

## THE NATIONAL ZOOLOGICAL PARK



From its earliest years, the Smithsonian received gifts of live animals, as well as specimens, but for the first four decades the live animals were transferred to the United States Insane Asylum (St. Elizabeth's) to entertain the residents. In 1882, Secretary Spencer Baird and Assistant Secretary G. Brown Goode lured the most talented taxidermist in the United States to create displays for the newly opened U.S. National Museum building (now Arts and Industries Building). William Temple Hornaday (1854-1937) had established a reputation for his innovative animal scenes, such as the famed orangutan group, "Life in the Treetops," purchased by the Museum.

An avid hunter and explorer, Hornaday had traveled the globe in search of exotic species. But in 1886, he was given an assignment that would alter his life course and lead to the creation of the Smithsonian's National Zoological Park, the Bronx Zoo, and the American conservation movement. Hornaday was sent west to collect specimens of the American bison or buffalo for a museum exhibit, since it was rumored to be on the decline. Hornaday had hunted bison previously, awed by the thundering herds of millions of animals. When he returned west in 1886, he was stunned to find all but a few remnant animals in Yellowstone Park gone. Piles of carcasses littered the prairies. Hornaday's letters back to Goode reveal a conversion experience from enthusiastic hunter to committed conservationist in a matter of months.



Hornaday returned with the skins necessary for his family American bison group exhibit for the National Museum, but also he brought with him a calf, Sandy, the nucleus of a herd he hoped to display in Washington to interest Americans in the fate of this iconic species. Sandy soon died, but Hornaday acquired other live buffalo and displayed them, with other animals used by the taxidermists as models, in the South Yard behind the Castle. A "Department of Living Animals" was created in 1887 and soon proved so popular with visitors that plans were initiated for a National Zoological Park. Secretary Baird died in 1888 but plans moved forward and in 1889 the National Zoo received legislative approval. The legislation provided for a new type of zoo that would be "for the advancement of science and the instruction and recreation of the people." The famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted was recruited

to plan the zoo, and the new Secretary, astrophysicist Samuel P. Langley, also initiated plans to establish an astrophysical observatory on the Rock Creek Zoo site. The expansive and enthusiastic Hornaday soon ran afoul of Secretary Langley, a micromanager who was frustrated when his observatory was dropped from the Zoo legislation and felt Hornaday was too independent. Sadly, Hornaday resigned in 1890, shortly before the Zoo opened. He went on to found the famed Bronx Zoo in New York, while the National Zoo, led by the uninspired Frank Baker, never met the promises of the Hornaday/Olmsted plan or the scientific research mandate of the legislation. (And since the Congress would not fund Langley's observatory, Regent Alexander Graham Bell provided an endowment for its early years.) Hornaday's popular book, *The Extermination of the American Bison*, awakened American consciousness to the decline of native species.



The Zoo opened in 1891, as the elephants Gold Dust and Dunk were led up Connecticut Avenue to the new facility by the first keeper. William H. Blackburne, a lion tamer for the circus, married, settled down, stopped drinking, and joined the staff of the Zoo on the same day, spending over a half century as the head of animal care, without ever taking a single day off. Its American bison exhibit was immediately popular. From the outset, the Zoo faced financial

challenges. Its budget was divided between the District of Columbia and the Smithsonian's federal appropriation, with management responsibility given to the Smithsonian Board of Regents. It was the perennial stepchild of both the DC and federal budgets for over a half-century, and its facilities grew slowly, despite its immediate popularity. In its early years, it was often dependent upon loans and gifts by the public as well as traveling circuses, such as the Adam Forepaugh Shows that would winter its animals at the Zoo. The early zoo had only minimal enclosures and the animals suffered high mortality, with regular damage from storms and floods. Described as being located "a pleasant carriage ride from the city," most visitors would arrive via the Rock Creek Electric Railway to what is now the Connecticut Avenue entrance. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the "Easter Monday" tradition was established at the Zoo, which continues to today. On the Monday after Easter, when African American servants had the day off, they would picnic on Lion/Tiger Hill, rolling Easter eggs down the grassy slopes.



In 1916, when Frank Baker retired at age 75, the zoo still only had two permanent buildings, the Lion House and the Monkey House; all other animals were sheltered in paddocks and temporary wooden structures. Baker was replaced as Zoo Superintendent by Ned Hollister, a young mammalogist who was more interested in research on mammals, and the assistant director, A.B. Baker continued to manage day to day operations at the Zoo. The Zoo now counted over a million visitors annually and struggled to control the automobile traffic on days when fifty or more vehicles would traverse the park. Funds still remained minimal as the nation focused on World War I. "Soko," the chimpanzee, was a popular sight as he would stroll outside the Zoo every day with keeper Blackburne, until one day he refused to return except under duress, and his wandering days ended. Hollister died suddenly in 1924, and a biologist from the U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey named Alexander Wetmore was recruited as Acting Superintendent. A year later, Wetmore became Assistant Secretary in charge of the U.S. National Museum and William M. Mann was named Superintendent.

