections continued to grow with the recent birth of three kangaroos and a gibbon and the purchase of two hyenas. Newborn animals were an especial favorite of newspaper editors. Gray's year-end report for 1954 estimated "many columns of approximately 30,000 words" had been published by various "very cooperative" newspapers. In 1956 alone, the Associated Press circulated around the country an average of two articles about the Memphis Zoo per week. Locally, a recurring *Commercial Appeal* column titled "Your Zoo" offered Henry

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<sup>13</sup> MPC Minute Book 7, 357, 382, 406; MPC Minute Book 8, 16, 17, 51, 157-158.

Mitchell's perspective on the zoo's progress. To help document the zoo's fiftieth year, Gray instituted a scrapbook archive of newspaper and magazine clippings, now kept in the former elephant house, which documents the next half century of zoo development.<sup>14</sup>

Most of these articles are public interest items that helped visitors appreciate certain animals on a more personal level. In 1956, for instance, the new hippo house was completed, giving famed breeder Adonis and his growing family snazzier quarters where children and adults alike could get a better look at the omnipresent infant water horses. The zoo sent two beavers to Japan's Higashiyama Zoo and, six months later, received in exchange two Hokkaido bears. "Rocky, the favorite woolly monkey" of visitors to the Kiddie Zoo underwent "a major operation." On Monkey Island, "King" was not only "the single adult male resident," but also "a pretty rough referee" when it came to breaking up fights among the females and the younger males. Visitors comforted Mae, the zoo's "bachelor girl giraffe" with soda crackers while awaiting the arrival of a mate for her, especially after the first anticipated mate was killed at sea during a storm. "Nosie," a baby elephant, delighted youngsters when she joined the daily free circus. Memphians mourned in late November the death of Lula the giant tortoise whose shell "was sufficiently roomy for a child to sit on," but could give thanks that hers was the "first big loss" of the year. Of course, not all deaths were reported; the local papers were mum on the Park Commission's approval to euthanize a "crippled pony" a year earlier, for

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<sup>14</sup> MPC Minute Book 7, 463; MPC Minute Book 8, 18; Henry Mitchell, "Your Zoo—Golden Anniversary of Zoo Will Be Observed This Week," *Commercial Appeal*, April 1, 1956.

example. Still, Gray was undoubtedly proud that the 1956 mortality rate at the Memphis Zoo was “one of the lowest ever” at 7.9%.<sup>15</sup>

With the golden anniversary celebration finished, articles in 1957 reminded readers that their zoo was a place of business as well. On January 3, journalist Thomas Michael announced the unprecedented news that the zoo would close for one month beginning January 16. Gray had outlined the proposal for the Park Commission, explaining that “it was virtually impossible” to extend vacations to zoo employees otherwise, as all hands were needed on a daily basis to maintain the animals and the grounds to public standards. The month would be divided into two vacation periods, with half of the zoo employees off each period. Gray pointed out that “some zoos close all winter,” whereas the Memphis Zoo had not closed longer than overnight, ever, since its inception. Commission approval was clinched with Gray’s suggestion that those on duty could also use the time for “painting handrails and other places touched by the public,” which “could hardly be carried out with the Zoo open.” He also expressed a desire to move the pony track to the east side of the zoo and to finish construction on a glare blocking, seven-foot-high “sun-shield wall west of the hippo house” during this period.

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<sup>15</sup> Henry Mitchell, “Your Zoo: Zoo Acquires A Secretary; 2 Beavers To Go To Japan,” *Commercial Appeal*, February 9, 1956; “Zoo Gets New Bears,” *Commercial Appeal*, August 22, 1956; “Just Babies,” *Commercial Appeal*, August 23, 1956; Henry Mitchell, “Your Zoo: Spring Is Making Changes In Overton Park Denizens,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 18, 1956; “1,000,000 Visit Zoo Each Year,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 25, 1956; Henry Mitchell, “Your Zoo – Stags Are In Soft Velvet; Now Gage Antlers’ Speed,” *Commercial Appeal*, July 8, 1956; “Joys Of Civilization,” *Commercial Appeal*, September 16, 1956; “Mae Must Wait Another Year – Giraffe Friend Killed at Sea,” *Commercial Appeal*, October 3, 1956; Henry Mitchell, “Your Zoo – Giant Tortoise Lula Is Dead, Zoo’s First Big Loss Of Year,” *Commercial Appeal*, November 25, 1956; MPC Minute Book 8, 157; “Zoo Will Close a Month For Keepers’ Vacations – Park Commission Gives O.K.: Dates to Be Determined,” *Commercial Appeal*, January 4, 1957.



With all this work to be completed on a skeleton crew, Gray told one reporter, “[it] doesn’t look like I’ll get away. Maybe I can take a vacation next year.”<sup>16</sup>

Mostly, though, the news outlets tended to focus on the animals in Gray’s charge. Births and deaths and “romance” took center stage, along with the occasional trend toward animal celebrities. While in Australia, for example, Elvis Presley received a wallaby as a gift. The animal had become something of a mascot during the period when Elvis was filming *Jailhouse Rock* for MGM Studios. But with filming finished, Elvis and his manager, Colonel Tom Parker, agreed to put the animal on an American Airlines jet and send it to the Memphis Zoo. The little animal had proved difficult to leash-train, and no one was sure whether to call it “Elvis...or, depending, Elvira.” Chalking up to stress the creature’s unsuccessful efforts to bite zoo Curator Carter Anderson in the process of collecting the creature from the airport, Gray made space for the wallaby in the Kiddie Zoo. Meanwhile, the newspapers had great fun with describing the animal, its personality, and its situation with every Elvis reference they could muster—especially once the flocks of teenaged girls arrived for a glimpse. Sadly, in 1962, the little wallaby (Elvis, not Elvira, as it turned out) was killed by “zoo vandals.” The perpetrators were thought to be out for revenge after having been previously removed from the zoo for vandalism, a surprisingly frequent occurrence during Gray’s administration. Lions had been burned with cigarettes flicked at their manes, peacocks were harassed for their

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<sup>16</sup> MPC Minute Book 8, 274; Thomas Michael, “Zoo Vacations To Close Gates For One Month,” *Commercial Appeal*, January 3, 1957; “Zoo Will Close a Month For Keepers’ Vacations – Park Commission Gives O.K.: Dates to Be Determined,” *Commercial Appeal*, January 4, 1957; “Closing of Zoo Is Wednesday – Last Chance To Visit For Month,” *Commercial Appeal*, January 13, 1957; Henry Mitchell, “Your Zoo – Zoo Locks Gates Wednesday; Hippo’s Glass Glare Will Go,” *Commercial Appeal*, January 13, 1957; “Zoo’s Doors Close To Bears’ Disgust – Staff Will Take Vacations During Next Month,” *Commercial Appeal*, January 16, 1957.

plumes, slingshots were the choice weapon against birds and monkeys, and many animals were fed non-food objects.<sup>17</sup>

Such incidents, though, were not the norm. Most people enjoyed the exhibits, and as with any zoo, it often is the larger animals who draw the crowds. Gray lamented in April 1957, “We have not been able to buy any large animals from our Capital Funds for several years past.” The new hippo house, of course, had Adonis and his constantly evolving family to occupy it, but the new monkey house would require residents. He reminded the Commission of “a request placed before the City Commission on three (3) previous dates for permission for the Park Commission to use the money” obtained from the cracker and peanut dispensers he’d had installed so visitors could feed the animals. This money was going to the City instead, and Gray urged the Commission to demand the City rectify the situation, as “all the labor, service and etc., for these machines is done by Zoo personnel . . . . no outside labor involved whatsoever.” The larger animals already in the zoo’s collections were beginning to age, and as they eventually died or were transferred out of the zoo funds would be needed to replace them.<sup>18</sup>

One such animal who was transferred out of the zoo was Modoc the elephant, who went to Hollywood. Much misinformation and confusion exists about her, mostly stemming from the loss to public memory of her time in the Memphis Zoo, coupled with an imaginative “biography” about her that is replete with creativity and slim on

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Johnson, “Elvis Sending Wallaby To the Memphis Zoo – Miniature Kangaroo Was Gift To Singer From Australia,” *Press-Scimitar*, June 11, 1957; “Zoo Expecting Wallaby Today – Gift From Elvis,” *Commercial Appeal*, June 12, 1957; “Elvis’ Pet Wallaby,” *Commercial Appeal*, June 12, 1957; Henry Mitchell, “Arrival of Elvis’ Wallaby Finds Excitement At Zoo,” *Commercial Appeal*, June 13, 1957; “Elvis The Kangaroo Killed, Apparently By Zoo Vandals,” *Commercial Appeal*, August 12, 1962.

<sup>18</sup> MPC Minute Book 8, 302.

documentation. Because of this controversy and heated debate on internet forums, tracking her origins is an interesting exercise. This is particularly true since the actor Kevin Costner has purchased the rights to produce a film “biography” of Modoc that he may be unaware is far more mythical than the reality.<sup>19</sup>

In his book *Modoc: The True Story of the Greatest Elephant That Ever Lived* (1997), Hollywood animal trainer Ralph Helfer wrote a conflated history of several animals with that name, including the elephant who lived at the Memphis Zoo almost as long as Raymond Gray did. Helfer’s “Modoc” was a well-traveled, globe-trotting, heroic elephant born in the Black Forest of Germany in 1896 and later shipwrecked in Calcutta. There, in Helfer’s story, “Modoc” was first “adopted” by the Maharajah and his own sacred white elephant before winding up on a Burmese teak plantation where her powerful tusks made her a champion timber mover. Helfer overlooks the fact that, like most female Indian elephants, Modoc had no tusks, as photographs of the Memphis Zoo’s Modoc confirm. What Helfer got right, mostly, was Modoc’s inception in the 1940s into the Ringling Brothers Circus elephant act. From there, lacking sufficient evidence of events in the interim, Helfer fabricated furtive arrangements made by “John [Ringling?] North” that resulted in Modoc spending up to twenty years chained to tree in the Ozark Mountains in Arkansas. There, he claimed, is where he rescued the lonely, suffering, one-eyed creature and turned her into a 1960s television and movie star.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Karen O’Keefe and Tana Helfer, April 24, 2013 correspondence regarding the rumored Modoc movie, <https://www.facebook.com/RalphHelferBooks/posts/367607540009837> (accessed August 29, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Ralph Helfer, *Modoc: The True Story of the Greatest Elephant That Ever Lived* (New York: MJF Books, 1997); Robert Dye, *Memphis Zoo* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2015), 61; Ralph Helfer, *Zamba: The True Story of the Greatest Lion That Ever Lived* (New York: Harper, 2005).

The truth of Modoc's storied past, as well as can be determined, is somewhat less glamorous, if not less interesting. Recently, great pains have been taken by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (of which the Memphis Zoo is a member) and participating zoos to track the lineage and origins of zoo elephants. According to this research, Memphis' Modoc was born in India around 1919 to a wild sire and dam. Sometime in the next few years, as most zoos and circuses want their "baby" elephants under 42 inches tall, or about three years old, she was captured in the wild and delivered to America to tour with the Gollmar Brothers Circus in 1922. In 1923 and 1924 she toured with the John Robinson Circus, and with the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus from 1925 to at least 1934. By 1939, Modoc was a resident of Baldwin Park, in Baldwin Park, California. That year, John Ringling North combined a number of subsidiary shows into the greater Ringling Brothers Circus, including the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus, the Al G. Barnes and Sells Floto Circuses, and the John Robinson Circus. Modoc joined this combined show in 1941. When and how she lost her eye remains a mystery.<sup>21</sup>

On April 11, 1942, Modoc was one of Ringling Brothers' 28 elephants to perform at Madison Square Garden in the so-called *Ballet of the Elephants*. Scored by Igor Stravinsky, directed by the famed choreographer George Balanchine, and accompanied by Balanchine's wife, Vera Zorina, the ballet was a boon to the patriotic fervor of the day. Zorina took the center ring with a tutu-clad Modoc, as annoyed elephants all around "kicked their skirts around while circling the track." Proceeds went to the Navy Relief Fund, the Army Emergency Fund, and the President's Infantile Paralysis Foundation, an

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<sup>21</sup> Mike Keele, Oregon Zoo, and Association of Zoos and Aquariums, *Asian Elephant (Elephas maximus) North American Regional Studbook, 31 August 2010-31 October 2014* (Portland: Oregon Zoo, 2015), 116.

organization established by Franklin D. Roosevelt to assist polio-stricken children and their families (now the March of Dimes). Six years later, Modoc donned a ball gown for the Ringling Brothers' 1948 season finale, *The Circus Ball*, in which she had charge of “a baby waist-high pachyderm” whom Modoc “led around unceremoniously by his trunk.”<sup>22</sup>

The year she arrived in Memphis, *The Billboard*, a journal of the entertainment industry, published an informative census of elephants in America. Of the 264 elephants listed, almost all were female Asian elephants, as male Asian elephants and African elephants of both sexes tend to be more aggressive and less manageable. Circuses owned 124, five were in carnivals, exotic animal dealers held another fifteen, 28 more were in “Acts” other than circuses or carnivals, and American zoos owned 92 elephants. The Memphis Zoo reported only Alice, who had been imported directly from Burma in 1926, and “two young ones coming direct from Siam this spring [1952].” One of these was the baby, Nosie, who would soon delight zoo circus goers; what became of the other one is unknown. In the 1952 census, elephants named Modoc were claimed by Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus, by the Dolly Jacobs Acts, and by Howe's Famous Circus, owned by Betty Biller Sturnak. The future “Memphis Modoc” had been transferred from the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus in 1949 to Sturnak's show, also known as the Biller Brother's Circus. Advertising as Howe's Hippodrome Circus, it was this show that booked performances in Memphis in 1952, and it was from this circus that the Memphis Zoo acquired Modoc when the show dissolved

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<sup>22</sup> Bob Cline, circus historian, “Reply: 18 Dec 2009,” to Jeanine Partridge's August 10, 2006 query, [www.circushistory.org/Query/Query09i.htm](http://www.circushistory.org/Query/Query09i.htm) (accessed August 31, 2015); “Big One Stresses Ballet: War Motif Is Passed Up; Some Conventional Turns Are Shelved,” *The Billboard* (April 18, 1942), 30; “R-B Blends Old With New; Bow Presages Garden Click,” *The Billboard* (April 17, 1948), 53; “Modoc Is Off To Big Career As Hollywood Ham – One-Eyed Pachyderm Will Be Replaced Soon With Baby,” *Commercial Appeal*, May 26, 1961.

after a financially dismal year. Modoc and “a rare male” elephant were left in Memphis to starve, but Tommy O’Brien was able to rescue Modoc and walk her the two miles from the fairgrounds to the zoo.<sup>23</sup>

Modoc is a prime example of how local newspapers forged a personal connection between a zoo’s public and its animals. For example, articles explained that Modoc was not too fond of youngsters of her own breed. When the baby elephant Nosie had arrived in the spring of 1952, keepers housed her with the hippos until she was big enough to attempt putting her in the elephant enclosure with the older elephants. Alice, the former veteran elephant in Memphis, had died on Halloween 1955 after 29 years at the Memphis Zoo. Modoc had since enjoyed a peaceful, quiet, solo existence in the elephant yard. Moving day for Nosie came in September 1956. For a while the youngster “trumpeted piteously for the hippos and was answered by Adonis, the veteran hippo.” Eventually Nosie realized she was not, in fact, a hippo. To Modoc’s consternation, Nosie soon aimed her complaints elsewhere. In November 1956, Henry Mitchell mused that

...now she bellows at the peacocks. The young elephant is much disgusted at the peafowl pluming around the elephant lot (where they have congregated for years, for some reason) and sweeps at them with her trunk.

On Thursday they shut the elephant house door, to keep out drafts. This new arrangement (it was open since last spring) has thrown Nosie into great alarm and caused her to run to Modoc for protection and comfort.

Since Nosie arrived in the elephant house, Modoc has been pestered almost every day—Nosie wants the hippos, Nosie doesn’t like the peacocks, Nosie wants the door open. Well, they say it keeps you young...<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> “Elephant Census: First In Decade,” *The Billboard* (April 12, 1952), 58; “Howe’s Animals, Equipment Sold To Tony Diano,” *The Billboard* (July 5, 1952), 54; Robert W. Dye, *Memphis Zoo* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2015), 61.

<sup>24</sup> Henry Mitchell, “Your Zoo—Cold Runs Animal Populace Into Cozy Quarters Of Zoo,” *Commercial Appeal*, November 11, 1956.

Modoc finally had enough of the youngster after the cold winter gave way to a wet spring and the elephants were released from the building. Modoc, Mitchell advised, “does not care to wallow in a mudhole, but the young elephant, Nosie, does. In the past,” he continued, “Modoc sat on Nosie to show disapproval of these wallowings,” but eventually Nosie “got too large to be sat on conveniently, and Modoc no longer objects to the mud.” But if Nosie was getting larger, Modoc was getting no younger, and zoo visitors like young, energetic animals. Nosie was ready to take Modoc’s place in the zoo’s circus, so in 1961 Gray oversaw the trade of the “38 year old four-ton” Modoc for a baby elephant and \$1,000 cash.<sup>25</sup>

The reluctant pachyderm fought for two hours against getting into a trailer to travel to Hollywood, where her performing days would evolve once again. Dale Logston, owner of Animals International in Fort Worth, Texas, purchased her in May 1961 to send her to Long Beach, California, where Nature’s Haven Wild Animal Rentals needed an elephant for the “Journey from Hannibal” episode of the Western series *Frontier Circus*. She appeared in the *Bonanza* episode “Old Sheba” in 1964. The next several years were very busy ones for Modoc. In 1966, she appeared in *Daktari* episodes “The Elephant Thieves” and “The Trial” and worked at Marine World/Africa USA (now Six Flags Discovery Kingdom) in Vallejo, California. In 1967, she appeared in the *Daktari* episode “Judy and the Baby Elephant,” starred in the *Cowboy in Africa* episode “What’s an Elephant Mother To Do?”, and had a spot in the movie *Good Times*, starring Cher and Sonny Bono. Her last television appearance for a while was in the *Gomer Pyle: USMC*

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<sup>25</sup> Henry Mitchell, “Your Zoo – Misery In Hippo’s Jawbone Eased By Cautious Probing,” *Commercial Appeal*, May 12, 1957.

episode “Goodbye Dolly” in 1968. In 1973, Modoc guest starred in the *Gunsmoke* episode, “Arizona Midnight.” In 1974 she was transferred to Ralph Helfer’s Gentle Jungle in Saugus, California, and then to his Laguna Hills attraction, Lion Country Safari. Modoc was retired to the San Francisco Zoo in June 1975, and died there a month later. Although Robert W. Dye’s recent photographic history *Memphis Zoo* memorializes Modoc (and adds that she also starred in a peanut butter commercial), few people are aware of the connections between Memphis and this “massive” Hollywood star of the 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>26</sup>

But if celebrity and “ordinary” animals were the most widely written about, they were far from being the most significant news reported about the Memphis Zoo in this period. Throughout Memphis as elsewhere in the mid-1950s, questions of civil rights and racial equality began to come to the fore, particularly following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision and in the wake of the brutal 1955 murder of Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi. A 1955 Supreme Court decision “outlawing segregation in public parks, playgrounds, and cultural facilities,” handed down in response to a suit filed by the NAACP, created tensions within the Park Commission as tests of local compliance with this decision continued. First, the Commission received an appeal from the Tennessee Council of Human Relations (TCHR) to open the zoo one day each week “for both White and Colored to visit the Zoo together.” One of twelve such

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<sup>26</sup> “Modoc Is Off To Big Career As Hollywood Ham – One-Eyed Pachyderm Will Be Replaced Soon With Baby,” *Commercial Appeal*, May 26, 1961; [Image caption] “‘Modoc’ just didn’t seem to want to leave Memphis for Hollywood and a chance to get in movies...”, *Press-Scimitar*, May 26, 1961; “Sonny & Cher in ‘Good Times’,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTtEgM5OJKg> (accessed January 28, 2016); “Gunsmoke Full Episode Season 18 Episode 15 – Arizona Midnight,” 21:41-35:00, 40:20-40:36 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HeLB-Z5nqv4> (accessed January 28, 2016); Robert W. Dye, *Memphis Zoo*, 58.



statewide organizations across the South, “the TCHR was chartered by the state of Tennessee in 1954 as a nonpolitical, nondenominational, interracial organization” which used education and awareness as a vehicle for driving improvements in “economic, civic, and racial conditions” in every aspect of citizenship including access to public accommodations. The appeal also requested permission to integrate the Summer Concerts series at the Overton Park Shell on the southern edge of the zoo. This appeal was “taken under advisement” by the Commission and its effective rejection was taken by the TCHR to the NAACP.<sup>27</sup>

Two months later, Memphis Branch NAACP President Hosea T. Lockard and Chairman of the Executive Board, Reverend Alexander Gladney, brought a more formal, if terse, appeal for enforcement before the Park Commission Board. Their letters to Chairman Vesey and to the other Commissioners were direct and precise: “Request is hereby made by the Memphis branch of the N.A.A.C.P., through its Board of Directors, that compliance with the recent Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation in public parks, playgrounds, and cultural facilities be made effective.” The *Tri-State Defender* reported to the city’s black community that this was part of a “double-barreled action” aimed at forcing the Park Commission and the Board of Education to comply with the integration ruling, but that Mayor-elect Edmund Orgill refused to address the matter until after the Commission and school board had considered it. Although the zoo itself was not mentioned in either the letter or the *Tri-State Defender*’s report, in response to the action an opponent organization calling themselves “Pro-Southerners of Memphis” appeared “in

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<sup>27</sup> MPC Minute Book 8, 136; Kimberly E. Nichols, “Tennessee Council on Human Relations,” in *Organizing Black America*, edited by Nina Mjagkij (New York: Garland Publishing, 2001), 567.

large numbers” to protest “race mixing” in public spaces. The Park Commission, however, refused to address this potentially volatile situation, having apparently interpreted the Supreme Court’s language urging “all deliberate speed” to mean the issue could wait.<sup>28</sup>

Park Commission Chairman Vesey justified this hesitation by claiming to be ill-informed about the organization supporting the request. Asserting that he did “not know how many Negroes belong to this Organization,” but knew only that “it is promoted by outside interest,” Vesey tabled the request for integrated visitation at the zoo. If Vesey was in fact unaware of the TCHR, it seems unlikely that he would be unaware of the NAACP, which would ultimately succeed in its quest to integrate the Memphis Zoo and parks. The Memphis Branch NAACP had been established in 1917, when the lynching of seventeen-year-old Ell Persons prompted a meeting between NAACP Field Secretary James Weldon Johnson and Memphis’s wealthiest and most influential black Republican, Robert R. Church, Jr. Within two years, the Memphis branch was the largest in the South. Church later “helped to establish 68 branches in 14 states and represented over 9,000 members in the South.” This amounted to a mere tenth of the overall membership across the country in 1919, which continued to grow exponentially, reaching some 600,000 members by the end of World War II. But despite the growing power of the NAACP in the 1950s, the Commission’s response was to file away their request and to take “NO ACTION toward opening these facilities to the Negroes at the present time.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> MPC Minute Book 8, 162-163; MPC Minute Book 8, Folder 4, NAACP letter to John Vesey, November 27, 1955, following page 162; “NAACP Opens Drive To End Local Barriers,” *Tri-State Defender*, December 10, 1955.

