THE ZOOLOGICAL GARDENS OF SAN DIEGO

Its Story and Its History

Belle J. Benchley

CHAPTER III

ALTHOUGH this history of the Zoological Garden should deal with actual development, a digression to furnish the outstanding details of the first Zoo circus cannot be out of place, for raising funds is and has always been the greatest task confronting the Zoological Society. And whenever the business of raising funds is mentioned, someone is sure to suggest a benefit and then Frank Spalding or “Dr. Harry” will say, “Oh yes, let’s have a circus.”

Now this circus started out with much hope of success, the different service branches promised and delivered a program of interesting contests and bouts, staging an excellent gymnkhana. Other features were from the artistic sense a real triumph, but when the day of the circus arrived, none of the persons responsible for the carrying on of the real work were to be found. From the sketchy details and reminiscenses I have gathered, the following facts. Frank Spalding stepped into the breach and officiated as Master of Ceremony, Announcer and General Manager. Dr. Wegeforth held down the position of ticket taker, usher, chief entertainer and “barker.” After the meet was over and they began counting the costs—literally counting the costs—Mr. Spalding realized that the receipts: for all those who promised to sell tickets had ceased to function long before the circus; would fall far short of the expenses. Consequently, in his capacity as treasurer of the Society, he announced that he would pay off all obligations at approximately forty cents on the dollar, if the claims duly executed would be presented at his desk at the Southern Trust & Commerce Bank. Early the line of claimants began to form, each with a demand for a few dollars. Each had a slip showing he had been employed at the circus. Mr. Spalding insists that the circus had been conspicuous during the performance, for its lack of the usual circus comedy. But for days afterward, individuals with their claims continued to appear. When asked what part they had had in the circus, the answer was invariably “Oh I was a clown.” So long after the funds were exhausted, clowns continued to appear. Mr. Spalding has never, so rumor says, seen anything very funny in the antics of a clown since the historic Zoo circus.

Funds necessary to begin the actual work of the Garden came entirely from private sources. Many persons gave generously in proportion to their resources and the widespread interest in the project made it, from the very beginning, something which belonged to the entire community, and proved beyond a doubt the popularity of its appeal. Little zoo history has been written in books for, it is written more permanently in the stone and steel of our cages and in the flesh and bones of its specimens. But much of it is written in the hearts and minds of our citizens.

Leading in the public subscriptions for the upbuilding of this institution, not only in the size of her donations, but in the order of giving, must always stand the name of Ellen Browning Scripps. If she had left no other monument in our midst than the Zoological Garden, her name could never be forgotten.

With her wide interest and broad vision, she early caught the dream of Doctor Wegeforth, saw something new and out of the ordinary in the way of a zoological exhibit; but she went farther with him than most did and saw what it would mean to the little children of our community now and in the future, and agreed with him that this Garden, with its collection or rare animals housed in the most interesting and unique way possible, created as much as safety would permit according to their natural habitat, should be dedicated to the children of San Diego and never for one minute has the interest of the children of our community been forgotten, neglected or jeopardized in the carrying on of the work.

In the laying out of the grounds as well as in the founding of the plans under which the Zoo would be operated, consultation was sought with experienced experts. Many such found the plans of Doctor Wegeforth far too radical and different for their approval and predicted that animals could not be kept under such conditions. But many were quick to see that the true topography and the excellent climatic conditions here offered a unique opportunity for a habitat zoo.

The first donation of any size was the money for the fence, which was donated by Miss Scripps, as...
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tacticians. Usually those who object
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Development itself. It is to avoid
the disastrous consequences of
such political administrations that
the admission fee into the Garden
was early decided upon.

The chief function of the Zoolo-
gical Society is to maintain public
interest in the Zoo at all times and
to prevent its being used as a po-
tical cat’s paw by unscrupulous
politicians. Usually those who object
to the small admission fee do not
understand the workings of the
Zoological Garden and do not real-
ize how inadequate is the support
received from public funds, nor
how small a part of their tax
money is devoted to park purposes.
In fact, many of the real objectors
are people who pay no taxes upon
real estate and thus give no sup-
port to the Zoo except this small
admission fee.

It was decided at this same time
that the Zoo should forever, so
long as it remained under the juris-
diction of the Zoological Society,
be free to children of our com-

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Barless grottoes for the great cats were absolutely unheard of at the time our Zoo was started. The success of these grottoes and something of their structure will be detailed in a forthcoming chapter.

Nowhere in San Diego does the camera enthusiast find such a galaxy of varied and interesting subjects to “shoot” as here in our own Zoo.