



Park Once Echoed With Animal Sounds

By
Bill Edson

(The following article was originally published in the Enid Morning News in May 1990. It was part of a series of articles about the history of Enid's Government Springs Park - published to stimulate interest in the Park renovation project under way at the time.)

For 20 years, the hills overlooking Government Springs Park echoed with sounds of the Oklahoma countryside and with an occasional growl right out of the African jungle.

Those sounds mixed with the sounds of children at play, were the sounds of the Grady Brock Zoo.

Nothing remains on the hillside at 4th and Garriott where the zoo once stood. The Museum of the Cherokee Strip now occupies the site, but between 1952 and 1972, most of the children living in Enid knew Hippity, Hop, Jack and Jill, the black bears who begged candy from the bear pit; Tara the African lion; and rhesus monkeys with names like Grace, Lee Midget and Scarface.

Those children who grew up visiting the zoo learned to know each new animal as it came to live there. There were Bobbie and Tommy the bobcats, Bambi the deer, Paul the pelican, Flowers the skunk, Dumpling the buffalo, and Rita the Baylor bear. There were births there too, like Jennie, the monkey; and Tara's cub, DeLayne; as well as a host of exotic fowl, deer, rabbits and peccary pigs.

It didn't start off as a zoo at all, but, like Topsy, it just grew. In the beginning, officers of the Northwest Oklahoma Sportsmen's Association, headed by Fred Lewis, offered to build a monkey island at the park somewhat in the order of a popular Oklahoma City attraction. It seemed harmless enough and members of the City Council voted to accept.

The idea of an island in the lake was quickly abandoned when it was learned the monkeys were good swimmers and would probably swim ashore as soon as they were turned loose. Planners substituted a 10-foot deep concrete lined pit to house the monkeys and moved the site up on the hill overlooking the lake.

Dedication of Monkey Island came on July 4, 1952, with City manager Gerald Wilkins as master of ceremonies. The 400 persons who attended the ceremonies saw only a few of the older monkeys. The young ones were still locked in their cage until the elders decided who would be boss monkey. At the time of the opening Lee Kruckenberg was chairman of the zoo committee while Kelly Debusk and Grady Brock were in charge of publicity near the zoo entrance. But the cost of feeding the animals and the salary of a zoo keeper fell to the City, which actually owned the zoo and all its critters. City commissioners occasionally grumbled when the zoo committee announced the arrival of another big eater. Tara, the African Lion, for instance, ate about 30 pounds of meat daily. Eventually there were three lions at the zoo and the feed bill soared.

Some of the early criticism waned when Brock, who had been serving on the city's park board, was elected to the City Council in 1965.

Throughout its entire existence, the zoo continued as one of the most popular spots to take children. It was free to the public and open every day.

In recognition of Brock's service to the zoo and to the community, the City Council renamed the zoo in his honor in 1969.

There were problems, of course, there was never enough money to do everything that needed to be done and the position of zoo director was reduced to that of zoo keeper, causing a constant turnover in personnel.

To make matters worse, neighbor complained of the smell and noise coming from the zoo. When Tara and later Tuffy, her mate, and Delaynne the cub, died of a mysterious kidney ailment, an autopsy revealed traces of heavy metals in their bodies. Brock pondered the possibility that someone was out to get rid of the zoo by poisoning the animals.

Other animals took the place of those that died or were traded to other zoos, but there was a plan to get rid of the zoo by some in city government. Besides the cost of operating the facility, the federal government and various animal rights groups were taking a serious interest in zoos that kept animals in cages. If zoos were to continue, they would have to be designed so animals lived more or less in a natural surrounding. Such zoos needed a lot of room and huge amounts of money.

The end came quickly. Brock sustained a heart attack in 1972 and was hospitalized when a plan came before the city council to form a committee to study the zoo and suggest what course it should take. The committee was formed, returned after touring the zoo and suggested it be closed. The council accepted the proposal, shipped the animals off to other zoos and bulldozed the cages and pits within days of the report. Brock eventually was released from the hospital, but his zoo was gone. He lived four more years.