<sup>29</sup> MPC Minute Book 8, 136, 162-163 [emphasis in original]; NAACP Memphis, “Memphis Branch History,” [www.naacpmemphis.org/history.php](http://www.naacpmemphis.org/history.php) (accessed January 23, 2016); NAACP, “NAACP:

The long-standing “Negro Day” policy had been changed only twice, first to switch the day on which black visitors would be allowed in the zoo from Tuesday to Thursday and then to ban white visitors on Thursdays. At a meeting of the Memphis and Shelby County Council of Civic Clubs in July 1957, the attendees demanded “an official explanation” from Parks Superintendent Hal Lewis as to why white visitors had been turned away from the zoo on the recent Fourth of July holiday, which had fallen on a Thursday. Lewis “clarified the policy,” reminding his audience that the policy had “been in effect about five years” that “no switch in days is made if a holiday falls on Thursday.” Although the concern was for the inconvenience of white visitors being excluded on the rare occasion of a weekday holiday rather than for the inequity of confining black visitors to a single weekday, this question did raise an important suggestion that discriminatory admissions practices could cut both ways.<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, a debate was brewing over instituting admission charges to the zoo. In April 1956, the Forward Memphis Committee of the Chamber of Commerce argued for the funding potential even a modest fee could return when received from the zoo’s million annual patrons. The committee had learned in its study that “most of the better zoos of the country charge a small fee,” and its initial proposal was to charge a dime on Saturdays and Sundays, “with a proposed aquarium to be tied in with the zoo.” What was specifically not addressed was the effective economic barrier to access this might impose on some, particularly within the African American community. While the North

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100 Years of History,” [www.naacp.org/pages/naacp-history](http://www.naacp.org/pages/naacp-history) (accessed January 23, 2016); Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 35-36.

<sup>30</sup> “Zoo Policy Is Clarified – Thursday For Negroes, Even If A Holiday,” *Commercial Appeal*, July 11, 1957.

Memphis Inter-racial Council (NMIC), a group of church and school leaders, did not specifically address fees, they blamed part of the city's racial tensions on a dearth of playground space and public facilities for black children, and asked the Park Commission specifically "to make more time available for Negro citizens to visit Overton Park Zoo." Ultimately, the Forward Memphis Committee "turned thumbs down" on the admissions proposal, citing "public protests against the idea," and the NMIC request was also declined.<sup>31</sup>

The protests against the situation were not all formal, though. When one family, whose car bore a Louisiana license plate, attempted to visit the zoo in August 1958, park police escorted them back to their car with an admonition that they were only allowed to visit on Thursdays. One of the officers allegedly overheard one of the boys say, "Wait until we tell them about it," and assumed that the incident was "a planned attempt to make a test suit for the NAACP." The Police Commissioner, though, "didn't attach much significance to it" and assumed it was an "honest misunderstanding." H. T. Lockard, past president of the Memphis NAACP, flatly denied that the NAACP would "be a party to such a thing."<sup>32</sup>

In another instance the next year, "Miss Eddie Mae" Herron loaded her students on a bus at the Pocahontas Colored School in Pocahontas, Arkansas, some two hours from Memphis. They had planned a trip to Memphis to visit the zoo, but were unaware of

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<sup>31</sup> "Zoo Admission Fees Studied By Chamber – Question of 10-Cent Charge Handed Subcommittee," *Commercial Appeal*, April 25, 1956; "Help Asked To Ease Juvenile Tensions – North Memphis Group Seeks Race Squabble Relief, More Space For Play," *Commercial Appeal*, May 24, 1956; "Committee Rejects Zoo Admission Plan – Forward Memphis Unit Also Urges Improvements," *Commercial Appeal*, May 26, 1956.

<sup>32</sup> Wesley Pruden, "6 Negroes Escorted From Zoo Shortly After They Enter," *Commercial Appeal*, August 27, 1958.

the Jim Crow policy in effect. Herron reported that the children exited the bus for a picnic in Overton Park before entering the zoo, but those plans were preempted “when a police car came at us with sirens blaring and lights flashing. Two policemen jumped out of their car shouting all kinds of vulgarities and racial slurs. One of the officers was swinging his club in the air like he wanted to beat us. We didn’t know it but we were in a whites-only area,” Herron explained. “They acted like we were some kind of filthy animals. . . . We were scared and we got on the bus as fast as we could.” Still misunderstanding the situation thoroughly, the bus driver took the group on to the zoo entrance. “When we got there they told us we had to leave. We were there on the wrong day. There was a sign at the entrance that said Colored Day was on a certain day of the week. One man kept pointing to that sign, calling us names and acting like we were ignorant and couldn’t read,” Herron recalled. This busload of students learned an unexpected lesson that day about racial discrimination that surely made a deep impression, and likely altered forever their perceptions of Memphis and its attractions. By the end of 1960, the zoo was officially “open now to anybody seven days a week,” but only so far as the gate and the exhibits; the zoo’s restaurant and restrooms remained segregated, and the Memphis Branch NAACP threatened to sue if integration of these facilities was not forthcoming.<sup>33</sup>

Not all of the problems Gray faced during his administration were public ones. Like his predecessors, Gray lived on the zoo grounds in a house designated for the director and his family. Because the business of animal keeping adheres to no set

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<sup>33</sup> David McDonald, *The Pocahontas Colored School: A Trip to the Memphis Zoo and the Clash With Jim Crow* (North Little Rock, AR: Hazel House Publishing, 2008), 26-27; “Dispute On Zoo Delays 2 Suits – Restaurant And Restroom Segregation Brings Challenge,” *Commercial Appeal*, December 31, 1960.

schedule, proximity to any potential problems was essential. Gray rarely left the zoo grounds other than to study other zoo operations or to conduct business in the animal trade. Accordingly, his wife seldom had opportunity to leave the zoo grounds either. For five years, Wanda Gray was confined mostly to home and the zoo grounds, where she supported her husband's work by assisting with record keeping.<sup>34</sup>

Initially, Mrs. Gray was quite distraught at having left her favorite pet behind at the Little Rock Zoo. The Grays had no children, and this pet was her best substitute. At one point she threatened to return to Little Rock if she wasn't quickly reunited with her beloved Sissy, the 60-pound mountain lion she'd once donated to and visited at the Little Rock Zoo. The Little Rock Park Commission agreed to transfer the animal to the Grays, but once the cat arrived in Memphis, Mrs. Gray was forced to visit Sissy only through the bars of a cage in the lion house. This deeply circumscribed existence, perhaps more so than the painful curvature of the spine reported as causative by the local newspapers, may be what led her to a fatal decision. In February 1958, as her husband celebrated being named chairman of the Mid-West Section of the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums, his 32-year-old wife retreated to their bedroom in the superintendent's cottage. Using her husband's German .32-caliber Luger, Wanda Gray shot herself in the head. She died at a local hospital soon after. Mrs. Gray has become legend among zookeepers to the present day, who continue to tell of unexplained phenomena they've observed. Believers say Mrs. Gray's spirit haunts the bird house in

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<sup>34</sup> Henry Mitchell, "Your Zoo—Overton Park Will Receive Young \$850 Cape Buffalo," *Commercial Appeal*, November 4, 1956.

the southwest quadrant of the zoo, adjacent to where the cottage stood until it was demolished several years later.<sup>35</sup>

Gray soon remarried and started the last family to live in the little cottage at the zoo. His second wife, Pattye, delivered a son in the fall of 1959. His original employment contract with the city included the home and utilities free of charge, but trouble arose when Gray told the Commission that doctors had advised him that he must move his new wife out of the superintendent's cottage. "Park officials," it was declared, "have stated in the past that free houses are given employees only when there is an existing house on a park tract which is purchased." But the strain of living in the home where Gray's first wife had died was perhaps understandable to the Commission. In 1961, the Grays moved into a Park Commission property at 749 Holly Street, a modest home less than two miles from the zoo grounds on the eastern outskirts of the prestigious Hein Park subdivision. The zoo cottage was eventually demolished.<sup>36</sup>

The year Gray's son was born, the opening of a modern animal hospital and dedicated aquarium building had made headlines while bringing the Memphis Zoo on par with other world-class zoos. Park Commission Chairman J. J. Brennan and Memphis Mayor Walter Chandler had begun discussing building an aquarium "within the Zoo or close thereto" as early as 1940. Once it was settled that an aquarium would be built, great debates over the expense and maintenance demands of such a facility stretched on for more than a decade. Initially requesting to remain anonymous, Abe Plough eventually

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<sup>35</sup> Eldon Roark, "Strolling—Tough Promise to Keep," *Press-Scimitar*, June 5, 1953; "Zoo Director's Wife Dies From a Bullet Wound," *Press-Scimitar*, February 26, 1958.

<sup>36</sup> MPC Minute Book 9, 297; James H. White, "Park Commission Wants To Buy House From Gray And Then Let Him Live on in It—City Commission Asks More Facts," *Press-Scimitar*, [date?], clipping in Memphis Zoo Education Building scrapbook archives.

emerged as the benefactor who made the project possible. Plough was the founder of the pharmaceutical company Plough, Incorporated (Schering-Plough since 1971). While yet shrouded in anonymity, in 1957 Plough attached to his \$100,000 endowment the stipulation that whatever the current or future policies of the zoo in terms of general admission, the aquarium must charge separate admission for the next quarter-century. Receipts from admissions were to be earmarked for the future purchases of animals, with the result that soon the earmarks exceeded the zoo's capacity for housing new creatures. In its first year, the aquarium admissions raised \$39,000 for the animal fund, with \$45,000 to \$50,000 expected in its second year. The aquarium also greatly boosted general zoo admissions, which reached 1.25 million in 1959. This new attraction and the free circus probably prompted more attendance than any of the exhibits.<sup>37</sup>

The aquarium's opening came half a year after the zoo's free circus returned from a four-year hiatus. Circus director Tommy O'Brien reported that between 1500 and 2000 visitors attended the opening performance, which included acts by "eight ponies, two horses, two goats, 15 dogs, a guanaco (wild llama) and a comical mule," in addition to "six human members of the troupe." O'Brien had spent 28 years with a traveling circus, beginning at the age of 14 by training animals for the Gentry Brothers. Later he spent a decade with Ringling Brothers, where he met his wife Marguerite, an aerialist. In 1949 the O'Briens moved to Memphis and expanded their family, which would eventually form the bulk of the troupe at the zoo's circus. The 1963 season included 2-year-old Myra Lynn as a helper with the dog act and 9-year-old David as a clown, while 14-year-

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<sup>37</sup> MPC Minute Book 6, J. J. Brennan to Mayor Walter Chandler, August 20, 1940.



old Anita and 16-year-old Mencie were there to “dress up the whole show.” David O’Brien would grow up to become a long-time elephant keeper at the Memphis Zoo.<sup>38</sup>

With all the fun to be had inside the zoo gates, outside the city’s political, civic, and social circles seethed with controversy over a proposed plan to bisect Overton Park with a highway. Discussion had begun in 1953 to create an east-west transcontinental interstate route from Barstow, California through North Carolina. In 1955, the firm Harland Bartholomew developed a plan to connect Nashville, Tennessee and Little Rock, Arkansas along this route by building a “high-speed, six-lane corridor” through Memphis and Overton Park. The zoo would lay north of the proposed highway, and the rest of the park would lay to the south. By late 1957, the grassroots organization The Committee for the Preservation of Overton Park (later Citizens to Protect Overton Park, or CPOP) spearheaded a campaign to stop the extension of Interstate 40 through the park. The long-standing controversy would not be finally resolved until 1981, but it did not mark Gray’s administration as it would that of his successors.<sup>39</sup>

Regardless of the interstate outcome, the zoo’s development plans were interminable. While Gray had overseen much progress in ten years, the Park Commission, zoo boosters, and the public continued to envision changes. By 1963, “almost every animal facility at the zoo ha[d] been remodeled or demolished and completely rebuilt” with the exceptions of the lion and elephant houses built in 1909.

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<sup>38</sup> “Zoo’s Free Circus Back After 4-Year Absence,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 24, 1961; Charles Goodman, “One-Family Circus for Zoo,” *Press-Scimitar*, May 4, 1963.

<sup>39</sup> “Campaign to Keep Expressway From Going Thru Overton Park Planned,” [newspaper and date unknown, clipping in 1956-1962 scrapbook in Memphis Zoo Education Building]; Joseph F. C. DiMento and Cliff Ellis, *Changing Lanes: Visions and Histories of Urban Freeways* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2013), 181-192.

Gray had achieved his goal of, on average, the construction or improvement of one building a year. The zoo's patrons and residents were enjoying new facilities for the reptiles, hippos, rhinoceroses, monkeys and gibbons, and birds; a remodeled giraffe enclosure; the completion of various infrastructure improvements; and a new administration building. He had also established the zoo's first permanent recordkeeping system related to the individual animals.<sup>40</sup>

That summer, an avoidable tragedy led Gray to put zoo life behind him once and for all. A grizzly bear managed to escape its enclosure, and anxious police officers killed the animal, to Gray's dismay. When the 46-year-old resigned his post effective August 15, 1963 to return to Arkansas, the Park Commission initiated the search for his replacement. In the spring of that year, Abe Plough had offered to finance five million dollars' worth of improvements on a "pay-as-you-go" basis, which would set a new bar for zoo projects over the next half century and beyond. Plough's pledge also seemed certain to attract high-quality applicants to the zoo directorship, strengthening the professionalization trend Gray had launched.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Carl Crawford, "Zoo's Director Resigning Post After 10 Years," *Commercial Appeal*, August 13, 1963.

<sup>41</sup> Carl Crawford, "Zoo's Director Resigning Post After 10 Years," *Commercial Appeal*, August 13, 1963; Henry Mitchell, "Plough Offers Plan To Provide Millions For Improving Zoo," *Commercial Appeal*, February 13, 1963.

## Chapter 6

### The Challenges of Professionalism: Superintendents Mattlin and Wallach, 1963-1976

When Raymond Gray stepped down as director of the Memphis Zoo in August 1963, the Memphis *Press-Scimitar* declared that under Gray's administration the zoo had been brought "to the threshold of a new era." The possibility of opening new acreage for exhibits, the addition of new animals, and the promise of some \$5,000,000 in funding for improvements offered a bright prospect to the candidates for Gray's replacement. While the search was on, former assistant director John W. Tapp served as interim director, upholding the primary goal of continuity of care. Tapp's principle contributions in the interim included the addition of over \$3500 worth of assorted reptiles, birds, fishes, and turtles, plus thirty dwarf seahorses for the aquarium.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, applications for the zoo's top job came in from seven interested parties: Robert Mattlin of Tempe, Arizona; Elvie Turner, Jr. of Dallas, Texas; James C. Savoy, a Columbus, Ohio veterinarian; Donald E. Way and Clayton F. Freiheit, both of Buffalo, New York; Donald Davis of Colorado Springs, Colorado; and Hamilton Hittson of Fort Worth, Texas. The Commission Chairman and Parks Director were in Washington, D.C. for the American Institute of Parks Executives Conference, so the only action taken initially was "to invite Mr. Turner and Mr. Hittson over for an interview if they were not going to attend the Convention." While at the convention, the Commission Chairman interviewed Freiheit, then Acting Director of the Buffalo Zoo in New York,

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<sup>1</sup> "A New Zoo Director," *Press-Scimitar*, August 14, 1963; "Tapp Is Interim Head of Zoo Until Permanent Selection Is Made," *Press-Scimitar*, August 15, 1963; "Tapp Is Appointed Acting Head Of Zoo," *Commercial Appeal*, August 15, 1963; Minute Book 10, 194-195, 218-219.

and a new candidate, Frederick Meyer of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Both men came “highly recommended.”<sup>2</sup>

Meyer, as it turned out, soon suffered a reversal of health and “requested that he be released from any consideration.” An animal dealer had passed along two other candidates’ names to the Commission, John Fletcher from St. Paul, Minnesota and Ronnie Blakely of Chicago’s Brookfield Zoo. The Assistant Director of the Mexico City Zoo was also added to the list, and he and Fletcher were scheduled for interviews. By mid-October, the search had been narrowed to four candidates, and the Park Commission superintendent met with Abe Plough to discuss the prospects. Plough had determined to delay his funding of improvements until a new director was named, as he believed that the new leadership should be involved from the beginning in “planning the new zoo.” By the end of the month, a total of five candidates had been interviewed. Finally, two weeks before Christmas, the Park Commission approved the negotiation of a contract with Robert Henry Mattlin, the past president of the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums.<sup>3</sup>

Why it proved so difficult to replace Gray is not specified in the Park Commission minutes, but without question the professionalization of the field presented new challenges. As one reporter acknowledged, “Good zoo men are none too numerous at best. It is easy to consider it a political job instead of going out to find the unusual combination of experience in doctoring and feeding animals, serpents, fishes and birds, in management of crowds, in construction and purchasing,” among other qualifications. In

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<sup>2</sup> MPC Minute Book 10, 200-201, 222.

<sup>3</sup> MPC Minute Book 10, 244.

addition to these highly specialized skills, “personality must be considered” as well. In all likelihood, a major consideration was each man’s capacity and interest in envisioning and actualizing a long-range master plan for the Memphis Zoo that was not yet fully developed.<sup>4</sup>

Mattlin was up to the task, though, and would become the first director of the Memphis Zoo whose heritage had little, if anything, to do with animals. An only child, Mattlin was “born and educated in Toledo, Ohio,” where his family had lived since at least 1882. Mattlin’s grandfather, Henry, was a German immigrant who worked as a railroad laborer before finding employment as a riveter in a wheel factory. Henry’s wife, Maggie, was an American born child of German immigrants. Mattlin’s father, William, proceeded from a riveting job in the wheel factory with his father to being a truck driver and receiving clerk for an automotive light factory. Mattlin’s mother, Elizabeth, kept house in his early life, but by the time the Depression began she was employed as a machine operator in the same factory that employed her husband. As a child, Mattlin “started playing with frogs and snakes...and never got over it,” he recalled. “I had my own zoo,” Mattlin mused, recalling the ragtag collection of orange crates in the yard of his childhood home which acted as “cages” for “striped cats (tigers), spotted cats (leopards), black cats (panthers), snakes, toads, frogs and several types of dogs.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Get A Good One,” August 14, 1963, paper unknown, in news clipping scrapbook “1963-1969” at Memphis Zoo.

<sup>5</sup> 1900 Federal Census, Toledo Ward 2, Lucas, Ohio, Roll: 1296, Page: 4B (Provo: UT, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2004); 1910 Federal Census, Toledo Ward 3, Lucas, Ohio, Roll: T624\_1208, Page 2A (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2006); 1920 Federal Census, Toledo Ward 3, Lucas, Ohio, Roll: T625\_1407, Page: 2A (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010); 1930 Federal Census, Toledo Ward 3, Lucas, Ohio, Roll: 1833, Page: 9A (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2002); “Ohioan Named To Direct Zoo Gardens,” *The Salt Lake [City, Utah] Tribune*, March 30, 1952.

Mattlin was fifteen years old when his father died in 1933. He plunged himself into his studies, majoring in biology at Woodward High School in Toledo. As a sophomore, he worked with the Toledo Zoological Society to create a “group of winter scenes” for a display case in the school, including flora samples as well as “bird specimens.” In his junior year, he was a founding member of his high school’s Scientific Research Society, whose mission “to dissect and vivisect lower forms of mammals” and to collaboratively study with area hospitals and universities, particularly in the field of bacteriology, would be a helpful background in his future career. As a senior, Mattlin was one of eight biology students to receive praise from the Toledo Zoological Society for “arranging a display of plant fossils there.” Mattlin’s primary qualifications for future zoo work, then, stemmed from his passion for animals and his realization that an education could open a path for him to follow that passion.<sup>6</sup>

By 1940, he’d completed high school and his first year of zoology studies at Toledo University, while his mother worked as a press operator in a toy factory to support them. Mattlin supplemented his mother’s income by working as a factory clerk while he earned his degree. When World War II began, he joined the effort and served three years in the U.S. Army Air Force. After the war, he undoubtedly found that his early membership in the Field Naturalists’ Society, regular rattlesnake hunts with Toledo zoo curator Roger Conant, and collaborative studies of bird skeletons with “Fred

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<sup>6</sup> “William Mattlin (1889-1933, Woodlawn Cemetery, Toledo, Ohio)” U.S. Find A Grave Index, 1600s-Current (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012); “Display In Case Contains Group Of Winter Scenes,” *Saga Tattler* (Toledo, OH: Woodward High School, 1934); “Research Society Formed; Quinten Kelley Is President,” *Saga Tattler* (Toledo, OH: Woodward High School, 1935); “Fossil Display Draws Praise From Former Zoo Director,” *Saga Tattler* (Toledo, OH: Woodward High School, 1936); “Senior Student Is Young Naturalist: Robert Mattlin Studies Diet Of Lizards; Stuffs Birds, Bats,” *Saga Tattler* (Toledo, OH: Woodward High School, 1935); “Senior Synonyms,” *Saga Tattler* (Toledo, OH: Woodward High School, 1935).