Mann (1886-1960) led the Zoo through a great period of expansion, despite the challenges of the Great Depression and World War II. An entomologist, Mann was an outgoing charismatic character who traveled in the best social circles. As a boy he had run away to the circus and maintained a lifelong fascination with the big top. He had begun donating animals to the Zoo in the 1910s. His annual Circus Party at the Zoo was legendary – Mann would purchase tickets to a large section of the circus for an evening, inviting Congressman, philanthropists, business and cultural leaders, etc. The performance was followed by a lavish picnic at the Zoo that cultivated the favor of the Zoo's benefactors. Mann was a favorite of popular writers, including Alexander Woolcott's "Around the Town" columns in the *New Yorker*. He partied with the Marx Brothers, Cleveland Armory, Irene Castle and the impresario Alexander Salmaggi, among others. The public loved the stories of his great Zoo collecting expeditions, such as the Chrysler Expedition to East Africa in 1926, the NZP/National Geographic Expedition to the Dutch East Indies in 1937, and the 1940 Firestone Liberia Expedition, that greatly expanded the range of the Zoo's exotic animal collections.



Mann immediately set out to secure new buildings for the animal exhibits, with a new Bird House opening in 1928. Despite the onset of the Great Depression the following year, Mann pushed ahead with a major renovation program, securing WPA funds for a new Reptile House, wing to the Bird House, Small Mammal House, Great Ape House, Elephant House, and central heating plan. Civil Works Administration workers laid pipes, built stone fences, paved roads and cleared debris across the Zoo. Due to Mann's friendship with Ned

Bruce, director of the New Deal Federal Arts Project, the Zoo was the first client of the project's artists, who sculpted statues for the tops and entrances to buildings, produced mosaics in the new Bird House, and painted murals of environmental scenes in the animal enclosures. When food shortages occurred during the Depression and war, Zoo staff would pick up condemned food from grocers across the region, to use for the animals. And Mann was at master at cultivating our funders. At one annual Regents dinner, where the staff would present exhibits on their work, Mann brought a mynah bird that he had spent a good deal of time coaching. When the dour General H.H. Lord, head of the Bureau of the Budget, arrived, Mann gave the mynah signal and he asked General Lord, "How about the appropriation? How about the appropriation?" When Lord replied that he thought that this was impertinent, the mynah retorted, "So's your old lady!" Mann soon had not only the Zoo animals but the White House and Congress eating out of his hand. The Zoo grew rapidly in popularity, with the gorillas, N'Gi who arrived in 1928 and Okero, but they soon succumbed to pneumonia, and Mann, who took every animal loss deeply to heart, refused to replace them until the advent of penicillin. They were followed by such iconic residents as Smokey Bear, who arrived in 1950.



But by the 1950s, the Zoo was again looking forlorn and out of date. Mann retired in 1956 and veterinarian Theodore H. Reed was appointed the new director in 1958. Tragedy struck immediately when a senile grandfather lifted his granddaughter into a lion enclosure, and the two year old was killed. In the public outcry that followed, Reed refused to euthanize the lion and channeled concerns about the lack of safety at the Zoo into the newly created Friends of the National Zoo and the Zoo MasterPlan, a major renovation program over the next two decades

that entirely changed the public face of the Zoo. He also enlisted the help of Washington insiders, such as Max Kampelman, to revise the Zoo's legislation to finally place its budget entirely within the Smithsonian where it would receive more favorable and consistent treatment. Reed, and the new Secretary, S. Dillon Ripley, renewed efforts to cultivate the Congress with annual Zoo picnics and popular animal appearances at Congressional hearings. The Giant Pandas arrived in 1972 and greatly increased zoo visitorship, which now had the new lion/tiger enclosure, administration/education building, the Think Tank, and remodeled houses for most of the animals.

From the outset, Reed took to heart the multiple mandates of the Zoo for research, education, and recreation of the people. He established a scientific research department,



hiring top young biologists from across the country, and built a hospital and research center. He also sought a facility where endangered species could be bred, raised and studied away from the stresses of public display downtown. He secured a former U.S. Army Cavalry Remount Station that later served as a USDA Beef Cattle Station, and created what is now the



Conservation Biology Institute in Front Royal, Virginia, in 1975.

By the time Reed retired in 1983, the modern zoo and research facilities had taken their basic shape. In the following decades, led by Michael H. Robinson, innovative new exhibits took an ecosystem view of the natural world, notably in Amazonia; animal behavior, including the primate O-line; and endangered species conservation, with the Cheetah Conservation Station.