Flickinger, noted authority on nature” were sufficiently impressive accompaniments to his biology degree to launch his long-desired career. Mattlin’s accomplishments in the field throughout high school had earned him special recognition locally as “a young naturalist...who is quite an authority on reptiles and birds.” In fact, in a yearbook feature titled “Senior Synonyms,” Woodward High School students in general acknowledged that “Robert Mattlin” was synonymous with “scientific.” Mattlin was not simply fond of maintaining and displaying animals as he had as a child. He had proven himself to be a dedicated researcher with a broad interest in zoology at a time when the educational turn in American zoos was well underway.<sup>7</sup>

Mattlin’s zoo career led him to serve as director of several zoos over the next twenty years before he arrived in Memphis. His zoo career began in Cleveland, where he was the curator of reptiles before being named acting director. He was hired in March 1952 as the director of the Hogle Zoological Gardens in Salt Lake City, Utah. Within a few years, Mattlin had taken a job as director of Miami, Florida’s Crandon Park Zoo. In January 1962, he transferred to Phoenix to become the first director of the Papago Park Zoo, which was slated to open in November of that year. When the offer came from Memphis in late 1963, it included a salary of \$9,600 a year (some \$2,100 higher than Gray’s ending salary) and a city-owned car. He was also to have Gray’s former house on Holly Street and utilities furnished by the city at a combined value of \$150 per month. With the condition that the city also pay his moving expenses, Mattlin officially accepted

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<sup>7</sup> 1940 Federal Census, Toledo, Lucas, Ohio, Roll: T627\_3258, Page: 7A (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012); James H. White, “Tentative O.K. For New Zoo Director – Mattlin, of Phoenix, Ariz., Would Receive \$9600 Yearly, Plus Housing,” *Press-Scimitar*, December 1, 1963; Cornelia Carrier, “Zoo Scene South – Old and New Are Mixed by Overton in Memphis - \$5-Million Building Plan Now Underway,” New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, November 25, 1971.

the offer a few days before Christmas, and scheduled his relocation to Memphis for early January. He was introduced to Plough's budding master plan for the zoo before his first two weeks on the job were over. The master plan included expansions of existing facilities, replacing the lion house and perhaps other aging structures, and the additions of a new ape house and other exhibits. Neither could then anticipate the problems that would besiege this ambitious project.<sup>8</sup>

The interstate question that had left Gray's administration mostly unscathed would not be so kind to Mattlin. By April 1966, Plough was threatening to withdraw his funding, as the project had been indefinitely delayed by the interstate debate. Plough's major objection to the proposed interstate extension through the park was that it would leave the zoo "closed in" without the possibility of future expansion, a concern that Mattlin shared. There was also the concern that a proposed pedestrian bridge crossing the interstate would deter admissions, hurting the zoo's ability to repay the portion of his funding that Plough considered a loan. Mattlin agreed with the Park Commission that moving the zoo to Riverside Park, as had been frequently proposed, "would be a bad move," but no easy answer could be found. As the debate heated up, Mattlin and others

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<sup>8</sup> "Sand Lizard Particular," *Lima [Ohio] News*, August 16, 1946; "Ohioan Named To Direct Zoo Gardens," *The Salt Lake [City, Utah] Tribune*, March 30, 1952; "Dade County Zoo Gets Baby Camel," *Panama City [Florida] News*, December 20, 1957; "Robert Mattlin," *Tucson [Arizona] Daily Citizen*, November 28, 1961; "Discuss New Zoo Director," *Press-Scimitar*, October 14, 1963; "New Zoo Head Next Week?," *Press-Scimitar*, October 29, 1963; "Zoo Remodeling May Start Soon," *Commercial Appeal*, December 11, 1963; "New Zoo Chief Is Due Jan. 1," *Commercial Appeal*, December 21, 1963; James H. White, "Tentative O.K. For New Zoo Director – Mattlin, of Phoenix, Ariz., Would Receive \$9600 Yearly, Plus Housing," *Press-Scimitar*, December 1, 1963.



would object on behalf of the animals, too, who would be forced to live with the noise and air pollution of an expressway just beyond their enclosures.<sup>9</sup>

By 1967, though, the likelihood of the controversial highway plan seemed high enough that a new, scaled-back plan for the zoo was under discussion. Anticipating no contributions from Plough, but based on the designs he'd paid for, the new master plan was one million dollars cheaper. In addition to an elevated walkway from the parking lot to the south of the proposed expressway, the project would include new primate, giraffe, and camel houses, nearly an acre for an "African veldt" watering-hole exhibit, a rocky mountain feature for goats and baboons, a new sea lion pool with underwater viewing, and a new children's zoo. The initial phase would also add concession stands, restrooms, and landscaping features. Later phases would result in a reflecting pool, new houses for birds, elephants, rhinos, and reptiles, a polar exhibit, and "renovated bear dens." The plan called for the demolition of at least 18 existing structures.<sup>10</sup>

Although Plough's master plan and later revisions of it were the work of design firms outside of Memphis, Mattlin did have some ideas of his own. The day before he began his directorship, he had brought in "several rattlesnakes and Gila monsters" to the reptile house and took the opportunity then to speak with reporter Charles Thompson about his vision for the zoo. The sea lion pool helped him envision "an aquatic mammal house." A nocturnal animal house, which would "just reverse the cycles on the animals"

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<sup>9</sup> Charles A. Brown, "Plough May Withdraw Fund Pledged for Zoo Expansion," *Press-Scimitar*, April 8, 1966; William J. Miles, "Lane Proposes Zoo Relocation – 6-Million-Dollar Facility Would Find New Home In Riverside Park," *Commercial Appeal*, March 10, 1966.

<sup>10</sup> "Zoo Program Will Cost \$1,000,000 First Year," *Commercial Appeal*, January 31, 1967; E. W. Brody, "New Zoo Plans Call For Glamorous Look, More Buildings, Land – Little To Remain – Four Or Five Acres Along East Side Would Be Added To Tract," *Commercial Appeal*, May 23, 1964.

by keeping visitors in a darkened observation area and using white or colored lights to indicate day and night to the animals, was one of Mattlin's concepts. This idea was well before its time, as it would be another three decades before the Animals of the Night exhibit came to pass. He envisioned temporarily housing gorillas where Memphis' last horse-drawn fire engine, known as the 1910 E. H. Crump Steamer, was kept before its transfer in 1962 to a museum operated by the Memphis Fire Department. Mattlin foresaw a quick end to occasional visitor cruelty to the animals once most were "behind glass where the public will be closer to them but cannot touch them." A goal of "contented captivity" was aimed at improving the mental health of the animals, he explained. He predicted improvements would result in "less neurotic pacing back and forth" and "less growling and fighting over nothing," in addition to greater privacy for the animals. In this, Mattlin was the first director in Memphis to openly acknowledge the "neurotic, repetitive behaviors technically known as stereotypy" brought about by "the naked cage" as abnormal, undesirable, and indicative of a need for more "natural" captive environments at the Memphis Zoo. As late as the 1970s, some researchers were concluding that "stereotypies were probably not a serious problem" even as they admitted that these behaviors perhaps did "not portray the best image of the animals for the visiting public."<sup>11</sup>

But before Mattlin could address such matters as captive animal behavior—and indeed, *in order* to address it—he must first get the master plan improvements underway.

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Thompson, "New Zoo Director Looks To Future," *Commercial Appeal*, January 6, 1964; Fire Museum of Memphis, "1910 E.H. Crump Steamer," *Exhibits*, [www.firemuseum.com/exhibits](http://www.firemuseum.com/exhibits) (accessed February 4, 2016); "Contented Captivity Is Goal at Zoo," *Press-Scimitar*, July 29, 1964; Vicki Croke, *The Modern Ark: The Story of Zoos: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 37; Geoff Hosey, Vicky Melfi, and Sheila Pankhurst, *Zoo Animals: Behaviour, Management, and Welfare* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 113.

Part of this master plan called for the institution of admission fees for the first time in the zoo's sixty year history. The idea was hotly debated from time to time beginning with Gray's administration, but only finally settled in 1968. On June 18, the zoo collected its first admissions fees. Adults paid fifty cents for access. A "47-inch measure bar" was installed to check the height of children; children who could walk under the bar got in free, while taller children paid twenty cents. In keeping with Abe Plough's original agreement, the aquarium continued to charge a separate admission. Contrary to some public apprehensions, admissions charges did not seriously deter attendance. In fact, in the first week, gate collections amounted to \$4,797 received "from 10,948 paying visitors." Children admitted without charge were not included in the report, but the 2,263 paying children were. Opponents of the charge had suggested that sales within the zoo would decline, but concessions and rides managers reported no decrease and, in one case, an actual increase in revenues.<sup>12</sup>

These gate revenues were earmarked for improvements and the purchase and care of animals. One of the attractions removed to make way for the coming changes was the zoo's pony track. For 39 years children had ridden ponies and shared their snacks with them, but by 1966 the attraction had become a losing proposition amounting to \$12,000 a year, according to Mattlin. Three years later, children likely gave no thought whatsoever to the ponies that had once plodded around the track, as they eagerly pressed their faces against the "small glass-covered vents" in the new Primate House. These little windows allowed a visitor to "place his face to the glass and get an eyeball-to-eyeball look at the

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<sup>12</sup> Jay Hall, "Would Charge Cut Zoo Attendance?", *Commercial Appeal*, May 19, 1961; "First Week of Admission Fees - \$4,797 Collected by Zoo," *Press Scimitar*, June 25, 1968.

primates.” For safety, the tempered glass carried an “electrical-conductor coating” that would deliver a mild electric shock to animals who touched it. Mattlin had applied the same technology to solve a problem during his years in Salt Lake City. “Goofus...an overweight camel” at the Hogle Zoo had a habit of leaning against and damaging a pipe fence surrounding his enclosure, which was resolved after Mattlin had electricians install the type of electrical voltage that sometimes encloses cattle corrals. These changes and several others first described to Mattlin as part of Plough’s plan were completed by the summer of 1969. Construction of a new reptile house and elephant house began later that year.<sup>13</sup>

Having a plan and making progress toward it, though, had not curtailed employment issues, and the city was taking notice that its zoo was not as nice as it once was. Although the bear dens, giraffe enclosure, and Carnivora Building “were very clean,” curator John Tapp blamed a labor shortage for an embarrassing situation “hard-driving young reporter” Beth J. Tamke took public in May 1969. Tamke, whose future investigative work would tackle racial discrimination in the Memphis Police force and the truth behind what killed Elvis Presley, pulled no punches in describing the zoo as filthy and neglected. The elephant pool was nearly empty and flies engulfed their shelter, drawn to the dung “piled up just outside the bars.” Monkey Island was hardly a refuge for its residents when the moat “was rust-colored with leaves, peanuts, bags, cans and cups, littering the whole area.” The duck pond was fetid. Litter overflowed from receptacles and covered the walkways. The restrooms “had been vandalized by the public,”

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<sup>13</sup> Elinor Kelley, “Memories Ride Into Sunset With Last Trip Of Zoo Pony,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 11, 1966; Orville Hancock, “Real Charge Is in Store For Apes,” *Press-Scimitar*, April 25, 1969; “S.L. Zoo’s Goofus Will Be Shocked To Learn This!”, *Ogden [Utah] Standard Examiner*, March 20, 1953.

according to “officials,” who also blamed visitors for missing exhibit signs. Tapp stressed that the labor shortage made it simply impossible to “police” the visiting public on a daily basis.<sup>14</sup>

Structural changes beyond the zoo’s control only made such problems harder to surmount. A week after Tamke’s visit, a new contract between the city and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFL-CIO) reduced the working hours of the 35 zoo staff. This reduction in man hours in turn forced a change in zoo operating hours. Where previously employees had worked eight hours daily, not including breaks, now zoo staff were only required to devote eight hours per day to work, period. Breaks were to be deducted from that allotment, effectively reducing each employee’s actual working time by an hour per day. Tamke revisited the zoo a week after her first report and found that additional Park Commission workers had been shifted from their usual jobs to help make the zoo “very clean in comparison.” Even so, the problem was rampant throughout the parks system and, indeed, across the country. Nixon’s Environmental Protection Agency was still a year and a half in the future, but concerns and grassroots campaigns were mounting. The anti-litter group Keep America Beautiful had organized in 1953, but its (mostly) successful “Crying Indian” campaign didn’t emerge until 1971, admonishing that “People Start Pollution; People Can Stop It.” For the Memphis Zoo, getting this \$75,000 a year problem under control was an issue of both manpower and public education.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Joel Williamson, *Elvis Presley: A Southern Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 14-15; Beth J. Tamke, “Trash, Odor Make City Zoo Uninviting,” *Commercial Appeal*, May 28, 1969; Beth J. Tamke, “Black Police in Memphis Are Not Quite Equal,” *Hazleton [Pennsylvania] Standard-Speaker*, February 5, 1970.

<sup>15</sup> “Surprise Opening—Or Closing,” *Press-Scimitar*, July 8, 1969; Kay Pittman, “Expansion, Admission Charge In Elaborate Plans for Zoo,” *Press-Scimitar*, May 5, 1966; Beth J. Tamke, “Zoo

In the 1950s, newspapers helped familiarize the public with the animals, democratizing the zoo with reminders that it was, in fact, “Your Zoo.” During Mattlin’s administration, newspapers focused most on the proposed, mostly thwarted, physical evolution of the zoo. Artist renderings helped readers envision the improvements, while from time to time maps suggested how these proposed buildings might alter the layout of the zoo. But for a variety of reasons, many of these proposals never came to pass. A circular building containing a restaurant with floor-length windows overlooking a reflecting pool, separated from the main entrance by a “vast esplanade,” never materialized. Neither did the planned 500-seat auditorium facing the esplanade, or a new building for the big cats, or an alligator pit and reptile exhibit. The same was true for the desired expansion of the aquarium to include “a sea water wing and an amphibian wing.” Although Mattlin was able to install a penguin display, he hoped for “two-story, completely air-conditioned polar building” where visitors could “see the polar bears swim underwater in a glass-enclosed pool on one level and play out of water on another level,” and watch walruses and seals swim in another glass-walled pool would remain a dream until well into the next century. The proposed elevated walkway over the proposed interstate extension became just another nice illustration of what might have been, thanks to the eventual success of the *Citizens to Preserve Overton Park v. Volpe* case in 1981. That decision effectively ended the threat of the interstate construction through the park. Thankfully, the 1909 Carnivora Building, one of the zoo’s first structures, was spared

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Revisited: An Improvement,” *Commercial Appeal*, June 4, 1969; Wendy Melillo, *How McGruff and the Crying Indian Changed America: A History of Iconic Ad Council Campaigns* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2013), 5; Gary Haq and Alistair Paul, *Environmentalism Since 1945* (New York: Routledge, 2012), xi-xii; Robert Samsot, “Litterers Outnumber Cleaners-Up,” *Commercial Appeal*, May 30, 1969.

from planned destruction while the case played out. Meanwhile even basic maintenance remained deferred in anticipation of starting the improvements. But the near certainty in the 1960s that the interstate would be built through the park caused major delays in new construction.<sup>16</sup>

In some ways, Mattlin's administration was as plagued with disappointment as had been Phil Castang's some fifty years earlier. Mattlin did accomplish some of his vision, though. For example, the African Veldt exhibit brought together "compatible range animals, including zebra, elands, ostrich and so on" in an open, moated enclosure. New antelope runs gave those animals new freedom, while the giraffes, primates, reptiles, and sea lions all got new homes. An imposing concrete pachyderm and rhinoceros building was completed in 1972, exhibiting a "forceful," if rather bleak, Brutalist architectural style reminiscent of the London Zoo's Elephant and Rhino Pavilion designed by Sir Hugh Casson and opened in 1964. Concrete construction lends itself well to this type of structure as few other materials can withstand the strength of a truly determined elephant. The new herpetarium looked, from the outside, like a grassy mound hiding a cave full of snakes, lizards, frogs, alligators, and insects.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> "Showcase area of the proposed new Overton Park Zoo would be the vast esplanade," *Press-Scimitar*, May 5, 1966; Jack Morris, "Dramatic Displays To Highlight Zoo," *Commercial Appeal*, August 11, 1964; Bob Phillips, "Zoo to Be One of Finest," *Press-Scimitar*, August 25, 1965; Thomas F. BeVier, "Zoo Feeling Effects Of Improvement Plan Delay," *Commercial Appeal*, May 29, 1966; Kay Pittman, "Expansion, Admission Charge In Elaborate Plans for Zoo," *Press-Scimitar*, May 4, 1966.

<sup>17</sup> Kay Pittman, "Expansion, Admission Charge In Elaborate Plans for Zoo," *Press-Scimitar*, May 4, 1966; Peter Guillery, *The Buildings of London Zoo* (London: Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, 1993), 115; Architectural Press Archive, "Elephant House, London Zoo, 1965," RIBA Library Photographs Collection, <https://www.architecture.com/Explore/ArchitecturalStyles/Brutalism.aspx> (accessed February 7, 2016).

Perhaps the most significant accomplishment of Mattlin's tenure was the zoo's "enviable" captive breeding program. The Memphis Zoo had long been considered the Hippo Capital of the World thanks to the incredible reproductive record of Adonis, and zoos throughout the country exhibited and perpetuated his bloodline. But other breeding records originated in Memphis as well. Mattlin was the first zoo director in the world to oversee the successful captive breeding of the Laos- and Vietnam-native Douc Langur monkey. The American Zoological Society issued the 1969 Bean Award for the most notable birth of the year to the Memphis Zoo for this achievement. Primate curator Connie Wadlington proudly reported the third such successful birth in 1974, although the firstborn monkey "died before reaching maturity" due to "lack of exercise." Endangered species were promoted through breeding also, especially "pygmy hippos, polar bears, orangutans, some species of antelopes, and Gevey's Zebra." Memphis Zoo animals were sent out to other zoos for breeding from time to time, as well, including the first two surviving Douc Langur monkeys. They were sent to the San Antonio Zoo in Texas as payment for Keio, the female who delivered these babies, although the Memphis Zoo would keep any other babies born to Keio and her mate, Leio.<sup>18</sup>

Although unable to realize his vision, Mattlin had envisioned programs that would coordinate grade school curricula with selective tours of the zoo, featuring animals from particular regions of the world. In late 1972, he proposed a national first: supplying each visitor with a headset at the gate, which would allow them to hear recorded information about the various exhibits. Equipping each exhibit "with a magnetic field" that the

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<sup>18</sup> Orville Hancock, "Resigned Director Gives Views of Needs of Zoo," *Press-Scimitar*, August 7, 1973; Orville Hancock, "Rare Monkey Born At Overton Zoo," *Press-Scimitar*, April 11, 1974.



headphones would activate sounded almost like science fiction, but would become a fact of exhibitions in museums throughout the country over the next several decades. The elephant, black rhino, and white rhino exhibits were wired for sampling, and although two visitors admitted they would not pay extra at the gate for the service, the majority “who tried it have praised it.” Similar plans were under consideration by zoos in Denver, San Francisco, and Portland, Oregon, but Mattlin had wanted Memphis to be first. Ultimately, this visionary idea was relegated to his list of disappointments. He also wanted to establish a program that would enable college and graduate students to earn course credits while gaining field experience and conducting research. It would fall to Mattlin’s successor to see some of these dreams to fruition.<sup>19</sup>

By 1973, the attitude toward the Memphis Zoo had shifted from “what might be” to “what used to be.” The *Press-Scimitar* expressed the problem bluntly: the zoo had declined from a place of promise to one suffering “from financial neglect and bureaucratic indecision.” The “people with the power to get something done at the Overton Park zoo appear to have lost interest,” the article continued, such that “it was no longer possible to give Memphians a zoo that could be a source of pride.” The Park Commission seemed more interested in running away from the interstate controversy by simply moving the zoo to the Penal Farm in the eastern portion of the county. What the Commission did not seem interested in was hiring enough trained staff and paying them enough to want to work. Mattlin despaired over his inability to hire “15 more keepers, more maintenance men, and curators for birds and reptiles and a new education and

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<sup>19</sup> Orville Hancock, “Overton Zoo Considering Special Exhibition Plan,” *Press-Scimitar*, November 3, 1972.

graphics department.” With inescapable dismay, he lamented, “Many things go undone.” The Park Commission appeared to have given up on the Memphis Zoo. Clearly Mattlin felt the same way, for he tendered his resignation from the zoo in 1973 and remained unclear if he even wanted to stay in Memphis any longer. The promise of creating “a first-class zoo within five or six years” had drawn him to the job. But a decade of “all that hassle about the expressway” and then discussion about moving the zoo (which Mattlin thought should “very definitely” be done) had left him disappointed. Ultimately, Mattlin left Memphis for a wooded property in a bend of the Little Red River in Heber Springs, Arkansas. He maintained a residence in Memphis as late as 1990, but was at home in Heber Springs at the time of his death from natural causes in 2008.<sup>20</sup>

But not everyone had given up. The Zoo Action Patrol (ZAP), founded in 1972, used volunteers to help maintain the grounds and remind the public that animals shouldn’t have “people food.” ZAP members acted as tour guides, teaching visitors about the animals while watching for public behaviors that might injure or sicken the animals. Interim zoo director M. N. “Nat” Baxter removed plastic straws from the concessions stands and replaced peanuts in the shell with popcorn in an effort to limit debris that cluttered the walkways and clogged the sewage system. Baxter also tasked the maintenance crew with repainting and reroofing dilapidated structures, and worked with landscape architects to establish a beautification plan. Although removing a number of aging structures was part of Baxter’s beautification plan, one of “the ancient buildings”

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<sup>20</sup> “The Zoo’s Present Needs,” *Press-Scimitar*, August 8, 1973; Orville Hancock, “Resigned Director Gives Views of Needs of Zoo,” *Press-Scimitar*, August 7, 1973; “Robert Mattlin,” U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs BIRLS Death File, 1850-2010 (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011); “Robert H. Mattlin,” U.S. Social Security Death Index, 1935-2014 (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011).

did escape destruction. The 1909 elephant house was converted first into a hay barn and then to an education building, library, and archive used primarily by regular and volunteer staff and the Zoo Action Patrol. The sea lion pool also survived the widespread demolition that claimed the reptile house, circus arena, carousel, Monkey Island monkey house, fire house-turned-temporary gorilla shelter, giraffe house, and kiddie zoo during and after Mattlin's administration.<sup>21</sup>

During Baxter's beautification process, the Bureau of Business and Economic Research at Memphis State University (MSU, now University of Memphis) undertook a study of admissions policies at the zoo. The aim of the study was to better understand the variable economic impact of the admission fee, group admissions that were often free, and the "free hour." Since the funding fiasco surrounding Plough's master plan in the early 1960s, the zoo had transitioned from offering perpetually free admissions with the exception of the aquarium to requiring minimal gate charges in addition to the aquarium fee. Once free every day, the zoo's schedule for free admissions had been drastically cut, to one day per week, then to one hour each Saturday. The MSU study contradicted a widespread belief that the zoo was used most by African Americans. In fact, the study found that "88 per cent of paying visitors are white." Only among school groups, admitted free during school-sponsored visits, were visitors predominantly African

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<sup>21</sup> "Animals Are Facing Feeding Famine," *Commercial Appeal*, September 30, 1973; "Zoo News Is Encouraging," *Press-Scimitar*, November 1, 1973; Orville Hancock, "Updating to Begin At Overton Zoo," *Press-Scimitar*, August 11, 1973; James Cortese, "Your Zoo – Demolition To Begin Major Cleanup," *Commercial Appeal*, August 5, 1973.

American. In addition, more than half of visitors were from out of the area, while only 43 percent of zoo visitors were local residents who attended the zoo with their families.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, Baxter was part of the search committee for a new director. At a meeting of the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums held in Houston, Texas in early October, Baxter and city personnel director Henry Evans interviewed eleven of the twelve applicants for the job. The perfect candidate, Baxter said, “will have the challenge of relocating and building a regional zoo and also of giving form to the idea of outdoor containment – get them [the animals] out in a natural habitat.” The new director would also be one prepared to “create a meaningful zoological society to promote the zoo” while curating “the finest collection of animals that can be obtained.” Raymond Gray had kicked off the professionalization trend in the Memphis Zoo in the 1950s, and Mattlin had strengthened it with the strong scientific background he brought in the 1960s. By the early 1970s, the search committee found, nearly every applicant was college educated. Baxter reported that among the twelve applicants were one with a doctoral degree and several with master and bachelor’s degrees. Many had between five and 15 years of experience as well, reflecting the midcentury trend toward professional zoological training. The new director would be the first in the Memphis Zoo’s history who would not receive housing as part of his salary package, but the overall salary would be commensurate with Mattlin’s ending salary of \$17,000 plus housing and utilities.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Orville Hancock, “Overton Zoo Study Shows Visitors to Be ‘Outsiders’,” *Press-Scimitar*, July 30, 1973; James Cortese, “Your Zoo – Demolition To Begin Major Cleanup,” *Commercial Appeal*, August 6, 1973; “Free Zoo Admissions Cut to Hour a Week,” *Press-Scimitar*, December 7, 1973.

<sup>23</sup> “Animals Are Facing Feeding Famine,” *Commercial Appeal*, September 30, 1973.

As it turned out, the man for the job was Dr. Joel D. Wallach. Wallach, at 33 years old, had “an impressive background.” An undergraduate degree in animal husbandry had preceded his earning of the doctor of veterinary medicine degree. His practical experience was equally impressive:

He served in the Republic of South Africa with the National Game and Fish Department, taught diagnostic pathology at Iowa State University, and served as pathologist and director of research at St. Louis Zoological Gardens. He also was associate director of the Brookfield Zoo in Chicago, and resigned as director of the Jacksonville (Fla.) Zoological Park to take the Memphis position.

Perhaps it was his extensive education that helped Wallach convince the Park Commission and the City of the need to hire more professionally trained employees. Within a matter of weeks, not only had this been done, but other changes had been instituted that helped earn the zoo approval for federal licensing.<sup>24</sup>

Federal approval and licensing standards under the Animal Welfare Act, originally intended to apply to laboratory animals, were extended to zoos in 1971. The regulations required a federal inspection of the zoo facilities, which the Memphis Zoo could not pass in 1971. Once again the Park Commission pulled parks system laborers from other duties to assist with cleaning the zoo and tending to deferred maintenance. Others worked on installing a drainage system in the various animal enclosures. Attention to food preparation for the animals was also a priority, which trained professionals worked to improve. A curator of education was hired to facilitate training programs for the staff and educational programming for the visitors. Once these improvements were in place, “beautification added icing to the cake.” Wallach envisioned a day in which “flower gardens and fountains may decorate the entire zoo.” This was in keeping with a

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<sup>24</sup> “Zoo News Is Encouraging,” *Press-Scimitar*, November 1, 1973.

broader trend in the 1970s that centered landscaping as a dominant feature in a “more naturalistic and stimulating environment” for the “psychological and physical needs of the animals”—and, one might argue, for the visitors and staff as well.<sup>25</sup>

When the zoo’s 1973-1974 Annual Report was published, the first page included a listing of zoo employees by classification under the names of the six members of the Park Commission Board (then chaired by E. R. “Bert” Ferguson) and three Commission staff members including Nat Baxter, who had returned to his job as Director of Special Services. “Zoo Staff” included Director Wallach, General Curator Wayne Carlisle, Assistant in Charge of Buildings and Grounds—and former interim director—John Tapp, Business Manager Larry Campagna, Staff Veterinarian Stuart Porter, Concessions Manager W. T. Shearon and his assistant Elna Bartee, four curators, two secretaries, and a park foreman. Mammal curator Cliff Ross was the only curator without a college degree. Other employees included three male security guards, thirteen “crewmen” on a unisex labor force including at least three women, seven concessions attendants (only one male), seven female cashiers, and 27 male and female keepers. Some of the keepers listed would go on to rival first zookeeper and hippo caretaker Will Flynn for the title of longest employed keeper at the Memphis Zoo, including current cat keepers (in 2016) Clifton “Louie” Bell and Morgan Powers. Others would have much shorter careers at the Memphis Zoo, including Deborah “Debbie” Blackwell, whose career ended tragically just a few years later. When a four-month-old giraffe “caught its neck in a stockade-like

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<sup>25</sup> “Zoo Obtains U.S. Approval, License,” *Press-Scimitar*, December 12, 1973; Patricia Beecham, “Zoos and Aquariums,” in *The Architect’s Handbook*, edited by Quentin Pickard (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Science Ltd, 2002, 2003), 392; “Federal Inspection Finds Revamped Facility Up To Standards For Licensing,” *Commercial Appeal*, December 9, 1973.

fence” in 1976, keepers rushed to free the baby and its mother attacked. The 27-year-old Blackwell fell into a coma after the giraffe kicked her repeatedly in the head. She never recovered from the coma, but lived in a vegetative state for the next twenty years until her death in 1996 at her parents’ New Orleans home from “complications from pneumonia.”<sup>26</sup>

In addition to boosting the staff and gaining federal licensing, Wallach could report by the end of his first year that a new contact area, or petting zoo, had been established in accordance with a philosophy that the public should interact with the animals. The newly hired education curator, Kathy Moore, had distributed a new brochure to area schools and a bi-monthly newsletter called “The Ark” throughout the zoo, the community, and to “other major zoos.” Staff and “friends of the Zoo” were privy twice a month to presentations on “other zoos and conservation techniques” as well as programs on various animals. Wallach spoke at conferences and workshops on topics like “Ulcerative Shell Disease in Turtles” and “gearing zoos to provide the modern visitor with a full-service zoo.” He also published an article on reptile anesthesia. Wallach collaborated with veterinarian Robert Houk, curator Cliff Ross, and a student intern to publish the article “Cosmetic Repair of a Fractured Horn in a Sable Antelope” in the June 1974 edition of *Journal of Zoo Animal Medicine*.<sup>27</sup>

That student intern, Janet Olcott, was part of an advance that would have made Mattlin proud. Mattlin had been unable to initiate his program for high school and college

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<sup>26</sup> Overton Park Zoo and Aquarium, *Annual Report, 1973-1974* (Memphis: Overton Park Zoo and Aquarium, 1974); “Woman in coma 20 years dies,” *Northwest (Florence) Alabama Times Daily*, December 2, 1996.

<sup>27</sup> Overton Park Zoo and Aquarium, *Annual Report, 1973-1974* (Memphis: Overton Park Zoo and Aquarium, 1974).

students interested in zoo careers, but Wallach carried those plans forward. Two Memphis high school students interned at the zoo for 90 hours each, while “third-year veterinary student, Janet Olcott, participated in a joint externship program between the University of Missouri School of Veterinary Medicine and the Overton Park Zoo.” Other educational outreach measures included the installation of 500 signs explaining the animal exhibits in the zoo and twelve large, illustrated graphics exhibited in major buildings around the city. The Zoo Action Patrol kept up its activities of monitoring and educating the public and added special fundraising events to its repertoire. Proceeds from the sale of rye crackers for Contact Area visitors to feed to the animals, as well as from a bake sale, went to fund ZAP projects. For the thriving volunteer program of 130 members, Moore printed a training manual for volunteers and a 44-page orientation booklet titled “Who’s Who in the Zoo”.<sup>28</sup>

If Raymond Gray had enjoyed the support of local newspapers in the 1950s, Wallach’s administration was no less fortunate. A public relations department organized thirty catered lectures for area business and civic clubs. Wallach appeared every Sunday morning on WMCT alongside Memphis television icon Dick Williams for “Zoo Corner,” while other local channels also made time for zoo news. The “Your Zoo” column, taken over by James Cortese when Henry Mitchell departed to become the *Washington Post*’s “Earthman,” continued to inform *Commercial Appeal* readers about new animals and events, while Orville Hancock shared such information with Memphians who preferred the *Press-Scimitar*. Radio stations aired many of these press releases. A number of

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<sup>28</sup> Overton Park Zoo and Aquarium, *Annual Report, 1973-1974* (Memphis: Overton Park Zoo and Aquarium, 1974).



special events were among these reports in the 1973-1974 season. Park Commission members were treated a luncheon tour of the zoo. A Rededication of the Zoo followed the completion of renovations and was attended by Memphis Mayor Wyeth Chandler as well as by Abe Plough. Children delighted at the Memorial Day event, rumored to become an annual one known as the Overton Park Zoo International Tortoise Race.<sup>29</sup>

Although the start of the “Mission Statement” trend was still a few years in the future, with Wallach’s hire the Memphis Zoo established its first official “philosophy.” Stating that the zoo was “for people as well as animals,” the philosophy was intended as an orienting point around which staff and visitors could unite to “co-create” a zoo for all. Maintenance issues in the preceding few years had led to the curtailment of animal feeding opportunities, but Wallach reversed that decision in order to “bring back public interaction” with the animals. Previous problems had drastically reduced attendance from well over a million per year in the 1950s to just over half that by 1974. Surprisingly, out of a total of 551,538 admissions in the 1973-1974 season, the number of paying adults outnumbered the paying children nearly two to one. Part of this may have been nostalgia, as those adults who remembered the zoo of Gray’s day began to bring their own children to the zoo to make memories. Surely, part of it had to do with a national decline in family size as a decade-long recession took hold. American fertility rates in the 1970s dropped to a record low even as compared to the drop in fertility during the Great Depression. Simply put, families were getting smaller, either due to declining birth rates or to a rise in divorce and single parenting. As a result, even under ideal conditions Wallach’s

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<sup>29</sup> Overton Park Zoo and Aquarium, *Annual Report, 1973-1974* (Memphis: Overton Park Zoo and Aquarium, 1974).

generation of zoo guests would be hard pressed to ever keep up with Baby Boom attendance levels.<sup>30</sup>

Keeping up with acquisitions would soon pose a challenge as well. Recognizing that looming federal legislation would restrict the animal trade effective July 1, 1974, Wallach purchased 323 animals, the largest single-year acquisitions in the zoo's history. Many of these would be difficult or impossible to obtain after the new restrictions took effect. Almost all of the acquisitions were targeted to facilitate breeding. A male black rhinoceros, a male reticulated giraffe, and three Blesbok antelopes would join females already in the zoo. A herd of five European wisent bison, a species extinct in the wild and surviving in only a few zoos, was purchased with the intent of increasing the endangered population. Three "rare white-tail Gnu" and a female Nilgiri tahr from India were other hopeful additions. The San Diego Zoo sold a Siberian tiger couple to Wallach, and MSU football mascot TOM (whose name was an acronym for "Tigers Of Memphis") was joined by a female Bengal tiger.<sup>31</sup>

Wallach beamed about the 145 incidents of natural increase in his first year, and about the collaboration with other zoos. Some of that collaboration involved traditional trade. Knoxville Zoo acquired Memphis' adolescent African elephant, Hazel, and Wallach replaced her with a mating couple of the same species. The St. Louis Zoo donated seven "aged" female llamas when Wallach purchased three males, and Wallach

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<sup>30</sup> Overton Park Zoo and Aquarium, *Annual Report, 1973-1974* (Memphis: Overton Park Zoo and Aquarium, 1974); Mark Mather, "Fact Sheet: The Decline in U.S. Fertility," *Population Reference Bureau*, [www.prb.org/publications/datasheets/2012/world-population-data-sheet/fact-sheet-us-population.aspx](http://www.prb.org/publications/datasheets/2012/world-population-data-sheet/fact-sheet-us-population.aspx) (accessed February 8, 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Overton Park Zoo and Aquarium, *Annual Report, 1973-1974* (Memphis: Overton Park Zoo and Aquarium, 1974).

was pleasantly surprised when “three viable babies” were born in the first year. Other collaborative efforts were part of breeding exchange programs. In one case Wallach sent a pair of maned wolves to the Oklahoma City Zoo to “court” in a three-acre paddock, while in another case one of Memphis’s two male radiated tortoises was exchanged with a female from the New York Zoological Society for two years. Sadly, though, he mourned the losses of “a female white rhinoceros, a pair of snow leopards, a female clouded leopard, a female camel, a trio of kudu antelope, a female bontebok and a female Andean Condor.”<sup>32</sup>

The Herpetarium gained 150 new residents from as far away as Fiji Island, Ceylon, and South America. The aquarium drew over 126,000 visitors during the 1973-1974 season, many of whom gladly contributed to the accumulation of \$26,370 for the animal fund in exchange for observing the zoo’s new “deadly poisonous turkey fish, the anemone fish, [and] Chinese ribbon eels.” Under the direction of Bird Curator Connie Wadlington, a trio of new and “interesting flocks” delighted visitors, including African Weaver birds with their woven “basket” nests, Egyptian geese, and flamingos, while the flight cage became a “lush Walk-Through Aviary...stocked with existing ibis, spoonbill, flamingos, waterfowl and a variety of perching birds.”<sup>33</sup>

Wallach opened the gates, so to speak, to new levels of diversity in the zoo. In keeping with his philosophy that the zoo was “for people as well as for animals,” Wallach instituted a reduced admission fee for senior citizens and for the blind and otherwise

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<sup>32</sup> Overton Park Zoo and Aquarium, *Annual Report, 1973-1974* (Memphis: Overton Park Zoo and Aquarium, 1974).

<sup>33</sup> Overton Park Zoo and Aquarium, *Annual Report, 1973-1974* (Memphis: Overton Park Zoo and Aquarium, 1974).

handicapped. Various classifications of visitors could obtain a discount card from the zoo administration office, which would allow them access to the zoo at the child's rate of one quarter. These classifications included those with proof that they were over age 65 or on Medicare, vision-challenged individuals who could produce a letter from an ophthalmologist or government agency confirming at least 90% sight loss, disabled people "who qualify with the various city agencies," and anyone presenting a reduced fare card issued by the Memphis Transit Authority (MTA). The program was modeled after the similar MTA policies already in effect.<sup>34</sup>

Even with all these advances, though, some old problems had not disappeared. Wallach, too, contended with the ongoing questions of the interstate extension and whether or not to move the zoo. Working toward the possibility of a major move, rather than denying it outright as some would suggest, Wallach traveled to other zoos and parks to gather ideas. After a trip to San Diego in 1975, he recommended that if the zoo was indeed moved to the Penal Farm, it should "be an animal theme park" similar to the three-year-old San Diego Wild Animal Park. Animals would be grouped together by geographic origins and surrounded by appropriate "native" flora and fauna, much as Mattlin had envisioned when designing and installing the African Veldt exhibit. Wallach compared San Diego's "five-mile safari area" where a thousand animals roamed freely to his vision for a new Memphis zoo. Memphis would need more animals, as he felt that the public is "content only with entertainment and seeing one giraffe in a 40-acre area is pretty boring to the average person." Evidence of this could be found in comparative

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<sup>34</sup> Overton Park Zoo and Aquarium, *Annual Report, 1973-1974* (Memphis: Overton Park Zoo and Aquarium, 1974); Orville Hancock, "City Zoo to Admit Special Groups at Reduced Rate," *Press-Scimitar*, March 1, 1974; "Zoo Will Offer Some Citizens Reduced Fare," *Press-Scimitar*, June 7, 1974.

attendance figures; on average, three million people visited the San Diego Zoo each year while only a third of that number attended the safari park.<sup>35</sup>

In Toronto, Canada, Wallach found that a twenty million dollar budget had proved inadequate when that city moved to open a 710-acre zoo 25 miles from downtown. Where San Diego had opted for open, natural settings, Toronto built “massive buildings” that proved “inflexible” in accommodating unexpected changes in the planned collections. Toronto’s Canadian Animal Domain was scheduled to open in spring of 1975, which visitors would reach via a city-funded \$13.2 million train ride from the geographically organized main exhibits. This was in addition to the \$22 million train ride that would shorten the Metro Toronto Zoo’s eight miles of walkways for visitors by 3.5 miles. Finally, Wallach visited Miami, Florida, where a replacement of the Crandon Park Zoo (where Mattlin had once been director) was “being constructed slowly” and carefully for a planned opening in 1976. While San Diego and Toronto aimed at creating additional animal attractions, Miami planned simply to close the Crandon Park Zoo after moving its collections to the new facility. A lack of expansion options and threat of flood damage prompted the move to a 350-acre “former blimp base” in Dade County. Although only 60 acres smaller than the Toledo park, the Miami-Dade Zoo intended to create the best, rather than the biggest, possible attraction.<sup>36</sup>

Like similar national zoo tours in the past had suggested, Wallach’s study of these zoos revealed that in each city, the success of the zoo depended heavily on a large, well-

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<sup>35</sup> Lynn Lewis, “A Word to the Wise...Memphis Zoo Must Learn From Others’ Mistakes,” *Press-Scimitar*, April 8, 1975.

<sup>36</sup> Lynn Lewis, “A Word to the Wise...Memphis Zoo Must Learn From Others’ Mistakes,” *Press-Scimitar*, April 8, 1975.

organized zoological society. In San Diego, “large” meant over 40,500 members. In addition to society memberships and “other auxiliary enterprises,” much of San Diego’s \$14.1 million operating budget was met by gate receipts, special exhibit admissions similar to Memphis’ separate aquarium charge, and various “revenue-producing attractions” including monorail, bus tour, and skyride tickets, plus gift shop and restaurant sales. The Toronto Zoological Society funded its zoo in similar ways, and had also raised a six million dollar animal fund surplus, even after the acquisitions of 4,000 animals. Miami-Dade’s new facility was planned in phases, with an \$8 million budget for Phase I and more than three times that for Phase II, although funding for the second phase had not yet been secured. The Crandon Park Zoo was a fully taxpayer supported facility that remained open without admission charges on a city-allotted budget of half a million dollars per year. The new zoo was expected to have a \$3 million dollar budget to be met in part by a new, fifty- to 70-cent admission fee. Wallach estimated that a “complete zoological gardens” at the Penal Farm would require fifty million dollars and five years for construction. The challenge expressed by Wallach’s report was clear: even with current gate receipts, building a new, larger, “modern” zoo for Memphis would require creative funding.<sup>37</sup>

Discussion of moving the Memphis Zoo was nothing new. In 1924, Park Commission Chairman John Willingham announced that the Commission had settled on “definite plans” to move the zoo to the fairgrounds. The Commission had also considered moving the zoo to Riverside Park, but decided that the riverfront was “too remote” to be

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<sup>37</sup> Lynn Lewis, “A Word to the Wise...Memphis Zoo Must Learn From Others’ Mistakes,” *Press-Scimitar*, April 8, 1975; Kate Dickson, “Zoo Gardens Would Cost \$50 Million,” *Press-Scimitar*, December 17, 1975.

suitable for a zoo site. The Riverside proposal had been raised again in the 1960s, and once again was defeated. Despite all of Wallach's efforts to plan a new zoo at the Penal Farm (or Shelby Farms, as it was eventually named), not to mention his advocacy of keeping the Overton Park zoo operational when the proposed Shelby Farms zoo opened, real action toward moving the zoo never transpired and ultimately the matter was dropped altogether.<sup>38</sup>

On May 28, 1976, Wallach's brief career with the Memphis Zoo came to an end. A personnel scandal led him to resign his post after curators, keepers, and other staff accused him publicly of prioritizing public opinion above animal welfare and of intimidation against the staff. Wallach had apparently had similar issues with his employees in Jacksonville, Florida before coming to Memphis, and it was for this reason that the Park Commission was "willing to drop the issue" and accept his resignation without further ado. In fact, Wallach was so open in his abrupt treatment of employees that former Park Commission superintendent Jim Hadaway "even gave him a Dale Carnegie book once," although Wallach called Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* "outdated." His preferred guidebook on such matters, Robert J. Ringer's *Winning Through Intimidation*, he insisted was not about using intimidation to win but rather about winning in the face of intimidation. Still, it cannot be said that Wallach did not accomplish much in his short administration. Wallach had intended to stay in Memphis to research and teach veterinary medicine at the University of Tennessee Center for Health Sciences, but instead he went to Atlanta's Emory University Yerkes National

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<sup>38</sup> "News of Bygone Days – 50 Years Ago – May 2, 1924," *Commercial Appeal*, May 2, 1974; Otis L. Sanford, "Johnican Will Push For Mud Island Zoo," *Commercial Appeal*, December 25, 1979.

Primate Center, where he worked with the inventor of the tranquilizer gun, Harold “Red” Palmer. In 1982 he shifted gears to become a naturopath. He went on to become a trace-element research pioneer and founder of Youngevity, an international “network-marketing leader” for “health conscious consumers and business owners.” His biography on the Youngevity website carefully omits his time in Memphis.<sup>39</sup>

The first hints toward the corporatizing and inevitable privatization of the zoo came with a discussion of qualifying candidates to replace Wallach. The new director would be a civil servant and would earn between \$18,000 and \$20,000 a year, down at least \$800 from Wallach’s ending pay. Postings on city bulletin boards for 10 days was a civil service requirement, and the Park Commission planned to publish an advertisement in the AAZPA magazine to coincide with the city posting. The ideal candidate would “hold a degree in a zoo-related field and...have five years of experience in the field.” Nat Baxter was in charge of the search. Even before the city posting officially opened for applications, he already had received applications from Wisconsin and South Carolina. Five of the zoo’s current curators qualified for the job, as did the zoo’s veterinarian.<sup>40</sup>

The zoo had been a curiosity, then a menagerie, and always a recreation and entertainment venue. It had become a classroom and a laboratory as well. Two things hinted that the Commission was edging toward another evolution, to make the zoo a business above all else. First came the suggestion that zoo business manager Larry Campagna qualified, although he had not yet expressed an interest in the job. Then, when

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<sup>39</sup> James Chisum, “Wallach Zoo Case Closed; To Join UTCHS,” *Commercial Appeal*, June 24, 1976; Clark Porteous, “Arkansan Selected as Director of Zoo,” *Press-Scimitar*, December 2, 1976; [www.youngevity.com/index.cfm/more/people/joel-d-wallach-bs-dvm-nd/](http://www.youngevity.com/index.cfm/more/people/joel-d-wallach-bs-dvm-nd/) (accessed February 10, 2016).

<sup>40</sup> James Chisum, “Wallach Zoo Case Closed; To Join UTCHS,” *Commercial Appeal*, June 24, 1976.



six months had passed without filling the job, the Commission bluntly announced that its search was “primarily for a man with public relations and administrative experience rather than strictly an animal man.” It would take another decade to fully and officially make the transition, but the Memphis Zoo was on its way to becoming one of Memphis’ most significant privatized businesses.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> James Chisum, “Wallach Zoo Case Closed; To Join UTCHS,” *Commercial Appeal*, June 24, 1976; “Search for Zoo Director Narrowed to 4 Names,” *Press-Scimitar*, November 29, 1976.

## Chapter 7

### The Modern Zoo Is A Privatized Zoo: Wilson and MZS, 1976-2016

Seven months passed between the May 1976 resignation of Joel Wallach and the selection of Charles G. Wilson out of a pool of 40 candidates for the top job at the Memphis Zoo. The Park Commission, noting that “the last three directors have been animal oriented,” was on the search for “more of a business manager and a PR (public relations) man than an animal man.” For the second time in its history, Memphis tapped the Little Rock Zoo for its new director. An Oklahoma native, Wilson had studied at Oklahoma State University, although his direction initially lacked focus. He told Memphis columnist James Cortese, “I began studies in art, then changed to forestry, switched over to zoology, then to speech and drama, and then I enlisted in the Army.” He served three years in Vietnam, Korea, and Germany as a U.S. Army sergeant. On his return, he returned to school and finished his undergraduate degree in zoology. He served as a graduate assistant under Dr. Bryan P. Glass, the Oklahoma State Museum director and well-respected mammologist. Glass pointed Wilson to the Oklahoma City Zoo, which supported his master’s research. Wilson began his career there part-time as a research assistant and was promoted first to record keeper and then to curator. When he left Oklahoma three years later, he remained three semester hours short of completing the Master of Science degree, but he had gained valuable experience as the author of “a number of articles for scientific and zoological publications.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Clark Porteous, “Arkansan Selected as Director of Zoo,” *Press-Scimitar*, December 2, 1976; Shirley Downing, “New Director Terms Zoo One Of The Nation’s Best,” *Commercial Appeal*, December 3, 1976.

In April 1975, Wilson became the director of the Little Rock Zoo. He was only in charge there for a little over a year and a half when the offer came from Memphis. Wilson seized the opportunity to advance from the smaller zoo which “needed a lot of work” to one that was larger and better funded. His record of employee interactions in Little Rock was “very good,” various printed materials the search committee had received suggested he was “promotion minded,” and other inquiries suggested he was both “good with animals and with business matters.” He seemed the perfect man to run the Memphis Zoo. The 28-year-old Wilson was enthusiastic about his new charge, calling the zoo one of the ten best in the world and its staff “one of the finest anywhere.”<sup>2</sup>

One of Wilson’s first tasks would be to address waning admissions. The recent closing of Overton Park to vehicular traffic on weekends as part of its “People’s Day” program also limited access to the zoo by car. Potential visitors mistakenly assumed that congestion of the one main road into the park that allowed access to the zoo indicated that the zoo itself was overcrowded. Another major cause of the decline, it was thought, was the opening of the Libertyland Amusement Park at the fairgrounds on the nation’s bicentennial, July 4, 1976. This is where public relations would prove important. While the newspapers in the past twenty years or more had done a good job of telling readers about the zoo, Wilson intended to expand that to educate the public about the purpose of zoos. For Wilson, the pillars of the zoo were conservation, research, education and recreation. Wilson believed professionalism in zoos carried a heavy responsibility, from which he laid out the Memphis Zoo’s first detailed philosophy of zoo keeping:

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<sup>2</sup> Clark Porteous, “Arkansan Selected as Director of Zoo,” *Press-Scimitar*, December 2, 1976; Shirley Downing, “New Director Terms Zoo One Of The Nation’s Best,” *Commercial Appeal*, December 3, 1976.

I believe a zoo is a cultural institution responsible for the preservation of our wildlife heritage for future generations. . . . In this world of increasing urbanization, many species are vanishing, and we owe it to our children and grandchildren to preserve instead of destroying. In order to conserve you have to do...[r]esearch. What does it take to get animals to breed? And to eat and live? And research leads to...[e]ducation. This is a natural consequence of research. Through conservation, research and education, you accomplish the fourth goal:...Recreation. I pronounce this 're-creation,' the re-creation of the inner spirit of appreciation for the world around us."<sup>3</sup>

Wilson also sought to increase year-round attendance, which tended to slump in the winter. To draw visitors, admission fees were reduced between November 1, 1978 and the start of the spring 1979 season. Admissions for visitors over the age of 12 were reduced by half from the usual one dollar. Children 12 and under gained admission for 20 cents rather than the customary 35 cents. Wilson made a point of reminding the public that "Winter is a perfect time to visit the zoo" as crowds were practically nonexistent. Furthermore, "while the temperature may drop, the buildings are heated for the animals as well as for the comfort of the public." He hoped to boost not just annual attendance, but perhaps more importantly, attendance revenues. The free hour of admission proved popular with the public, but for the zoo, it was turning out to be too much of a good thing.<sup>4</sup>

In 1974, when the free hour policy had begun, 20,437 people attended during the free hour. Ten years later that number had more than tripled to 68,949, constituting "12½ per cent of annual attendance." Tourists were abusing the zoo's free hour, he said, which was "originally intended for needy Memphians." In addition, collecting admission fees in

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<sup>3</sup> Clark Porteous, "Arkansan Selected as Director of Zoo," *Press-Scimitar*, December 2, 1976; Shirley Downing, "New Director Terms Zoo One Of The Nation's Best," *Commercial Appeal*, December 3, 1976; James Cortese, "Director Charles Wilson Is A Most Reasonable Man," *Commercial Appeal*, January 2, 1977; "Zoo Revenues Drop – Competition Cited," *Commercial Appeal*, September 25, 1976.

<sup>4</sup> "Zoo Prices Cut for Winter," *Press-Scimitar*, August 15, 1978.

the few minutes after the free hour proved increasingly problematic. In 1985, Wilson proposed shifting the hour from 9:00 Saturday morning to 4:00 Saturday afternoon. Since 1979, admissions charges had increased to \$2.25 for adults and a dollar for children. Wilson estimated the free hour revenue loss at “about \$100,000” and noted that “nonpaying visitors also use up precious parking space.” The Commission waited until the zoo hours shifted for the summer in April to institute a policy change. The new free period began at 3:30 p.m., an hour and a half before the last admission, and guests were allowed to remain in the zoo until closing at 6 p.m. During the winter season, free admissions would “begin at 3 p.m. and last until the 4:30 p.m. closing time.” Paying visitors, it was hoped, would come earlier and begin to depart by the time the free admission period started, which in turn should relieve parking congestion in the late afternoon.<sup>5</sup>

Wilson also believed it was high time for the zoo to have an official name that was widely and immediately recognizable. A sign at the public entrance read “Memphis Zoological Gardens.” Most newspaper articles and most people, mostly out of habit and convenience, tended to call the institution “Overton Park Zoo.” Wilson wanted to bring the zoo up to par with a broader zoo-naming (and re-naming) trend that suggested grandeur and broad support rather than provincialism. He noted that many well-known zoos had once borne different, more obscure names. The St. Louis Zoo had been the Forest Park Zoo, and the Balboa Park Zoo became much better known as the San Diego

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<sup>5</sup> Wayne Risher, “‘Abuse’ of zoo free hour costly,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 13, 1985; James Chisum, “Free hour moves to later in day for visit to zoo,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 21, 1985.

Zoo, for example. Every convention, he contended, brought the question, “Where is the Overton Park Zoo?” and Wilson was determined to put the Memphis Zoo on the map.<sup>6</sup>

Collaborating with his curatorial staff in planning the future of the zoo was important to Wilson, which surely was reassuring after the inimical conditions that had forced Wallach’s resignation. A potential loss of federal licensing, though, threatened that future. Wallach had brought the zoo up to the minimum standards required under the 1971 Animal Welfare Act by 1973, when the zoo first obtained federal licensing. But now that license was in jeopardy. The city had been repeatedly warned that the staff was insufficient, and repeatedly the city had delayed funding new personnel. The Park Commission was funded by the City Council, and the Commission budget had no room for the six new keepers Wilson was calling for. Wilson argued in response that “Memphis could have a zoo without a license, but people couldn’t visit it.” With revenues in 1976 topping \$866,000, losing the license and closing the zoo to the public was not an option. Parks Director Nat Baxter told the city budget committee he “would try to work out some solution” that would allow the hire of the necessary personnel. One strategy was Wilson’s own: he promoted three keepers from within to become the zoo’s first assistant curators. Martin Mahoney, Dan MacDonald, and Walter Douglas would assist the curators on a daily basis and fill in for them on their days off. After all, Wilson pointed out, the zoo “is a seven-day-a-week operation, involving animal care and veterinarian treatment and diets.” Previously, one curator’s day off meant a double workload for another curator.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> James Cortese, “Your Zoo – Who Knows The Official Name?”, *Commercial Appeal*, April 17, 1977.

<sup>7</sup> Orville Hancock, “6 More Zookeepers Required,” *Press-Scimitar*, May 12, 1977; “Zoo’s Director Touts Its Value,” *Press-Scimitar*, May 31, 1977; James Cortese, “Week’s Work: Gain Some, Lose Some, Earn An ‘A’,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 12, 1978.

Obtaining more staff might ameliorate some issues, but other staffing problems soon arose. In 1978, allegations levied by Reverend James E. Smith, head of the Local 1733 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), put Wilson's hiring and internal promotion choices under scrutiny. The Local 1733 represented a number of the zoo employees. Smith accused Wilson of "nepotism, favoritism and racial discrimination" in hiring and promotion practices. Furthermore, Smith argued, the zoo had institutionalized a "systematic plan and scheme to keep present (black) employees from moving up to zoo keepers, etc." Rather than taking his accusations to Wilson or even the Park Commission, though, Smith shared his sentiments with the newspapers and announced his intention to ask Mayor Wyeth Chandler to launch an investigation. Superintendent of Special Services for the Park Commission, Robert Fouche, admitted such allegations may have been true in the past. But he insisted that this was not the case with the Wilson administration. Wilson told reporters that the zoo currently employed 29 black and 52 white employees. Seventeen black workers were "crewmen," while three of the 36 keepers were black. The jobs of the other nine were not named. But as with AFSCME's similar allegations in the past, Wilson expected that any resulting investigation would prove groundless and, indeed, little became of Smith's action.<sup>8</sup>

Other age-old controversies and difficulties continued to plague the zoo in Wilson's early years. As late as 1980, the debate over moving the zoo out of Overton Park continued. County Commissioner Minerva Johnican favored moving the zoo downtown to the then-undeveloped Mud Island, rather than east to Shelby Farms. Six

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<sup>8</sup> "Discrimination Complaint Directed At Zoo Officials," *Commercial Appeal*, October 16, 1978.

years had passed since architect Rudolph Jones, Jr. had drawn plans for a proposed zoo at Mud Island, which Johnican supported as a means to “have downtown alive and popping” rather than in decline. Wilson opposed the idea on the basis that Mud Island was flat and, at 744 acres, too small for the state-sponsored “Megazoo” under consideration for placement in Memphis, Nashville, Chattanooga or Knoxville. Even though the western portion of the state was overdue for a major state project, Wilson wasn’t so sure the zoo needed to be moved at all, even if the interstate was extended through Overton Park. He pointed out that although “an interstate runs alongside the Little Rock zoo,” careful landscaping shielded it from the public so well that “95 per cent of zoo visitors don’t realize it is there.”<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, Wilson did favor the idea of an “open country concept,” “drive-through wild animal farm-zoo in the Penal Farm area.” A feasibility study for the Megazoo suggested that repaying a \$30 million bond issue for its construction there would require either a prohibitive \$4 admission fee or “substantial private contributions.” An anonymous offer of five million dollars, believed to have come from Abe Plough, was extended to facilitate situating the proposed state zoo in Memphis at Shelby Farms. Competition was expected to “turn into a brawl in the coming legislature.” Each of the rival cities had its advantages. Memphis had the largest population, but Nashville had the most tourists, while tourists in East Tennessee were freer spenders. But certain legislators were loath to sponsor a zoo that was not self-supporting, despite Assistant Conservation

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<sup>9</sup> “News of Bygone Days – 50 Years Ago – May 2, 1924,” *Commercial Appeal*, May 2, 1974; Otis L. Sanford, “Johnican Will Push For Mud Island Zoo,” *Commercial Appeal*, December 25, 1979; Shirley Downing, “New Director Terms Zoo One Of The Nation’s Best,” *Commercial Appeal*, December 3, 1976; “Zoo Perspectives,” *Commercial Appeal*, January 6, 1980.



Commissioner Kent Russ' pointed observation, "No zoo in the country except the San Diego Zoo makes money." Governor Lamar Alexander insisted the question was moot, as the state had no money for such a project anyway. Although Memphis Mayor Wyeth Chandler supported building a state zoo at Shelby Farms, even after Johnican withdrew her Mud Island proposal she refused to support such a use of Shelby Farms. By 1985, the issue was completely dead and Mayor Dick Hackett declared that the zoo would remain in Overton Park.<sup>10</sup>

Hackett had recently endorsed the Commission's five-year capital improvement plan for the zoo, which was projected to cost \$1.4 million. The City of Memphis had entered into a \$50,000 contract with Ace Torre of Design Consortium to create the master plan. Torre's design incorporated more parkland into the plan for both parking and exhibits, expanding the zoo from 36 acres to 60. Memphis Zoological Society (MZS) member Jim Jalenak insisted that the expansion would "absolutely make better use of the land than we have now. These 24 acres shouldn't be a genuine environmental question." Certain members of the community heartily disagreed. "Arguments and insults erupted frequently during the first meeting" of the zoo, the Park Commission, and neighborhood groups. One neighborhood group, the Evergreen Historic District Association (EHDA), was comprised of homeowners and residents whose homes flanked the zoo and Overton Park on the west. This neighborhood had been hardest hit by the interstate debacle, when hundreds of its historic homes were razed while the plan was still under discussion,

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<sup>10</sup> "Zoo's Director Touts Its Value," *Press-Scimitar*, May 31, 1977; James W. Brosnan, "Donelson Receives Study On Megazoo," *Commercial Appeal*, December 15, 1979; "Governor's Report Questions Megazoo Feasibility," *Press-Scimitar*, March 1, 1980; Jim Balentine and Walter Leavy, "Mud Island Is Withdrawn As Possible Megazoo Site," *Press-Scimitar*, February 12, 1980; Wayne Risher, "'Abuse' of zoo free hour costly," *Commercial Appeal*, March 13, 1985.

leaving a wide, bare swath that became known to many as “the scar.” Greg Belz, an EHDA member, accused the planners of being willing to sacrifice Overton Park in favor of the zoo—a claim that would be oft-repeated by others in the coming decades.<sup>11</sup>

Belz suggested that a master plan was needed for the entire park, not just for the zoo. He advocated for an impact study that included the zoo, the park, and a proposed expansion of the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art. Belz insisted his thinking was long-term, suggesting that he believed the zoo’s was not. MZS member Nick Vergos, son of the owner of the world-famous Charles Vergos’ Rendezvous restaurant and vocal advocate for downtown expansion, tried to be reassuring. “We don’t want to be a threat to you, your neighborhood or anyone else,” he said. “We want to do something we can be proud of.” To Vergos, the point of the master plan was to provide a concrete bargaining tool when MZS began to seek corporate sponsorships. But even the Park Commission was not entirely convinced the Torre plan was in the best interest of the zoo and the park. Executive director of the Commission Allie Prescott called for careful analysis of the potential impact of the proposed expansion. “We don’t want the park to be the front door of the zoo,” Prescott said. This conflict would not be quickly or easily resolved, and it set the stage for future tensions between the zoo, park advocates, and neighbors that would continue well into the next century.<sup>12</sup>

The *Commercial Appeal* printed a full-color copy of Torre’s plan in its April 9, 1986 edition. A new entry plaza and court, the open-air Cat Country exhibit, and

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<sup>11</sup> John Beifuss, “Plan for zoo envisions \$30 million expansion,” *Commercial Appeal*, December 6, 1985.

<sup>12</sup> Wayne Risher, “‘Abuse’ of zoo free hour costly,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 13, 1985; John Beifuss, “Plan for zoo envisions \$30 million expansion,” *Commercial Appeal*, December 6, 1985; James Chisum, “Zoo growth called costly but flexible,” *Commercial Appeal*, December 7, 1985.

proposed African Savannah and Rivers of the World exhibits were each projected to cost above \$3 million. A new primate exhibit, aquarium renovations, and proposed exhibits “North America New World” and “The Forest” were each estimated to cost \$2.2 million. Converting the Carnivora Building into the Cat House Restaurant, creating a new Children’s Village, habitats for waterfowl and bears, geography-specific Asian and South American exhibits, a new Maintenance Complex, and planned education expenditures each ranged from \$1.1 to \$1.9 million. Also planned were \$880,000 worth of upgrades to the Central Barn, an improved tropical bird exhibit at a cost of roughly three quarters of a million dollars, and a quarter-million-dollar reptile house. The expanded acreage would incorporate the then-drained Rainbow Lake and greatly expand the available parking.<sup>13</sup>

As with so many earlier ideas for improvements, these plans were put on hold by forces outside the zoo’s or the Commission’s control. The 103 acres of parkland and adjoining neighborhoods the State of Tennessee had acquired in the 1960s and 1970s to extend the interstate were still in limbo. Part of that parkland fell within the proposed zoo expansion boundaries. In 1969, the State had paid \$2.2 million for the parkland with earmarked federal “interstate funds.” Since federal dollars had secured the purchase, the federal government had to approve the state’s release of the tract to the City of Memphis. Unnamed “State and city officials” reportedly wanted the area “to be used by the zoo,” but under federal guidelines, no release of the land could occur without an environmental impact study. The Memphis firm Allen and Hoshall Engineers, Architects & Consultants Inc. conducted the study. A follow-up report in late November of 1986 gave Wilson much to be thankful for as the Thanksgiving holiday approached. Learning that the land

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<sup>13</sup> “The Zoo,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 9, 1986.

should be released within a week, he said, was “the best news I’ve heard all week.” “Finally,” he continued, the zoo would “be able to make some progress.” He particularly looked forward to the completion of the long-anticipated Cat Country exhibit, which he believed would “set a new standard for cat exhibitry at zoos everywhere.” Jimmy Ogle, then Deputy Director of the Park Commission, called parking and a new cat facility the zoo’s most pressing needs.<sup>14</sup>

This new exhibit and the rest of the master plan would be subsidized primarily through the dedicated fundraising efforts of the MZS. Zoological societies had been established, declined, and revived throughout the years to support the zoo’s growth and development, but the 1910, 1923, and 1951 organizations had all eventually tapered off or dissolved. The support arm of the zoo was reinvigorated in 1981 and grew quickly, from 200 members to 700 in its first three years. By 1984, the group appealed to the Park Commission for a greater “voice in decisions affecting the zoo.” Specifically, MZS wanted “exclusive control” over special fundraising events. An upcoming American Cancer Society-sponsored Zoo Day became the focal point of the debate. At previous such events, the city received a quarter of the proceeds and the balance went to the American Cancer Society. MZS argued that Zoo Day patrons believed their ticket purchases benefited the zoo in some way, while those aware of the reality “complained because no money is funneled back into the zoo.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> John Beifuss, “City to get land back from I-40 – Transfer boosts zoo expansion,” *Commercial Appeal*, November 25, 1986; John Beifuss, “Growing ambition still penned in by old I-40 land,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 4, 1986; Wayne Risher, “‘Abuse’ of zoo free hour costly,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 13, 1985.

<sup>15</sup> Deborah M. Clubb, “Zoo fans ask city to unlatch rules on funds,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 21, 1984; Wayne Risher, “Zoo group is resisted on clout bid,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 22, 1984.

Although MZS Vice President David Curley insisted this request was “never intended as a power-grabbing move,” Commission Chairman John Maxwell disagreed. Maxwell was opposed to Commission delegation of such issues, but Commissioner John Elkington pointed out that special events decisions at the Pink Palace Museum were in fact delegated to the museum’s support group. The Pink Palace’s annual crafts fair, for example, operated under an agreement with the Commission in which the proceeds directly benefited the museum. Furthermore, a contract was under negotiation for similar arrangement with the Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium. Elkington understood that MZS was only seeking the same arrangement for the zoo. The Commission finally agreed to the MZS proposal, “as long as the commission has the final say.”<sup>16</sup>

The following year, twenty civic-minded individuals were appointed to the board of a new organization, Memphis Zoo Incorporated (MZI). William F. Kirsch Jr., partner in the legal firm Heiskell, Donelson, Bearman, Adams, Williams & Kirsch, was named president. The mission of the organization was to “oversee and carry out any major fund-raising drives for the zoo.” This group intended to raise the funds as yet unpledged to build Torre’s design. The City had committed \$1.4 million, but another \$3.5 million remained to be secured before the Cat Country exhibit could commence. Some of these funds, MZI hoped, could be found through public sources at the county or state levels, but most was expected to come through private donations. Seven members of the group began to meet regularly to discuss strategies; they became known as “the Breakfast

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<sup>16</sup> Deborah M. Clubb, “Zoo fans ask city to unlatch rules on funds,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 21, 1984; Wayne Risher, “Zoo group is resisted on clout bid,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 22, 1984.

Club.” Two of the Breakfast Club, Scott Ledbetter and Roger Knox, would provide top management in the coming years following the death of MZI president Kirsch in 1989.<sup>17</sup>

In January of that year, Roger Knox was hired as MZI president. Knox, former Chairman and CEO of Goldsmith’s, also had extensive corporate retail experience with Fred’s Inc., Hancock Fabrics Inc., and Foley’s Department Stores. Scott Ledbetter of LEDIC Management Group would serve the next four years as the board chairman. Knox tapped Jim Prentiss to run a capital fundraising campaign. Prentiss was the CEO of Shoney’s South before trading that post for the chair of the United Way campaign. He “had never been to the zoo and had no interest in it,” despite having lived in Memphis since 1970. Ledbetter and board member Frank Norfleet kept the pressure on Prentiss, though, and after a month of consideration he agreed to participate if Memphis Light Gas and Water CEO Larry Papasan would share the duties. By June, a plan was in place. Blaming the I-40 debate for two decades of falling behind other American zoos, MZI pledged to raise three million dollars to get the first five years of improvements moving in such a way that the zoo could host “a grand opening every year.” MZI far exceeded expectations. Rather than three million dollars over five years, the group raised five million dollars in just six months. With such rapid success, MZI raised their goal to \$8 million. The group also negotiated a two-to-one match with the city, planned to amount to \$22 million over the next five years.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Goodwin Moore, PPLC, “Firm History – William F. Kirsch,” [goodwinmoore.com/historyb.htm](http://goodwinmoore.com/historyb.htm) (accessed February 13, 2016); James Chisum, “Zoo growth called costly but flexible,” *Commercial Appeal*, December 7, 1985.

<sup>18</sup> Bloomberg Business, “Executive Profile: Roger T. Knox,” [www.bloomberg.com/research/stocks/private/person.asp?personId=592628&privcapId=6730851](http://www.bloomberg.com/research/stocks/private/person.asp?personId=592628&privcapId=6730851) (accessed February 10, 2016); Bloomberg Business, “Executive Profile: Scott P. Ledbetter, Jr.,” [www.bloomberg.com/research/stocks/private/person.asp?personId=83287532&privcapId=4486028](http://www.bloomberg.com/research/stocks/private/person.asp?personId=83287532&privcapId=4486028) (accessed February 10, 2016); Debbie Gilbert, “A Class Menagerie – How the Memphis Zoo rose from

Part of this success stemmed from a planned broad community outreach plan that emulated programs in New Orleans and resonated with city leaders. The Audubon Zoo had given close attention to bringing “poor inner-city residents and church and school groups to the zoo” by targeted media campaigns and events specifically aimed at African Americans, who were in a majority in the city’s poorest sectors. As the most poverty-stricken major city in the nation at the time, Memphis city leaders liked the idea of putting similar strategies to work at the Memphis Zoo. “One of the wonderful things about the zoo,” Knox said, “is that it crosses all economic, racial, social and age barriers.” It also offered unique educational experiences, and like the Audubon Zoo, the new Memphis Zoo would stress education. But unlike in New Orleans, these would not forsake the favorite recreation and entertainment elements that still resonated best with some visitors; despite being urged to end both, the Memphis zoo planned to keep its rides for children and snacks for animals that encouraged interaction. Moreover, interactive “touch-screen computers and animal artifacts children can touch and hold” would be highlights of the new, immersive exhibits. In 1971, a declining New Orleans zoo had prompted officials to study the Memphis Zoo for improvement ideas; by 1990, Memphis was taking note not only of the turnabout in the Audubon Zoo, but also of the power of the New Orleans Zoological Society.<sup>19</sup>

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mediocrity to become one of the nation’s best,” *Memphis Flyer*, February 26-March 4, 1998; Paula Wade, “Bold zoo plans mean reprieve for cat inmates – Access to land will end cell era,” *Commercial Appeal*, June 12, 1989; Dave Hirschmann, “Triumphant project at New Orleans zoo sets standard here,” *Commercial Appeal*, May 27, 1990.

<sup>19</sup> Dave Hirschmann, “Triumphant project at New Orleans zoo sets standard here,” *Commercial Appeal*, May 27, 1990; Cornelia Carrier, “Zoo Scene South – Old and New Are Mixed by Overton in Memphis - \$5-Million Building Plan Now Underway,” New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, November 25, 1971.

Since at least the 1950s, the point had been made time and again that the best zoos in the country were those supported by a strong and active zoological society. The New Orleans Zoological Society, by 1990, was second in size only to the society that supported the San Diego Zoo. In Memphis, the two support arms (MZI and MZS) were determined to join those organizations on the short list of top zoo supporters. When a deal to finance a Federal Express maintenance facility fell through, Prentiss and Knox went after the allotted money. In June of 1990, Governor Ned McWherter agreed to budget a million dollars for each of the next five years, but MZI was not ready to relax due to “political vagaries” that may terminate the agreement. At the zoo, Wilson called it “Christmas in January” when Memphis Publishing Company, owner of *The Commercial Appeal*, pushed MZI past its \$8 million fundraising goal with a five-year, \$1 million pledge. Meeting this goal also meant another \$400,000 from a “challenge grant” offered by the Michigan-based Kresge Foundation. The successes of the major fundraising arm and the suggestion that a strong zoological society was crucial to further success soon led MZI and MZS to strike a bid for privatization.<sup>20</sup>

As children headed back to school for the start of the 1993-1994 academic year, MZS outlined its bid in response to a 1992 request from the city for a privatization proposal. More than 75 American zoos had already privatized, providing ample points for comparison and projection to justify the proposal. MZS proposed to control costs by streamlining the management and decision-making process, and to increase revenues by

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<sup>20</sup> Dave Hirschmann, “Triumphant project at New Orleans zoo sets standard here,” *Commercial Appeal*, May 27, 1990; Dave Hirschmann, “State may give zoo \$1 million a year – Informal OK extends to ’94,” *Commercial Appeal*, June 14, 1990; Dave Hirschmann, “Zoo’s Cat Country to get \$1 million from newspaper,” *Commercial Appeal*, January 9, 1992.



boosting gate receipts and memberships, through donations and special event fundraisers, and by reorganizing admissions policies. By raising admission rates gradually from \$5 to \$7 for adults, ending senior and school group discounts, and terminating the weekly free hours, MZS projected a savings of \$4.4 million. Adding “more effective marketing” campaigns, even with increased fees, was expected to boost annual attendance from 491,000 in 1993 “to 709,000 in 2000, compared with a projected 570,000 under city management.” As with the fundraising campaigns, MZS quickly exceeded this expectation as well. By the end of 1997, annual attendance averaged 700,000. Although still short of mid-century attendance records, the 1996 figure “exceeded 827,000 visitors—up from the 541,000 who visited in 1989.”<sup>21</sup>

Admissions fees had risen by 1992 to \$5 for adults and \$3 for children and senior citizens. In 1995, these rates went to \$6 for adults, \$5 for visitors age 60 or above, and \$4 for children ages two to twelve. School group rates remained at \$2 per person. The increases were deemed necessary to defray the expenses of “new workers and programs corresponding with expanded animal exhibitions.” Still, Knox justified the increased charge by comparing a day at the zoo to “the same price...as a first-run movie.” The new rates were in line with, and in some cases lower than, admissions fees for other zoos. In Atlanta and New Orleans, for instance, adults paid \$7.95 at the gate, and in Knoxville adults paid \$6.50. Atlanta’s seniors paid \$6.50 and children, \$5. In New Orleans, children and seniors all paid \$3.75. Knox said the rate for seniors in Memphis was reduced, but not to the child admission level because “officials believe that senior visitors should pay

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<sup>21</sup> Wayne Risher, “Private zoo may save \$4.4 million – Society outlines bid for management,” *Commercial Appeal*, August 19, 1993; Deborah M. Clubb, “Zoo quests for Northwest Passage – Fund drive to build homes that Pacific critters will like,” *Commercial Appeal*, December 22, 1997.

more than children.” The adult fees in Nashville and Louisville, Kentucky were only a half dollar lower than the new Memphis rate, while seniors could enter either zoo for \$3.50. In Nashville, this was also the children’s rate, but in Louisville children paid \$2.75 to enter. The improved, but much smaller Little Rock Zoo charged just \$3 for all adults and a dollar for children. The St. Louis Zoo was the only zoo to remain free to all. MZS expected the modest increase to raise between \$350,000 and \$400,000, allowing the hire of 20 new “zoo keepers, education specialists, commissary workers, [and] others—to keep pace with new facilities built since 1990.”<sup>22</sup>

While higher admissions fees might sit better with some than with others, the same could be said for less public points of the proposal. City officials and MZS disagreed initially over who should pay the zoo’s utility expenses, but that contest was expected to end in compromise. The city would provide a \$1.2 million annual operating subsidy as promised, but when that ended in 2000, a similar amount would continue to be paid by the city for zoo utilities. The City would still own the zoo and financially support the maintenance of the animals and the equipment, but MZS would set admissions charges and control special events and programs. A 90-day cancellation notice would apply to either party. Zoo employees would become MZS employees, but the Park Commission would still approve the choice of director and President-CEO of MZS. Herein lay the greatest point of contention for some. AFSCME opposed this plan on

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<sup>22</sup> Wayne Risher, “As displays go up, so does zoo fee: by \$1,” *Commercial Appeal*, January 4, 1995; Wayne Risher, “Private zoo may save \$4.4 million – Society outlines bid for management,” *Commercial Appeal*, August 19, 1993.

behalf of “about 50 of the zoo’s 66 employees” who were represented by the union. The employees’ individual positions on the matter are unknown.<sup>23</sup>

When the final contract between the city and MZS was signed by all parties in 1994, the question of employees was resolved. The zoo then employed, and MZS was expected to continue to employ, a total of 38 zoo keepers, four curators and four assistant curators, five “crewperson[s],” three truck drivers, three cashier-tellers, three accounting and general bookkeeping clerks, two custodians, and two medical technicians who supported the zoo’s sole staff veterinarian. Other authorized, budgeted positions included foremen of parks, grounds, and horticulture; a manager of animal services; a business supervisor; one secretary; a crew chief; one equipment operator and one special equipment operator; and one sweeper operator. Vacancies at the time of the signing were for one zoo keeper, a grounds foreman, an equipment operator, and an assistant curator. All were authorized to be filled and remained on the budget, and any changes required approval of both the Park Commission and MZS. All budgeted employees as of December 31, 1994 remained City employees, but MZS retained “sole authority to employ or terminate any employee at the Zoo and determine the terms and conditions of such employment.” New employees would not be city employees, but would be employed directly by MZS. The contract specified MZS compliance with equal opportunity employment practices then in effect: “race, sex, age, color, religion, national origin, or disabilities.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Wayne Risher, “Private zoo may save \$4.4 million – Society outlines bid for management,” *Commercial Appeal*, August 19, 1993.

<sup>24</sup> City of Memphis, *Contract #N10713*, Memphis Zoological Society Zoo Management Agreement (December 30, 1994), 8-9, 22, [www.overtontoparkforever.org](http://www.overtontoparkforever.org) (accessed January 26, 2016).

The day after the contract was signed, a merged MZI and MZS launched the era of private management of the zoo under the mission statement, “One zoo, one team, many talents. Together we are ‘Building One of the World’s Great Zoos’.” Even before privatization MZS had made possible several improvements to this end. Between 1990 and 1995, a new front gate entrance, front parking and plaza, tram, Cat House Café, and Discovery Center greeted visitors before they in turn greeted the animals in their new homes. The “Avenue of the Animals” entry plaza and redesigned gate visually connect Memphis, Tennessee with its ancient Egyptian sister city. Completed in 1990, the imposing façade is exemplary of what has been called “Memphite Egyptomania.” An “avenue of animals (rather than sphinxes)” leads visitors to hieroglyph-laden, Gate of Pylon-styled entranceways specified for visitors’ use or for members’ use. Although some of the hieroglyphs are simply pictures of animals, local Egyptologists helped to insure that “the gateway’s inscriptions do read, possibly with the first phonetic renderings in hieroglyphs of words like ‘kangaroo’ and ‘shark’.” Inside the gate, a courtyard plaza vaguely reminiscent of the Hypostyle Hall at the Karnak Temple Complex in Luxor funnels visitors past a colonnade sheltering entrances to the administration building and restrooms on the west, and to the gift shop and discovery center on the east. Just beyond the eastern colonnade, the 1909 elephant house became the volunteer office, Kay Fisher Memorial Library and archives, and the Education Building.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Debbie Gilbert, “A Class Menagerie – How the Memphis Zoo Rose From Mediocrity To Become One Of The Nation’s Best,” *Memphis Flyer*, February 26-March 4, 1998; Jean-Marcel Humbert and Clifford Price, eds., *Imhotep Today: Egyptianizing Architecture* (London: Institute of Archaeology, University College London, 2003), 152-153.

In 1992, a meerkat exhibit and short-term robotic dinosaur exhibit, *Dinosaurs Alive!*, maintained public interest while construction continued on the next step of the master plan, the open-air big cat exhibit. The Commercial Appeal Cat Country exhibit opened in 1993. The first exhibit completed and the first exhibit stop inside the gates, Cat Country finally relieved the once “forlorn” big cats of their cramped “kitty-jail” in the old Carnivora Building. The Primate Canyon and Animals of the Night exhibits emerged simultaneously in 1995, after mammal curator Chuck Brady realized that “many of the mammals were too small” for the new primate exhibit. Brady “seized the opportunity to create a nocturnal exhibit” that finally brought to life the vision Robert Mattlin had first expressed more two decades earlier. When the Canyon opened, the gorillas, orangutans, siamang gibbons, and seven other primate varieties moved into the new outdoor exhibit, and the former ape house Mattlin had opened decades earlier was darkened and redesigned to incorporate a bat flying cage, naked mole rat tunnels, and other nocturnal animal displays.<sup>26</sup>

“Branding” became an important part of the new zoo, and no detail was overlooked. For example, the redesigned Elephant’s Trunk Zoo Shop replaced the existing Elephant’s Trunk Gift Shop. Opened in September 1993 with a new look and a more carefully crafted name, the renovated space had “an upscale specialty store” feel and a name that reflected its intended broader appeal. The new shop name was meant “to reflect the fact that it is more than a souvenir shop for zoo visitors.” Instead, the store was “a destination shop for animal lovers.” Nearly three times bigger than its precursor and

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<sup>26</sup> Debbie Gilbert, “A Class Menagerie”; Paula Wade, “Bold Zoo Plans Mean Reprieve For Cat Inmates – Access To Land Will End Cell Era,” *Commercial Appeal*, June 12, 1989; Paulene Keller, “Discovery 901: Animals of the Night,” *Memphis Downtowner*, April 2011, 9-11.

some 2,100 square feet bigger than the original shop started by ZAP in the late 1970s, the new design was realized through the combined retail experience of Conne Bellet, Barry Hartzog, Larry Sutton, and MZS President and CEO Roger Knox. Bellet, Hartzog, and Sutton had been on the staff of Memphis-based Goldsmith's Department Stores under Knox's direction until the company was bought out in 1988. Although Hartzog and Sutton took jobs elsewhere after the buyout, Bellet became MZS retail manager.<sup>27</sup>

The planned Children's Village, completed in 1995, was "the last project in the [then] current master plan." Renamed Once Upon a Farm when it opened—another move, like the gift shop, to carefully avoid limiting appeal—the new exhibit replaced former director Joel Wallach's "Contact Area." Careful attention to every detail ensured as immersive an exhibit as possible. Connie Wadlington Douglass became the zoo's first female "curator" when she was hired in 1973, although contrary to newspaper reports, she was not the zoo's first female keeper. Douglass had shifted from curating animals to curating educational experiences for the visitors. She stressed that the plan was to interest not only young visitors, but also older ones who might find more interest in a "generic family farm" than in a "Children's Village." A "large, barnlike" interpretive center offered museum-type displays of old-fashioned farming implements and methods as well as demonstrations and classes to immerse visitors in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century farm experience. Choosing dwarf varieties of animals encouraged children to interact with the goats, chickens, potbelly pigs, sheep, cattle, zebu, and horses. All of the species displayed were new to the Memphis Zoo except the zebu. A train ride "originating in the zoo's

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<sup>27</sup> Wayne Risher, "Gift shop promises big things for zoo," *Commercial Appeal*, September 9, 1993.

minimidway” was designed to give a view of the farm from above without creating congestion in the exhibit from entry and exit lines for the ride.<sup>28</sup>

With the 1986 plan completed, attention turned to Phase II. In 1996, a picnic pavilion and new parking lot entrance were completed, followed by a commissary and maintenance complex the next year. A butterfly exhibit in 1997—replete with its own specialty “Cocoon Shop” butterfly-themed gift shop—drew thousands of additional visitors. New exhibits would focus on creating “the very optimal standards for the best possible living conditions” for geographically grouped animals. Jim and Carol Prentiss spearheaded the fundraising campaign for the planned Northwest Passage exhibit, which would keep arctic animals cool through humid Memphis summers “by pumping cold water from surrounding pools into stone walls” surrounding the exhibit. Water within the exhibit was channeled through “high-tech water cleaning equipment” that would “electronically scrub or ‘polish’ the water,” providing a clear view for visitors and a chemical-free environment for the animals. Charles Wilson, still director but far less present in the public discussion than Knox, was pleased with the incorporation of ethnographic elements in the new, “zoogeographic” groupings of exhibits. Chuck Brady, then curator of mammals, expressed the zoo’s hope that these new exhibits “will last as long as the old ones did—65 or 70 years,” particularly considering the enormity of the investment to build them.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Debbie Gilbert, “A Class Menagerie”; James Cortese, “Your Zoo – Romance Lends Hand To Veterinarian’s Job,” *Commercial Appeal*, June 5, 1977; Wayne Risher, “Farm Exhibit Moooving In At The Zoo,” *Commercial Appeal*, May 11, 1995.

<sup>29</sup> Debbie Gilbert, “A Class Menagerie”; Deborah M. Clubb, “Zoo quests for Northwest Passage – Fund drive to build homes that Pacific critters will like,” *Commercial Appeal*, December 22, 1997; Christine Arpe Gang, “Butterflies: Memphis Zoo’s Aflutter With Hundreds And Hundreds,” *Commercial*

The Park Commission's vision was not quite as long as Brady's, though. In 1988, the Commission had drafted the master plan for the entire Overton Park complex that Belz and the EHDA had called for. As it pertained to the zoo, the Overton Park master plan called for reducing park usage along the western, residential edge of the park closest to the zoo entrance by restricting traffic from the west through a "zoo-only" entrance and by improving pedestrian access from the south. An existing playground would be moved to the eastern edge of the Greensward to make way for expansion of the zoo parking lot from 435 to 900 spaces. The "only forest intrusions" by the zoo at that time had been the addition in the 1970s of the "east zoo parking and picnic area." But as the zoo's master plan is revised approximately every decade, a similarly revised master plan for Overton Park drafted in 1997 was expected to "set the future of this system for the next 40 to 50 years." Although the team of park planners intended that their efforts would "enhance the relation of zoo and park," it is likely that neither the zoo nor the Park Commission could foresee the heated struggle to come over potential expansions into forested areas. Certainly neither foresaw the surprising dismantling of the Park Commission just a year after the zoo completed its first phase of construction.<sup>30</sup>

But before that unexpected turn of events transpired, other changes in the zoo stirred debate over the direction MZS was taking. Effective July 1, 1999, the zoo raised all admissions prices by fifty cents, bringing an adult admission to nearly ten dollars. Park Commission Chairman John Malmo feared that higher fees were going to negatively

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*Appeal*, May 17, 1997; Wayne Risher, "Zoo benefactors just helping out," *Commercial Appeal*, September 30, 1993.

<sup>30</sup> MPC Minute Book 29, 180-182; Ritchie Smith Associates, *Overton Park Master Plan: A 20 Year Program of Park Improvements and Renewal*, prepared for the City of Memphis and Memphis Park Commission, April 1988, 12-14, 28, 32, 38.



impact attendance. Malmo claimed that admissions had already dropped ten to fifteen percent over the previous ten or twelve years, but Knox disagreed, arguing that “there was actually a 30% increase in attendance since 1975.” Not only did new exhibits boost attendance, he said, but landscaping and beautification projects throughout the zoo proved beneficial to creating an atmosphere that drew visitors, echoing Wallach’s vision as early as 1973. Knox had long touted the zoo’s positive economic impact on the city. Although Torre’s New Orleans based Design Consortium planned the improvements, Memphis companies completed the installations, boosting the local economy and providing jobs. Moreover, increased revenues made possible other programs crucial to the MZS mission, which was not simply to build new habitats for the zoo collections.<sup>31</sup>

Zoo administrators were “particularly excited” about two new initiatives. Animal enrichment activities provided “intelligent, sociable animals with lots of toys and stimulating activities” in an effort to ward off the neurotic stereotypies historically displayed by caged animals. The ever-growing education program had launched “keeper chats,” a regularly scheduled series of informal “lecture-demonstrations” designed to interest the public and provide more in-depth educational opportunities. Wilson believed the program “personalizes the experience” for visitors, who at times crave contact with keepers. Creating a so-called “zone of contact,” zoo management specialists believe, immerses animals, their keepers, and visitors in a three-way communication and behavioral interaction that enhances the experience for all.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> MPC Minute Book 29, 307-308; Christine Arpe Gang, “Zoo In Bloom: Don’t Fauna All Over The Beasts—There’s Flora, Too,” *Commercial Appeal*, October 8, 1995.

<sup>32</sup> Debbie Gilbert, “A Class Menagerie”; Geoff Hosey, Vicky Melfi, and Sheila Pankhurst, *Zoo Animals: Behaviour, Management, and Welfare*, 461.

Not all of the programs at the turn of the century were new, but were at least equally important to the zoo's mission. The Memphis Zoo had been known for its prolific hippos as early as 1915, and had been the first zoo (in America in some cases, and globally in others) to breed various animals in captivity. Among these were Laotian and Vietnamese Duoc Langur monkeys and lowland gorillas. Since the 1970s, the National Zoological Association had spearheaded efforts to regulate captive breeding practices to ensure genetic diversity as well as species survival. In 1977, Wilson received on behalf of the zoo a "Significant Achievement Award" from the Association of American Zoological Parks and Aquariums for "Captive Propagation of West African Dwarf Crocodile[s]"—a global first. With eight births in 1976 and 13 more in 1977, Wilson said the notable deliveries likely made the Memphis Zoo "the West African dwarf crocodile capital of the world." In 1979, a Federal Express airliner delivered a set of celebrity twins to the Memphis Zoo: orangutan siblings Locke and Lisa, who had appeared several times on the Johnny Carson show. Originally appearing because they were rare twins in a species that normally has only single births, Carson liked the little twins and had them on the set several more times. The 17-month-old twins and Sarah, a 7-month-old female, joined 2-year-old Woody as the Memphis Zoo's youngest orangutans. Woody was born to Sally, Memphis' oldest orangutan and only female, and Junior, on breeding loan from the Tulsa Zoo.<sup>33</sup>

Woody, the third captive-born orangutan in Memphis, was rejected immediately at birth by Junior and soon after by Sally. Junior "became very upset and hostile toward

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<sup>33</sup> Phone interview with Connie Wadlington Douglass by author, January 28, 2016; James Cortese, "Breeding Of Crocodiles Brings National Award," *Commercial Appeal*, October 2, 1977; Orville Hancock, "2 Jet-Set Orangutans Visiting Memphis Zoo Are TV 'Stars'," *Press-Scimitar*, February 22, 1979.

the baby,” and bit him on the nose. Sally’s rejection of her baby was spawned by Junior’s reaction. Then-curator of mammals Mike Williams told reporters that the zoo tried “to avoid hand raising whenever possible,” but Woody’s abandonment left keepers “no choice.” Fearing excessive human imprinting, keepers moved Woody as soon as was feasible into a cage adjoining the one that held “his two half-brothers” so he could observe how to be an orangutan. Williams figured it was “likely that Woody will always behave a little differently from an orangutan [that has] been raised by its mother.” This may have contributed to later research successes when Southwestern University anthropology professor and Memphis musician Sid Selvidge put together a five-member team to determine if orangutans could be taught to communicate through American Sign Language. By the end of the first month, one of the team members reported that Woody had for the first time returned the “come-to-me” sign the team had repeated. It was unclear to Selvidge, though, whether this action was a sign of training or actual communication. Selvidge passed away in 2013, but his son Steve, who recalled Woody from his childhood, reported that he believes Woody did eventually learn to communicate through sign language.<sup>34</sup>

Another baby orangutan sired by Junior was claimed by the Tulsa Zoo, a common practice in breeding loan programs. Such programs have been a boon to rare species propagation, as when the National Zoo in Washington and the Oklahoma City Zoo together loaned Memphis a breeding pair of “the rarest tamarins in the world – the golden

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<sup>34</sup> Peggy Riley, “Your Zoo—Young Woody Is Adjusting Well Following Turbulent Welcome,” *Commercial Appeal*, August 28, 1977; William Thomas, “Anthropologist’s Daily Talks With Orangutan Are Serious,” (paper and date unknown, in news clippings file at Zoo library, scrapbook 1974-1978); Steve Selvidge interview by author, June 25, 2015.

lion marmosets, which are a striking golden and have lionish faces in a miniature sort of way.” Other rare animals bred in zoos boosted revenues in one zoo when they were sold and in the other when they were displayed. One example is the Andean spectacled bear, the only bear native to South America. When the Memphis Zoo acquired a breeding pair of the 30 in captivity in America in 1980, the animal’s rarity drew crowds and zoo officials were hopeful that the pair would breed. But sometimes the zoo has had to control reproduction, as in the case of the puma. “We can’t have little pumas all over the place,” Brady told a reporter. “Pumas are kind of hard to get rid of,” so the zoo was careful to keep the females isolated when they went into heat. While the zoo wanted to bolster threatened and endangered species populations, they didn’t want to overpopulate zoos or the wild with already plentiful species. With the spectacled bears and with other species, stud books were developed to help mitigate inbreeding and encourage genetic diversity. Other tactics physically separated genetic similar specimens, as with the twin polar bears born in Memphis who were sent to “separate zoos in Germany.”<sup>35</sup>

By 1982, Wilson was rightfully proud of a season that “turned out one of the largest collections of births and hatchings yet.” These included a lowland gorilla, a bontebok antelope (“one of the rarest animals in the world”), Nilgiri tahrs, a Sicilian donkey, four Mandarin ducks, and two cotton-top tamarin monkeys. An American zoo first that year was the hatching of one of two eggs laid by a “military green” Buffon’s macaw, “a rare species of South American parrot.” Birds curator Cliff Ross said that, to

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<sup>35</sup> John Knott, “Balanced Budget Is Unrealistic For This Kind Of City Service,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 16, 1980; John Knott, “Marmosets Enhance ‘Family’ Of Extremely Rare Tamarins,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 20, 1980; John Knott, “‘Exclusive’ Bears Switched For Departed Big Kodiaks,” *Commercial Appeal*, November 2, 1980; John Knott, “Your Zoo – Two Mute Swans Fine Replacement For ‘Ostrichlings’,” *Commercial Appeal*, November 23, 1980.

his knowledge, the only others had been hatched in Great Britain and in East Germany. Late in the year, two rare scimitar-horned oryxes were born to two different mothers, increasing the zoo's stock to eight and moving the species that much further away from extinction. The scimitar-horned oryx had been bred and domesticated by the ancient Egyptians but was hunted nearly to extinction by the 1960s by "desert tribesmen, oil surveyors and soldiers in the region" as well as by sport hunters. It was such "wholesale destruction" of species that made it clear that zoos around the world must play a role in threatened and endangered species propagation so that the creatures could "be reintroduced to the wild someday, if political stability returns." In America, this realization led to a national, cooperative breeding program in 1978, known since 1980 as the Species Survival Plan, or SSP.<sup>36</sup>

Some of the efforts to participate in the SSP have been natural, while others have been experimental. Wilson blamed inbreeding for the ultimate failures of the zoo's Siberian tigers' attempts to successfully reproduce naturally. A female cub "died of a brain defect" that Wilson "suspects is genetic." Her two brothers seemed healthy, but Wilson admitted "their future isn't certain." While the Siberian tigers were left to continue to breed naturally, Wilson launched an experimental embryo implantation project using domestic cows as surrogate mothers for endangered cattle breeds. The Bronx Zoo and the San Diego Zoo launched similar projects at the same time. The six domestic cows, "all proven breeders," were prepared for their roles as surrogates by means of medications that would help create a suitable environment for embryo

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<sup>36</sup> Linda Hilbun, "Newborns Breed Happiness At Zoo," *Press-Scimitar*, June 16, 1982; Barbara Burch, "Hatching Of Macaw Egg Ranks As U.S. Zoo First," *Commercial Appeal*, June 27, 1982; William Dawson, "Rare Births Bring Award A Bit Nearer," *Commercial Appeal*, December 12, 1982.

implantation. Meanwhile, the Ankoli female—a “cross of the Egyptian longhorn and wild African cattle”—was given fertility drugs to cause her to produce multiple eggs for fertilization. The Ankoli bull was then introduced to fertilize the eggs, and five to seven days later the embryos were “flush[ed] out” and transferred to the waiting surrogate. Success with the Ankoli would lead to similar efforts with the more endangered Gaur. Keeper Wayne Carlisle expressed his pride in “the way the zoo has grown from being a menagerie holding wildlife to a zoo with exotic animals and a breeding program that is helping save endangered animals.”<sup>37</sup>

Other significant programs have opened new avenues of inquiry and understanding, especially since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The AZAA Conservation Endowment Fund provided \$11,750 to the Memphis Zoo for the study of cranes in Russia. Louisiana’s Natural Heritage Program devoted \$61,500 to the Memphis herpetarium for the study of the pine snakes indigenous to that state. But the most publicly significant research and conservation program the Memphis Zoo has undertaken has been a collaborative effort with Chinese zoos to study giant pandas. After completing construction in 2002 on the Chinese-themed exhibit, CHINA, the Memphis Zoo negotiated a ten-year loan of giant pandas Ya Ya and Le Le in April 2003. A \$43,000 grant from the Morris Animal Foundation covered the costs associated with the study of panda nutritional requirements. The zoo also joined a “forest health and bio-diversity program in China and a study of giant pandas mating behaviors in China’s Foping nature

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<sup>37</sup> John Knott, “Your Zoo – Bribe A Cop, Raise Money For 2 Causes,” *Commercial Appeal*, May 11, 1980; Orville Hancock, “Zoo’s Six Cows May Deliver First Results in Breeding Experiment,” *Press-Scimitar*, (1981, day unknown, in Memphis Zoo clippings file at Memphis Public Library); Charles Thornton, “Former Pony Boy Went Ape In His Role As Gorilla Father,” *Press-Scimitar*, November 8, 1982.

reserve.” Where once the Memphis Zoo had no education program at all, and by the 1960s director Robert Mattlin was just beginning to share his vision of a community outreach education cooperative for high school and college students, now the zoo was part of a pioneering international education program.<sup>38</sup>

In February 2003 Roger Knox announced his retirement from MZS after 14 years. He recommended Dr. Chuck Brady to replace him as zoo Director and Chief Executive Officer. Charles Wilson had welcomed Brady as curator of mammals in 1976, but Brady hadn’t expected to stay in Memphis long. Brady had gotten his start as a research assistant and fellow at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., and Memphis may have seemed a step down in some ways. A native New Yorker, Brady was surprised at how quickly Memphis grew on him. A “strong interest in conservation” and “of wildlife and wild places” led the zoologist to remain a part of what would turn into an exciting, progressive future. After 24 years as curator, he was promoted to Associate Director of Animal Programs in 2000 and then, later the same year, to MZS Vice President and Director of Animal Programs. In that capacity, he set his sights on strengthening the research and conservation programs as part of a bid for creating a giant panda exhibit. On March 22, 2003, Brady assumed his new role. Within a matter of weeks, Brady proudly announced that “six years of work and negotiations” had paid off when the Memphis Zoo became one of only two zoos in America to have Chinese giant pandas. Brady could also

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<sup>38</sup> Wayne Risher, “Zoo Secures Grants For Research,” *Commercial Appeal*, September 18, 2003.

boast that the Memphis Zoo had become a leader “in conservation and veterinary medicine and animal research.”<sup>39</sup>

The decision to promote Brady to the zoo’s top job seemed natural and was supported by many in the zoo community. Wilson, for example, thought highly of Brady’s crisis management skills. He described his former curator as “Chuck on the spot” on the day in 1995 that a man climbed into the Sumatran tiger enclosure and was mauled. The man had decided, like the biblical Daniel in the lion’s den, “to test his faith in God.” The man survived his bites and scratches, thanks in part to Brady’s level-headed response and adherence to a well-rehearsed disaster plan just for such rare occurrences. But if he had the confidence of his former bosses, Brady would increasingly find dealing with the public troublesome.<sup>40</sup>

The zoo had had its problems in the past with visitors littering, crossing barriers meant to keep them at a safe distance from the animals, and even harming the animals from time to time. By 2010, the free admission period had been changed to Tuesday afternoons from 2:00 p.m. to closing. Known as “Tennessee Tuesdays,” admission during this period was only free for Tennessee residents. On March 31, Tennesseans set a single-day attendance record when 25,314 people converged on the zoo. Memphis City School students were on Spring Break, the day was sunny with temperatures in the seventies, and the combination of beautiful weather, freedom, and free admission quickly overwhelmed

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas Jordan, “Zoo’s vice president will fill top position,” *Commercial Appeal*, February 12, 2003.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Jordan, “Come tigers, pandas, projects, people, zoo chief keeps his cool,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 21, 2003; Kevin Robbins and Christina Connor, “2 tigers attack man who jumped into Cat Country,” *Commercial Appeal*, November 12, 1995; Thomas Jordan, “Zoo’s vice president will fill top position,” *Commercial Appeal*, February 12, 2003.



crowds and zoo officials. Fighting broke out inside the zoo as well as in the park. On Overton Park Avenue, gunshots shattered the peace in the usually quiet neighborhood. Ten police units, the organized crime unit, and a police helicopter responded to the zoo and the park. Traffic congestion was such that one person reportedly took “45 minutes to get two blocks” on McLean Avenue, the street on the zoo’s western edge. Overton Park was closed temporarily to “clear out the overflow crowds from the zoo.” The incident prompted Brady to consider new security practices and to rethink the free period admission policies once again. The result was that “the zoo axed free Tennessee Tuesdays in March,” when area schools had their spring breaks. The policy upset some, but others felt it made the zoo safer and more enjoyable.<sup>41</sup>

Brady’s most vociferous opponent, though, grew to be the revitalized grassroots organization Citizens to Preserve Overton Park (CPOP). The original members of CPOP had taken the fight to keep the interstate out of Overton Park all the way to the Supreme Court, and had convinced zoo administrations in the past to support their efforts. Once the federal case was settled in 1981, the group dissolved. CPOP reorganized as a nonprofit organization in 2008 in response to the clear-cutting of four acres of old growth forest inside the zoo to begin construction on the Teton Trek exhibit following the completion of the Northwest Passage exhibit in 2006. Almost immediately, CPOP’s web blog filled with opinions about and pleas against the zoo’s expansion plans. The group was not only appalled at the clearing for Teton Trek, but also determined to reclaim for

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<sup>41</sup> Jody Callahan, “Gunfire Adds To Rowdy Zoo Day – Police Shut Overton Park Due To Crowds,” *Commercial Appeal*, March 31, 2010; April Thompson, “Free Tennessee Tuesday On Hold At The Memphis Zoo This Month,” WREG News Channel 3 Memphis, March 17, 2015, [wreg.com/2015/03/17/free-tennessee-tuesday-on-hold-at-the-memphis-zoo-this-month/](http://wreg.com/2015/03/17/free-tennessee-tuesday-on-hold-at-the-memphis-zoo-this-month/) (accessed February 14, 2016).

the park 17 acres that had been incorporated in the zoo's master plans since the 1980s. This acreage is the site of the future Chickasaw Bluffs trail exhibit, scheduled to open in 2017. According to Brady, the exhibit will include a "low-impact" boardwalk through the old growth forest that will allow visitors to enjoy the "natural plant life and animal wildlife" from "a safe path through the forest while maintaining its delicate ecosystem." To accomplish this, the zoo plans to "partner with forestry experts" as well as to "comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act" to ensure accessibility for all zoo visitors. Brady expressed his regret that the plans for this exhibit "came as a surprise to some," but firmly reiterated that the 17-acre tract had been in the zoo's master plan for more than two decades.<sup>42</sup>

The master plan is nearly complete. The Teton Trek exhibit opened in 2009, and apart from the Chickasaw Bluffs exhibit planned for 2017, all that remains of the zoo's earlier master plan is the Zambezi River Hippo Camp. Scheduled to open in late spring of 2016, the exhibit will resemble an African fishing village. It will be home to Nile crocodiles, flamingos, and for the first time ever the Memphis Zoo will exhibit the okapi. This unusual ruminant is native to the Congo rainforests. It looks to be part zebra, part giraffe, and part deer, and was only discovered to exist 115 years ago. The exhibit will also include above ground and underwater viewing of the hippos, thanks to a design similar to that of the Northwest Passage exhibit. In response to concerns from CPOP, Brady insists that the zoo has no intention of seeking more parklands for any future expansions, though. By the time the Chickasaw Bluffs exhibit opens, the zoo will once

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<sup>42</sup> Citizens to Preserve Overton Park, "In Brief: Zoo Expansion Revives Group," <http://www.overtonparkforever.org/2008/03/in-brief-zoo-expansion-revives-group.html> (accessed February 14, 2016); Dr. Chuck Brady, "Chickasaw Bluffs," *Exzooberance*, July-August 2008, 8-9.

again have expanded to its limits, now twice the size of the original zoo grounds as delineated in 1906.<sup>43</sup>

This space limitation presents the Memphis Zoo a real challenge in terms of sustainability. With no further expansion room, the focus will have to be on innovation within the existing footprint of the zoo. The zoo is a perennial favorite among Memphis' attractions, trading places regularly with Elvis Presley's Graceland for the title of most attended attraction in the city, and if the zoo wants to keep the top spot it will have to keep innovating. Parking has been an issue since the automobile became the predominant mode of transport. But, as has been the goal these past thirty years, opening a new exhibit every year or two or three may prove increasingly challenging to sustain. "Recycling" once-popular attractions like the daily free circus or animal rides seems unlikely in the current climate of animal rights and the debate over the ethical use of animals. Although certain members of CPOP may scoff at the thought as the group and the zoo debate the use of the park's Greensward for overflow zoo parking, Brady has always taken seriously his belief that "we are the stewards of the Earth. We have to take care of it for our children and for our children's children and for our well-being."<sup>44</sup>

Park Commission Chairman Joe Brennan had expressed as early as 1938 the desire to bring nearly all of the Memphis Zoo's animals out of the naked cage and into more appropriate, naturalistic enclosures. Brennan recognized that doing so would "take a lot of time and a lot of money," but surely he would have thought impossible the

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<sup>43</sup> Memphis Zoo, "Our History: How And When It All Began," [https://memphiszoojobs.silkroad.com/memphiszooext/About\\_Us/Company\\_History.html](https://memphiszoojobs.silkroad.com/memphiszooext/About_Us/Company_History.html) (accessed February 14, 2016).

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Jordan, "Zoo's vice president will fill top position," *Commercial Appeal*, February 12, 2003.

amount of money doing so would require. He likely would have despaired over the creeping pace of progress had he known it would take the rest of the century to achieve that vision. When Wayne Risher revived Brennan’s prediction in 1993 at the opening of Cat Country, he called Brennan’s “prophecy...fulfilled,” although the zoo still had a long way to go to free all of the animals from the cage. To visit the Memphis Zoo in 2016, though, must surely make Risher wonder how he could have thought the dream was complete then.<sup>45</sup>

N. J. Melroy had supervised the liberation of the monkeys, bears, and elephants during the New Deal era. Robert Mattlin did his part for the environmental movement in the 1970s with the installation of the African Veldt. The zoo’s first fully realized master plan had certainly turned out more animals into the open air than anyone had thought possible before. But the changes are yet incomplete, in the winter of 2016, as Memphians look forward to the spring-season opening of the Zambezi River Hippo Camp, and onward to the Chickasaw Trail in another year. The Old Growth Forest is literally at the gates of the zoo, and—park advocates hope—untouchable beyond the clear-cutting of 16 acres already removed for the Northwest Passage and Teton Trek exhibits. With crowd capacity and parking issues becoming more regular problems, the zoo’s options seem limited: expand vertically or revive the historical option to move the zoo to a larger space. For now, both seem unlikely. But perhaps our children’s grandchildren will have a better solution by the time the “new” zoo has seen better days.

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<sup>45</sup> Wayne Risher, “55-year dream to free zoo’s cats comes true,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 11, 1993.

## Conclusion

### On the Importance of Remembering the Memphis Zoo's Past

This study opens a scholarly dialogue about the Memphis Zoo and its historical movement from an elitist public institution to a professional, vastly more open (if not necessarily fully democratized) public space operated under a privatization agreement. The first generation of the zoo was all about pragmatism: how do a group of men with no zoo experience proceed to build a zoo? How do they fund it? Where and how do they acquire animals? Who will maintain the animals once acquired? Who will enjoy the animal displays, and under what circumstances? Drawing on the designs of existing zoos solved the first problem, while turning to the city for financial backing solved the second major hurdle. Other zoos also supplied connections for animal acquisitions and sometimes became suppliers themselves. “The public” is too simplistic an answer to the question of patronage, especially in the segregated South, and almost immediately the Park Commission was approached by black Memphians for permissions to enjoy the zoo and the city parks. But the solution to the question of who would manage the zoo seemed a simpler one. To maintain animals, the zoo needed an “animal man.” For nearly fifty years, the superintendents of the Memphis Zoo primarily were animal men. Most of them had extensive circus backgrounds as animal trainers and performers. Where else was a zoo in those days to find experienced people to manage wild animals?

But after World War II, new benefits for veterans meant potential zoo leaders were increasingly educated in various fields that offered a host of potentialities for the future of professionalizing zoos. The new title of “Director” reflected the gravity of this educational entitlement. An “animal man” who studied business was prepared for the

added responsibilities of budgeting, human resources, and similar matters that would ensure the zoo would become and remain self-sustaining. One whose innate interests in wildlife shaped his secondary school experiences, molding him for a collegiate career in the biological sciences, seemed the perfect person to move the zoo from a place of recreation and entertainment to one of both serious science and “edutainment” decades before the coinage of the term. In a diversifying, fragmenting postmodernity, an ideal zoo director must be prepared for not only the business and scientific aspects of running a zoo, but also for balancing the demands and expectations of culturally pluralistic staff and visitors against the needs of the animals in his charge.

The Memphis Zoo entered its fourth generation as postmodern ideas of sensory immersion engulfed the nation through media outlets, leaving visitors ever more demanding that the zoo-going experience be as “authentic” as possible in relation to their media-informed perceptions of reality—hopefully while still satisfying an innate human hunger for spectacle. It was no longer enough for animals to be released from their neurotic pacing in “the naked cage” to pace in the open air, safely imprisoned by artificial rocks and separated from the public by a moat. The search for that perceived reality and the desire for both spiritual satisfaction and a transformative experience created the demand for new designs that closed the gap between the viewer and the viewed. Artificial rocks gave way to fences hidden by landscaping carefully cultivated for its geocultural compatibility with the origins of the animals it would surround, planted around culturally appropriate backdrops built not only to look as if they’d been there forever, but to transport the visitor to “the wild” through immersive design. Such designs were (and are)

unquestionably expensive, and it increasingly became clear that municipalities would be hard pressed to subsidize such exhibits. Public/private partnerships provided the solution.

For at least thirty years before privatization, zoo leaders had noted that the “best” zoos in the country had strong zoological societies raising funds for growth—and Memphis, in that same time, had dropped lower and lower on the list of the best zoos in the country. A zoological society had existed in Memphis in various forms since nearly the beginning, but a meaningful, sustainable organization only arose in the 1980s. Privatization of the zoo under the Memphis Zoological Society’s direction has since established an environment where nothing more than a sheet of tempered glass separates visitors from some of the favorite animals, creating an illusion of connectivity with the wild that will be hard to top in the future. In addition to enabling urban visitors to experience a sense of reconnection with nature, the sense of timelessness that pervades many of the exhibits at the Memphis Zoo today also provides a temporary respite from the demands of the modern world. It is this illusory, elusive sensation of escaping “the world” to become more fully a part of the world that is perhaps the finest accomplishment of the modern zoo. In that sense Memphis has rightfully reclaimed its place as one of the country’s top zoos.

But today’s Memphis Zoo resembles its origins in only the minutest of ways. Fortunately its most historically significant structures have been saved from destruction. However, they are so transformed as to be almost unrecognizable. The Carnivora Building, where giant cats once thrilled visitors with roars that echoed against concrete walls and bounced off high ceilings, is now—unimaginably to some older zoo visitors with longer memories—the Cat House Café where families enjoy snacks and lunches.

Where giant and baby pachyderms once took shelter from the weather, today a library, education center, and volunteer office make good use of the space but do little to showcase the origins of the building as the zoo's first Elephant House. Signs or docents educating the public about the few remaining historic buildings and exhibits are conspicuously absent, contributing to the widespread perception in Memphis and elsewhere that zoos are ahistorical places. Nor can there be found a memorial of any sort to the men who managed the zoo before privatization. Hopefully, this dissertation will encourage the zoo to incorporate a public discussion about its development and those responsible for shaping the direction of that development.

Even the zoo's address reflects this marginalization of the zoo's origins. In 1910, Overton Park contained two residences. One was the home of the Park "Florist," John C. Shivler, his wife Aletha, and her nine-year-old son William A. Walker. The other was the home of "Zoological Gardens" superintendent Elmer Rietmeyer, his wife Cora, their 6-year-old son Tommy, and Elmer's children, 18-year-old Elizabeth and 16-year-old Truman. A boarder, John A. Webb, lived with the Reitmeyers and worked as an "Assistant" in the park. How interesting it must have been for them all to explain to others how to find them at home or how to address mail to them! The census taker in 1910 wrote "none" for both homes in the column for the house number, and for the "Street" name he wrote simply "Overton Park." The 1948 city directory listed Superintendent Melroy and his wife Lottie as renters in "Overton Park," but still no street address was associated with the zoo and the home within its perimeter. In 1960, the Grays were only slightly easier to find at home, as renters in "Overton Park ns Poplar av," or in the park on the north side of Poplar Avenue. By the time the zoo privatized in



the early 1980s, the zoo no longer housed employees but was easier to find at its official address, 2000 Galloway Avenue. In the year 2000, in honor of the contributions of Jim and Carol Prentiss to the development of the “new” zoo, the zoo’s official street name was changed from Galloway Avenue to Prentiss Place.<sup>1</sup>

This change underscores this study’s most significant contribution to Memphis history. It is indicative of a trend in Memphis in recent years toward replacing distant history with “living history” memorials or with commemorations that honor previously marginalized individuals or groups while “demoting” the formerly venerated. An example is the renaming of a portion of Auction Avenue, one of the streets named in the original 1819 city plan, to A. W. Willis Avenue in honor of Archie Walter “A.W.” Willis, a Civil Rights lawyer and activist who became the first African American elected (in 1964) to the Tennessee General Assembly since Reconstruction. Certainly both Willis and the founders’ plan are worthy of remembrance, no matter how distasteful the idea of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century slave auction (which, ironically, never actually occurred at Auction Square, at the river terminus of Auction Street). Still under litigation is the debate over the renaming of three Memphis parks which were originally given names all too reminiscent of Memphis’ historical intersections with slavery. For some, the major debate is whether renaming Forrest Park to Health Sciences Park to reflect the park’s proximity to the medical district rather than commemorating Nathan Bedford Forrest, really, and

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<sup>1</sup> 1910 Federal Census, District 0242, Memphis Ward 19, Shelby County, Tennessee, Roll: T624\_1521, Page: 7A (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2006); R. L. Polk & Co., *Polk’s Memphis (Shelby County, Tenn.) City Directory, 1948* (St. Louis, MO: R. L. Polk & Co., 1948), 552; R. L. Polk & Co., *Polk’s Memphis (Shelby County, Tenn.) City Directory, 1960* (St. Louis, MO: R. L. Polk & Co., 1960), 357; Memphis Zoo press kit, 4, [memphiszoo.org/assets/1478/memphiszoo-presskit.pdf](http://memphiszoo.org/assets/1478/memphiszoo-presskit.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2016).

fairly, “rewrites” history. Depending on who one asks, there is as much historical reason for one commemoration or another regardless of the public venue under discussion.

The larger question is whether we can or should revise our views of historical public venues to obscure the unpleasant or outmoded, whether to honor living history, to instead bring forth the forgotten and marginalized, or simply to strive to avoid offense against any segment of society by telling only the most palatable stories of our past. Is there not room for both, or all? To be sure, when it comes to the Memphis Zoo, the contributions of the Prentisses since the 1980s have enabled undreamt-of growth, and they are rightfully honored for their contributions. But the zoo would not have come into being when it did if not for the vision, passion, effort, and early financial support of Colonel Robert Galloway. His contributions in the first decade were equivalent in kind, if not in scale, to those of the Prentisses eighty years later. For his efforts, as with the Prentisses, he was honored in his lifetime. The first building in the zoo was named Galloway Hall in his honor, and the street on the southern border of the zoo was named Galloway Avenue. Yet slowly his contributions have been eradicated from public memory. Galloway Hall was demolished in 1954. The Egyptian stones Galloway had imported from the Memphis, Egypt palace of Pharaoh Amasis II (570 BCE-526 BCE) were removed to City Hall in 1965 and later into the Art Museum at the University of Memphis. Galloway’s beloved Japanese Garden in the park outside of the zoo was ransacked and then completely dismantled in the wave of anti-Japanese sentiment following the attack on Pearl Harbor. With the renaming of the zoo’s dedicated stretch of Galloway Avenue in 2000, the founder’s memory was effectively obliterated from the zoo whose “nucleus” and growth had been his dream and his passion.

Furthermore, the superintendents and directors whose visions shaped the zoo between Galloway's death and the privatization of the zoo have been largely forgotten—to say nothing of long-time early keepers like Will Flynn on the other end of the hierarchy. Certainly the first superintendents—Horner, Reitmeyer, Lewis, Castang and probably Cullen—were all gone before anyone alive today would have known or cared about who was running the zoo. Only our oldest citizens recall the zoo when Melroy first took over in 1924, but the oldest of the Baby Boomers very likely remember Melroy's zoo in its later years. Certainly the Boomer generation recalls the zoo as Gray remodeled it in the 1950s and early 1960s. Progress delays caused by the interstate controversy throughout the 1960s and 1970s meant that the Boomers and their children were the only generations to actually share common memories of the Memphis Zoo that once was. Generation X was just beginning to experience social freedoms or start their own young families when privatization brought the first major, multi-million dollar changes to the zoo. It is this “new” zoo that fills the earliest memories of the Millennials who visited in their youth. The shift to this privatized business perspective has not just changed the face of the zoo. It has also created a space between the visitors and the administrators that did not exist when the Park Commission managed the zoo and the superintendents or directors managed the animals and the people.

But just as this study has shown that the men who have shaped the zoo over the past century have increasingly been forgotten or relegated to a few oft-repeated platitudes on the way to a discussion of more recent history, it hopefully also has presented some insights into the question of whether that process should be allowed to continue unabated. Along with this come the questions, “Whose zoo is it?” and “Who decides?” when it

comes to planning and making changes. Before Memphis had a zoo, it took a wealthy elite vision to spark a democratic push for a zoo. The 2,000 signatures on a petition demanding the founding of a zoo represented just over one percent of the population of Memphis in 1906, but it likely also represented a cross-section of Memphis' class structure. Undoubtedly, those signatures revealed the mindset of a burgeoning town whose population had grown from 90,000 in 1896 to 190,000 the year the zoo opened. Clearly, the people of Memphis not only wanted a zoo, but they believed "their town" was big enough and important enough to support "their zoo."<sup>2</sup>

Over the years, the direction of the zoo has been determined not so much by its public's visions as by the individual and collective visions of the administrators, the Park Commission, the City, and the Zoological Society in all its incarnations. In this sense, the zoo became a patriarchy of sorts, presenting to the public what was deemed to be in the public's best interest. What, if any, thought these various leaders gave to what the public actually wanted from "their zoo" is challenging to deduce, and perhaps is best inferred from how each administration coped with fluctuations in attendance numbers. Today, the Zoo has finally regained midcentury attendance levels of approximately one million visitors per year. But one might wonder whether this has as much to do with the current arrangement of the zoo or its current programming as with the concomitant rise in population that prompted such high attendance in the 1950s. The Center for the Future of Museums has delineated what may become the Memphis Zoo's greatest challenge: "Millennials represent the largest population bubble in U.S. history—significantly larger

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<sup>2</sup> Illinois Central Railroad Company, *The Yazoo-Mississippi Valley: A Pamphlet Full of Information For Home Seekers and Investors* (Manchester, IA: Illinois Central Railroad Company, 1906), 9.

in number than the vaunted Baby Boomer generation that has long been the object of many marketers' affections." The challenge will lie in maintaining the interests of a generation whose views on animal captivity are more sophisticated than those of their predecessors, and their interests are not long held without outreach programs designed to cater to technology-driven tastes. Finding a place for history in a perceived ahistorical public space only adds to the challenge. Public history could certainly have a place in the zoo, and could even incorporate technologies that would appeal to the tech-savvy, but Memphis Zoo leadership has long been forward-thinking rather than historic-minded. Perhaps this study will convince current and future zoo leadership to consider adding an historical approach to its educational programming.<sup>3</sup>

This sort of public history outreach does not exist at the Memphis Zoo in part because no in-depth history of the Zoo has existed until now. Robert W. Dye's 2015 book, *Memphis Zoo*, is a great way to spend a rainy afternoon when going to the zoo would be unpleasant. Although Arcadia Publishing mostly prefers its authors to confine their books to pre-1980s history, Dye's plethora of photographs takes readers over the age of five back to the zoos of their childhoods. Still, his book provides only captioned snapshots of what was rather than deep analysis of the processes and personalities that created the zoo and helped it prosper. Some of these personalities have been more forceful than others, but only those who occupied a place in "living history" are typically remembered. Restoring the others, resurrecting their contributions, and seeking patterns

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<sup>3</sup> Colleen Dilenschneider, "The Future of Ethics: Living Collections and the 'Ambassadors for Their Species' Concept," July 26, 2012 blog, [futureofmuseums.blogspot.com/2012/07/the-future-of-ethics-living-collections.html](http://futureofmuseums.blogspot.com/2012/07/the-future-of-ethics-living-collections.html) (accessed February 12, 2016).

in the historic administration of the Memphis Zoo is outside the scope of the Zoo's current mission, and has thus far been overlooked.

Research for this project to provide that missing history began with Dye's *Memphis Zoo*, as the only published historical account of the zoo. More pieces of the publicly apparent "grand narrative" regarding the zoo emerged with a study of the scrapbooks maintained by the zoo from 1953 to 2010. These scrapbooks are only loosely organized chronologically, and contain clippings from local and national newspapers regarding the zoo's directors/superintendents, extremely truncated accounts of its history, and more than anything else, its animals and their audiences. But these scrapbooks cover only the latter half of the zoo's history, and raise as many questions as they contribute answers. News clipping files at the Memphis Public Library and Information Center include some older articles, but even those are only particularly useful back to the late 1930s. The two pre-1930 clippings, both untitled, give little significant insight; one, from 1906, mentions only that the new zoo is being constructed, while the other, from a decade later, reveals that a local traveler brought a Gila monster back from a vacation in Arizona to donate to the zoo. Accordingly, sorting fact from misinformation posed its own set of challenges, especially in the earliest papers, and discovering more about the zoo's formative years became the greatest challenge.

A close reading of the Memphis Park Commission minute books from the first meeting in 1901 was by far the most fruitful means of understanding how and why the zoo developed the way that it did. Most importantly, it was these meeting minutes that provided a reliable timeline of zoo development and offered insights into the personalities of the commissioners and superintendents in the first half century of the zoo. By studying

these records carefully, “forgotten” superintendents materialized. These records also supplied a starting point for further research into the backgrounds of the various superintendents and directors over the years.

From these starting points, an examination of census, military, and educational records as well as city directories and newspapers offered a means of understanding who these zoo leaders were and what qualified them to run the Memphis Zoo. Early superintendents were mentioned in connection with various circuses in editions of *The Billboard*, a magazine for the entertainment industry. In the case of Castang, a biography written about his brother Reuben was useful in piecing together the early years of his life in England and in Germany. It was from these biographical insights that patterns became evident, leading to connections between the circus and zoo worlds that helped explain the greater showmanship of the early zoo as compared to its later iterations. Just as importantly, understanding the family backgrounds, employment histories, and educational backgrounds of the zoo’s leaders has suggested causality for the decisions, designs, and directions these men incorporated into the zoo during their administrations. Many of the patterns and philosophies of the zoo’s administrators can only be seen by studying and ruminating on the deep, intractable connections between nature and nurture and between background and behavior made manifest in these individuals.

It is not difficult to conclude that the role of the zoo in the community has been as dependent on its directorship as on its public’s expectations, returning to the question of to whom the zoo “belongs.” Some of the greater challenges that emerged in later years for the Memphis Zoo administrations have resulted from shifting public perceptions of the role the zoo should play in “modern” life. For the Zoo’s earliest superintendents, the

natural assumption of zoo leaders seems to have been that people enjoy a performance, and the public played right along. Perhaps because the early superintendents were not highly educated, they may not have considered the possible arrangement of the zoo as an outgrowth of the scientific revolution. The layout of the zoo, the selections of type and quantity and personality of animals on display, and the exhibits themselves were geared instead toward making animal performances as widely accessible (and reliably repeatable) as possible. For a quarter of a century this meant not only open enclosures when possible, but even the addition of a free circus and a pony track to incorporate as fully as possible the direct amusement of the populace. Accordingly, it was for amusement that the public attended the zoo, and in some ways it may have been in its first half century that the zoo most closely approximated a truly democratic space.

But in the decades following World War II professionalization and the educational turn among zoo staff encroached on this philosophy, shifting the zoo from an entertainment space to an educational and recreational one where the nature of the experience was as carefully curated as the animal collection. The additions of walkways, then directional and interpretive signage and maps, and finally scheduled talks by docents or keepers were not-so-subtle attempts to guide the visitor experience to a particular shared outcome, inculcating the same lessons upon an entire generation whether they cared to learn at the zoo or not. Throughout the midcentury period, Memphians were well acquainted with the animals in their zoo, by individual name and predictable public behaviors if not by genera and species. They knew, for instance, that a pair of chimps was named Peter and Pan after the title character of James Barrie's beloved children's book *Peter Pan*, but may not have known (or much cared) that *Pan troglodyte* was the



scientific name for the chimpanzee. They knew the bears could be counted on to wave to crowds, especially if tossed popcorn or peanuts from across the moats. But they may have appreciated the novelty of the interaction more than the knowledge whether the wavers were grizzly, sun, or black bears. Thanks to signage at each exhibit, though, the curious could at least be sure the opportunity existed to make a trip to the zoo a learning experience for their children or themselves.<sup>4</sup>

The children of the 1980s were the last to know “the old zoo” their parents had grown up with, although even today a few of the old exhibits await renovation. These children showed up at the zoo seeking entertainment, not education, with their dimes for admission to the aquarium and quarters for the rides, vending machines for their own sugary snacks, and to purchase healthier snacks to feed the animals. Unlike their parents, “their” zoo had no pony track, so they rode the broad backs of the wide-mouthed plastic hippopotami in the children’s area when they couldn’t get a seat on the train or the carousel. Like their parents and grandparents before them, they waved to the bears in their faux concrete pits, oblivious that those exhibits were as old as their grandparents. Their interactions with the animals often were less about knowing the animals’ names or scientific backgrounds and more about encouraging the Siamang monkeys to whoop, the hyenas to laugh, and the wolves to howl. As the last generation to grow up without electronic technology as a constant, inescapable distraction – or as a constant, dependable (if not always reliable) source of information about *everything* – they embraced the zoo as an escape from ennui.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert W. Dye, *Memphis Zoo* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2015), 53.

An increasing dependence on technology has broadened access to knowledge, but has made our worlds much smaller in other ways, even in the zoo. An afternoon at the zoo in 2016 will reveal nearly as many cameras and cell phones as people. Where once people visited the zoo to interact with the animals and “experience wildlife,” many zoo goers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are just as likely to breeze through without really experiencing the zoo the way earlier visitors did. “Selfies” taken in front of the animals or their enclosures are a poor substitution for direct interaction with the animals, as young visitors dash from one exhibit to the next to capture the next shot for their social media audiences. The removal of bars and cages and the addition of glass partitions that can place the viewed within inches of the viewer have created some incredible photo opportunities, to be sure. On the other hand, while more naturalized exhibits have achieved the goal of reducing the neurotic tics captivity once entailed, increased comfort for the animals has also subdued animal personalities, which may leave some viewers disenchanted. As the zoo’s visitors live increasingly urban lives with ever broader exposure to digital forms of “nature,” simply looking at animals and reading static signage is unlikely to continue to satisfy. The craving for communion with nature and the thirst for the spectacle, for that “viral video” moment, have imposed a new tension that the Memphis Zoo and other zoos will have to find ways to contend with in the future if attendance is to remain high.

Since the opening of the “new” entrance in 1990 and the Cat Country exhibit in 1993, the privatized Memphis Zoo has greatly expanded exhibit quality while consistently meeting the attendant increase in costs that such improvements demand. The ongoing debate with CPOP and the Overton Park Conservancy over how to balance the

parking needs of the zoo against competing uses of the parkland is a direct outgrowth of the Zoo's ongoing record attendance levels. It also shows that the zoo continues to have an impact on its greater community, even if some Memphians believe the zoo has lost sight of that fact. If some Memphians are disgruntled with the zoo's growth, in meeting its goal "to preserve wildlife through education, conservation, and research" while providing "a clean, friendly, entertaining and educational experience" for visitors, it nonetheless has become "one of the world's great zoos."<sup>5</sup>

By considering how it managed to do so, and under whose authority and vision, a dialogue can begin about how the zoo moved from a place of recreation and entertainment to becoming a world leader in research, conservation, tourism, and "edutainment." From its example, other zoos can do the same. Perhaps by better appreciating its past, an understanding can emerge about how to best meet the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century zoo goer while maintaining high standards for animal care. Ideally, the Memphis Zoo can accomplish this while bringing its strengths to bear locally as well as on the global scale in terms of conservation measures. This history of the administrations of the Memphis Zoo is only a starting point, though. The potential avenues of future historical inquiry are broad.

Future studies might, for example, consider the animal perspective in terms of the evolution and ethics of captivity, the use of wild animals for entertainment and recreation purposes, the development of veterinary care in the zoo, or whether modern zoos are really any better than Victorian-age or earlier zoos as far as the treatment and display of

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<sup>5</sup> Memphis Zoo, "Why We Do What We Do," [www.memphiszoo.org/missionvision](http://www.memphiszoo.org/missionvision) (accessed February 28, 2016).

animals is concerned. Another avenue might consider the public perception of the zoo through time. Environmental historians—and groups like the Overton Park Conservancy and CPOP, especially—might be interested in the impact of the Memphis Zoo on the old-growth forest from which it has arisen and which continues to be incorporated into future plans. Labor historians may expand on what has been started here, by exploring more closely the racial, gendered, and economic aspects of zoo labor from the bottom up, perhaps in a comparative study across American zoos. Museum or zoo planners might find the Memphis Zoo a likely case study for analysis of how exhibit design, crowd control, and educational programming have changed over the past century in order to better project the direction of the “living collections museum” in the next century.

The research presented here creates a framework upon which to understand how the zoo’s administrators have shaped the broad development of the Memphis Zoo. It does not claim or attempt to be a comprehensive history of every minute development over 110 years, but it does aim for reliability in every recounted detail. Given the opportunity, this study might be improved by expanding it to incorporate more of those minute details that complicated or enriched the various administrations but which, although interesting to some, may have made the final project too lengthy or tedious. But for gaining a basic understanding of the power structures that defined and directed the Memphis Zoo, this limited study hopefully will suffice. By understanding that concept, we can not only make sense of the zoo’s past and present, but we can hopefully consider the direction it is likely to take in the future by better understanding its current or potential leadership. Although privatization has taken much of the once (almost) democratic nature of the zoo out of the public’s control, one hopes that zoo leaders grasp that the smoothest way

forward will involve a public-private partnership that incorporates not only the desires of the City and the Zoo, but also the memories of its oldest visitors, the hopes and dreams of its youngest ones, and as far as is feasible, the wishes of its public as a whole.

For the author of this study, as a part of that public, those wishes include the adoption of historical educational programming within the zoo and, perhaps, an artistic nod to its origins. This might be achieved by commissioning a bronze statue of Colonel Galloway, perhaps holding a leash attached to the neck of Natch the bear cub in one hand and a map or scale model of the early zoo in the other. The duo could be posed near “our” zoo library/“their” elephant house, looking across the water feature toward the statue of the Prentisses and beyond to the Cat Country exhibit that bears the Prentiss name. In this way, perhaps the Memphis Zoo can prove itself a leader in reversing the trend of erasing an older, but no less valid, history for one more likely to resonate with the generations of the present and the future.

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